

My Brilliant Friend



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ELENA FERRANTE

Elena Ferrante is a pseudonymous Italian author whose bestselling books include the popular Neapolitan Novels: 2011's *My Brilliant Friend*, 2012's *The Story of a New Name*, 2013's *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, and 2014's *The Story of the Lost Child*. Ferrante's novels have received recognition from the Man Booker Prize and the Independent Publisher Book Awards, and Ferrante herself has been listed as one of *TIME* magazine's 100 most influential people. Ferrante's decision to publish her life's work under a pseudonym has left many readers itching for answers as to her "true" identity—but many others insist that a woman publishing on her own terms heralds a new era in novel-writing and a new way for female writers to achieve recognition. In 2016, the Italian journalist Claudio Gatti published an article which purported to reveal the identity of the mysterious Ferrante—the article was controversial in nature and many readers denounced Gatti's attempt to unmask the novelist. Elena Ferrante's other novels include *The Days of Abandonment* and *The Lost Daughter*. Her work has been widely adapted for stage and screen; her 1992 novel *Troubling Love* was adapted into 1995 film called *Nasty Love*, while the Neapolitan Novels are currently being adapted into a sprawling 32-part television series for HBO. While little is known of Ferrante's biography, her work revolves around themes of female friendship, love and infidelity, fractured communities, and the unhappy, often transactional nature of relationships between men and women.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Set in Naples, Italy in the 1950s, *My Brilliant Friend* concerns itself with major milestones in Italian history and controversial topics in Italian politics and social life. Reeling from the impact of World War II, Lila and Lenù's impoverished neighborhood is full of people struggling to make ends meet in a time of widespread poverty and turmoil. The Neapolitan neighborhood of Lila and Lenù's youth is run by loan sharks and Camorristi—members of an Italian crime syndicate and secret society called the Camorra, whose roots in Naples date back to the 17th century. *My Brilliant Friend* is rife with violent killings motivated by love and money. As the Sicilian mafia (or Cosa Nostra) and similar organizations like the Camorra spread their influence across the globe throughout the 19th and early 20th century, Ferrante posits that social mobility became a kind of dark contract—advancement, wealth, and comfort could be sold to the highest bidder or bestowed upon the most devoted soldier. Lila and Lenù's political awakening is slow, but over the

course of the novel, the girls come to recognize these dark influences in their society. They also interrogate the role fascism and Nazism have played in their country's recent history and begin to indict the social, religious, and academic structures which failed to resist the political pull of fascism's cruelty.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though little is known of the pseudonymous Elena Ferrante's biography, many of her readers have speculated that the Neapolitan Novels are highly autobiographical in nature, pointing to Ferrante's choice to adopt her protagonist and narrator's name, Elena, as her own pseudonym. Karl Ove Knausgård's controversial *My Struggle* series is also a sprawling autobiographical epic based on the minutiae of his life, and many readers of Knausgård and Ferrante alike have pointed to the authors' two series as representative of a new, bold wave of autofiction, or fiction drawn from the author's life. Other examples of contemporary autofiction include Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy, consisting of the novels *Outline*, *Transit*, and *Kudos*, as well as Sheila Heti's "novels from life," *How Should a Person Be?* and *Motherhood*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *My Brilliant Friend*
- **When Written:** 2010s
- **Where Written:** Italy
- **When Published:** 2011 (Italy), 2012 (English translation)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** 1950s Naples, Italy
- **Climax:** Lila Cerullo realizes, in the middle of her wedding reception, that her new husband Stefano Carracci has betrayed her to her hated former suitor Marcello Solara in order to enter into business with the wealthy Marcello.
- **Antagonist:** Don Achille; Marcello and Michele Solara; Donato Sarratore; Rino and Fernando Cerullo; Elena's mother
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dialects in Dialogue. Throughout *My Brilliant Friend*, Lila, Lenù, and their neighbors in their suburb of Naples speak a Neapolitan dialect derived from Italian. Often called *napulitano* or *napoletano*, this dialect shares vocabulary with Italian, but the differences in accent (related to the pronunciation of

unstressed vowels) are so profound that the languages often sound entirely disconnected to non-native speakers of either. Throughout the novel, dialect becomes an important instrument of status and class. Characters move between dialect and Italian depending on the social situations in which they find themselves—for instance, when Lenù speaks the Italian she learns in school at home or in the neighborhood, her family and friends accuse her of acting superior or unnatural.



PLOT SUMMARY

In a brief prologue, Elena Greco—a woman in her sixties living in Turin, Italy—receives a call from her friend Lila's son back in Naples. Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo, Elena's friend since childhood, has gone missing. Elena suggests that Rafaella—whom she has always called Lila—doesn't want to be found and coldly tells her son to stop looking for her. Angry with Lila for taking things "too far," she sits down at her computer to write their story. Looking back on her childhood in 1950s Naples, Elena—then known as Lenù—recalls life in a neighborhood run by loan sharks and Camorristi (gangsters) and dominated by widespread violence perpetrated by both men and women.

Elena begins her story when she and Lila are in elementary school. As Elena describes their primary school years, she interweaves stories of day-to-day life with the tale of her and Lila's journey one fateful afternoon up to the apartment of Don Achille, a mysterious and feared loan shark, to demand the return of a pair of dolls they believe he stole from them. Lenù and Lila bond over the years as they compete fiercely in school—Lila is preternaturally gifted and has taught herself to **read** and write by the age of seven. Lenù, desperate to keep up with Lila, vows to do whatever Lila does in every aspect of her life, no matter the danger or the cost. Together, the girls fend off the violence of their male classmates, watch the women of their neighborhood assault one another over their husbands' and lovers' infidelities, and study hard—but it becomes clear that despite their shared love of books and their desire to get rich by writing a novel together, Lila and Lenù are on very different paths.

When it is time to take the admissions test for middle school, Lenù, encouraged by her teacher Maestra Oliviero, begins attending study sessions in preparation. Lila's parents, who know they cannot afford to continue sending her to school, prepare her to go to work alongside her brother Rino in their father, Fernando's, cobbler shop. Shortly before the exam, Lila tries to get Lenù barred from taking the test by enticing her into playing hooky and taking a trip to the seaside—but halfway there, Lila changes her mind and drags Lenù back home. Then, on a rainy August day just before Lenù is due to start middle school, Don Achille is murdered. Lila and Lenù's friend Carmela Peluso's father, Alfredo, a disgruntled carpenter who lost everything gambling in bars run by Don Achille and the

powerful Silvio Solara, is arrested for the crime. The stoic Lila comforts the distraught Carmela by assuring her that even if Alfredo did commit the murder, he did the right thing in taking out the "ogre of fairy tales."

As young women, Lila and Lenù continue to seek ways of escaping the bleak fates for which they feel they are destined. Lenù struggles in school, leading her mother and father to argue about whether or not she should drop out. Lila, meanwhile, begins work in her father's **shoe** shop. She extols her occupation to Lenù at every chance she gets, insisting that her work is worthier than studying. Soon, however, Lila asks Lenù if she can join her as she studies for her end-of-year test—it is clear that the books Lila borrows from the library are not enough to keep her mind occupied. But after several weeks of studying, Lila tells Lenù that she wants to stop. She and Rino have an important secret project to work on: a line of fine shoes for men and women that will hopefully sell well in town, allowing Fernando to open a factory and make more money. As Lila and Lenù each become more aware of the stronghold the Solara family has over their neighborhood—and the ways in which Marcello and Michele Solara, a pair of brothers several years the girls' senior, pick on and harass the poor girls of the neighborhood—they realize that the only way to protect themselves is by securing money of their own.

Lenù passes middle school with flying colors. She is upset, however, when Lila doesn't seem proud of her. Her confidence suffers further hits when Lila beats Lenù out for an award for top borrowers from the local library and when Pasquale, Carmela's older brother, uses Lenù to flirt with Lila. Lenù cannot deny that Lila has changed lately, becoming lovelier in indefinable ways. Meanwhile, when Lenù tells Lila that she is going to study Greek at high school in the fall, Lila responds by asking "What is high school?" One day, while Lila and Lenù stroll through the neighborhood, Marcello and Michele Solara pull up in their Fiat 1100 and ask the girls to go for a drive with them. Lila and Lenù refuse, but the boys continue pestering them. When Marcello grabs Lenù's arm from the car, snapping her mother's bracelet, he gets out to help her pick it up—Lila, pulling a knife from her pocket, holds the blade against Marcello's throat and threatens to kill him if he touches Lenù again.

As the weeks go by and the summer fills up with local dance parties at the homes of Lila and Lenù's friends and classmates, it becomes clear to Lenù just how many of their male friends have fallen in love with Lila. At a dance at the house of Gigliola Spagnuolo, a classmate of Lenù's whose father works as the pastry maker at the Solaras' bar, Lila dances with boy after boy, lost in the music. Marcello and Michele show up—Marcello engages the hedonistic Lila in a dance while Michele has Pasquale, Antonio Cappuccio, and several other of Lila's male friends kicked out of the party. Lila and Lenù follow their friends downstairs, where Pasquale rails against the loan

sharks and Camorristi who run the neighborhood. After this, Lila becomes obsessed with learning about the history of Italy and starts taking long walks with Pasquale during which he explains communism, fascism, and many other political concepts to her. Lenù, meanwhile, realizes that her childhood crush, Nino Sarratore, is among her new high school classmates. Previously, Nino's family was forced to leave the neighborhood after Nino's poet father, Donato, was accused of having an affair with Antonio's mentally unstable mother, Melina.

Over the Christmas break, Rino becomes obsessed with amassing **fireworks** for a New Year's Eve display that will rival the Solaras' yearly blowout. Lila and Lenù accept an invitation to celebrate New Year's with Stefano Carracci and his family—the son of Don Achille, now a grocer, is determined to mend fences with his neighbors in the wake of his father's death. At the celebration, Rino and his friends set off a huge display of fireworks—but when their display threatens to outlast the Solaras', the Solaras begin shooting bullets across the spaces between their buildings' terraces, which terrifies Lenù, Lila, Rino, and their friends.

After this incident, Lila and Rino's relationship suffers further when Rino attempts to show their father they shoes they designed, only for Fernando to lash out in anger at both of them and condemn them for making shoes behind his back. Meanwhile, Lenù returns to school and continues to excel, earning the admiration of many of her teachers—even though Nino continues to ignore her. Marcello Solara begins pursuing Lila and starts visiting the Cerullo home for dinner each night. Rino and Fernando welcome him warmly, but Lila hates him as passionately as ever. Rino puts the shoes in the shop window, hoping they'll sell. Marcello considers buying them but backs down at the last minute—though he asks for Lila's hand in marriage.

At Maestra Oliviero's suggestion, Lenù heads to stay with Oliviero's cousin Nella Incardo at a small boarding house Nella runs on the island of Ischia. Here, Lenù enjoys several weeks of sun and relaxation—but she is perturbed when she doesn't receive an answer to the many letters she sends to Lila, and her vacation takes a strange turn with the Sarratore family shows up to stay at Nella's. Lenù pines for Nino—but when she realizes that she has attracted the attentions of Nino's lecherous father, Donato, she flees the island in terror and repulsion. Back in the neighborhood, Lenù realizes that Lila is hatching a plan to reject Marcello and marry Stefano. Stefano purchases the shoes and announces his intention to marry Lila. Lila herself tells Marcello the news, warning him that if he tries to harm Stefano or anyone in her family out of vengeance, she will kill him. Stefano pours money into Fernando's shop, insisting he hire more workers and begin manufacturing Lila's designs for Cerullo shoes. Fernando reluctantly agrees to do so.

Lenù begins seeing Antonio, motivated by the desire to have an older paramour just like Lila. Meanwhile, Marcello begins spreading cruel rumors about Lila, and Pasquale, Enzo, and Antonio attack the Solaras and destroy their car. Lenù helps Lila with preparations for her wedding, fending off the cruelty Lila faces from her future mother- and sister-in-law, Maria and Pinuccia. Lenù becomes more anxious as Lila's wedding day approaches—she fears losing her friend forever. While Stefano showers Lila in gifts and secures a fancy new apartment for them to live in after the marriage, Lenù tries to convince herself that school is her “wealth”—even as she gets into trouble with her religion teacher for making a scene in class. Nino offers Lenù the chance to publish a polemic against religion in a local political journal, and Lenù begs Lila for help finalizing the article, but Lila declares that reading Lenù's writing and seeing how Lenù shines hurts her.

A few weeks before the wedding, Stefano and Lila get into a huge fight when Stefano, desperate to make sure that Cerullo shoes is able to make money in the neighborhood in the future, offers Silvio Solara an important role in their wedding ceremony as a show of good faith. Lila is furious, but Lenù reminds Lila that together, she and Stefano can begin to change the neighborhood for the better. Lila agrees to go through with the wedding on the condition that Marcello is not present for any part of it. Stefano agrees. On the day of the wedding, Lenù helps Lila get ready for the ceremony. She is full of fear, envy, and even repulsion as she considers that her friend will soon be a married woman. After the ceremony, at a boisterous reception at a nearby restaurant, Lenù ignores Antonio and tries to make conversation with Nino—she is devastated, however, when Nino casually tells her that the journal didn't have “room” to run her article. As the party becomes more drunken and debauched, the adults present begin fighting. Lila's relatives believe they have received poorer service and worse food and wine than Stefano's. Lila is oblivious to the chaos all around her—until Marcello Solara enters, sits himself down at her and Stefano's tables, and, upon crossing his legs, reveals that he is wearing the prototype of the Cerullo shoes for men—the pair Lila worked hard on for months, “ruining” her hands in the process of bringing them into being.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Elena “Lenù” Greco – The protagonist and narrator of *My Brilliant Friend*, Elena Greco is a woman in her sixties looking back on her 1950s childhood and early adolescence in an impoverished neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples, Italy. At this time, she was known as Lenù, and her life revolved around her “bad” but magnetic friend Lila Cerullo. Over the course of the book, Elena reflects on her and Lila's entwined but often divergent paths through young womanhood as they dream of

escaping their violent, insular, and economically-depressed neighborhood. From an early age, Lenù realizes that an education is her only means of attaining a better life than the one her miserable, angry mother leads. Though supportive of her schooling, Lenù's father is unenthusiastic about her success and he doles out the physical abuse that Lenù's handicapped mother is unable to inflict. As children, Lenù and Lila bond over their shared love of **language** and their desire to write a book—but while Lenù admires Lila's natural intelligence, it is Lenù who's allowed to continue past elementary school and into middle and high school. From that point on, Lenù's academic success is a major source of tension in the girls' relationship, and Lenù feels simultaneously jealous of Lila's romantic pursuits yet oddly superior because of her own schooling. The girls manage to remain friends over the years despite several rough patches and the very different lives they lead as adolescents. During this time, Lenù has a longstanding crush on Nino Sarratore which continues into her teenage years despite dating Gino and Antonio. Lenù and Nino's relationship is complicated, and they never become a legitimate couple. Despite her demure and insecure nature, Lenù also emulates Lila's strong-mindedness. For instance, she speaks out against her religion teacher and tries (and fails) to get an article published in a journal that Nino writes for. Overall, Lenù's journey (which is inextricably linked with Lila's) primarily speaks to the intense nature of close female friendships. As young Lenù gradually learns more about the cruel world of men that she and Lila are doomed to spend their lives moving through, the novel takes on an increasingly ominous air and foreshadows the challenges that Lenù and Lila will continue to face in friendship and love as they grow, together and apart, into women.

Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo – Lila Cerullo is Fernando and Nunzia Cerullo's daughter and Rino Cerullo's sister. She's known to her family as Rafaella and to most of her friends as Lina—but to her lifelong friend Elena Greco, she is and always has been "Lila." In the present day, decades after the main events of the story, Lila has mysteriously disappeared from her home without a trace—not even her adult son knows where she is. The news of Lila's disappearance, which the now-middle-aged Elena writes off as Lila "overdoing it as usual," is what motivates Lenù to spitefully write the memoir that becomes the narrative of *My Brilliant Friend*. Lenù portrays Lila as sharp-witted, steel-willed, and seemingly fearless—both a troublemaker and a self-taught learner from a young age. Lenù's narration about her friend also suggests that Lila is intensely angry and self-critical beneath her withdrawn, stoic exterior. From an early age, Lila displays natural academic talent and shares in Lenù's love of **reading** and writing. However, Lila's parents force her to drop out after elementary school, after which she tries and fails to create a line of high-end **shoes** in her father's cobbler shop. At the same time, Lila's entanglement with the cruel but powerful Marcello Solara, her adversarial relationship with Rino, and her

secret jealousy of Lenù's ability to pursue an education all push her to demand more from life. And yet as Lila surges upward socially and financially, she finds herself reckoning with the betrayals, sacrifices, and the physical and emotional acts of violence that the quest for social mobility necessitates. Despite Lila's natural intelligence, it eventually becomes clear that the titular "brilliant friend" is not Lila, but Lenù—as Lila prepares to embark on a marriage to the greedy and power-hungry Stefano Carracci, Lila begs Lenù to continue in school no matter what. By the end of the novel, both Lila and Lenù feel that they've chosen wrong in their attempts at changing their fates. Ultimately, Lila realizes that her brand-new marriage is over before it has even begun and that her heart is forever hardened to the optimism which pushed her into it.

Nino Sarratore – Nino is Donato and Lidia Sarratore's son and Marisa Sarratore's brother. He is the aloof, unattainable object of Lenù's affection from her elementary school days onward. From the time Lenù is small, she pines for Nino—yet when they are in primary school and Nino approaches Lenù one day to ask if they can get married when they grow up, Lenù panics and rejects him. When Nino and his family move out of the neighborhood after Donato and Melina Cappuccio's affair becomes a public spectacle, Lenù fears that she'll never see Nino again. Years later, she is surprised and delighted when she begins high school in Naples and realizes that the two of them are classmates once again. Nino, however, has grown skinny, shabby, and disaffected, while Lenù is too afraid of pursuing him to break through the walls between them. Nino and Lenù continue to orbit each other as the years go by—when Lenù goes to the island of Ischia for the summer and realizes that Nino and his family are staying at the same inn, she and Nino have their first real conversations and exchanging a brief but meaningful kiss. But Lenù's feelings for Nino are complicated even further when Nino's father gropes her and kisses her one evening; repulsed by Donato and yet full of love for Nino, Lenù flees the island and begins avoiding Nino at school. When Lenù gets in trouble with her religion teacher for speaking out against the church's tenets, Nino urges Lenù to harness her discontent and contribute an **article** to a journal he writes for. Lenù is full of hope, believing that perhaps if Nino sees her as an intellectual equal, he might at last fall in love with her—but her hopes are dashed when Nino cruelly reports that the journal didn't have "room" to publish Lenù's essay. Lenù and Nino's burgeoning relationship is complicated and tinged with resentment, competitiveness, and cruelty, foreshadowing the ways in which they will continue to seek to best one another throughout the remainder of the Neapolitan Novels.

Stefano Carracci – Stefano is the eldest son of Don Achille and Donna Maria. Several years older than Lila and Lenù, when readers first meet Stefano, he is a fearsome bully who threatens Lila after she bests his younger brother, Alfonso, in an academic competition. Though just a young teen, Stefano is

already learning that his fearsome father's influence as the neighborhood loan shark extends to him too. Later in the novel, after Don Achille is murdered and the shadow of fear surrounding the Carracci family's influence over the neighborhood dissipates, Stefano works alongside his mother Donna Maria, his brother, and their sister Pinuccia in their family's grocery. When Lenù returns from a summer on the island of Ischia, she realizes that Stefano and Lila have gotten close in spite of the fact that the intimidating, powerful Marcello Solara has been courting Lila for months. Together, Stefano and Lila hatch a plan to help her escape Marcello's influence—Stefano, with money to spare from his late father's wealth, buys the prototype **shoes** that Lila and Rino have made for an enormous sum. He also offers not just to marry Lila, but to pump money into her father's business so that Cerullo shoes can become its own brand. Powerful, controlling, and yet beholden to the Solaras' influence over the neighborhood, Stefano affects ease and abundance—yet he is tied to the same rules as the rest of the neighborhood, and he ultimately disappoints Lila when he makes concession upon concession to the Solara family.

Marcello Solara – Marcello is the eldest son of Silvio Solara. He's a handsome, swaggering braggart who, together with his brother Michele, patrols the neighborhood in his Fiat 1100 picking up girls and enforcing his father's stronghold over the neighborhood. Marcello takes an interest in Lila after witnessing her fiery personality and her disregard for showing him any fealty or respect. Marcello begins courting Lila by showing up for dinner at her family's apartment each night—Lila, however, has a deep-seated hatred not just of Marcello but of his entire family, and she rejects the many gifts Marcello brings over and elects to spend as much time as possible in her bedroom during his visits. Marcello believes that there is no way Lila will refuse him, given his family's status in the neighborhood—yet he underestimates her complete disregard for the power structures that rule their shared world. Marcello is devastated when Lila at last rejects him for Stefano, with whom Lila believes she can begin to change the neighborhood's oppressive financial and social structures. However, Marcello continues to seek out ways through which he can remind Lila that he and his family are not going anywhere. At the end of the novel, he shows up at Lila and Stefano's wedding wearing the prototype Cerullo **shoes** that Stefano previously purchased in order to demonstrate his willingness to invest not just in Lila but in her father's business. The implication is either that Marcello has purchased the shoes from Stefano for an even higher price, or that he demanded them for free. Either way, this moment—which serves as the novel's conclusion—demonstrates the fact that Marcello will always have control over not just Lila but over the entire neighborhood. Cruel, vindictive, and often comically self-important, Marcello Solara is one of the novel's main antagonists and represents the embodiment of the male

violence and control which rule Lila and Lenù's world.

Rino Cerullo – Rino is Fernando and Nunzia Cerullo's son and Lila Cerullo's older brother. Rino is just as ambitious as his younger sister, and he, too, hates the way their neighborhood is run by violence and corruption. He longs to find a way to escape his lowly station as a shoemaker's apprentice, and when Lila approaches him with an idea for a line of fine men's and women's **shoes** that will help pull their father's cobbler business out of obscurity, Rino is all in. However, Rino approaches his upward climb much differently than Lila does—because he is a man who has been raised in a neighborhood steeped in a culture of male violence, he believes that in order to prove himself to the wealthy, powerful people who run the neighborhood (such as the Solaras), he must use displays of brute force to make himself seen, known, and respected. During a New Year's Eve **fireworks** display, Rino attempts to show up the Solaras by launching the neighborhood's biggest light show. His efforts to prove his dominance are met with even more violence from the Solaras. Amid this process of trying to prove his manliness, worth, and power, Rino reveals his true self to Lila, who begins to feel that Rino is just like every other man in the neighborhood: ruthless, cruel, violent, and miserable. A complicated and volatile figure, Rino truly seems to long for his family's betterment—but any time his authority over Lila is questioned or his plans don't work out the way he wants, he becomes violent and rageful. Rino's arc demonstrates the novel's examination of masculine versus feminine violence, as well as the demands and sacrifices that climbing out of poverty require.

Fernando Cerullo – Fernando is Lila and Rino's father and Nunzia's husband. He owns a cobbler shop in the neighborhood where he mends and makes **shoes**, a trade he learned as a young man. Fernando is a stern man who takes pride in his work, yet his children seek to rebel against his entrenched ways as they consider how they might help their father's business. It's implied that Fernando is deeply afraid of what will happen to his business and his family should he seek too much money or influence—Fernando is content to make a living and just get by. He's fearful of drawing the ire or jealousy of his neighbors, or finding himself beholden to the loan sharks and Camorristi (gangsters) who run the neighborhood. Fernando seems to love his children, yet he is more concerned with demanding their respect than he is with showing them respect in return. He seeks to use Lila as a tool in his family's social advancement—he believes that if Lila marries Marcello Solara, the Cerullis will be more secure without the risk of seeking advancement through business or money. Fernando is a complicated man who wants many things at once, yet he is unsure—or afraid—of how to secure them for himself and his family.

Antonio Cappuccio – Antonio is the eldest son of Melina Cappuccio. Antonio works as a mechanic and is a part of Lenù's extended friend group in the neighborhood, though he is a

couple of years older than her. Antonio is protective of his fragile mother, Melina, and he's self-conscious and defensive about his family's abject poverty. He's also generally sensitive to the moods and problems of those around him. Antonio is often flirtatious with Lenù during their friend group's outings, and during the summer of Lenù's 15th year, he officially asks her to be his girlfriend. Antonio is a loyal boyfriend, and he and Lenù see each other nearly every day during the summer, exploring each other's bodies and growing closer—even as Lenù secretly pines for Nino and makes plans to break up with Antonio after Lila's wedding. Lenù uses Antonio to make herself feel better about Lila's having found an older fiancé—she believes that in emulating Lila's actions, she herself will be fulfilled. Antonio suffers as he begins to realize that Lenù is simply using him for many things—to ward off Donato Sarratore, who has returned to the neighborhood to profess his love for Lenù; to stave off Lenù's own complicated desire for Donato's son, Nino; and to compete with her best friend and rival, Lila. Kind, helpful, and yet deeply insecure, Antonio becomes an important emotional pillar for Lenù in the second half of the novel—even as she finds that he fails to produce in her the romantic feelings she is desperate to feel.

Maestra Oliviero – Maestra Oliviero is Lila and Lenù's elementary school teacher. A stern but kind woman, Oliviero has a soft spot for Lenù—and especially for Lila, once Oliviero realizes that Lila has taught herself to **read** and write on her own. Oliviero attempts to stress to both girls' parents just how important it is for them to continue in school—and when Lila's parents don't heed her advice, Oliviero becomes disappointed and almost pained by the waste of such a brilliant mind. As Lila goes to work in her father, Fernando's, **shoe** shop and eventually marries the wealthy and powerful Stefano Carracci, Oliviero's disappointment in Lila's failure to live up to her intellectual potential increases—even as Oliviero continues encouraging Lenù to study, hone her smarts, and explore the world. Benevolent but able to bear a grudge, Maestra Oliviero makes a serious impression on both Lenù and Lila—and they make a tremendous impact on her life, as well.

Don Achille Carracci – As the neighborhood loan shark and the “ogre of fairy tales,” Don Achille is a terrifying man who moves in the shadows of Lila and Lenù's neighborhood throughout their childhood. Don Achille is a feared moneylender who has the power to make or break families in the neighborhood—and because Lila and Lenù know that they should fear Don Achille but don't precisely understand why, they make him into a fairy-tale monster in their minds, imagining that he lives in their building's cellar, collecting his neighbors' refuse and using it to fashion a grotesque living armor for himself. In a way, the girls' childhood vision of Don Achille is profoundly symbolic—as the neighborhood loan shark, Don Achille *does* take from his neighbors with impunity and he uses debts and threats of violence to make himself (seemingly) invincible. Ultimately, Don

Achille is murdered by an unseen assailant; Alfredo Peluso, a carpenter who lost his livelihood gambling away borrowed money, is arrested for the violent crime. Don Achille's death makes room for the Solaras to take control of the neighborhood—and it demonstrates to Lila and Lenù that not even powerful, fearsome men are invincible.

Pasquale Peluso – Pasquale is Alfredo and Giuseppina's son and Carmela's older brother. He's a construction worker and a Communist who develops a crush on Lila when she and Lenù are in middle school. Pasquale is a radical and an agitator—he knows the corrupt way things work in the neighborhood and the historical reasons for the crime that pervades it, and he is one of the only people willing to call out those in power (for examples, the Solaras) for the ways in which they terrorize their neighbors. Pasquale becomes instrumental in Lila's education after her parents force her to drop out of school—while Lila can't learn about books, languages, and religion in a classroom setting, she finds herself learning a lot about the history of Italy's politics from the passionate, political Pasquale. Pasquale loves Lila intensely and wants to marry her, but Lila insists that she only sees Pasquale as a brother figure. After Lila's rejection of him—and a few months of sour grapes—Pasquale becomes committed to defending Lila against any threat that comes her way.

Carmela Peluso – Carmela is Alfredo and Giuseppina's daughter and Pasquale's sister. She's a classmate and neighbor of Lila and Lenù. Carmela is a sweet and fun-loving girl who works hard to put the pain of her father's arrest for the murder of Don Achille behind her. Carmela is obsessed with Lila and strives to emulate her speech, her movements, and her inflections—whenever Lenù spends time with Carmela, she finds herself worrying that she, too, is too preoccupied with Lila's favor.

Nunzia Cerullo – Nunzia is Lila and Rino's mother and Fernando's wife. She is often bewildered by reports of Lila's brilliance in school and baffled by her daughter's abilities to teach herself to **read** and write without any assistance. Nunzia is rarely excited by Lila's accomplishments, however, as she knows that she and her husband do not have the money to invest in Lila's education. Fretful and aloof, Nunzia struggles to keep Lila, Rino, and Fernando—all of whom have hot tempers—at peace with one another.

Elena's Mother – Elena's mother is never given a name in the novel, yet she is a defining presence in her daughter's life. A strict, humorless woman with a wandering eye and a pronounced limp, the young Lenù lives in fear of her mother—and in fear of becoming her one day, taking on deformities of her own as she ages into womanhood. Lenù's mother alternately disparages and encourages her daughter's desire to pursue an education. Similarly, she alternately allows Lenù to explore feelings of freedom and autonomy (such as when she allows her to vacation on the island of Ischia alone for

several weeks) and restricts Lenù's social life (such as when she attempts to prevent Lenù from spending time with boys like Pasquale and Antonio).

Elena's Father – Elena's father, a porter who works at city hall, is a simple, honest man who wants the best for his family. Lenù's father is supportive of his daughter obtaining an education, yet he is often unenthusiastic about her academic successes. Since Lenù's mother refuses to beat her, she often enlists Lenù's father to dole out the physical punishments that she feels Lenù's infractions at home and in school necessitate. He does so begrudgingly, revealing his hatred of the violent culture in which his family lives.

Donato Sarratore – Donato is Nino's father, Lidia's husband, and Melina's lover. He's a railroad worker who moonlights as a poet and journalist. Donato and his family leave the neighborhood when Lila and Lenù are still in elementary school after Donato's rumored affair with Melina Cappuccio goes horribly wrong. Later, when Lenù is in high school spending a summer on the island of Ischia, she finds that the Sarratore family is also staying at the inn run by Nella Incardo. Lenù begins reframing the things she's heard about Donato and starts seeing him as an intelligent and sweet family man—but when he initiates sexual contact with her one night, she flees the island and becomes repulsed by him entirely. When Donato shows up in the neighborhood the following year claiming that he's been unable to stop thinking of Lenù, Lenù enlists the help of her boyfriend, Antonio—who is also Melina's eldest son—to scare Donato off. Slimy, sleazy, and a relentless womanizer, Donato serves as an early example of the ways in which men, at least in Lila and Lenù's world, often live up to the negative rumors that women spread about them.

Alfonso Carracci – Alfonso is Don Achille and Donna Maria's son and Stefano and Pinuccia's brother. He's a classmate of Lila and Lenù, and when the three of them are young (when Don Achille is still alive), Lila and Lenù feel compelled to show deference and respect to Alfonso for reasons they don't fully understand. After Don Achille's death, however, Lenù begins developing a genuine friendship with Alfonso when the two of them head to middle school and eventually high school together. Alfonso is sweet, quiet, and smart, though throughout the latter half of the novel, he seems sad and self-conscious about living in the shadow of his older brother, Stefano.

Alfredo Peluso – Alfredo is a disgraced carpenter who loses his tools, his shop, and his dignity to the loan shark Don Achille. The narrative implies that Alfredo's gambling problem is behind his fall from grace, yet because Lila and Lenù are children at the time of Alfredo's struggles, they are unable to comprehend what his downfall really symbolizes about their neighborhood and the cruel, cutthroat way in which it's run. When Alfredo is arrested for the murder of Don Achille, he professes his innocence—yet he winds up imprisoned for the crime, and the *carabinieri* (police) investigate no other leads.

Melina Cappuccio – Melina is a desperately poor woman who lives in Lenù's apartment building. She's Antonio and Ada's mother, and she's a distant relative of Lila on Nunzia's side of the family. Melina has an affair with Donato Sarratore, which leads to a vicious feud between Melina and Donato's wife, Lidia. Melina's mental health deteriorates after the affair falls apart, and when Donato and his family pack up and leave the neighborhood, Melina collapses entirely. Melina soon gains a reputation as the town lunatic—few people, Lila among them, defend her against the cruel forces of gossip and isolation that infect the neighborhood.

Silvio Solara – Silvio is the owner of Bar Solara, a neighborhood bar and pastry shop where gambling, fights, moneylending, and Camorrist activities take place in shadowy rooms. As a Camorrist himself, Silvio seizes financial control of the neighborhood in the wake of Don Achille's death. His sons, Michele and Marcello, are cocky and violent boys who work in the bar as their father's muscle and often go around settling his debts and grudges throughout the neighborhood. The imposing Silvio serves as speech master at Lila and Stefano's wedding—Stefano is forced to give Silvio this important, symbolic role as ring-bearer in order to placate him after Lila's rejection of Marcello. He does so in order to ensure that Cerullo **shoes** can be sold in the right places.

Donna Maria Carracci – Donna Maria is Don Achille's wife and Stefano, Pinuccia, and Alfonso's mother. She runs the grocery store and works alongside Stefano and Pinuccia, and sometimes Alfonso when school is out. Maria and her daughter Pinuccia share a dislike of Lila once she and Stefano get engaged—they accuse her of trying to act like a moneyed lady even before the marriage. Together, Maria and Pinuccia try to make things as difficult as possible for Lila throughout preparations for the event.

Pinuccia Carracci – Pinuccia is Don Achille and Donna Maria's daughter and Stefano and Alfonso's sister. Spoiled and jealous, Pinuccia is indignant about Lila's carelessness with Stefano's money after their engagement. Together with her mother, Pinuccia attempts to make Lila's experience of preparing for the wedding difficult, revealing her selfish and vindictive nature.

Enzo Scanno – Enzo is one of Lenù and Lila's classmates and neighbors. The class dunce, Enzo has a big crush on Lila yet has trouble expressing his feelings for her—one moment he gives her a bouquet of sorb apples, and the next he lobs rocks at her in the streets. Enzo eventually grows up into an honorable and kind young man.

Gino – Gino is the son of the local pharmacist. Gino has a big crush on Lenù and pays careful attention to her developing body. He even gives her a share of his winnings in a bet with another boy that Lenù's breasts are real and not simply a bra stuffed with cotton. Later, he asks Lenù to be his girlfriend, but she rejects him out of hand and coasts high on the feeling of

being so wanted. Eventually, in high school, Gino asks Lenù out again, and the two of them date for a short time.

Maestro Ferraro – Maestro Ferraro is a teacher at Lila and Lenù's elementary school as well as the school librarian. He teaches classes of boys, but as the librarian, he holds a soft spot for Lila, the most frequent borrower from the school's collection. Ferraro even hosts a small awards ceremony in order to honor Lila, who uses her family's library cards to check out as many **books** as possible at one time.

Ada Cappuccio – Ada is Melina's daughter and Antonio's younger sister. Ada has a rebellious streak and often spends time out on the town with the Solara brothers, which earns her a scandalous reputation in the neighborhood. However, she is also a concerned daughter who frets over her fragile mother's wellbeing and mental health.

Marisa Sarratore – Marisa is Donato and Lidia's daughter and Nino's younger sister. After Donato is outed for having an affair with Melina Cappuccio, Marisa publicly denounces Melina as a "whore." However, later on, Marisa seems to be a rather sweet and sociable young girl who spends time bonding with Lenù during their shared weeks vacationing on the island of Ischia.

Lila's Son / Rino – Lila's son is named after Lila's older brother, Rino. The younger Rino is a "small-time crook and spendthrift" who, in the prologue, alerts the now-middle-aged Elena to the fact that his mother has been missing from her Naples, Italy home for weeks. Rino is panicked by this fact, but Elena is disdainful of worry and feels Rino should know about his mother's deep-seated, longstanding desire to disappear.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lidia Sarratore – Lidia is Donato's wife and Marisa and Nino's mother. In spite of the rumors that swirl about her husband, Lidia is a woman who prioritizes composure and stoicism in the face of gossip and scandal.

Michele Solara – Michele is the younger of the Solara brothers. Colder and often more violent than his older brother Marcello, Michele is a flirt and a braggart who dates Gigliola Spagnuolo.

Professor Gerace – Professor Gerace is a male teacher at Lenù's high school. He praises Lenù's intelligence and is invested in her education.

Professor Galiani – Professor Galiani is a controversial professor at Lenù's high school who is rumored to hold Communist beliefs. She supports Lenù in her conflict with the school's religion teacher.

Nella Incardo – Nella is a kind, gregarious cousin of Maestra Oliviero. She hosts Lenù one summer at her home on Ischia, an island off the coast of Naples where Nella runs a small inn catering to local and foreign tourists.

Gigliola Spagnuolo – Gigliola is one of Lenù and Lila's classmates and neighborhood friends, the daughter of a pastry

maker. Gigliola later begins dating Michele Solara.

Signor Spagnuolo – Signor Spagnuolo is Gigliola's father and Rosa's husband. He's a pastry maker at the Solaras' bar and pastry shop.

Rosa Spagnuolo – Rosa is Gigliola's mother and Signor Spagnuolo's wife.

Giuseppina Peluso – Giuseppina is the kindly wife of Alfredo. She's Pasquale and Carmela's mother.

Assunta Scanno – Assunta is Enzo's father and the proprietor of a fruit and vegetable cart in the neighborhood.

TERMS

Camorra / Camorrist – A Camorrist is a member of the Camorra, an Italian crime syndicate and secret society dating back to the 1600s. The Camorra originated in Naples, where *My Brilliant Friend* takes place, and Camorristis have a domineering, violent presence in **Lenù** and **Lila's** neighborhood in the 1950s. In the novel, Camorristis like the Solaras family tend to take part in illegal or otherwise disreputable activities like gambling, exploitative moneylending, and fighting. Small business-owners like Lila's father, **Fernando**, live in constant fear of the gangsters' financial domination and violence.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* is a novel about many things—community, poverty, violence, toxic masculinity, and education—but at its heart is the profound, complicated relationship between Elena "Lenù" Greco and Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo. As the two girls grow up together, they find themselves helpless to resist each other's influence—and as they move from childhood into adolescence, they make sometimes bizarre but always impactful choices based on their desire to impress each other, to draw each other in, or to push each other away. In charting the waxing and waning of the girls' bond over the years and demonstrating the ways in which Lena and Lenù's journeys reflect and refract each other's opinions, ideas, and decisions, Ferrante argues that female friendship has the power to control the course of one's life and choices—even if the friends themselves rarely discuss this dynamic—because women throughout history have had to rely on female friendship due to their vulnerable status in their

respective communities.

Even as first-graders, Lila and Lenù are both aware of a peculiar magnetism between the two of them. Over the years, Ferrante charts how their closeness, a fact of their lives that they cling to for protection and sustenance, morphs from a blessing into a curse (and back again) at various points in the girls' lives. The first major instance in Lila and Lenù's friendship in which the girls realize that their choices revolve around one another comes when, during an afternoon playing with each other's dolls near a cellar grate, Lila betrays Lenù by throwing Lenù's doll, Tina, into the dark grate. Lenù barely hesitates before tossing Lila's doll, Nu, into the cellar as well. "What you do, I do," Lenù says to Lila—and the words take on a vow-like quality as the girls continue to grow older. The girls' paths diverge as they grow up—Lenù remains in school while Lila drops out and goes to work in her father Fernando's cobbler shop; Lila becomes slender and beautiful in puberty while Lenù grows full-figured and afflicted with acne; Lila grows sharp, stoic, and aggressive while Lenù remains softer, quieter, and more romantic. But Lenù's thoughts are always consumed by worry and love for Lila, as well as the desire to impress her—and Lila, though often inscrutable, works to make something of herself and prove herself to Lila in a similar way. "In losing pieces of [Lila's] life," Lenù later reflects, "mine lost intensity and importance." In other words, without each other, the girls feel that they have no audience for their triumphs and failures—no rival and no ally. As both girls' vulnerability rises alongside their entry into womanhood, they feel the need to cling to each other even more deeply—even as barriers to their closeness, the consequences of their newfound adolescence, creep into their relationship.

As Lila and Lenù grow older, their friendship continues to influence their individual choices as they seek to confirm their bond in the face of mounting troubles with men. Their relationships with men are socially necessary but often leave them vulnerable to violence or lack of agency—so Lila and Lenù attempt to continue circling each other even as circumstance pulls them apart. Another major instance in which Lenù reflects on the entwined nature of her and Lila's fates—a quality which she herself has made sure to imbue their friendship with over the years—occurs as Lenù helps wash and dress Lila for her wedding to Stefano Carracci, their childhood bully and the son of the deceased loan shark Don Achille, toward the end of the novel. As Lenù imagines, in great and horrific detail, Lila losing her virginity on her wedding night, she is full of stark revulsion. She determines that "the only remedy against the pain I was feeling [...] was to find a corner secluded enough so that [my boyfriend] Antonio could do to me, at the same time, the exact same thing." This passage is perhaps the most pointed moment in the entire novel related to the ways in which female friendship steers one's impulses and decision-making. Lenù and Lila have been competitive all their lives, but in this moment,

the more sexually experienced Lenù isn't jealous of Lila reaching the threshold of losing her virginity first. This passage instead suggests that Lenù simply wants to experience what Lila is feeling—whether it is pleasure, pain, degradation, or anything else—at the same time her friend is experiencing it out of solidarity. Lenù cannot imagine her friend having an experience she can't relate to for fear that it would drive them apart, and so Lenù wants to make sure that she and Lila experience the exact same thing at the exact same moment, for as long as they can. At the most vulnerable moment of Lila's life, Lenù wants to make herself vulnerable too, in hopes of symbolically making her friend feel less alone and thus stronger.

By showing how Lila and Lenù go through life entwined with one another out of a desire to be less alone (and to help the other feel less alone as well,) Ferrante demonstrates how female friendship—with its attendant pressures, problems, and possibilities—can be a force powerful enough to define one's life. Though Lila and Lenù often fail to communicate the ways in which they look to each other for guidance or admit how profoundly they depend on each other, they nonetheless circle each other, emulate each other, and compete with each other as their friendship proves itself to be the driving force behind the major decisions of their lives.



MASCULINE VS. FEMININE VIOLENCE

The world of *My Brilliant Friend*—set in a poor suburb of Naples, Italy in the 1950s and 1960s—is one suffused with violence. As the men of the neighborhood engage in acts of violence as a means of securing revenge, of defending the honor of their wives or sisters, and of settling debts and slights, Elena Ferrante demonstrates how this atmosphere of unending, pervasive male violence trickles down to the women of the community. Ultimately, Ferrante suggests that even in a culture in which physical violence is perpetrated primarily by men, women eventually mirror that same violence, replicating in their own relationships with one another the physical and emotional cruelty to which they bear witness each day.

As Lila and Lenù come of age in a small, insular, violent neighborhood in Naples, they witness violence and even murder—and they are themselves subjected to physical attacks from men and women alike. Loan sharks intimidate their debtors; jilted lovers create scenes in the street; revenge killings and assaults are commonplace. Often, Lila and Lenù's own parents or siblings are the perpetrators of the violence against them. As the novel progresses, Ferrante charts how the pervasive violence committed often unthinkingly or obligatorily among the men of the neighborhood dulls and normalizes the relationship that the women of the neighborhood have to physical violence.

Even as a child, Lenù is able to intuit the malicious presence in

the neighborhood which ultimately manifests as feminine rage and indeed violence. “I feel no nostalgia for our childhood,” the grown-up Lenù—who now goes by Elena—recalls early on in the novel. “The women fought amongst themselves more than the men [...] I imagined tiny invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood [...] and entered the water and the food and the air, making our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs.” Though the young Lenù imagines “tiny invisible animals,” as a grown woman, she is able to examine the connection between the omnipresent violence perpetrated by the men in the neighborhood and the “rage that had no end” which seized the women of her neighborhood. Where, for example, the loan shark Don Achille, a frightening, powerful, and wealthy man, is murdered in his pajamas by an unseen assailant, the kinds of violence women perpetrate against each other are more personal. The disgraced Melina Cappuccio, abandoned by her married lover Donato Sarratore, flings household items out of her window as the Sarratore family flees the neighborhood to move somewhere else, nearly killing the young Nino Sarratore. Lila and Lenù are both sensitive to the violence all around them, and they are particularly affected by the fear that they themselves are doomed to be infected by “tiny invisible animals.”

The violence women perpetrate against one another in the book is often but not always physical—sometimes, it is emotional in nature. Through examples of the cruelties the women in the novel level against one another, Ferrante shows how this emotional violence is a direct reflection of the rampant (yet casual) physical violence committed by the women’s fathers, lovers, brothers, and schoolmates. As Lila and Lenù grow older, the violence in their neighborhood morphs and begins to affect them more directly. No longer are Lila and Lenù silent, petrified witnesses to the ravings of Melina Cappuccio or the revenge killings involving loan sharks and Camorristi (members of an organized crime syndicate). Now, as young women, they find themselves surrounded by young men who have learned that violence is the answer to every perceived slight. For instance, men will react violently at an untoward glance another man makes at a sister or girlfriend. Young men are also determined to show their dominance through any means necessary: fistfights, **firework** displays, fast cars, and even shootings. Lila and Lenù internalize these responses and become violent in their own ways. Lila carries a knife which she brandishes at any man who threatens her (a response learned from the violent men around her), but she also begins acting cruelly toward Lenù when the two are in competition with each other in school or in love (a response learned from the spurned, angry women around her). “Lila was malicious,” Lenù thinks to herself as she realizes that Lila has surpassed her not only in smarts but in beauty. “I said to myself: she will release something more vicious [soon].” Womanhood, to Lenù, is synonymous with the release of viciousness and ill will—as her friendship with Lila grows more intense and more

competitive, Lenù begins to feel that the only end the two can arrive at is one marked by malice, evil, and indeed danger.

The violence around every corner in the world of *My Brilliant Friend* is the status quo—it defines how people in the neighborhood talk to one another, respond to one another in times of need, raise their children, run their businesses, and plan (or fail to plan) for the future. By contrasting the violence committed by men (often in the name of honor or revenge) with the violence committed by women (often physical but just as often emotional), Ferrante shows how violence is a learned response that’s replicated and disseminated throughout an entire community. The violence that forms so much of the novel’s tension has roots in toxic masculinity and sexism—yet as women adopt the violent tendencies they see perpetrated by the men around them each day, they confirm violence’s utility as an unhappy tool not just of men but of women struggling to be seen, heard, and respected.



WOMEN'S WORK

As Lila and Lenù come of age in their Naples, Italy neighborhood, their paths diverge when Lenù remains in school while Lila goes to work in her father’s shop after her parents refuse to pay for her education. Elena Ferrante sets *My Brilliant Friend* in the 1950s, a time when women’s intellectual and professional aspirations were not taken seriously but were on the cusp of a new kind of recognition—thus contrasting Lila and Lenù’s wishes for their own futures with the realities of the lives of the older women all around them. Ferrante explores the different kinds of “work” both available to and foisted upon women of Lila and Lenù’s generation, ultimately suggesting that women’s bravery and initiative are too often met with ridicule, cruelty, and even betrayal due to the entwined forces of capitalism and sexism.

Throughout the novel, Lila and Lenù persist in their struggles to make themselves known through their work in the face of unimaginable odds. While Lenù focuses on academics, Lila becomes preoccupied with dreams of revolutionizing her father’s shoe business—an idea to which her father, Fernando, is deeply resistant. Toward the end of the novel, two climactic incidents—the unhappy culmination, for both women, of their youth’s “work”—underscore how even when women devote themselves entirely to an idea or a project, the forces of capitalism and sexism conspire to blunt their initiative and render their efforts meaningless. Just as their mothers before them were reduced to roles as wives and caregivers, Lila and Lenù are confronted with the smallness of their efforts in the eyes of the men who surround them. Lenù, who has devoted her life to academics and who has recently, inspired by her crush Nino Sarratore, submitted a paper criticizing religion to a journal in which Nino frequently publishes work, learns that her piece has not been accepted for publication. Lenù is devastated as she reckons with the failure of what she sees as

her life's work. Since her youth, Lenù has felt academically inferior to the preternaturally smart Lila, whose proficiency for **languages** and whose effortless writing style have continued to flourish in spite of the fact that her parents, unable to pay for an education, pulled her out of school at a young age. Lenù's academic and ideological work has been the focus of so much of her life, and as she faces down its failure, she thinks the following: "Nothing diminished the disappointment. [...] I discovered that I had considered the publication of those few lines, my name in print, as a sign that I really had a destiny, that the hard work of school would surely lead upward, somewhere, that Maestra Oliviero had been right to push me forward and to abandon Lila." Lenù's work has always been meaningful in her relationship with Lila—she knows that her continued success in academia has made Lila jealous, and when she showed the piece she submitted to the journal to her friend, Lila admitted that Lenù's writing made her jealous and sad. Lila has told Lenù that she is "brilliant" and must continue studying no matter what—but in the eyes of Nino and the (presumably male) editors of the journal, Lenù's work is not worthy.

Meanwhile, the intrepid Lila, barred from attending school, tries to make something of herself in other ways, turning to a capitalistic approach to attempt to combat the forces of sexism that have kept her from an education. When she goes to work in her shoemaker father's shop, she decides to design a line of fancy **shoes** of her own. Lila believes they will sell for high prices and allow her father's business to flourish. Lila's ideas are discounted by her father and her brother Rino—and her attempts to make herself heard are often met with physical or verbal abuse. Eventually, the wealthy Stefano Carracci, in wooing Lila, offers to support her financially in producing the shoes. However, in the book's final lines, Lila realizes that Stefano has betrayed her not just by inviting her enemy and former suitor Marcello Solara to the party, but also by giving him—in an apparent show of fealty and goodwill—the very first shoes Lila herself made. "Marcello had on his feet the shoes bought earlier by Stefano, her husband. It was the pair she had made with [her brother] Rino," making and unmaking them for months, ruining her hands." Not only has Lila's work been sullied by the hated Marcello, but also her husband has seen the work she "ruin[ed]" herself for as nothing more than a tool in a compromise meant to protect himself, his honor, and his business from the wealthy and vengeful Solara brothers. Lila also realizes that her attempt to take on work of her own in order to game the forces of capitalism (which conspire against women) has been for nothing. The men in her life do not respect her, and the one to whom she has promised herself for life sees her dreams as things to be bought, sold, and traded.

Ultimately, both Lila and Lenù are forced to reckon with the ways in which their attempts at making their accomplishments known have failed. As Ferrante highlights the disappointments both girls face, she argues that women's work will always be

overlooked. Even though Lenù is narrating from the present day, there is not much optimism in her voice as she recounts the ways in which she and Lila, as girls, "ruin" themselves time and time again in hopes of achieving the recognition they deserve.



POVERTY, SOCIAL CLIMBING, AND SACRIFICE

In the poor suburb of Naples, Italy where *My Brilliant Friend* is set, opportunities for economic and social advancement are few and far between. As Lila and Lenù scheme throughout their shared childhood and adolescence, forever imagining ways to elevate themselves socially, economically, and academically, Elena Ferrante points out the fierce competition that arises between even the best of friends when matters of self-preservation enter the fray. Ultimately, Ferrante suggests that for those faced with a lifetime of poverty and hardship, it's often necessary to sacrifice emotional health, ideological values, and personal happiness on the road to escaping such dire circumstances.

Through the novel, Ferrante highlights several important moments in both Lila and Lenù's journeys where the girls—together and individually—seek the advancement of their social, economic, and intellectual stations. As Lila and Lenù strive for better social positions for their families, dream of amassing wealth for themselves, and seek escape through the promises of education, Ferrante demonstrates how both girls are forced, at different moments, to sacrifice their values, their dreams, and their hearts' desires in search of material betterment. Early on in the novel, Lila and Lenù begin to think of ways to escape poverty through their achievements. Lenù recalls, "In [our] last year of elementary school, wealth became our obsession. [Lila and I] talked about it the way characters in novels talk about searching for treasure. [...] We began to link school to wealth. [...] All you had to do was go to school and **write** a book." Lenù and Lila's shared the belief that if they studied hard and wrote well, they'd achieve fame and fortune as novelists. This passage is the key to understanding a great deal of the competitiveness that Lila and Lenù engage in throughout their academic careers. Lila and Lenù both see academia as the one way in which they can differentiate themselves from their parents and neighbors and make something of themselves—but when school is stripped away from Lila (her parents can't afford to pay her fees), she begins thinking of other ways to climb the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. Lenù, meanwhile, knows that in continuing school, she is sacrificing a part of her relationship with Lila—the two will never again be able to bond over schoolwork or books, the foundation of their friendship, and there will always be a seed of jealousy between them. Nonetheless, Lenù takes advantage of the opportunity she's been offered and pursues an education with vigor and determination.

As Lenù continues her studies, Lila goes to work in her father,

Fernando's, shop and begins to blossom into a beautiful young woman. Sensing the change in the way men look at her, Lila begins to see love and romance as a way of advancing her social position, given her failure to convince her brother Rino and her father to manufacture a line of **shoes** of her own invention—as well as the fact that learning and books are off-limits to her. As a result, Lila feels compelled to turn to partnership in order to live a comfortable life. Using her skills to invent and craft shoes would give Lila a way to make her own money—and her own social impact—while avoiding a painful sacrifice. But ultimately, Lila has no choice but to turn to romances with men anyway. Throughout courtships with the cruel but powerful Marcello Solara and the wealthy but self-centered Stefano Carracci, Lila sacrifices her time and attention—and, in Lenù's view, her dignity—as she abandons books and learning to focus only on becoming a beautiful and submissive wife. Just as Lenù sacrificed something enormous—her kinship with Lila—in pursuing her own advancement through education, Lila, too, chooses to sacrifice her relationship with Lila as she pursues the economic and social advancement that a good match will bring to her and her family. Lila rails against her parents' belief that she should marry the corrupt Marcello, perhaps believing that such a marriage would require too much sacrifice. But even when she takes up with Stefano Carracci, Lila still finds that she must still give up her autonomy, her integrity, and ultimately her dignity to ensure the match is sealed. Stefano's betrayal of Lila at the end of the novel takes place when he invites Marcello to their wedding against Lila's wishes and even gives him the special shoes Lila worked so hard to make as proof of her ideas' worth. In the middle of her wedding reception, Lila realizes that she has sacrificed her values in order to secure money, freedom from her family, and the ability to pursue her own life.

In the world of *My Brilliant Friend*, simply bettering oneself intellectually and emotionally doesn't really translate to the betterment of one's circumstances, no matter how much the protagonists wish that it would. Pulling oneself up out of poverty, according to Ferrante, necessitates a cutthroat competitive streak and a sense of determination. Most tragically of all, it requires a willingness to renounce one's happiness and one's inner world in pursuit of more money, more power, and more security.



THE USES OF COMMUNITY

The neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples, Italy in which *My Brilliant Friend* is set is a small and insular one in which generations of families have grown—however uncomfortably—alongside with one another. Throughout the novel, Elena Ferrante questions what the uses of a community are when one's community is divided so profoundly by interpersonal conflict, generational animosity, financial inequity, and, above all, violence. Ultimately, Ferrante

suggests that a community that fixates on resentments, vendettas, and smallminded struggles will never be able to confront its checkered past or organize together to work toward a future defined by prosperity, neighborliness, and true solidarity.

In a community as insular as the one in which Lila and Lenù grow up, it would seem that kindness and camaraderie would abound—however, the opposite is true. Gossip, betrayal, and violence are all a part of life along the main *stradone*, or avenue, of the Neapolitan neighborhood. Throughout the novel, Ferrante demonstrates how the divisions in the community make so many things impossible: the pursuits of friendship, economic advancement, or simple neighborly support are drowned out by social posturing, the drive for vengeance, or plain jealousy. Early on in the book, Lila and Lenù's elementary school teacher Maestra Oliviero tells Lenù about “the plebs”—the lower classes of Ancient Rome who were represented by the Gracchi, brothers who pushed for social reform but failed and were met with execution. Maestra Oliviero warns Lenù that “plebeians” still exist, and that “if one wishes to remain a plebian, he [and his family] deserve nothing.” Maestra Oliviero tells Lenù this in order to encourage her to “forget [Lila] and think of [her]self only.” In other words, she thinks that Lenù should sacrifice anything—even her best friend—in order to avoid being a plebian. Maestra Oliviero's cruel words represent much of the neighborhood's view of one another. Rather than uniting and working together in their businesses, marriages, and social gatherings, people are encouraged as individuals and as family units to “forget” their neighbors and focus only on themselves. This passage also illustrates the deep-rooted history behind these decisions and influences. In ancient times, the “plebs” failed to unite and better their situation—now, Lila and Lenù's neighbors feel there is no hope for betterment through community, even though their frustrations with their individual failures continue to mount and intensify.

Throughout the novel, social divisions related to money and power divide the families of the neighborhood even on occasions which should unite them all in service of their greater community. One of the major instances in which the divisions that plague Lila and Lenù's community is made clear comes during a New Year's Eve celebration. Each year, the wealthy Solara brothers Marcello and Michele amass a stock of **fireworks** and put on a grand display—but tired of the Solaras' showiness, Lila's brother Rino becomes determined to put on his own display. Rino sees the Solaras—a family tied to the Camorra, a crime syndicate dating back to the 17th century—as “enemies to be beaten.” Rino is disgusted by his neighbors' fealty to the powerful Solaras, and so he decides to take a stand against them. Rino, then, begins collecting money from his neighborhood friends and stockpiling fireworks. At midnight on New Year's Eve, a “war” begins as Rino and his friends launch

fireworks in competition with the Solaras, shouting taunts and curses as they do. The night culminates in a finale no one expected yet perhaps should have seen coming: the Solaras fire gunshots at Rino and the other neighborhood boys. The fireworks incident is just one of many in which the various members of the neighborhood—generally the men, but often the women as well—attempt to humiliate and best one another rather than coming together in unity. Many of the neighborhood conflicts are rooted in crime and money—but just as many are steeped in honor and hubris, as men try to defend their sisters and girlfriends from unwanted stares and provocations, protect their businesses from being bought out by wealthier neighbors, and prove their families' superiority. The fireworks display is singular in its grandiosity, and it comes to symbolize the waste, vanity, and violence of the neighborhood's power struggles. Through this sequence, Ferrante indicts the divisions and cruelties that keep communities from coming together in harmony.

Even during major events, the members of Lila and Lenù's stratified community fail to come together: uneasy alliances are brokered and new partnerships are made as a few of the men in the community try to soften things for themselves. But when these men selfishly seek ease for themselves without considering the needs of their partners, friends, or community, trouble ensues. Another incident in which Ferrante highlights the pettiness of the community's failure to come together harmoniously—even in times of joy—comes during Lila's wedding to Stefano Carracci, son of the deceased loan shark Don Achille. Toward the end of the novel, as Lenù looks around Lila's increasingly raucous wedding reception, she realizes in horror that "The plebs were us. The plebs were that fight for food and wine, that quarrel over who should be served first and better..." As Lenù realizes that there will never be an end to the posturing, fighting, and slights in her community, a sense of despair washes over her. She feels that she and her family will never be able to better themselves socially or economically as long as every other family is seeking its own individual profit, prosperity, and advancement at the expense of their neighbors' health, happiness, and dignity.

The cruelty, animosity, and envy that pervade the neighborhood of Lila and Lenù's youth have roots deep in the region's history—and deep consequences for its future. By pointing out how petty interpersonal or interfamilial fights hold communities back from achieving goals, Ferrante suggests that individuals will have to start standing up for their neighbors if they're ever going to build strong communities capable of real change.



LOVE, SEX, AND STRATEGY

As Lila and Lenù grow from children to young women over the course of *My Brilliant Friend*, they compete with each other not just in terms of

academics, creativity, or even beauty, but in the measure of male attention they receive over the course of their adolescent years. As the girls rotate through a veritable carousel of crushes, boyfriends, and violent or nonconsensual sexual encounters, they struggle to understand the world of love and sex while maintaining their ever-shifting senses of self. As Lila and Lenù chase the attention of the boys and men around them (or, in some cases, halfheartedly submit to it) Elena Ferrante suggests that while romance and passion are powerful forces in the formation of one's identity, they are just as often strategic as they are impassioned and genuine.

Lila and Lenù's friendship diverges and converges again and again throughout the novel as the girls' individual and intertwined experiences with love, sex, and romance unfold—and Ferrante demonstrates how there are most often highly strategic or otherwise unemotional motivations detached from real passion behind those choices. "In the courtyard [of school] [...] only love and boyfriends counted," Lenù recalls of her middle school days. Even as a young teen, Lenù recalls considering romance and partnership a social strategy—she is "proud" when Gino, the son of the neighborhood pharmacist, asks to be her boyfriend, but she rejects him out of hand and enjoys the feeling of power that rejection gives her. When Lila begins going steady with a neighborhood boy named Pasquale, Lenù's mind becomes filled with one "single true thought: to find a boyfriend," desperate not to lag behind her friend in terms of emotional or romantic experience. As the girls themselves become older, the ages of the men they attract also become socially strategic factors. For instance, when Lila becomes betrothed to the older and wealthier Stefano, Lenù, too, becomes determined to get herself a man—not a scrawny, poor neighborhood boy. She begins using Alfonso, Stefano's brother, both to compete with Lila and to distract herself from her own longing for the aloof Nino Sarratore. While Lila and Lenù enjoy having boyfriends, they are less attached to the men themselves than to the status and privileges having a boyfriend allows them: the social superiority of a well-positioned boyfriend and the idea of a built-in chaperone are more appealing ideas than romantic love or sexual passion. Though Lenù does secretly harbor genuine feelings of love and longing for Nino, she focuses instead on the strategy of dating rather than allowing herself the possibility of real love, a concept which is considered secondary, in her and Lila's world, to the advantages of a well-made match.

Lila and Lenù's romantic exploits comprise much of the novel's trajectory, yet toward the end of the book Ferrante chooses to center the climactic event of Lila's wedding to Stefano Carracci in order to show how the pursuit of strategic, advantageous matches have in fact blunted both girls' experiences of the world and, in Lila's case, thrown their lives off course perhaps forever. As Lenù helps Lila get ready for her wedding to Stefano, she reflects on her deep love for her friend—but also

admits to feeling the impulse to “distan[c] her with words just at the moment of greatest closeness.” Lenù considers the divergent paths their lives are now taking for the first time: “In the end there was only the hostile thought that I was washing her [...] just so that Stefano could sully her in the course of the night.” Lenù’s pain in this passage shows her belief that Lila, in strategically marrying herself off to Stefano in pursuit of wealth, improved social status, and an investor in her father’s **shoemaking** business, has made the wrong decision. Lenù aches for her friend, who is soon to be “sull[ie]d” forever by a man who does not truly love or care for her. Lenù herself is at this point dating Antonio, a boy she doesn’t love, while pining for Nino as she has for years. Lila’s decision to marry someone out of strategy seems to confirm Lenù’s fears as real: Lila’s decision solidifies the notion that the pursuit of romantic love will always be foolish and perhaps even useless.

Ultimately, Ferrante uses Lila and Lenù’s story of intense friendship to underscore the ways in which romantic and sexual relationships between men and women are so often strategic or calculated. Lila, Lenù, and their classmates see love as a means to an end: security or protection, social or financial advancement, or escape from one’s family or neighborhood. Love is a frivolity or even a waste in this world—a fact which will have devastating consequences for both Lila and Lenù as they make decisions with their heads rather than their hearts.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



SHOES

Shoes are a symbol of hope and financial progress, but also of the impossibility of success. When Lila’s parents, Fernando and Nunzia Cerullo, are unable to pay for her to continue her education into middle school, Lila goes to work in her father’s cobbler shop making and mending shoes for other families in the neighborhood. Lila is obsessed with finding a way to make money for herself as a means of escaping the neighborhood, so she begins scheming with her brother Rino to design a line of fine shoes for men and women that will pull their family’s business up out of obscurity and allow them to make real money. In this way, shoes represent a hope for a better life, a wealthier future, and a happier existence. However, when Rino gives the prototype he and Lila make to Fernando, their father lashes out in anger, furious that his children would attempt to change his business model (and likely afraid of how the neighborhood loan sharks would react to their money-making attempt).

In the second half of the book, an older Lila realizes that in order to make her dreams a reality, she must rely on the wealth

of men she at worst despises and at best tolerates. As such, the shoes become a symbol of the impossibility of true social mobility. Lila’s suitor Stefano Carracci becomes interested in the shoes. Though they are too small, he buys them for an astronomical sum directly from Fernando—and, in the same breath, he proposes to Lila and promises to invest a grand sum of money in the Cerullo shoes business so that Lila’s designs can be faithfully made. It seems that every move forward Lila makes has strings attached, and in order to make money for her family and establish social security for herself, she must sell herself (and her ideas) to the highest bidder. At the end of the novel, when the hated Marcello arrives at Lila and Stefano’s wedding wearing the very shoes Stefano purchased, Lila is full of rage and sadness—she realizes that even though marrying Stefano has given her the illusion of security, wealth and power will always rule her neighborhood. The implication is that Marcello has bought, extorted, or demanded from Stefano the shoes Lila made in order to free herself socially and financially. Ultimately, then, shoes represent Ferrante’s assertion that for women of Lila and Lenù’s time, there is little room for freedom, advancement, or recognition through work: everything is inextricably tied to men, money, and power.



LANGUAGE, LITERATURE, AND WRITING

Language, literature, and writing symbolize the complex connection that Lila and Lenù share throughout their friendship. From the time Lila and Lenù are young children, their relationship revolves around language. At first, the two barely speak—but soon, as both girls’ competitive natures become evident and as their connection deepens, their friendship becomes a way for them to test the boundaries of spoken and written communication. Throughout the novel, Lila and Lenù use spoken and written language, their love of literature, and alternating dialects in order to express themselves to one another and the world around them. When Lenù continues in school and Lila goes to work, Lila still tries to keep up with Lenù by checking books out from the library incessantly and eventually reading Lenù’s Greek, Latin, and Italian textbooks alongside her. Throughout their friendship, Lenù expresses fear that Lila will always be smarter, more articulate, and more expressive than she is—yet at the end of the novel, it is Lila who refers to Lenù as her “brilliant friend.” In this way, language represents the strain that living very different lives puts on Lila and Lenù’s friendship, as well as the mutual respect and admiration they hold for each other despite their differences.

Throughout the book, language, literature, and writing continue to serve as important symbols of instances in which the two girls are attempting to connect with one another across the vast distances their friendship weathers. As Lenù continues in school, Lila develops a chip on her shoulder about

what Lenù's access to education will mean for their friendship. When Lila begins communicating and having relationships with older boys, Lenù worries that she herself has chosen wrong in dedicating herself to her studies rather than striving to advance herself through social or romantic pathways instead. When the girls exchange written communication, each envies the other's writing style: Lenù despairs when she realizes how easily and naturalistically Lila is able to communicate through letters, and Lila is upset and intimidated when she reads Lenù's essay against religion and realizes how good her friend has become at developing strong written arguments all by herself. In this way, Ferrante uses language, literature, and writing as a symbol not only of connection, but of competition. The written and spoken word are external representations of the ways in which Lila and Lenù idolize each other while simultaneously seeking to prove themselves to and, ultimately, best each other.



FIREWORKS

Fireworks symbolize fraught the fraught class divisions between ordinary and powerful families in the novel. Each year, the residents of Lila and Lenù's neighborhood put on grand fireworks displays for New Year's Eve. The biggest of all these displays is always that of the Solara family, who are relatives of Silvio, a wealthy neighborhood loan shark and Camorrist (gangster). Marcello and Michele Solara, Silvio's sons, buy up fireworks from stores all over Naples—and one year, Lila's brother Rino becomes determined to put on a display that will rival theirs. As Rino collects money from his friends and neighbors in order to purchase fireworks, it seems as if he'll be able to best the Solaras after all—but on New Year's Eve, as the dueling displays get under way, it becomes clear that the Solaras' wealth will always enable them to squash their neighbors. Their family's ability to dominate something as frivolous as this New Year's celebration reflects their ongoing domination in more meaningful realms—namely, business, wealth, and positions of power.

As Rino becomes more and more furious and continues setting off more and more fireworks, Lila experiences something akin to a panic attack as the boundaries of those around her and the landscape of the neighborhood begin to break apart and “dissolve,” revealing the rotten core of cruelty, competition, and male violence at the heart of everything in her life. When the Solaras seem to have run out of fireworks, they begin shooting guns at Rino, Lila, and their gathered friends and guests in a final show of dominance and vengeance. Fireworks, then, come to represent the futility—and the danger—of attempts on the part of ordinary families like the Cerullos to combat, disrupt, or even begin to challenge the indomitable forces of money, power, and inherited financial and social capital.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Europa Editions edition of *My Brilliant Friend* published in 2012.

Prologue Quotes

☹☹ I was really angry.

We'll see who wins this time, I said to myself. I turned on the computer and began to write—all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Lila's Son / Rino, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, taken from the prologue of the novel, Elena Greco sits down at her computer to write down the story of her lifelong friendship with Rafaella Cerullo, whom she has called Lila since the girls met as children in 1950s Naples, Italy. Elena has just learned from Lila's panicked son that Lila has gone missing from her Naples home after clearing out her closet, cutting herself out of old photographs, and generally erasing her entire presence from her family's house. Elena is “angry” because she feels that Lila has taken her disappearance too far—and as revenge, she decides to write down every detail of their lives together. Throughout the novel, the ways in which Lila and Lenù use language, literature, and writing to prove themselves to their friends, to their teachers, and most importantly to each other will become clear. The girls, having grown up in poverty, see success in writing and academia as a ticket out and proof of their specialness. It's also a way to connect in the midst of a culture built upon violence, cruelty, and cutthroat survival tactics. Even into their later years, it is clear that Elena and Lila use writing as a way to one-up, punish, and make themselves seen to each other.

Childhood: Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence. [...] The women fought among themselves more than the men... [...] As a child I imagined tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood at night [...] and entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

As Elena begins looking back on her childhood, she recalls the “violence” that marked the entirety of her childhood. This passage is significant because it introduces the idea that the generational, physical, retributive violence that marks relationships among men in Lenù and Lila’s neighborhood also has an effect on how the women relate to one another. The women in Lenù’s life are just as violent as the men around them—not only that, but Lenù suggests that their anger is even more desperate, rabid, and unpredictable. The “tiny, almost invisible animals” the young Lenù envisions in this passage speak to the sneaky but toxic ways in which violence integrates itself into a community, infecting people like a virus as its roots spread throughout a population and draw on old grudges, new tensions, perceived slights, and ingrained jealousies. The ways in which violence manifests differently—but just as dangerously—among men and women will play a major role in how the novel’s plot unfolds. Particularly, it will affect how Lila and Lenù struggle to navigate their own complicated friendship as well as the demands of staying afloat in such a cutthroat environment.

Childhood: Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ Anyway, however it had happened, the fact was this: Lila knew how to read and write, and what I remember of that gray morning when the teacher revealed it to us was, above all, the sense of weakness the news left me with.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Maestra Oliviero, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù realizes that Lila has taught herself to read and write—she is the first in their elementary school class who can do either. Maestra Oliviero, the girls’ teacher, is proud of Lila and urges her to show off for the rest of the class. Lenù feels “weakness” at the realization that Lila has surpassed her—and because Lila has made her brilliance known in the arena of language, reading, and writing, this passage sets up the idea that the written and spoken word will become the realm through which the two girls compete with each other as their lives continue to unspool. This passage shows readers the genesis of Lila and Lenù’s shared investment in learning languages, becoming expressive writers, and finding ways of making their voices heard. In a community like theirs, such skills are rare (and underappreciated) gifts, and yet Lila and Lenù will soon begin devoting their lives to proving themselves through their access to literature and their ability to navigate the world of language.

☝ Something convinced me, then, that if I kept up with her, at her pace, my mother’s limp, which had entered into my brain and wouldn’t come out, would stop threatening me. I decided I had to model myself on that girl, never let her out of my sight, even if she got annoyed and chased me away.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Elena’s Mother, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Elena recalls learning that Lila taught herself to read without any assistance, before any of their classmates. In the midst of this, the young Lenù realizes that in order to avoid turning into her mother (who is miserable and angry) or becoming tied to a fate similar to hers, she needs to emulate Lila’s academic success in order to advance and make something of herself. Elena’s mother has a limp and a wandering eye—and when Lenù pictures her older self, she imagines, with horror, turning into her mother. Meeting her mother’s physical fate is a fear which stands in for Lenù’s fear of meeting with her mother’s larger

fate—a fate tied to poverty, dissatisfaction, and violence. As a result, at an early age, Lenù forms the belief that in order to rise above and out of her neighborhood, she must tie her fate to Lila’s—no matter the cost to either of them.

Childhood: Chapter 10 Quotes

☹️ I merely threw into the cellar her Nu, the doll she had just given me.

Lila looked at me in disbelief.

“What you do, I do,” I recited immediately, aloud, very frightened.

“Now go and get it for me.”

“If you go and get mine.”

We went together.

Related Characters: Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo, Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lila and Lenù have been playing with their dolls near the grate over the cellar of their apartment building. When Lila throws Lenù’s doll into the cellar, Lenù responds by throwing Lila’s doll in rather than crying, emoting, or admitting how badly Lila’s actions have hurt her. When Lenù tells Lila that she plans on doing whatever Lila does—seemingly, for the rest of their lives—a solemn pact between the two young girls emerges. Lila seems to accept Lenù’s vow, perhaps viewing it as a kind of challenge as she agrees to descend with her friend down to the cellar together. As the novel progresses, the ways in which Lila and Lenù’s friendship often involves the two of them making complicated choices together—or separately, in response to each other—will repeatedly come to the forefront of both girls’ lives. Ferrante demonstrates that while Lila and Lenù often challenge and harm each other, their lives nonetheless continue to revolve around each other—and this impulse to circle and emulate each other can be traced back to this exact moment in their shared childhoods.

Childhood: Chapter 15 Quotes

☹️ Things changed and we began to link school to wealth. We thought that if we studied hard we would be able to write books and that the books would make us rich. Wealth was still the glitter of gold coins stored in countless chests, but to get there all you had to do was go to school and write a book.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù describes a change in her and Lila’s shared thinking. The girls begin to realize how necessary it is for them to make money if they ever want to escape their insular, violent neighborhood—and, somewhat charmingly, they begin to believe that the way to make piles of money to store in “countless chests” is to write novels. The author’s penname, Elena Ferrante, is an invented pseudonym meant to suggest that it is truly Elena (Lenù) who has grown up to write and publish novels about her and Lila’s childhoods. As such, this passage operates on a number of levels, some of which lend themselves to the idea of metanarrative or metafiction. Clearly, Lenù has grown up to write books—but whether she has escaped the neighborhood through her career or through some other twist of fate or drastic action remains unknown. Nevertheless, at this point in the novel, Lila and Lenù decide to use their shared proficiency for language and self-expression to try to pull themselves up out of poverty. As the girls age, they will continue to use language, literature, and writing as a point of connection and competition at varying points in their lives.

Childhood: Chapter 16 Quotes

☹️ “All they did was beat you?”

“What should they have done?”

“They’re still sending you to study Latin?”

I looked at her in bewilderment.

Was it possible? She had taken me with her hoping that as a punishment my parents would not send me to middle school? Or had she brought me back in such a hurry so that I would avoid that punishment? Or—I wonder today—did she want at different moments both things?

Related Characters: Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo, Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Nunzia Cerullo, Fernando Cerullo, Elena’s Father, Elena’s Mother

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

Toward the end of the first section of the novel, as Lenù prepares to take an admissions test for entrance into middle school, her and Lila’s paths begin to diverge for the first time in their lives. While Lenù’s parents support her as she pursues an education, Lila’s parents, who are poorer than Lenù’s, declare that there is no money for Lila to continue in school and they prepare to bring her to work in the family business at her father’s cobbler shop. Lila, who has for years been the better student of the two, pretends that she doesn’t care about the new direction her life has taken—or, alternately, she insists that she’ll simply attend middle school anyway and get a teacher to pay for her textbooks and tuition. Of course, of these responses suggest that Lila really *does* care, and that she’s deeply envious of Lenù’s ability to continue her education.

As the test nears, Lila suggests that Lenù play hooky from school one day. Halfway through their journey on foot to the sea, Lila becomes nervous and drags Lenù back to town, where Lenù’s enraged parents reprimand and beat her—but they don’t tell her that she cannot continue preparations for the test. In this passage, Lenù realizes that Lila attempted to cruelly betray her in hopes of getting Lenù barred from the admissions test. Her feelings are complicated as she processes the idea that her best friend would have sought to sabotage her so that they could continue to be together—or simply so that Lenù would not be able to outstrip the wounded, indignant Lila in terms of her accomplishments. This dynamic—the desire to keep from being left behind at any cost—will continue to define Lila and Lenù’s relationship as they grow older and experience fluctuating “convergences and divergences.”

Adolescence: Chapter 8 Quotes

☞ I said no because if my father found out that I had gone in that car, even though he was a good and loving man, even though he loved me very much, he would have beat me to death, while at the same time my little brothers, Peppe and Gianni, young as they were, would feel obliged, now and in the future, to try to kill the Solara brothers. There were no written rules, everyone knew that was how it was.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Michele Solara, Marcello Solara, Elena’s Father

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù refuses an offer from the handsome, powerful Solara brothers to take a ride with them in their brand-new Fiat 1100—the nicest car in the neighborhood. Here, as she explains to her readers the reasons behind her refusal, Lenù makes a series of pointed observations about the nature of generational, retributive male violence, and how acts of vengeance hearkening back years or even decades control the social, economic, and emotional atmosphere of the neighborhood. Though there are no “written rules” about the way violence is perpetrated and perpetuated throughout the neighborhood, Lenù is intimately aware of how her actions in these crucial adolescent years will reverberate not just through her own life, but through the lives of her relatives and descendants as well. This passage, which comes early on in the second part of the novel—the part which covers Lenù and Lila’s adolescence—sets a dark, foreboding stage for the complicated and indeed frightening world in which the girls will come of age.

☞ I tried to remind her of the old plan of writing novels... [...] I was stuck there, it was important to me. I was learning Latin just for that, and deep inside I was convinced that she took so many books from Maestro Ferraro's circulating library only because, even though she wasn't going to school anymore, even though she was now obsessed with shoes, she still wanted to write a novel with me and make a lot of money. Instead, she shrugged... [...] "Now," she explained, "to become truly rich you need a business."

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Fernando Cerullo, Rino Cerullo, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

Early on in the second part of the novel, Lenù and Lila's paths begin to diverge sharply: Lenù continues on in middle school, while Lila, whose parents cannot afford to continue supporting her education, goes to work for her father in his cobbler shop alongside her brother Rino. In this passage, Lenù, fearful that Lila is drifting apart from her (and jealous of the gusto with which Lila has thrown herself into the craft of making and mending shoes), attempts to connect with Lila over the subject which bonded them most closely together: language, literature, and writing.

As the novel continues to develop, the written and spoken word will serve as a symbol for the ways in which Lila and Lenù continue to compete with each other even as their paths diverge, while shoes will come to symbolize the sacrifices one must make in order to pull oneself or one's family up out of poverty in Lila and Lenù's world. Here, Ferrante contrasts these symbols in a single paragraph to show that while Lenù clings to the childlike idea that she and Lila can continue living in a world defined by their smarts and imaginations, Lila has decided to sacrifice the intimacy of her friendship with Lenù and her love of learning in order to try to "become truly rich" and game the socioeconomic system which she feels is rigged against her.

Adolescence: Chapter 12 Quotes

☝☝ I told her in a rush that I was going to the high school. [...] I did it because I wanted her to realize that I was special, and that, even if she became rich making shoes with Rino, she couldn't do without me, as I couldn't do without her.

She looked at me perplexed.

"What is high school?" she asked.

"An important school that comes after middle school."

"And what are you going there to do?"

"Study."

"What?"

"Latin,"

"That's all?"

"And Greek."

[...]

She had the expression of someone at a loss, finding nothing to say. Finally she murmured, irrelevantly, "Last week I got my period."

Related Characters: Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo, Elena "Lenù" Greco (speaker), Rino Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 132-133

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Lenù passes her high school entrance exam, she finds herself slightly disappointed and lonely when no one—not even her parents—seem too excited about her academic success. Lenù decides to go to Lila to share the good news with her—but Lila, too, is "perplexed" rather than excited by Lenù's announcement. As the passage unfolds, Ferrante shows how Lila uses willful ignorance and purposefully forces Lenù to consider the smallness of her achievement and the irrelevance of school and learning in order to make her feel bad. Lila, who herself is intensely jealous of Lenù's ability to continue in school, feigns an inability to understand the importance of a high school education. She then tries to one-up Lenù with the only ammunition she has, which is that she has recently gotten her period and become a woman—at last catching up to Lenù, who got her period years ago.

This passage represents just one example of the many times throughout Lila and Lenù's teenage years in which the girls, sensing a shifting chasm between them, will alternate

between trying to one-up each other and trying to relate to each other in order to connect again. Due to the competitive nature of their relationship, getting closer often feels like competing with each other—Lila and Lenù will continue to center their lives and achievements around each other as they try to remain on the same page in spite of their ever-shifting individual circumstances.

Adolescence: Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ She had begun to study Greek even before I went to high school? She had done it on her own, while I hadn't even thought about it, and during the summer, the vacation? Would she always do the things I was supposed to do, before and better than me?

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 141-142

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lila has just bragged to Lenù about knowing the Greek origins of the word “gramophone.” Lenù is devastated to find out that Lila has begun studying Greek on her own over the summer without telling Lenù or inviting her to study alongside her. Lenù realizes that even though she herself is continuing on in school while Lila is barred from attending institutions of higher education, Lila will always “do the things [she is] supposed to do” first—and perhaps better. This passage is significant because it demonstrates the ways in which Lila and Lenù feel the need to continually one-up each other and challenge each other’s superiority as they grow up: both girls have a terrible fear of being left behind by the other intellectually, emotionally, or experientially. Lenù is afraid of a life in which she must always compete with Lila—and yet without Lila’s influence, there is a part of Lenù that knows she would not be so driven to succeed in school.

Adolescence: Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ [Rino] had always seemed to her only generously impetuous, sometimes aggressive, but not a braggart. Now, though, he posed as what he was not. He felt he was close to wealth. A boss. Someone who could give the neighborhood the first sign of the good fortune the new year would bring by setting off a lot of fireworks, more than the Solara brothers, who had become in his eyes the model of the young man to emulate and indeed to surpass, people whom he envied and considered enemies to be beaten, so that he could assume their role.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Michele Solara, Marcello Solara, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo, Rino Cerullo

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, as Rino declares his intention to host a New Year’s Eve party with a massive firework display that will rival that of the Solaras’ yearly blowout, Lila becomes concerned about the changes she has begun to witness in her brother. Given the entrenched, immutable social hierarchy of the neighborhood, attempts to get “close to wealth” or act like a “boss” are not just foolish but dangerous. In attempting to outdo the Solaras, Rino is making a statement for the whole neighborhood to see about who deserves to be in charge. The fireworks, which are crucially important to social hierarchy and dominance in the neighborhood, emerge as a potent symbol of the struggle to advance socially and economically in the face of entrenched, generational social roles and the constant threat of retributive violence. Though Lila worries that Rino is being careless in his attempts to outdo the Solaras, Rino is taking an action that is in many ways similar to Lila’s own attempt to advance through shoemaking or Lenù’s attempt to advance through obtaining an education: he wants to “assume [a better] role” and leave his old life behind.

Adolescence: Chapter 21 Quotes

☛☛ Stefano, according to Lila, wanted to clear away everything.

He wanted to try to get out of the before. He didn't want to pretend it was nothing, as our parents did, but rather to set in motion a phrase like: I know, my father was what he was, but now I'm here, we are us, and so, enough. In other words, he wanted to make the whole neighborhood understand that he was not Don Achille and that the Pelusos were not the former carpenter who had killed him.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Alfredo Peluso, Don Achille Carracci, Stefano Carracci, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stefano Carracci—the grown son of the hated and murdered loan shark Don Achille Carracci—invites Lila, Lenù, their families, and even the Peluso family (the relatives of his father’s alleged murderer) to come to his house for a New Year’s Eve party. Lenù and Lila are both shocked by Stefano’s unprecedented decision to make peace with an enemy rather than seeking retribution through violence or extortion. Stefano is different from anyone else in their neighborhood: he wants to sever the tradition of generational, retributive violence that defines all relationships in their community in hopes of making the neighborhood a better place for all. This passage represents a glimmer of hope for Lila and Lenù, who have, since childhood, been scheming and plotting ways to escape their neighborhood. If things seem on the verge of change, perhaps there is a way forward which will allow the community to come together rather than seek individual advancement, vengeance for past slights, and the continuation of petty vendettas which define so much of life for Lila, Lenù, and their neighbors.

Adolescence: Chapter 22 Quotes

☛☛ [Lila] was staring at the shadow of her brother—the most active, the most arrogant, shouting the loudest, bloodiest insults in the direction of the Solaras’ terrace—with repulsion. It seemed that she, she who in general feared nothing, was afraid. [...] We were holding on to each other to get warm, while they rushed to grab cylinders with fat fuses, astonished by Stefano’s infinite reserves, admiring of his generosity, disturbed by how much money could be transformed into fiery trails, sparks, explosions, smoke for the pure satisfaction of winning.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Stefano Carracci, Michele Solara, Marcello Solara, Rino Cerullo, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù recalls a fateful New Year’s Eve celebration at the home of the Carraccis. At this party, Rino and his friends—with the help of Stefano—set off a massive display of fireworks meant to rival the Solaras’ yearly blowout and suggest to the Solaras that their position of dominion in the neighborhood was not fixed. This passage is significant because it demonstrates the ways in which male violence controls and seeps into every part of life in Lila and Lenù’s neighborhood—even momentous celebrations such as this one are easily tainted and warped by the desire of the neighborhood’s perpetually-warring men to best one another. While the violent, terrifying fireworks display escalates in intensity, Lila and Lenù cling to one another not just out of cold but indeed out of fear. Lila and Lenù are not without socioeconomic aspirations—like their male counterparts in the neighborhood, they want better for themselves and their families. Displays like this one, however, are particular to the strain of violence which infects the men in their community. As the girls watch their male siblings and friends light “cylinders with fat fuses” and set off fearsome explosions, the girls become “repuls[ed]” by the endless cycles of cruelty, violence, and punitive displays of force which rule their lives.

Adolescence: Chapter 27 Quotes

“What would it cost you to let him see them?” I asked, confused.

She shook her head energetically. “I don’t even want him to touch them.”

Related Characters: Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo, Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Fernando Cerullo, Rino Cerullo, Marcello Solara

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lila cowers alone in her building’s stairwell during one of Marcello Solara’s visits to her family’s home. The cruel yet handsome and powerful Marcello has been courting Lila for months, and no amount of indifference or outright contempt she shows him can scare him away. Her parents encourage Lila to accept Marcello, knowing that a match between them would do wonders for their social and economic position—not to mention for Fernando’s cobbler shop. Just before this scene, Lila has been sent to fetch a pair of shoes that she and Rino made themselves as a prototype of a new line of shoes for men. Rather than let Marcello touch or even see the shoes, however, Lila holds them in her lap in the stairwell, desperate to keep her work from being sullied by the odious Marcello. Shoes function as a symbol of the sacrifices Lila makes throughout the novel to secure her social and economic advancement—yet when confronted with the prospect of marriage to the hateful Marcello, Lila would rather protect herself (and her dreams for the future) from him than accept the offer of financial stability and social advancement that a union with him would offer.

Adolescence: Chapter 34 Quotes

Lila was able to speak through writing; unlike me when I wrote, unlike Sarratore in his articles and poems, unlike even many writers I had read and was reading, she expressed herself in sentences that were well constructed, and without error, even though she had stopped going to school, but—further—she left no trace of effort, you weren’t aware of the artifice of the written word. I read and I saw her, I heard her.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Nella

Incardo, Maestra Oliviero, Donato Sarratore, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 226-227

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù—who is vacationing on Ischia alone at the home of Maestra Oliviero’s cousin Nella Incardo—receives a letter from Lila, who is still in their neighborhood. All summer, Lenù has been writing to Lila but hasn’t heard anything back—now, as she at last receives a letter from her friend, she finds herself stunned by Lila’s gift for expressing herself through writing. Lenù has, for years, come to see her own success in school as one of the few concrete ways in which she can compete with Lila’s more natural, ineffable brilliance—and here, Lenù is reminded that though Lila has been out of school for years and has not studied the books, languages, and concepts that she herself has, Lila remains gifted and talented in a way that Lenù perhaps never will be. Lenù finds herself enraptured by Lila’s words—on some level, she is jealous of her friend’s brilliance, but she is also spellbound and heartened by the idea that in spite of being unable to continue in school, Lila has not lost her preternatural gift for self-expression.

Adolescence: Chapter 36 Quotes

What did she have in mind? She had to know that she was setting in motion an earthquake worse than when she threw the ink-soaked bits of paper. And yet it might be that she wasn't aiming at anything precise. She was like that, she threw things off balance just to see if she could put them back in some other way.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Marcello Solara, Stefano Carracci, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Lenù returns home from several weeks on the island of Ischia, she realizes that Lila has decided to begin forming some kind of relationship with Stefano Carracci—a move that flies in the face of Marcello Solara’s recent courtship and threatens to destabilize the

neighborhood and engender more retributive violence should Lila refuse Marcello for Stefano. Lenù is familiar with Lila's desire to throw things out of balance "just to see" if she can repair them again in a new, unforeseen way—and though she has, in the past, been impressed by her intrepid friend's fearlessness and desire for change, Lenù admits here that she is frightened about what Lila has put in motion. Lenù is aware of the patterns of male violence that pervade her neighborhood—and of how Lila's actions could set in motion an "earthquake" which violently destabilizes everything and even puts Lila herself in harm's way. At the same time, Lenù is conscious of how Lila is using both men in her life to advance her own position and serve her own agenda—a risky move, to be sure, but one that could also change the neighborhood for better (and forever) if she is successful in her maneuvers.

Adolescence: Chapter 38 Quotes

☝ Punctually, three days later, he went to the store and bought the shoes, even though they were tight. The two Cerullios with much hesitation asked for twenty-five thousand lire, but were ready to go down to ten thousand. He didn't bat an eye and put down another twenty thousand in exchange for Lila's drawings, which—he said—he liked, he wanted to frame them.

Related Characters: Elena "Lenù" Greco (speaker), Marcello Solara, Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo, Fernando Cerullo, Rino Cerullo, Stefano Carracci

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 244

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Stefano Carracci visits the Cerullo shoe shop in order to purchase the shoes Lila and Rino have made—as well as Lila's sketches for a line of fine shoes for men and women—for an exorbitant price. Thus far, Lila and Rino's shoes have served as a symbol of the sacrifices Lila has made over the last several years in pursuit of economic and social advancement for herself and her family. Lila has given up school to learn the craft of shoemaking—and now, the shoes she has made, as well as her designs for future models, have been sold to the highest bidder. Lila is now sacrificing her independence in order to pull herself and her family up out of poverty, yet she has managed to goad Stefano Carracci into purchasing the shoes and investing in

her family's company before the cruel Marcello Solara could do so. Stefano seems genuinely devoted not just to Lila, but to her vision for the future of her family and her father's company. Lila believes that this will make the sacrifice of surrendering herself to a wealthy man less painful while also signaling to the Solaras that they cannot control her. Unfortunately for Lila, complications are still to come—complications that will destabilize her relationship with Stefano and dash her hopes for real change in the neighborhood.

Adolescence: Chapter 42 Quotes

☝ I established convergences and divergences. In that period it became a daily exercise: the better off I had been in Ischia, the worse off Lila had been in the desolation of the neighborhood; the more I had suffered upon leaving the island, the happier she had become. It was as if, because of an evil spell, the joy or sorrow of one required the sorrow or joy of the other; even our physical aspect, it seemed to me, shared in that swing.

Related Characters: Elena "Lenù" Greco (speaker), Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 256-257

Explanation and Analysis

As Lenù reckons with the new shifts in her relationship with Lila in this passage, she admits to her obsession with tracking the "convergences and divergences" in her and Lila's lives in an attempt to understand the mysterious connection between their fortunes. Lenù notices that when things are good for her, things are bad for Lila, and vice versa—she attributes this inverse proportionality to some kind of "spell" which will keep them bound to each other in times of "sorrow or joy" throughout their lives. This passage reflects the novel's central thematic ideal that female friendships have the power to determine the trajectory of a life (or a pair of lives). Lila and Lenù have made many important decisions in their lives based on how they want to appear to each other or how they'd like to influence the other. In this passage, however, Lenù allows for the possibility that in addition to the conscious alterations she and Lila have made to their lives based on the opinions or feelings of the other, there is also some inexplicable force tying their fates together as their parallel journeys unfold.

Adolescence: Chapter 43 Quotes

☝☝ Money gave even more force to the impression that what I lacked she had, and vice versa, in a continuous game of exchanges and reversals that, now happily, now painfully, made us indispensable to each other.

She has Stefano, I said to myself after the episode of the glasses. She snaps her fingers and immediately has my glasses repaired. What do I have?

I answered that I had school, a privilege she had lost forever. That is my wealth, I tried to convince myself.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Don Achille Carracci, Stefano Carracci, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù struggles with her jealousy over Lila’s newfound wealth. Having recently become engaged to Stefano Carracci, the son of the murdered loan shark Don Achille, Lila has found herself with plenty of money to spend for the first time in her life—and she has no hesitations about showing off her ability to do so as she procures gifts for herself and takes care of expensive favors for Lenù, even having her broken glasses repaired at an optical shop in the city. Lenù is jealous of Lila, but it’s not necessarily disposable income that she wants—she simply wants to never be behind Lila or out of step with her as they move through the world. Lenù tries to convince herself that she is lucky in other ways, and that school is her own personal “wealth”—yet Lenù cannot deny that the lifelong competitiveness she and Lila have exhibited toward each other has reached new levels in recent months as Lila’s life has changed drastically.

Adolescence: Chapter 46 Quotes

☝☝ I didn’t understand. The Solaras’ behavior seemed [...] consistent with the world that we had known since we were children. What, instead, did [Lila] and Stefano have in mind, where did they think they were living? [...] They weren’t reacting to the insults, even to that truly intolerable insult that the Solaras were making. [...] Was this her latest invention? Did she want to leave the neighborhood by staying in the neighborhood? Did she want to drag us out of ourselves, tear off the old skin and put on a new one, suitable for what she was inventing?

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Don Achille Carracci, Stefano Carracci, Michele Solara, Marcello Solara, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 273

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù expresses her surprise when she realizes that in spite of the fact that Marcello and Michele Solara have begun spreading ugly rumors about Lila—rumors that she performed oral sex on Marcello each night when he visited her parents’ house for dinner—neither Lila nor her fiancée, Stefano, plans on taking any retributive or violent action against the Solaras. Such a refusal to engage with the status quo is unprecedented in Lila and Lenù’s community—and the fact that it comes from the son of Don Achille, who was once the most fearsome, powerful man in the neighborhood, makes it all the more shocking. Ferrante uses this passage to demonstrate Stefano’s hope for a new way of building community—a hope that is soon to be dashed when he is, through shadowy and unseen mechanisms, forced to kowtow to the Solaras by including them in his wedding to Lila. Lenù’s hope that there could be a new “skin” for the neighborhood—one that Lila and Stefano themselves make—is pure but ultimately doomed.

Adolescence: Chapter 53 Quotes

☝☝ When she gave me back the notebook, she said, “You’re very clever, of course they always give you ten.”

I felt that there was no irony, it was a real compliment. Then she added with sudden harshness:

“I don’t want to read anything else that you write.”

“Why?”

She thought about it.

“Because it hurts me,” and she struck her forehead with her hand and burst out laughing.

Related Characters: Elena “Lenù” Greco (speaker), Nino Sarratore, Rafaella “Lila” Cerullo

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 300-301

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù, hoping to publish an article in a journal run by her longtime crush Nino Sarratore, shows a draft of her piece to Lila. Lila adroitly proofreads and edits the article, moving words and sentences around to help Lenù's arguments shine through more brightly. After editing the essay, however, Lila stoically declares that she doesn't want to read anything else Lenù writes—now or ever—because it hurts too much, before striking herself and making herself laugh.

This passage is significant because, for the entirety of the novel, readers have been following Lenù as she agonizes about being smart enough, good enough, and pretty enough to compete with Lila. Now, readers begin to realize (in the same moment as Lenù does) that Lila, too, has been living her life in pursuit of Lenù's approval, desperate to keep up with Lenù even as the gap between their lives widens. This shows that the competitiveness female friends commonly exhibit is often mutual, and that even bright and talented young people like Lila can be made insecure when they're forced to give up on their dreams. Further, Lila's laughter after her candid plea to Lenù suggests that she is characteristically downplaying her own sorrow in an effort to appear self-assured.

many have likely supposed that the "brilliant friend" of the title is Lila, here, Lila states that she believe Lenù is her "brilliant friend," destined to be the "best of all." Lenù realizes that the often-inscrutable Lila must have held her in high esteem all these years—just as the young Lenù made a concentrated decision to live a life that would revolve around Lila this passage confirms that Lila, too, has gone through life feeling bound to Lenù and determined to do right by her. Lila has chosen a path which keeps her from the things she loves—languages, literature, and learning—but she still believes that if Lenù completes the studious path before her, there will somehow be hope for both of them. Ferrante uses this passage to examine the effects of lifelong, entwined female friendships as well as the sacrifices so many are forced to make in hopes of elevating their social or economic station and lifting themselves out of generational cycles of poverty and violence.

●● In the end there was only the hostile thought that I was washing her from her hair to the soles of her feet, early in the morning, just so that Stefano could sully her in the course of the night. I imagined her naked as she was at that moment [...] His violent flesh entered her with a sharp blow, like the cork pushed by the palm into the neck of a wine bottle. And it suddenly seemed to me that the only remedy against the pain I was feeling [...] was to find a corner secluded enough so that Antonio could do to me, at the same time, the exact same thing.

Adolescence: Chapter 57 Quotes

●● "Whatever happens, you'll go on studying."

"Two more years: then I'll get my diploma and I'm done."

"No, don't ever stop: I'll give you the money, you should keep studying."

I gave a nervous laugh, then said, "Thanks, but at a certain point school is over."

"Not for you: you're my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls."

Related Characters: Elena "Lenù" Greco, Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, one of the most significant in the entire novel, Elena Ferrante throws her readers a curveball: while

Related Characters: Elena "Lenù" Greco (speaker), Antonio Cappuccio, Stefano Carracci, Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Lenù helps Lila get ready for her wedding day, she is full of envy, sadness, and apprehension. Her and Lila's lives, which have been so different for so long, are finally diverging in a huge and concrete way as Lila prepares to marry Stefano. As Lenù washes Lila's body and makes her beautiful for her wedding, she has violent and vivid visions of Stefano taking Lila's virginity later that night. Determined, as she always has been, not to let Lila leave her behind, she becomes convinced that she must find a way to lose her virginity to her boyfriend, Antonio, later that night—even though she doesn't really love him. This passage demonstrates the ways in which female friendship has the power to consume and direct the flow of a pair of lives, and it also deals with the ways in which women use the men in

their lives for purposes which are often secondary to the primary concern of female friendship. Lenù imagines sex and marriage as yet another realm of life in which violence, force, and cruelty reign—and even though she hates imagining her friend going through this, she becomes determined and even desperate to follow Lila into the unknown.

Adolescence: Chapter 62 Quotes

☞ Nothing diminished the disappointment. [...] I had considered the publication of those few lines [...] as a sign that I really had a destiny, that the hard work of school would surely lead upward, somewhere, that Maestra Oliviero had been right to push me forward and to abandon Lila. "Do you know what the plebs are?" "Yes, Maestra." At that moment I knew what the plebs were... [...] The plebs were us. The plebs were that fight for food and wine, that quarrel over who should be served first and better, that dirty floor on which the waiters clattered back and forth, those increasingly vulgar toasts.

Related Characters: Elena "Lenù" Greco (speaker), Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo, Nino Sarratore, Maestra Oliviero

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Lenù has just received the devastating news that her article will not be published in Nino's journal after all—smack in the middle of Lila's chaotic and increasingly violent wedding reception. She is deeply disappointed by the news, and as she attempts to process it in such a chaotic setting, she finds words Maestra Oliviero spoke to her years earlier echoing in her ears. During an elementary-school lesson about the "plebs"—the lower classes of Ancient Rome who attempted to unite and better their station, only to fail—Lenù struggled to comprehend the relevance of the history lesson. Now, though, Lenù realizes that the "plebs" are still a part of society—not only that, but she is one of them. Now that she has failed to publish her article, she fears that all of her attempts to move "upward" in the world have been for nothing. Lenù fears being trapped, as Lila is, in the world of their neighborhood, bound to the same fates as their parents—and even worse, she fears that all of her work to escape those things will serve no purpose other than to expose her sense of superiority and her desire to

leave her friends, family, and neighbors behind.

☞ Marcello sat down, loosened his tie, crossed his legs.

The unpredictable revealed itself only at that point. I saw Lila lose her color, become as pale as when she was a child, whiter than her wedding dress, and her eyes had that sudden contraction that turned them into cracks. [...] She was looking at the shoes of Marcello Solara.

[...] Marcello had on his feet the shoes bought earlier by Stefano, her husband. It was the pair she had made with Rino, making and unmaking them for months, ruining her hands.

Related Characters: Elena "Lenù" Greco (speaker), Stefano Carracci, Rino Cerullo, Marcello Solara, Rafaella "Lila" Cerullo

Related Themes:     

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 331

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the novel, Lila is horrified to realize that her new husband, Stefano, has broken his very first promise to her: the promise that her former suitor Marcello Solara would not be present at their wedding. Not only does Marcello show up at the reception and take a seat at the newlyweds' table—but when he does, he reveals smugly that he is wearing the very shoes which Lila and Rino made together as a prototype for a line of Cerullo shoes for men. Marcello refused to buy the prototype when it was shown to him—but Stefano offered an exorbitant price for the shoes. Now, it seems as if Marcello, whose family essentially controls all business in the neighborhood and its surrounding areas, has either demanded the shoes from Stefano or bought them off of the man at an even higher price.

This ominous passage foreshadows the influence that loan sharks, Camorristas, and predatory men will always have not just on Lila and her family but on the neighborhood as a whole. Stefano and Lila hoped that they could remake the rules of the neighborhood by refusing to participate in the violence and vengeance contained within it—now, however, Lila sees that there is no way to rise up against the circumstances of her birth. She has "ruin[ed]" her hands for nothing—it seems that no effort or endeavor she embarks on will ever truly free her from the control of men like the Solaras.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: ELIMINATING ALL THE TRACES

Elena Greco receives a phone call from her friend Lila's son. He tells her that his mother has been gone without a trace for two weeks. Elena can tell that Lila's son is worried by his inability to find his mother, but Elena suspects that the "small-time crook and spendthrift" hasn't actually looked very carefully for his mother at all. Lila's son asks if his mother is with Elena at Elena's home in Turin, but Elena scoffs at the idea that her old friend would ever leave Naples. When Lila's son begins crying, Elena tells him to stop looking for his mother and to learn to stand on his "own two feet." She hangs up.

Lila's full name, Elena writes, is Raffaella Cerullo. Everyone has always called her Lina, but Elena has never called her anything but Lila—she knows that if she were ever to use another name for her friend, it would signal that their friendship was finished. Three decades ago, Elena recalls, Lila told her she wanted to "disappear without leaving a trace" and vanish from her life, never to be found. Elena is not surprised that Lila has found a way to do so.

As the days go by, Elena looks through her house and realizes she has nothing from Lila—not a gift nor a note. She calls Lila's son, Rino, and tells him to look in his mother's closet. Rino stays on the phone with Elena as he opens his mother's closet: he reports that it is completely empty. Elena encourages him to look around the rest of the house. He stays on the phone as he does, reporting that all of his mother's possessions are gone—she has even cut herself out of old photographs. The next day, Rino calls back in a state of heightened distress as he realizes that all of his mother's possessions and papers are truly gone. He asks to come stay with Elena. Elena refuses him.

Frustrated with Lila for "overdoing it as usual," Elena sits down, "angry," to write all the details of her and Lila's shared story.

The opening lines of the novel investigate the strange relationship between Elena and her friend Lila. Elena doesn't seem concerned by the fact that Lila is missing, and she is full of nothing but contempt for Lila's son. Clearly, Elena seems to know Lila better than Lila's own family does—their friendship is mysterious but evidently strong.



This passage makes the depths of the relationship between Elena and Lila even clearer. The women seem to have something of a secret language, a friendship that has unwritten rules and unspoken vows. Elena knows Lila intimately, even though it seems that they have not seen each other in a while.



As Elena realizes the depths of Lila's decision to disappear completely, she becomes nostalgic for the friendship they shared. The prologue suggests that there has been a rupture in their relationship, as Elena has nothing from Lila anymore.



This passage introduces the idea of language, writing, literature, and storytelling as a central symbol within the novel—and within Lila and Elena's own mysterious relationship.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 1

Elena writes that her friendship with Lila began on the day they walked together up the stairs toward the apartment of Don Achille, a fearsome “ogre” of a man and the neighborhood loan shark in the girls’ small village on the outskirts of Naples, Italy. Elena, who was called Lenù as a girl, remembers watching the intrepid, fearless Lila “test [her] courage” each afternoon by sticking her hand into manholes, jumping from windows down the street, and sticking safety pins into her fingers. Whatever Lila did, Lenù did too, desperate to keep up with her brave friend.

On the afternoon, Lila decides that they need to go to Don Achille’s; Lenù is terrified. She has been taught that Don Achille must be avoided at all costs—Lenù and her family don’t even speak of Don Achille and his family out of a mixture of deference and fear. Lenù pictures Don Achille as a fearsome golem “created out of some unidentifiable material”—yet in spite of her fear, she follows Lila up the staircase toward Don Achille’s door.

On the fourth flight, Lila “unexpected[ly]” pauses and waits for Lenù to catch up with her. When Lenù reaches her, Lila extends her hand. Lenù points to this moment and gesture as the moment which “forever” changed things between the two girls, solidifying the nature of their friendship.

By interweaving the story of climbing the stairs to Don Achille’s apartment with other scenes of daily life in the neighborhood of her childhood, Elena creates an atmosphere of dread, escalation, and terrifying but unspoken power dynamics. She shows that as a young girl, she was willing to follow Lila into unthinkable situations—even at great cost to herself.



This passage makes clear how terrifying the unspoken rules of Lila and Lenù’s neighborhood are. The girls have been taught to fear Don Achille, but they don’t understand that because he runs the financial ins and outs of the neighborhood, he is fearsome to their parents in a way that is much more practical than the “ogre” or golem-like fantasies that the girls have made up in their heads.



Throughout the novel, Ferrante will examine how Lila and Lenù’s bond is based on a mutual tendency to emulate each other’s actions and experiences—this passage is the start of that transactional relationship.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 2

It is Lila’s fault that she and Lenù are on their way to Don Achille’s. Lila has recently thrown Lenù’s doll Tina down into a cellar grate. Lenù, a small girl in the first grade, is devastated by the loss of her doll. Her doll knows the same “terrors” she faces every day—such as Don Achille, whom Lenù constantly pictures crouching in their shared apartment building’s dank cellar. Elena recalls playing dolls near the cellar with Lila and her shabby cloth doll, Nu, one afternoon, when Lila suggested that they hold each other’s dolls for a while. The young Lenù agreed to switch—but as soon as Lila got ahold of Tina, she tossed her into the cellar grate in spite of knowing of Lenù’s fear of the cellar, Don Achille, and the black bag he uses to collect the things children drop into the grate.

This passage, in which Lila and Lenù mistreat each other’s dolls by casting them off into the cellar, shows that the girls are eager to test the bonds of loyalty and the boundaries of their budding friendship. This pattern will continue on throughout their lives as they compete with each other, seek refuge in each other, and fight for validation from each other time and time again.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 3

Elena writes that Lila, whom she met in first grade, was so impressive because of her badness. Lila was always getting in trouble, yet never kowtowed to their teacher Maestra Oliviero. Lenù recalls watching Maestra Oliviero fall and hit her head on the corner of a desk while walking through the classroom to reprimand Lila one day—looking at the teacher lying prone and unmoving on the floor, Lenù was full of horror but not shock. Lenù and Lila’s neighborhood is “a world in which children and adults [are] often wounded [...] and sometimes people die.” Tales of death from illnesses and accidents define the girls’ lives—fear lurks around every corner. The girls’ mothers tell them that swallowing cherry pits or gum will kill them instantly—so will drinking cold water too quickly or getting hit in the temple.

One afternoon, Lenù and Lila engage in a rock-throwing fight with Enzo Scanno (the son of Assunta the fruit and vegetable merchant) and some of Enzo’s friends. The girls hurl rocks at the boys together, and Lenù, bolstered by Lila’s determination to win, helps Lila land a blow on Enzo’s leg using a jagged stone. When Enzo picks up a large rock to throw back at Lila, Lenù grabs her friend’s arm—it is the first physical contact between them. Lenù urges Lila to quit, but Lila stands strong—and soon, Enzo succeeds in hitting her in the head with a rock, leaving a huge gash in her forehead.

This passage makes clear the atmosphere of violence and fear in which Lila and Lenù have grown up. While such an atmosphere has made Lenù timid and fearful, determined to fall in line and follow the rules, it has imbued Lila with a rebellious “bad” streak that makes her both dangerous to others and a danger to herself. Lila’s desire to flout rules and test the boundaries of the neighborhood’s social and behavioral dictums will continue as she grows older.



This passage demonstrates the ways in which, even at a young age, Lila and Lenù must deal with male violence in their daily lives. They must reckon not only with the violence itself, but also with the ways in which they, too, begin to feel compelled to replicate that violence in their own lives.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 4

Lenù thinks about blood: blood is what pours from wounds, but it’s also, according to her father, what connects her own mother to Don Achille through a “very distant relationship.” Lenù is frightened by her father’s hatred of Don Achille and the insults he often drunkenly hurls against the man after dinner. Lenù is afraid that Don Achille, with his “sensitive” ears, will overhear her father’s insults and murder him.

Don Achille’s “sworn enemy” is Signor Peluso, a carpenter with a gambling problem. Carmela and Pasquale, two of Lenù’s classmates, are the children of Signor Peluso. Their family is poorer than Lenù’s own, and Carmela and Pasquale are always trying to steal school supplies and toys from Lila and Lenù. Carmela and Pasquale’s father blames his “ruin” on Don Achille, claiming the man took all his carpentry tools and doomed his business. When Lila and Lenù are in second grade, a rumor of a terrible fight between Don Achille and Signor Peluso breaks out. Apparently, one recent Sunday after Mass, Don Achille responded to Signor Peluso’s screams by adopting his “most hair-raising form” and hurling Peluso against a tree, leaving the poor man spilling blood everywhere.

Lenù considers the frightening parts of life she doesn’t yet understand—she knows that Don Achille is fearsome and feared, but not exactly why. As a result of being protected from the reality of her neighborhood, she makes the situation even more fearful in her own head.



This passage demonstrates how casually and frequently violence is deployed in Lenù’s neighborhood. As the men around her squabble over money, honor, and perceived slights, blood is often spilt and reputations are often ruined. Lenù lives in a violent, dangerous world, the effects of which will continue to define the ways she seeks to escape it as she grows older.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 5

Elena writes that she feels no nostalgia for her childhood, which was “full of violence” each and every day—violence which she, Lila, and everyone in their neighborhood simply took for granted. The men, she says, were violent with one another, but the women fought even more often than their husbands. As a girl, Elena recalls, she imagined “tiny, almost invisible animals” pouring from ponds and sewers each night and infesting the bodies of the women in the neighborhood, making them all “angry as starving dogs.”

When Lila and Lenù are still young, Lila’s mother, Nunzia’s, relative Melina Cappuccio is suddenly widowed. Donato Sarratore, a railroad worker who lives in the apartment above Melina’s (in the same building as Lenù and her family) often helps the poor woman with her six children. Melina falls in love with the generous and helpful Donato and seeks to “do battle against [his wife] Lidia” and steal Donato from her. Soon enough, an all-out “war” breaks out between the two women as they sabotage each other by ruining each other’s laundry, trading insults in the street, and even fighting in the stairwell of their apartment building. Lenù soon grows frightened of the women’s rage.

Though Lenù sides with Lidia, the mother of her crush Nino Sarratore, Lila sides with her relative Melina. Lenù attributes Lila’s fealty to Melina not just to their status as distant relatives, but to the “mean[ness] in [Lila’s] heart.” One afternoon, walking home from school with Nino’s younger sister Marisa Sarratore, Lila and Lenù notice Melina coming down the street. Marisa taunts Melina, calling her “whore,” and Lila smacks Marisa to the ground. Lenù runs to Marisa’s side. When she looks up, she sees that Lila is across the street, walking determinedly in the path of passing trucks as she goes to Melina’s aid.

This passage demonstrates an early investigation into one of the novel’s central themes: the idea that women, exposed to prolonged and continuous violence perpetrated by the men around them, seek to replicate those violent tendencies because they’ve learned that violence is the only way to survive.



Female rage and violence is different from male violence in many ways—but it’s also similar, as this case between Melina and Lidia demonstrates. The violence the women perpetrate against each other is rooted in a sense of honor and vengeance—a desire not to lose what they believe is theirs.



This passage shows that from a young age, Lila seeks to go against the grain and show empathy to those who are not necessarily liked or respected. Lila extends her friendship and care even to those who are blighted, cast out, or downtrodden—she wants to repair her broken community, even though she doesn’t quite know how to yet.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 6

Maestra Olivero recovers from her fall and returns to school after a couple of days. She turns her attention to Lila, but she praises Lila rather than punishing her each day in class. One morning, Lila’s mother, Nunzia, is called to school. She brings gifts for Maestra Olivero and joins the girls’ class for the morning. The girls, who are just learning the alphabet, enjoy showing off for Signora Cerullo. Maestra Olivero announces to the class—and to Signora Cerullo—that Lila is the best among them. Lenù, thinking of Lila’s many infractions and behavioral incidents, is shocked.

The fact that Lila begins to succeed academically in spite of her badness makes her even more mysterious and attractive to Lenù. Lenù, who has long been her class’s star pupil, begins harboring curiosity—and perhaps a degree of jealousy and desire for retribution—about Lila.



Maestra Oliviero writes the word “sun” on the chalkboard in Italian. She asks Lila to read what is written there, and Lila says “sun” aloud. Nunzia gives Maestra Oliviero a “fearful” look. Maestra Oliviero calls Lila to the blackboard and asks her to **write** the word “chalk.” Lila spells the word mostly correctly, missing just one letter. Maestra Oliviero, proud, asks Signora Cerullo who taught Lila to read and write. Signora Cerullo says that she herself did not and adds that no one in the building has been giving her lessons. When Maestra Oliviero asks Lila who taught her to do such things, Lila answers, “Me.”

This passage further explores the idea of language, literature, and writing as central forces in Lila and Lenù’s relationship. The ability to express oneself—especially as a woman—in Lila and Lenù’s dangerous neighborhood is rare and exceptional, and the idea that Lila has taught herself to read and write at such a young age portends both her desire to prove herself and her need for an outlet through which she can make herself heard and known.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 7

Rino, Lila’s older brother, begins to insist that Lila taught herself how to read and write by sitting with him each afternoon while he works on his homework. Rino, six years Lila’s elder, was taken out of school when he was barely 10 years old—his father Fernando now takes him to work every day at his tiny cobbler shop to mend **shoes**. Lenù doubts that Rino, who was never studious and who never advanced past the fifth grade, taught Lila anything. Lenù believes that Lila really has taught herself how to read and write.

Rino wants to take credit for his sister’s success. Even though the two of them are still young, this pattern will become an important feature of their relationship as young adults—as Lila seeks her own advancement, Rino becomes determined to ride on her coattails.



The studious Lenù, who loves school, is full of “weakness” and defeat at the realization that the “bad” Lila has surpassed her academically. Though barely six, Lenù understands that excellence in school is a way to please those around her. Lenù is the favorite of her siblings and her father, and she’s desperate to please her distant, angry mother, whose wandering eye and pronounced limp make her fearful to Lenù. As such, Lenù knows that success in school is the only thing keeping her mother from sending her to work.

This passage introduces the idea of how badly Lenù wants to escape a fate in which she winds up like her mother. Lenù believes that succeeding in school is her ticket out of a life that resembles her mother’s miserable existence, and this is likely why her envy of Lila’s academic achievements is so pronounced.



Lenù laments that after Signora Cerullo’s visit, she is never singled out as special in Maestra Oliviero’s class anymore—Lila is now the one called to sit beside the teacher during lessons as a beacon to the other students. Lenù feels she has been demoted. She feels not only jealousy but an intense sense of doom. She becomes focused on Lila and determined to “model [her]self on that girl”—she never wants to let Lila out of her sight.

Lenù isn’t necessarily angry about Lila having surpassed her—she is simply depressed. Lenù becomes more determined than ever not to let herself be outstripped by Lila—she knows she needs to keep pace with Lila if she is to outrun the fate she fears for herself.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 8

Lenù attempts to “suffocate[e]” her jealousy of Lila and begins training herself to “accept readily Lila’s superiority in everything.” After a while, Maestra Oliviero returns some of her attentions to Lenù and her classmates Marisa and Carmela—but Lila, sensing she is about to be outshone, continues working harder academically and behaviorally. Soon, Maestra Oliviero is back to praising Lila above all others. Lenù is no longer focused on being the best in class—all she wants now is to be seen as being on the same level as Lila.

In spite of her brilliance, Lila remains disliked by all her classmates. Maestra Oliviero often sends Lila and Lenù together to other classrooms to compete with other classes—the teacher and her colleagues are always competitive with one another, and the Maestra is determined to show off her brightest pupils. Lila does spectacularly in these contests—she is able to solve complex sums in her head and spell difficult words in perfect **Italian**. Lila’s smarts appear “like a hiss, a dart, [or] a lethal bite” to her fellow students and her teachers alike.

One morning, Maestra Oliviero brings Lila and Lenù to Maestro Ferraro’s class of fourth-grade boys so that the girls can compete against Nino Sarratore and Alfonso Carracci (the third son of Don Achille) in a little competition. Nino and Lenù struggle to keep up with the difficult questions, and Lila is noticeably reticent to best the son of Don Achille. Enzo Scanno, however, begins shouting the answers from the back of the classroom whenever both students hesitate—Lila out of deference and Alfonso out of uncertainty. Enzo, the class dunce, surprises everyone with his participation—and his shouts bolster Lila, who soon begins holding her own against Alfonso.

Enzo soon steps in to replace Alfonso, and Enzo and Lila begin an exciting duel of the minds—but Lila quickly bests Enzo, who starts shouting “ugly obscenities” at her. This incident, Elena recalls now, was the impetus behind Enzo and his gang of boys beginning to throw rocks at Lila and Lenù.

As the months go by, Lenù realizes that her desire to keep pace with Lila doesn’t necessarily stem from a desire to be the best or to individuate herself from Lila or her other classmates. Lenù simply admires Lila so much that she wants to be like her in all things—she doesn’t want Lila to leave her behind.



Lila’s other classmates, both male and female, dislike her for her smarts. They envy her and take her superiority as a direct slight. This reaction on the part of Lila’s classmates isn’t so strange, given the culture of honor, vengeance, and retribution within which they are all being raised.



This passage makes clear that even the children of the neighborhood feel responsible for perpetuating the behavior of their parents’ generation. They feel the need to show deference to the children of the adults to whom their parents show deference—essentially, they’re bound by an unwritten and unspoken culture of violence and retribution to behave a certain way. As Lila begins to push against this unspoken dictum, she surprises those around her.



Just like their fathers, the young boys in Lenù and Lila’s school feel compelled to assert their dominance through violence—even over simple matters, such as school competitions and classroom embarrassments.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 9

Elena stresses the importance of the contest between Oliviero and Ferraro's classes. Though she and Lila were not yet good friends, she was able to intuit the sense of deference and respect Lila felt compelled to show Alfonso, the son of Don Achille—a sense that both girls have inherited from their parents.

Lenù feels terrible that even her beloved Nino Sarratore must show the same deference to Alfonso. Flashing back to the moment of the contest, Lenù recoils watching the beautiful, long-lashed Nino “collapse” in the face of the contest with Alfonso. She also has an important realization during the competition: Lila is beautiful, and especially so during moments of intensity. Lenù feels she is truly second-best in everything.

The day after the contest, the defeated and embarrassed Alfonso's older brother Stefano, who is 14 and an apprentice at the grocery store owned by Don Achille, shows up at school to berate and threaten Lila. When Lila shouts back at him, Stefano pushes her up against a wall and tries to grab her tongue, threatening to prick it with a pin. The next morning, Lila's brother Rino, having heard of Stefano's cruelty, picks a fight with Stefano and the two boys beat each other. Donna Maria, Don Achille's wife, comes to the Cerullos' door to shout at Nunzia. On Sunday, after mass, Fernando Cerullo apologizes to Don Achille timidly—Don Achille walks past Fernando as if he has not heard his words.

After Lila and Lenù's rock fight with Enzo, the older Elena recalls, Rino came to school to beat up the younger boy Enzo. Enzo, however, didn't mention Rino's beating to anyone. For a brief time, Elena recalls, the “feuds” came to a stop because of Enzo.

This passage confirms the fact that Lenù and Lila are compelled to move through the world in a certain way because of who their parents are—and who the parents of their classmates are. This makes Lila's defiance and insistence upon making her intelligence known all the more remarkable.



Lenù begins feeling jealous of Lila in ways. As she develops feelings for Nino, she begins to doubt her own beauty and seems to believe that Nino would prefer Lila. This represents an added layer of competitiveness that will emerge out of Lila and Lenù's friendship as the years go by.



This passage shows how the entanglements and fights that Lila, Lenù, and their friends get into have reverberations in their parents' world, as well. The children of the men who run the neighborhood are determined to maintain their fathers' dominance—and the parents of those who resist the children of the loan sharks and Camorristi who must pay the price.



This passage shows that there are small ways in which the endless cycles of retributive violence in the neighborhood can be broken or at least stalled—the question is whether the men of the neighborhood, young and old, can shoulder the humility needed to do so.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 10

After the rock fight, Lila begins subjecting Lenù to “proofs of courage” during their interactions at school, in the courtyard, and throughout the neighborhood. One afternoon, while playing with their dolls, Lila pushes Lenù’s doll Tina into the cellar grate. Though Lenù feels “unbearable sorrow” at the loss of the doll, she holds back her emotions. Lila asks Lenù if she doesn’t care, after all, about her doll. Lenù refuses to answer—she feels that to give the wrong answer and lose Lila would be even worse than losing Tina. In response, Lenù simply throws Lila’s doll Nu into the cellar. “What you do, I do,” she remarks stoically, to Lila’s amazement.

The girls resolve to go down to the cellar and fetch their dolls together. Though terrified of going into the dank space, they stick together as they grope their way through the dark crawlspace. Lenù imagines horrible things all around her and startles at the sight of a gas mask, a relic from the war, hanging on the hook. Lila helps to calm Lenù down, and the girls continue searching for their dolls but have no luck. As the girls walk back out of the cellar, Lila announces that Don Achille has taken the dolls and hidden them away in his black bag. Terrified, Lenù runs for the light of the courtyard.

In this passage, as Lila and Lenù test the boundaries of their friendship, Lenù openly declares her intention to mold her life around Lila’s choices. It is a bold declaration that is as vulnerable as it is assertive. It’s also significant that Lenù’s retributive, mirrorlike behavior toward Lila also reflects the ways in which the men of the neighborhood seek to replicate one another’s actions as they pursue honor and dominance. Lenù has likely learned such patterns by witnessing them as they unfold all around her.



The girls are both afraid of Don Achille, though they believe him to be a more literal monster than he actually is. The depth of their fears reflects the depths of their community’s fears of Don Achille and the things he can do with impunity.

CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 11

Lenù believes everything that Lila tells her—and so Lila’s declaration about Don Achille hits Lenù hard. She becomes frightened to her core and even gets sick with a fever over the days that follow. She stays home from school for several days, and when she returns to the streets and to school, she feels her neighborhood has changed. She can now see the “underground air bubble” of the cellar pressing up against the lives of her family and neighbors above ground.

Around this strange, sickly time, Lenù receives her first declaration of love. One afternoon, while returning home from buying bread, Lenù realizes that Nino and his brother are behind her. Nino catches up with Lenù and declares, in proper “school **Italian**,” that he wants to marry her when they are grown up. He asks if Lenù will be his fiancé. Lenù is filled with longing but answers that she “can’t” and runs away. She begins avoiding Nino, whose declaration, she feels, has come at an impossible moment: in the midst of her grief over losing Tina, her exhaustion over keeping up with Lila, and her fear over the threat of Don Achille and the cellar. Soon, Nino begins to avoid Lenù too. Lenù doesn’t tell anyone about their exchange for fear of embarrassing Nino.

Lenù’s fears of Don Achille continue to worsen, even making her sick as she considers just how powerful the man truly is and how much his influence “bubble[s]” beneath everything. Again, Lenù’s fears reflect the fears in her community—but she literalizes them, conceiving of Don Achille as a fairy-tale monster rather than a particularly powerful, violent man of flesh and blood.



In this passage, as Lenù receives a declaration of love from her crush, she balks at the attention and denies Nino—a decision which will haunt her over the course of the years to come. The fact that Nino offers up his declaration in “proper” Italian rather than the Neapolitan dialect (which he, Lenù, and all their neighbors speak day to day) shows again how important a symbol language is. It represents an opportunity to prove oneself, differentiate oneself, and gain the attention of others.



Lenù flashes forward in time. The Sarratore family is moving out of the neighborhood: Donato, Nino, and Lidia load a wagon with their household items, drawing the attention of their neighbors. Though the official reason for their move is that Donato has secured a better house through his job with the railroad, rumor has it that Lidia is forcing Donato to abandon the neighborhood to escape Melina. As the Sarratores ready their wagon to leave, the sounds of crashing and screaming begin to echo from Melina's apartment. Her tortured cries frighten Lenù and Lila. Melina begins throwing objects out of her window down to the street, shattering them on the ground. The Sarratores, all packed, begin leaving. Melina throws an iron out the window—it lands just inches from Nino, making a hole in the ground.

As Elena recalls the day that the Sarratore family moved out of the neighborhood, her wistful sadness at watching Nino leave is overshadowed by the terror of Melina's violence. Melina seems to mirror the violence that the men in the neighborhood exhibit, as she spares no one and thinks of no consequences. She exhibits a mixture of rage, fury, and desire for vengeance that threatens the very lives of her lover's children.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 12

Though Lenù and her schoolmate Gigliola Spagnuolo receive many more offers of affection from the boys in their class, Lila receives no male attention at all. She is unpopular, mean, and prickly. The only boy who shows her any sort of interest is Enzo, who one day brings her a bouquet of sorb apples. Lila insists she doesn't want them. Enzo tells her that in that case, she should take them home and throw them away there. On the way back to their building, Lenù declares that she likes sorb apples as a test to see if Lila will give the apples to her. Lila, however, doesn't offer them to Lenù and instead brings them home, where she hangs them prominently in her window.

This short chapter encapsulates the competing superiority and jealousy that Lenù feels toward Lila. As Lenù and her friends become interested in boys, Lila seems to shirk the idea of romance—yet she holds onto the bouquet given to her by Enzo, the very same boy who hurled rocks at her just a short time ago. Love and violence, this passage shows, are inextricable in the world of the novel—and as Lila and Lenù grow up, they'll have to learn how to navigate these overlapping concepts.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 13

Sometime later, Enzo asks Gigliola to be his girlfriend, but she rejects him and tells everyone about his offer. Enzo, humiliated, starts a loud fight with Gigliola in the courtyard and threatens her. Soon after, Enzo drops out of elementary school, enrolls in trade school, and begins work at his parents' produce cart. Lila and Lenù, meanwhile, face down the prospect of continuing on in school. Maestro Oliviero summons Lila and Lenù's parents as well as Gigliola's and tells all three pairs that the girls should pursue an education. Lenù's mother is against letting her daughter continue studying **Latin**, seeing education as a pointless thing—Lenù's father, however, advocates on Lenù's behalf, and soon her mother agrees to allow her to take the middle school admissions exam.

This passage shows how male violence infiltrates the spheres of women in insidious and frightening ways. In Lenù and Lila's world, when male honor is threatened, there is often violent, punitive retribution not just against other men but against women as well. To Lenù and Lila, the prospect of attaining an education seems like an escape from this vicious cycle.



Lila's parents reject the idea that she might continue on in school out of hand. Her father, Fernando, will not hear of it, and even hits Lila's brother Rino when he sticks up for her. Maestra Oliviero summons Nunzia to school to beg her to see Lila's brilliance—but Nunzia, controlled by her husband, cannot yield.

This passage shows how the men of the neighborhood control the lives and fates of the women around them. Despite Lila's academic talent, it seems that her father will never see her work in school as a worthwhile pursuit.



The day after Nunzia's visit to school, Lila and Lenù are walking to class when Lila declares that she is planning on taking the test to enter middle school anyway. Lenù believes without a doubt that Lila will do so. Lenù knows that "in the end," people always give in to Lila.

Lila refuses to believe that she will not be allowed to continue in school—and Lenù, inspired by Lila's strength and determination, shares in Lila's optimism.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 14

Lila is forbidden to do is to approach the home of Don Achille—but she nonetheless leads Lenù up the stairs toward the man's apartment a few days after the girls lose their dolls in the cellar. The girls are determined to make Don Achille give them the dolls back. Presently, looking back on the climb up the stairs, the older Elena can still feel Lila's hand in hers.

By again weaving in the story of approaching Don Achille's apartment, Lenù shows how Lila's ironclad will makes things possible for her that would be frightening or unthinkable to others.



At Don Achille's door, Lenù feels her heart pounding in her chest. Lila fearlessly rings the doorbell. Donna Maria answers the door and begins calling for Alfonso, believing the girls are there to see him. Instead, Lila demands to see Don Achille. Maria shouts for her husband, and soon the large man lumbers toward the door, a cigarette in his mouth. Lila introduces herself as "the daughter of the **shoemaker**," and introduces Lila as the oldest daughter of Greco, a city hall porter in Naples. Seeing Don Achille for the first time, Lenù is shocked to realize that he is a man of flesh and blood—not an ogre made of all the things he's stolen and hoarded from his neighbors over the years.

As Lenù begins to realize that Don Achille is an actual man rather than a monster, she feels her fears relax—yet her amazement at Lila's bravery is as powerful as ever. Lenù is able to see how even ordinary men can become fearful through the power they possess and the control they're able to exert.



Lila demands the dolls back, but Don Achille is confused. Lila tells Don Achille that he took them from the cellar. Don Achille shouts into the apartment, asking if any of his children stole the girls' dolls. His children shout back that they don't know anything about them. Again, Lila firmly tells Don Achille that he is responsible for taking the dolls and keeping them in his "black bag." With something "unexpectedly pained" in his voice, Don Achille repeats Lila's words, confused.

This passage shows that Don Achille truly is a man—a man who is, because of the power and influence he possesses, rarely confronted with what that power really means. Now, as he realizes that Lila and Lenù believe him to be a monster capable of magical feats, there is "pain" in him as he understands what even the young people in his neighborhood believe of him.



Donna Maria calls for her husband—dinner is ready. Don Achille reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a wallet. He gives Lila some money and tells her to go buy herself and Lenù new dolls—and to remember that the dolls are "gift[s]" from him. Lila grabs Lenù's hand and begins to pull her down the stairs. Lenù turns around, wishes Don Achille a good evening, and tells him to enjoy his dinner.

Don Achille gives the girls money to buy new dolls—but he urges them not to forget that he has done them a favor. Lenù continues to show Don Achille the respect she has been taught he deserves, even as Lila wordlessly denies it to him.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 15

Lenù and Gigliola begin attending private study sessions at Maestra Oliviero's house in order to prepare for the exam. Lila, whose parents have refused to pay for such lessons, does not accompany them—but she remains insistent upon taking the admissions exam. She declares that if she gets into middle school, she'll simply use Lenù's **books** rather than pay for her own.

With the money from Don Achille, Lila buys a copy of [Little Women](#) instead of a new doll. Lila has already read the **book** several times—it is her favorite. The girls begin meeting in the courtyard to read and reread the book over the next several months. Lila doesn't feel she can keep the book at home without incurring Fernando's wrath, so Lenù keeps it at her home instead.

Many arguments about Lila's academic future continue to unfold at home. Rino, who is about 16, defends her each time, but his own fights with his parents about their failure to pay him for his work in the shop discredits him and draws his parents' ire. Rino wants money so that he can pay for Lila to go to school. Fernando thinks it is preposterous for a girl to attend school, and Lila never speaks out against her father—she seems to sagely understand his reasons for keeping her home, even if she remains determined to go to school anyway.

Wealth becomes Lila and Lenù's "obsession" throughout their last year of elementary school. They dream of being rich ladies when they grow older, and they think of ways to amass a great amount of wealth and glittering treasure. Lila believes that if they write **books**, they will become rich. She suggests the two of them write a novel together—but when Lenù is distracted with preparations for the exam, Lila, bursting with energy, writes a novel on her own. When she shows the book, which is called *The Blue Fairy*, to Lenù, Lenù is deeply impressed with the depth and complexity of the work. Lenù suggests Lila give it to Maestra Oliviero to read, but Lila refuses.

One day, at Maestra Oliviero's house, Lenù gives the teacher Lila's copy of *The Blue Fairy* and excitedly tells her how great it is. The teacher replies that Lila should be studying rather than wasting her time with fanciful **novels**. Lenù is confused by Maestra Oliviero's attitude—and she's upset when Maestra Oliviero still has not read the book after several days. Maestra Oliviero asks Lenù if she knows what the "plebs" are. Lenù says she does. The teacher replies that if a man "wishes to remain a plebian, [then] he, his children, and the children of his children deserve nothing." Oliviero urges Lenù to forget about Lila and focus only on herself.

Lila is in denial about her inability to attend middle school and thus secure a path to a better life for herself through education. She is, however, as determined as she's even been to continue educating herself.



Lila and Lenù continue to use language, literature, and writing as a point of connection and competition as their friendship evolves.



Rino wants Lila to have the opportunities she deserves—he clearly loves and believes in his sister. Their violent father, however, is able to control Lila's fate regardless of how hard Rino fights for her.



Lila and Lenù have internalized the unspoken fact that the only way to escape their neighborhood is by amassing a great amount of wealth. Because language and literature have helped Lila attain the recognition of her teachers, the respect of her classmates, and even Lenù's friendship, she sees writing as a way of rising above her station and pulling herself up out of poverty, too.



Maestra Oliviero's cruel words in this passage reflect her anger with Fernando and men like him—men who prioritize their own vanity and power above that of the betterment of their children. Lenù takes Oliviero's sharp words to heart—they will continually inform her understanding of the world as she grows older, though Lenù will have a hard time not thinking about Lila's wants and needs.



In the aftermath of writing *The Blue Fairy*—and learning of Maestra Oliviero’s failure to read it—Lila becomes reserved and disheartened, yet determined to write another, better **book** one day. At the final class competition of the year, Lila beats out both Lenù and Gigliola—but during the last question, she falters and declares that there is a problem with the equation. Maestra Oliviero becomes angry with Lila and scolds her in front of the entire classroom.

Oliviero’s anger with Lila in this passage stems from the fact that she is despondent over her brightest student’s inability to continue in school. Oliviero knows that Lila has a great mind and could do great things with it, but unable to help her as she is, she decides to cast her out and distance herself from the girl who was once her star pupil.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 16

Just before the final test of elementary school, Lila encourages Lenù to skip school and leave the neighborhood for the afternoon. Lenù has never, within living memory, left the neighborhood. Lila devises a plan to tell their mothers that Maestra Oliviero is hosting an end-of-year party for her students so that they won’t worry when the girls aren’t home from school right away. Lenù tells her family about the “party,” and they all believe her lie—just as Lila predicted they would. The night before the excursion, Lenù is so excited she can barely sleep. She dreams of seeing the sea and glimpsing the nearby Mount Vesuvius.

Lila’s spontaneous suggestion that the girls play hooky excites Lenù—Lenù never stops to think that her friend might have a hidden desire or ulterior motive behind her request. Lenù thinks Lila simply wants to celebrate the end of elementary school, which speaks to her blind trust in Lila at this point.



Lenù and Lila meet early in the morning, as if they are going to class. Rather than head to the school, however, they turn toward the tunnel which separates their neighborhood from the countryside beyond. They hide their smocks and schoolbags in some nearby bushes and enter the tunnel hand-in-hand. They marvel at the echoes their voices make, and they laugh and shout as they head toward the other end. Lenù is elated by the idea of several hours of freedom alone with her beloved Lila. Unlike their other adventures to the cellar or Don Achille’s, this adventure fills Lenù with happiness rather than fear.

Every small adventure that Lila and Lenù have embarked on together so far—from rock fights with Enzo and the other boys to climbing into the cellar to confronting Don Achille—have been tinged with male violence and fear. Skipping school is the first thing they’ve done independently that is just about them and their freedom—and yet there is still an undercurrent of uncertainty and foreboding.



As the girls exit the tunnel and continue heading down the road, they hold each other’s hands and walk side by side—Lenù is comforted, since Lila is usually “ten steps ahead” of her on their adventures. After a while, the girls get tired and thirsty. Lenù starts to notice Lila looking at her strangely, and she feels Lila’s palm begin to sweat. Lila keeps looking back over her shoulder and stops talking—at first, Lenù attributes all of this to hunger or tiredness, but soon, she grows suspicious.

Lenù senses a change in Lila—but she doesn’t ever consider that her friend could be feeling guilt. Lenù believes the best in Lila and idolizes her profoundly. She doesn’t imagine that her friend could be capable of the jealousy and retribution exhibited by the boys and men around them.



Lenù notices that the sky is darkening—a storm is approaching. Soon, she can hear thunder. She turns to look at Lila, who is wearing a “new” kind of expression. Lenù realizes that Lila is afraid—she has never seen her friend exhibit fear before. As the first raindrops begin to fall, Lila suggests they head back. Lenù is reluctant, but Lila is “agitated.” She reaches for Lenù’s hand and begins dragging her back in the direction of home.

As the storm breaks, the girls begin running for home. By the time they reach home, they are soaked to the bone and shivering. They surreptitiously collect their schoolbags and put on their smocks, but as they enter the neighborhood square, Lenù sees her mother limping around with an umbrella in hand, searching the streets for her. Lenù runs to her mother, who slaps and hits her with the umbrella. Lila runs home. That night, Lenù’s mother orders Lenù’s father to beat Lenù. Lenù, however, feels faraway and disconnected from her father’s blows. She is still trying to figure out what happened to her and Lila’s plan.

The next day, when the girls encounter each other at school, Lila asks how Lenù’s parents punished her. When Lenù replies that she was beaten and shows Lila her bruises, Lila is surprised that that’s “all they did.” She is incredulous that Lenù’s parents are still allowing her to attend middle school. Lenù realizes that Lila tricked her—Lila got her in trouble in hopes that Lenù’s parents would punish her by keeping her from school. To this day, Elena still wonders if Lila changed her mind halfway through their adventure in hopes of helping Lenù avoid the very punishment she’d hoped her friend would suffer.

The storm makes a journey forward impossible and a journey backwards miserable. In this way, it’s an external symbol of the way Lila is feeling about her education. She knows she cannot continue on, and that she must endure misery and regret as she watches herself move “backward” by entering the working world and shirking her studies.



Lenù is taken aback by the events of the afternoon. Her and Lila’s grand adventure turned into something miserable and frightening—she is trying to understand what went wrong and at what point things took a turn, but she can’t yet figure out what motivated Lila to stop their journey halfway.



In this passage, as Lenù realizes that Lila deceived her in an attempt to prevent Lenù from attending middle school—thus evening the playing field between them and tying their fates together even more inextricably—she is shocked by Lila’s unrepentant boldness more than she is hurt. If Lila can’t move forward, she doesn’t want Lenù to either; this dynamic will come to define their relationship throughout their lives, and Lenù will eventually find herself in Lila’s position, too.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 17

Lila and Lenù sit for their final elementary school exit exams. Lenù gets straight 10s—Lila, however, gets only nines and eights. After this, Lila distances herself from Lenù and begins hanging out with Carmela Peluso. Lenù, however, will not let herself be abandoned—she joins the girls and together they form a kind of trio, even though Lenù often feels Lila purposefully trying to leave her out of jokes and games. Lenù notices that Lila seems to be going through her days in a kind of “daze”—she continues talking about attending school next year, even though both Lenù and Carmela know she did not sit for the admissions test, as Lenù did recently. Lila insists that she is going, “test or no test.”

Lila copes with her jealousy and resentment of Lenù by distancing herself from her, leading Lenù to feel miserable and lonely. At the same time, however, Lenù can sense the severe sadness and distress that Lila is feeling—emotions that are leading her to adopt a stance of denial to protect herself from her own despair and her classmates’ judgment.



As the weeks go by, Lila seems back to her old self—but Lenù can sense that she is still suffering under the surface. Lenù notices that Lila has started picking fights with her family: on days when they meet up in the courtyard, Lenù can hear Lila shouting horrible vulgarities at her parents. One afternoon, when Lila doesn't show up to play, Lenù goes to her window and starts shouting for her—and soon, she hears Fernando's agitated voice and the crash of a broken object. Lenù realizes that Fernando and Lila are having a shouting match. A few seconds later, Lila flies through the air—Fernando has thrown her out of the window. Lenù rushes over to Lila, who insists she isn't hurt in spite of her visibly broken arm.

In the depths of her despair, Lila begins lashing out at her father—the person who has told her she cannot pursue an education—in an attempt to provoke from him a physical manifestation of the emotional violence he's done to her by denying her the chance to advance in school. Though Lila's brawls with Fernando result in her bodily (and no doubt emotional) harm, she bears her wounds with pride and defiance.



CHILDHOOD: THE STORY OF DON ACHILLE, CHAPTER 18

That summer, Lila is in a cast, and Fernando will barely even look at her while it's on. Lenù thinks that Fernando's violence toward Lila is "small" compared to the violence happening elsewhere throughout the neighborhood as the temperatures rise. At the Bar Solara, a popular gambling location run by the Camorrist Silvio Solara, many fights break out each week. Silvio takes it upon himself to beat up customers who ask for loans or can't pay for drinks; he enlists the help of his teenage sons Marcello and Michele in doling out violence as well.

As violence between the men of the neighborhood ramps up throughout the summer months, Lenù paints a portrait of the many tensions escalating throughout the neighborhood and foreshadows a major shift in the neighborhood yet to come.



In the middle of the summer, Don Achille is murdered on a rainy August day. Don Achille had just gotten up from a midday nap in order to open the kitchen window—as he did, someone plunged a knife into his neck, spraying blood all over his kitchen and killing him. Lila becomes fascinated with the story of Don Achille's murder and repeats it over and over again, each time focusing on new details. Lila claims to know secret details of the murder and keeps Carmela and Lenù both rapt yet terrified with each new repetition. In each retelling of the **story**, Lila imagines the murderer to be female.

Lila becomes obsessed with telling the story of Don Achille's murder because she's preoccupied with the idea that a powerful man—who controlled the fates of so many—has been vanquished. In spite of her youth, Lila has put together the fact that her fate and the fates of her friends are dictated by the actions of a few powerful men, and she relishes imagining these men's ends.



Many days that summer, Lila and Lenù play at Carmela's house. Carmela's mother is a cheerful, kind, welcoming woman, and Lenù enjoys being at the Peluso house. One morning, as the three girls play checkers, there is a knock at the door. When Signora Peluso opens the door, she begins screaming—the *carabinieri* (police) begin dragging Alfredo away. Alfredo screams to his wife and children, professing his innocence—he declares that he was not responsible for the murder of Don Achille. As the Pelusos begin to weep, Lenù joins them—only Lila does not cry.

Though Alfredo Peluso professes his innocence to his family as he is dragged away by the police, he certainly had motive for killing Don Achille. Lenù is tremendously affected by the grief now facing the Peluso family—only Lila, who delights in the dismantling of the neighborhood's power structures, stoically stands by.



Lenù remembers this event as the “most terrible thing” she witnessed in her childhood—but now, as an adult, she remembers that Lila was strangely unaffected by it. Elena recalls Lila comforting Carmela by stroking her hair and gently telling her that if her father was the murderer after all, he’d done the right thing in killing Don Achille.

Lila and Lenù’s very different reactions to Don Achille’s murder—and Alfredo Peluso’s arrest—demonstrate their differing views on the structures of power and violence that define their neighborhood. Lenù feels terrified and helpless as she confronts them, while Lila seemingly believes in change.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 1

On December 31st of 1958, Elena writes, Lila would have her first episode of “dissolving margins”—a term she uses to describe “those occasions the outlines of people and things suddenly dissolved.” Lila won’t tell Elena about the episode, however, until November of 1980, when both women are 36.

This passage pushes to the foreground an event that will take place later on in the narrative. Including it here allows Ferrante to foreshadow both the secrets Lila and Lenù keep throughout their lifelong friendship as well as the turbulent times soon to come their way.



Elena describes the evening of December 31st, 1958. Lila and Lenù, teenagers, sat on the roof terrace of an apartment building shivering in the low-cut dresses they wore to attract the attention of the boys around them. According to Lila’s later account, as the **fireworks** started going off, she began to sweat and feel nauseous—she started to believe that “something absolutely material which had been present around her [...] forever” had suddenly revealed itself. Lila’s heart rate increased and she began to feel that the people and things around her were “poorly made.” Lila tried to calm herself, but her efforts failed as the sounds of nearby gunshots mingled with the noise of the fireworks. Most frighteningly of all, Lila felt she could perceive “unknown entities that broke down the outline of the world and demonstrated its terrifying nature.”

In relaying the details of Lila’s “dissolving margins” episode—an experience which may or may not be, a panic attack—Lenù shows how fragile the world around her and Lila truly is. As both young women confront the “boundaries” of their neighborhood, their families, and their friendship with each other, Elena implies that they will experience a breakdown of their separate understandings of the “nature” of the world.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 2

Several months after Fernando pushes Lila out of the window, Lila’s cast is removed and her arm is fully recovered. Lila begins going to a specialized school to learn stenography and home economics, but she starts skipping classes frequently. Lila is stricken by a terrible flu—when Lenù sees her friend out on the street for the first time in weeks, she is shocked by how ghostlike Lila seems. In spite of her ghastly appearance, Lila soon recovers, and Lenù is relieved. At the end of the year, Lila fails out of her special school and does not return.

Lila’s refusal to attend the special school to learn trades tailored to young women represents both her staunch personality and her ongoing despair at being barred from attending real school. Lila is not over the slight that has been done unto her—and she won’t be anytime soon.



Lenù, too, does poorly in her first year in middle school. She is grateful that Lila is not in class with her to witness her struggle to keep up. Lenù and Gigliola commiserate about their difficulties with the lessons, but Lenù feels that her and Gigliola's mediocrity has them mired in a "swamp." Lenù feels that without Lila, she will never be "the best." Alfonso, the young son of Don Achille, also attends Lenù's middle school. Lenù ignores him whenever she sees him, but she soon realizes that he is among the smartest students in school. At the end of the year, Lenù barely passes—her teacher suggests to her, at a meeting with her mother, that she begin taking private lessons. Lenù's mother believes she should drop out, but her father insists that since she has passed, she should continue.

Lenù spends much of the summer alone. Her distance from Lila depresses her. One afternoon, upon waking up from a nap, Lenù discovers that her underpants are stained with blood. Terrified, she runs out to the courtyard to find Lila. She tries to confide in Lila about what's happened, but Carmela, who is with Lila as she always is lately, insists on listening in. Carmela reassures Lenù that what's happening to her is normal and will recur each month along with some minor aches. Lenù is relieved, but Lila, who doesn't have her period yet, meanly declares that "anyone who has it makes [her] sick." She turns to leave, but before walking away, tells Lenù that she failed school on purpose so that she can do "whatever [she] want[s]" from now on.

Lila stops socializing with both Lenù and Carmela. Lenù spends a lot of time with Carmela, though she doesn't like her very much. Lenù notices that Carmela has tried to absorb and replicate Lila's gestures and cadences, a fact with "repulse[s]" Lenù. Carmela is intensely dramatic and often tells stories of how a mysterious creature, rather than her father, killed Don Achille. Carmela confides in Lenù that she is in love with Alfonso, Don Achille's son. After Carmela tells Lenù this great secret, Lenù feels slightly more attached to her. When school starts again in the fall, however, Lenù feels she has no time to listen to Carmela's wild passions and fanciful tales.

ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 3

Lenù's body begins changing. She grows plump, develops breasts and acne, and sprouts hair between her legs and beneath her arms. She begins feeling sad and anxious all the time, and her struggles to keep up in school continue. When looking in the mirror, she feels she cannot recognize herself and she fears changing even more—she doesn't want to develop and limp and wandering eye like her mother.

Lenù's struggles in school make her long for Lila's presence—with Lila around, she never felt mediocre and always felt pushed to aspire to more. Here, though, in this strange new environment, Lenù is uncertain about her future and her present capabilities alike.



When big changes happen in Lenù's life, Lila is the only one she wants to tell. Lila, however, perceives any experience that Lenù has without her as a direct slight or even an attack. Lila expresses disgust rather than empathy for what Lenù is going through, and she tries to make her own situation seem enviable by comparison.



Lenù doesn't like the idea of sharing Lila with anyone—she wants to believe their friendship is special. As a result, when she sees Carmela emulating Lila, she feels as if her relationship with Lila is cheapened by Carmela's desire to be so close to the magnetic Lila. Lenù feels lonely, overwhelmed by the changes happening around her, and annoyed by the undesirable friendships that are available to her in lieu of Lila.



Lenù fears that her changing body signals she will one day wind up exactly like her mother. Throughout the novel, Lenù's fears of adopting her mother's physical traits externalize her deeper fears of falling victim to her mother's social and economic circumstances—Lenù doesn't know how to voice it yet, but she doesn't want to be relegated to life as a wife and mother in an impoverished neighborhood.



One afternoon, Gino, the pharmacist's son, follows Lenù home from school and tells her that his classmates have accused Lenù of stuffing her shirt with cotton. He says that he's made a bet her breasts are real, and promises to give her 10 lire, half of the winnings, if she can prove she doesn't stuff. Thinking of what Lila would do, Lenù brazenly demands Gino hand the money over first. Gino scampers off and brings back another boy who has bet against him. Again, Lenù demands the money. Gino gives it to her. She takes the boys to the top floor of an empty building and lifts her shirt to show them her breasts. The boys, stunned, run away. Lenù is pleased with how well she was able to mimic Lila in a moment of crisis—yet she fears she's being like Carmela in her desire to emulate Lila.

Lenù's first experience with male sexual attention takes her by surprise—but rather than become overwhelmed or frightened, she channels Lila in order to maintain control of the situation. This passage shows how Lenù's close friendship with Lila has emboldened her to be stronger—even though they are on the outs right now, Lenù still turns to Lila as she makes decisions about her day-to-day life.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 4

Lila's brother Rino tries to get her to reenroll in the specialized school, but Lila again refuses to go. She begins spending her time helping Nunzia around the house and working in Fernando's **shoemaking** shop. When Lenù and Lila see each other, Lila doesn't ask about school and instead talks at length about how much "admiration" she has for her father and brother's work in the shop, drawing Lenù into the story of her family's work. Lenù begins to feel that school is "pointless," and she envies Lila's "magical" world of work. When Lenù spends time with Carmela, she finds herself talking about shoes with Lila's same passion—she is "embarrass[ed]" by her behavior and saddened to realize that she does not have any real interests of her own.

In this brief chapter, it becomes clear that Lila has decided to change tack and act as if she is wholly devoted to the work that's being thrust upon her. She does so in hopes of inspiring jealousy in Lenù—and her plan works. Lenù begins to doubt her own choices in life and reconsider everything she knows about her friendships, interests, and pursuits outside of Lila—evidence of how such absorbing female friendships as Lila and Lenù's often have the power to dictate the course of one's life.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 5

Lenù starts to feel that only the things Lila does have any importance. One Sunday, Lenù sees Lila duck into the elementary school building, and she sneakily follows her inside. The only open door in the building is the door to the library, which is run by Maestro Ferraro, but Lila is not in the room. Lenù wonders why Lila keeps abandoning her—and why Lila is taking out **books** without sharing them with her.

Lenù continues to feel hurt each time she realizes that Lila is going about life without her—and she is especially wounded when she realizes that Lila has been going on reading without inviting Lenù to join her. Writing and literature are, again, major centers of connection for Lila and Lenù.



Lenù continues developing. Her mother takes her to buy a bra, but her breasts are still noticeable to her male classmates, who "besiege" her and ask to see her breasts, having heard about what Lenù did for Gino. Lenù begins staying inside and studying hard during every spare moment. One morning in May, while Lenù is on her way to school, Gino asks her to be his girlfriend. She rejects him, feeling angry and embarrassed—yet she is proud to have been wanted. When news of Lenù's rejection of Gino reaches Lila, Lila asks why Lenù would turn him down—Lila suggests Lenù tell Gino she'll be his girlfriend if he'll buy ice cream for Lenù, Lila, and Carmela all summer. Lenù takes this proposition to Gino, who refuses her out of hand.

This passage shows how, in even an early experience with sex and romance, Lila encourages Lenù to think about a relationship with a man as a transaction and consider what she can get out of it before accepting to a man's terms. Lila and Lenù will go on to treat most of their future romantic relationships like trades or transactions, often sacrificing certain elements of happiness for having other needs met.



Lenù believes that Lila's sharp, witty advice marks a new chapter in their friendship, one in which they can talk about grown-up things like love and boys—but instead, Lenù finds that because Carmela has told all of their friends about Lila's advice, Lila has become more popular with the girls of the neighborhood than ever. She has several new friends who seek her advice—every time Lenù sees Lila out with these girls, dispensing relationship advice, she “suffer[s]” inside.

Lenù wants Lila to be all hers—she doesn't want to have to share her friends with the other neighborhood girls. Lenù continues hoping that she and Lila will experience a revival of their friendship even as she fears that others might take Lila away from her.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 6

At the end of the school year, Lenù does poorly on her **Latin** exam and is told she'll need to retake the test. Her father becomes angry with her and suggests it's pointless for her to continue in her lessons. Lenù becomes depressed and angry—but surprisingly, her mother assures her that if she studies hard on her own, even without the lessons, she could still pass the retake. Lenù studies harder than ever.

Lenù is desperate to stay in school—she knows that dropping or failing out will resign her to a life like her mother's, and she will do anything to avoid that fate.



One morning, while Lenù is studying, Lila calls her out to the courtyard. Lenù goes out to meet Lila and talk with her, reluctantly admitting that she is studying to retake the exam. As the two gossip about school, Carmela and Alfonso, and the things Carmela has told Lenù about Don Achille's murder, Lila is pained to realize that Carmela believes everything she says—as “all the girls” do. Lila says she doesn't want to talk to any of them anymore. Lenù points out that it's good to talk to others—Lila retorts that it is, but only when “someone [...] answers.” Lenù feels a burst of joy in the idea that Lila might want to talk only to her.

In this passage, Lila admits that she feels Lenù is the only one of her friends or former classmates who “answers” the questions she has and the topics she wants to discuss adequately. This makes Lenù feel proud—because language has been a point of connection between the two of them for so long, she feels proud and gratified to realize that she is the only person Lila really enjoys talking to.



The girls continue to stroll and gossip, and Lenù feels joyous. At one point, Lila asks Lenù if the two are still friends. Lenù answers that they are. Lila asks if Lenù will do her a favor. Lenù says yes, privately thinking that she would do absolutely anything for Lila. Lila asks if Lenù will meet her once a day in the public gardens and bring the **Latin** schoolbooks along. Lila wants to study with Lenù as Lenù prepares to retake the exam.

As Lila and Lenù reconnect, their friendship circles back—as it always does—to writing, reading, and studying. Lila knows that Lenù needs help, and because she herself misses school so much, she decides that the two of them could mutually benefit from an arrangement in which they study together.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 7

Lila and Lenù's middle school years are a time of great but gradual change. The Bar Solara expands and becomes a pastry shop where Gigliola Spagnuolo's father, a baker, makes the pastries. Marcello and Michele, the sons of Silvio Solara, buy a fancy new car—a Fiat 1100. Alfredo Peluso's old shop is now a grocery run by the Carraccis. Don Achille's death has removed the “shadow” of fear from the whole Carracci family, and their business is booming. Enzo runs his parents' fruit and vegetable stand. New businesses open and old businesses join forces, and renovations and beautification projects are under way. Lenù observes that everything and everyone in the neighborhood is trying “to show a new face.”

Lenù and Lila continue studying **Latin** together, and Lenù is surprised to realize that Lila already knows a great deal about the language. Lila reveals that she has been taking Latin grammar books out of the library for a long time; she has four library cards, one in the name of each member of her family, so that she can take out multiple books each week. Lila assigns Lenù translation homework and helps her come up with more intuitive ways to translate complicated sentences in Latin. Lenù finds that Lila's tips help her greatly.

In September, Lenù passes the exam with barely a single mistake. After getting her grade, Lenù hurries to the gardens to meet Lila. When she tells Lila of her success and asks if they can study together the rest of the year, Lila is dismissive; “I've understood, that's enough,” she says, and tells Lenù that she has something more pressing to work on with Rino.

As Lenù describes the changes that take place in her neighborhood as she and Lila themselves undergo the changes of adolescence, it seems as if there is hope for change in the neighborhood in terms of both its physical layout and its social atmosphere. Going forward, Ferrante will show how these changes influence the girls' lives and decisions.



Though Lenù is the one who has stayed in school, this passage makes it clear that Lila has not given up on her education. She is as intrepid and determined as ever, and she has even surpassed Lenù in some of Lenù's own coursework.



This passage makes clear the fact that Lila no longer care about tangible measurements of success. She wants to learn and “understand” the things Lenù is learning not out of a desire to best her friend in academics, but simply to share in the world of academia with Lenù.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 8

Lenù continues to succeed in school over the course of the year, and she continues filling out as well. One day, she attracts the attention of Marcello and Michele Solara, who try to take her for a ride in their 1100. Lenù refuses and heads to the gardens to meet Gigliola—she knows if she were to ever get in the Solaras' car and if her father were to find out, her little brothers would feel obliged to kill the Solaras once they were grown up. One day, the Solaras succeed in dragging an older girl, Ada Cappuccio, into their car. When Ada's brother, Antonio, confronts the brothers, they beat him bloody. The episode becomes a heated point of discussion for Lenù, Lila, Gigliola, and their other friends—Lila insists that if the brothers ever try to do to her what they did to Ada, she will “take care” of them herself.

This passage shows how fraught every interaction is as Lenù grows older and begins attracting the attention of boys and young men. Lenù knows that how she responds to advances from young men—especially powerful ones like the Solaras—will have a bearing not just on her own future reputation, but on how her family members conduct themselves in the years to come. Lenù and Lila try to prepare themselves to fend off such advances—while also recognizing that offending their suitors could lead to serious social strife and a new outbreak of retributive violence.



One day, Lila confides in Lenù that she and Rino are working on a plan: they want to persuade Fernando to make a fancy line of **shoes** that will sell well in the center of town, on the Rettifilo in Naples. Their father, however, believes in quality over appearance and in handmade shoes over factory-made ones. Lila and Rino are nonetheless determined to show their father the way of the future. One day, Lila shows Lenù some sketches—she and Rino are planning to make the shoes in secret and prove to their father that they are right about the direction his business should take. Lila is determined to become rich not through **novel-writing**, but through starting a business: the Cerullo shoe factory.

This passage represents a significant turn in Lila's fate. Lila decides to shift her attentions away from academics and instead focus on revitalizing her father's business. Shoes will, over the course of the novel, come to symbolize the sacrifices Lila makes as she seeks to advance her social and economic position. In turning her attention to shoes, she's already giving up her study sessions with Lila and her aspirations of becoming a novelist.



Lila points out that the Solaras run the neighborhood because they have money. They only mess with poor girls, she points out; as a result, she suggests, the only way to protect oneself from the Solaras and others like them is to make money. Lila pulls out a sharp knife she's stolen from Fernando's workshop and shows it to Lenù. She tells Lenù that if the Solaras ever try anything again, Lenù should come to her—she will deal with them herself.

Though Lila is young, she already has a deep understanding of the cycles of violence, cruelty, and wealth that run her neighborhood—and she is determined to stand up to them, no matter the cost.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 9

At the end of middle school, Lenù passes her exams with the best grades in the entire school—even better than Alfonso. Her father praises her greatly, and even her mother congratulates Lenù by letting her wear one of her nice silver bracelets out one day. In the courtyard, however, no one is impressed by Lenù's grades or her bracelet—the only thing that matters there, Lenù says, are “love and boyfriends.” Lila isn't particularly impressed by Lenù's grades, and Lenù knows that Lila is indignant because if she had been allowed to continue in school, she would have surpassed even Lenù with ease.

This passage shows that in spite of Lenù's belief that doing well in school will open up new avenues for her, her academic successes actually mean little to those around her. “Love and boyfriends” are the currency of the neighborhood—and Ferrante will go on to show how Lenù and Lila respectively adapt to that fact.



Lila's indifference makes Lenù feel sad and pathetic. When Lenù's parents begin talking about getting her a position in a local shop, she feels even worse. As she looks at herself in the mirror that evening, she is disgusted by how her body has changed, how her hair has turned from blonde to brown, and how her face has sprouted clouds of acne.

The changes Lenù feels happening in her body reflect the changes in her friend group's concerns and ideals. Lenù is uncomfortable with both—and resentful of always feeling one step behind.



One Sunday, Lenù receives an invitation in the mail from Maestro Ferraro summoning her to the library. When she arrives, she sees that a small crowd has gathered—the principal and Maestra Oliviero are among the families and students. Lenù learns that Ferraro has had an idea for a ceremony to honor those who borrow the most frequently from the library. The winners of the ceremony are called out: Rafaella Cerullo, Fernando Cerullo, Nunzia Cerullo, Rino Cerullo, and, in fifth, Elena Greco—Lenù herself. Lenù receives a **book** as a prize. She offers to take the Cerullos' books with her to give to them herself, as none of them are in attendance.

Pasquale Peluso, Carmela's older brother, is also in attendance. He jokes with Lenù about the Cerullo family's devoted reading habits and asks to come along with her as she delivers the prizes. Lenù is flattered by the attention. When Maestra Oliviero calls Lenù over, she chats with her old teacher. Maestra Oliviero asks what Lenù is doing now that middle school is over. When Lenù says she is going to work, Maestra Oliviero tells Lenù that she must go on studying instead, and she even volunteers to speak to the Grecos herself. Lenù thanks her teacher, but as she starts to walk away, Maestra Oliviero warns Lenù not to "waste" her time with Pasquale, who is a construction worker and a Communist whose father was responsible for the murder of Don Achille. However, this only makes Lenù more excited about Pasquale.

Lenù rejoins Pasquale and walks with him down the street. They make a plan to visit Lila at Fernando's shop the next day and bring her all the **books** she won. Pasquale also asks if Lenù would like to come to Gigliola's house for a little dance the following Sunday—he suggests she bring Lila along. Lenù asks Pasquale if he'll always be a construction worker; he tells her he will. She asks if Pasquale is a Communist; he tells her he is. She asks if he visits his father in prison; he says he goes every chance he gets. Lenù bids Pasquale goodbye.

ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 10

That same afternoon, Maestra Oliviero shows up at the Greco house and forces Lenù's parents to promise they will enroll her in the nearest classical high school—she even offers to buy Lenù's **books** herself. She also tells them that Lenù has been seen with Pasquale Peluso, and they reprimand Lenù. Before leaving, Maestra Oliviero urges Lenù to tell Lila that she is going to high school to study Greek.

As Lenù attends the ceremony at the library, it becomes clear to her just how devoted Lila still is to educating herself. Lila has gamed the system which allows residents of the neighborhood to take out just one book at a time—as a result, she is the biggest borrower from the library (and, Lenù realizes, likely even more well-read than she herself is.)



In this passage, Ferrante shows how Maestra Oliviero remains an important presence in Lenù's life—and an important force in the continuation of her education. Maestra Oliviero is invested in making sure that Lenù chases down the opportunities available to her and doesn't become sidetracked by young men who will keep her from her dreams.



This passage shows that Lenù is investigating her romantic prospects—as drawn as she is to Pasquale, she knows there is something to be said for Maestra Oliviero's prediction that settling down with the wrong boy could sideline her dreams. Still, Lenù is grateful for the attention—and seemingly willing to risk everything for more of it.



Maestra Oliviero continues to show that she is invested in the continuation of Lenù's education. In urging Lenù to tell the hotheaded, jealous Lila about her plans, Maestra Oliviero hopes to make Lila jealous and contemptuous enough to pursue an education even in the face of her parents' resistance.



That evening, shouts from the stairwell interrupt Lenù's arguments with her parents over school and Pasquale. They open the door to find that Melina is having "a new crisis of madness." Her daughter Ada is shouting for her to stop jumping on the bed. Lenù's mother goes out to find out more details and comes home reporting that someone has delivered to Melina a **book** of poems written by Donato Sarratore—he has inscribed the book for her and pointed out the poems she inspired. Melina's impassioned shrieks of joy continue all night. Lenù is amazed by the fact that someone from her neighborhood, someone she knows, has written and published a book. She feels a renewed sense of possibility about getting rich through writing.

Lenù has been having doubts about the value of education and about her own ability to surpass Lila as a reader and writer. However, upon realizing that someone she knows has written and published a book, she begins to believe that there is hope for her as a writer—and thus hope for the childhood dreams she and Lila used to share.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 11

The next day, Lenù goes to meet up with Pasquale against her parents' wishes. She tells him about the drama with Melina and Donato, embellishing their "tragic love" and Donato's poetic gifts. Lenù soon realizes that Pasquale is not very invested in the conversation. He begins to ask her questions about Lila, which she is all too happy to answer. As they arrive at the shop and begin talking and joking with Rino and Lila about the many **books** Lila has won, Lenù notices that Pasquale is stealing many furtive but intense looks at Lila. When Rino and Pasquale step outside to talk, Lenù tries to figure out what has changed in her friend to make her attractive to Pasquale—Lila hasn't gotten her period or grown breasts, yet something is different.

Lenù was bolstered by Pasquale's attention the other day—now, though, as she sees him and Lila in the same room together, she realizes that Pasquale has simply been using her to get closer to Lila, who is the true object of his affection. This inspires a new kind of competitiveness in Lenù: she realizes that just as Pasquale has used her, there is room for her and Lila to use male attention as a measure of a new kind of success.



Lila takes Lenù to the back and pulls Donato's **book**, *Attempts at Serenity*, from a shelf. Lila reveals that Antonio brought it over to get it out of his mother's hands. Lila says that Donato is a scoundrel for sending the book—now, she says, Melina expects him to come back to the neighborhood, and when he doesn't, she'll just continue suffering. Lenù is amazed by Lila's ability to "intensif[y] reality as she reduce[s] it to words." Lenù hopes that she herself has the same ability. She feels completely in awe of Lila, and she tries not to be too distracted by the realization that it's Lila, not herself, in whom Pasquale is interested.

As Lenù, rapt, listens to Lila's take on the situation between Melina and Donato, she finds herself feeling intensely jealous of her friend on several levels. In one sense, Lila and Lenù are closer than they've ever been—in another, there are deeper divisions opening up between them than they've ever had to reckon with.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 12

Pasquale and Rino return to the shop. Pasquale says he has to get back to work at the construction site, but he invites Rino and Lila to Gigliola's on Sunday before he goes. Rino says they'll think about it. Pasquale looks longingly at Lila, who is not paying any attention to him. Lenù begins to feel irritated. She tries to distract herself by talking some more with Lila about the Melina and Donato situation, but Rino reminds Lila that they must get back to work.

Lenù is disheartened once again as she realizes that Pasquale is truly only interested in Lila—and that Lila is perhaps truly only interested in the work she and Rino are doing together. Lenù feels alone, isolated, and unwanted.



Rino pulls from beneath the counter a wooden form, several pieces of leather, and some tools. Lila tells Lenù that they are at work making a man's traveling **shoe**, only able to make progress for a few minutes each day while their father is upstairs napping. Rino makes Lenù swear she won't tell anyone what the two of them are up to. Any attempts to bring up the idea of making new fancy shoes rather than just fixing up old ones sends Fernando into a rage. Lenù feels happy that Rino and Lila have a project, but she is disheartened by the fact that Lila is so enchanted by such a simple pursuit.

As Lila and Rino tell Lenù about their shoemaking project, Lenù finds herself flattened and saddened by how low Lila has aimed her sights. Lenù, like Maestra Oliviero, believes that Lila should be putting her mind to use—not sacrificing her future in pursuit of some vague sense of security.



At the door of the shop, Lenù tells Lila that Maestra Oliviero has convinced her parents to let her continue on to high school. Lila, in response, asks: "What is high school?" Lenù explains that she is going to study **Greek**. Lila looks as if she is "at a loss." She hesitates a moment before declaring that last week, she got her period.

In this passage, Ferrante shows how, when Lila and Lenù feel threatened, they seek to one-up each other. When Lenù tells Lila about her plans for high school, Lila pretends not to know what high school even is—and then she offers Lenù a new piece of information about her own personal advancement.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 13

Lenù, mystified and vaguely threatened by the change in Lila—a change she didn't sense, but should have—tries to start taking better care of herself and making herself prettier. She begins taking secret pleasure in seeing Lila around the neighborhood looking skinny, bedraggled, and disheveled as ever.

Lenù is continually realizing that there are new arenas in which she and Lila can compete—and as she tries to better herself, she always compares herself to Lila.



One afternoon, as Lila and Lenù walk through the neighborhood talking about high school, the Solaras pull up beside them. Marcello begins to joke with the girls, trying to cajole them into the car. Lila ignores them, but Lenù politely apologizes and says they can't join the boys. Marcello compliments Lenù's bracelet and reaches out, from the moving car window, to grab her arm. As she pulls away, the bracelet breaks. Lenù is upset. Marcello opens the door and gets out of the car, trying to comfort Lenù by touching her arm again. Lila pushes Marcello against the car and holds her knife against his throat.

In this scene, Lila makes good on her threat to hurt the Solaras if they should try to mess with Lenù. This moment represents the beginning of a toxic and difficult dynamic between Lila and Marcello—one which Lila doesn't yet realize will come to steer her life in unforeseeable ways. Lila is trying to signal to the Solaras that they don't control the neighborhood in the ways they think they do—a move that will likely only embolden them to try to expand that control.



Marcello tells his brother Michele that Lila doesn't have the "guts" to hurt him. Lila offers the boys to push her further and find out if she does or not. Lenù begins to cry. Michele tells Marcello to apologize and get back into the car. Lila removes the knife from Marcello's throat. He stoops to pick up Lenù's bracelet. He hands it back to Lenù—but he only offers an apology to Lila.

Though Lila tries to scare Marcello off, it is clear from the end of this scene that he is drawn to her. She is the only one in the neighborhood who stands up to him and his brother—and her irreverence is new and exciting to him.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 14

One morning, Lenù's father takes her on the route she'll have to travel to commute out of the neighborhood to her new high school. Lenù feels full of love for her father and excitement about the fading boundaries of the neighborhood—she is thrilled to be in the city. Her father excitedly shows her off around town, bragging to everyone about her good grades and bright future. As her father shows her around Naples, Lenù begins to wonder if her neighborhood is the only one plagued by violence and ugliness.

Toward the end of the day, Lenù's father takes her down to the sea to glimpse Mount Vesuvius. Standing near the ocean with her father, Lenù wishes that Lila were with them. Returning to the neighborhood that evening feels strange to Lenù, but she is nonetheless excited to tell Lila all about her excursion. Lila listens "without curiosity," and Lenù is offended, but soon she realizes that Lila is trying to focus on making the images of the bustling city and the beautiful ocean come alive in her mind—and failing to do so, since she knows nothing of the world beyond the neighborhood. Lila responds to Lenù's story by stating that they need to accept Pasquale's invitation for Sunday.

Over the summer, Lila begins going to more and more little dance parties at the Pelusos'. Lenù is shocked by Lila's newfound interest in dancing, but soon, in accompanying her, finds that she likes to dance herself. At one party, while dancing, Lenù discusses listening to music on a gramophone with Rino. Lila approaches them and tells Lenù that "gramophone" is a **Greek** word.

Lenù is entranced by her first real visit to Naples—she sees the city as a place of possibility, openness, and civility. Realizing that there are such places outside of her neighborhood makes her even more determined to do whatever it takes to make her way out one day.



The experiences Lenù has in life aren't as full without Lila—yet in this passage, she realizes that the more experiences she has on her own, the further apart she and Lila will drift. Lila can attempt to imagine the things Lenù is going through, but there will always be a fundamental gap between their experiences of the world. Lila tries to remind Lenù of experiences they can have together, which shows that she is still invested in making sure they have common ground.



Lila begins outshining Lenù socially—and, as she reveals that she has knowledge of Greek, she haughtily shows that she has the power to outshine her intellectually, too, even though she is no longer in school.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 15

Lenù is frustrated: Lila has clearly begun to study **Greek** on her own before Lenù herself has even gotten to high school. Lenù is upset that Lila will always do the things she herself is supposed to do "before and better." Lenù tries to go get a copy of a Greek grammar book from the library—but she finds that the Cerullios have it checked out. Lenù goes to Lila and begs Lila to teach her some Greek before the start of school. Lila happily obliges, but Lenù's sense of inadequacy does not abate even as she learns more and more from her friend.

Lenù continues to feel inadequate during the dances at the Pelusos' too. As she watches Lila whirl around the room with Rino, she realizes that Lila has begun to change. She has a new "feminine figure" and a decidedly womanlike energy. Lenù realizes, very suddenly, that every boy in the room is watching rapturously as Lila dances with her brother.

Once again, Lenù finds herself needing to rely on Lila's help and guidance in order to prepare for school. Lenù is grateful for Lila but resentful of the idea that even when Lila isn't in school, the things Lenù is learning (or preparing to learn) in her classes come so naturally to the brilliant Lila.



Lenù continues to be hammered by instance after instance in which she is reminded that she and Lila will always be in competition with each other—she is full of envy and awe.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 16

Over the summer, Lila is not the only one who is changing—Rino, too, is becoming more confident and more outspoken. He boasts about becoming richer than the Solaras, but he reels himself in around Lila. One evening, Rino, Pasquale, and Antonio take Lila and Lenù out into the city. Lila is clearly excited to be in Naples, and she spends a lot of time observing every person, every shop, and every small scene she encounters.

At a pizzeria, Antonio flirts with Lenù, and Pasquale flirts with Lila. At one point in the night, Rino says he believes that the pizza maker is making eyes at Lila. Pasquale becomes enraged. He walks behind the counter and begins assaulting the pizza maker. After leaving the restaurant, Lenù feels that the people are less glamorous, the glittering lights less inviting, and the streets less exciting. She is disheartened to realize that things are the same everywhere else as they are in her neighborhood.

Over the course of the summer, Lila continues attracting attention from men. One day toward the end of August, while out with in a group, Lenù, Carmela, Pasquale, Rino, and Antonio notice a man staring at Lila. He comes over to their table and explains that he was just telling his wife and sons that Lila will grow up to be as beautiful as “a Botticelli Venus.” Lila begins laughing, but Rino grabs the man by the collar, drags him back to his wife and children, and screams at them all.

At a party for Gigliola’s name day, a religious celebration tied to the festivals of the saints, all of Lila and Lenù’s friends from the neighborhood are present. There is lots of dancing, both to traditional music and rock and roll songs. Enzo pulls Lila onto the dance floor, and she is so excited to dance that she barely seems to notice her partner as he moves. Lenù notices that Stefano, who once threatened to prick Lila’s tongue, stares at Lila as if she is a “movie star.” While she’s still dancing, the Solaras arrive. They, too, are captivated by Lila.

As everyone’s dreams become bigger, they seek to expand their social lives and their experiences of the world by venturing beyond the confines of the neighborhood. Lila and Lenù are not the only ones who aspire to more—their friends, too, want to expand the boundaries of their insular existences.



Pasquale feels bound to defend Lenù’s honor. He uses violence to try to protect her—and, as he does, he makes clear that the violence that defines their neighborhood is not confined to it. Lenù believed for so long that in escaping her neighborhood she could escape its violence—now, she knows that even if she makes it out, she will always have to contend with the effects of male violence.



Even an innocent compliment made by a family man draws the desire for violence and retribution out of the men who orbit Lila and Lenù—they feel they are duty-bound to assert their ownership of her and her destiny.



Lila’s love of dancing is innocent and fun—but at this party for Gigliola, the arrival of the Solaras portends conflict and perhaps even violence. No space is safe from the entrenched, retributive male violence that runs Lila and Lenù’s neighborhood.



As the music continues, Lila dances with Pasquale. The Solaras taunt Stefano for letting Lila dance with a lowly construction worker. Lenù gets nervous, sensing the possibility of a brawl. Michele continues trying to stir up trouble while Marcello heads for the dance floor to steal a dance with Lila. Lenù's anxiety increases, and she is shocked when Lila grabs Marcello's hand and begins dancing with him. Pasquale, offended, goes to whisper to Michele, who himself is whispering to Stefano. The music stops and Lenù tries to pull a reluctant Lila off the dance floor. Lila insists on dancing with Marcello. As Lenù senses tensions in the room continuing to mount, she begs Lila to leave with her. Lila at last agrees. When Marcello stops her and begs her for another dance, she looks at him strangely, as if she didn't even realize who she was dancing with all along.

Lila, so caught up in dancing that she doesn't even realize whom she's partnered with, finds herself unwittingly arousing Marcello's interest yet again. The Solaras use their ironclad influence over everyone in the neighborhood to seize control of the party and eliminate all other potential romantic competition—Marcello clearly has his sights laser-focused on Lila.



Outside, Lila and Lenù find Pasquale raving to Antonio, Carmela, Ada, and anyone else who will listen. He rails against the Solaras and their establishment, a place for “loan sharks from the Camorra.” He accuses Don Achille of being a “Nazi Fascist” and claims Stefano runs the grocery using money from the black market. He shouts that his father was “right” to kill Don Achille and threatens to kill Stefano and the Solaras himself. When he rounds on Lila, Antonio defends her. Enzo tries to urge everyone to go home. Lenù, Lila, and the other girls burst into tears. At last, at the sight of Lila crying, Pasquale agrees to go home. As they walk down the street together, Lila asks Pasquale what Nazi Fascists are and what the black market is.

This passage shows just how sheltered and isolated Lila and Lenù's neighborhood truly is. Lila knows nothing of her country's dark history or the mechanisms of crime, power, and control which fuel every aspect of life in the neighborhood and in the world more broadly. Lila wants to learn more about her country and her place in it.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 17

Lila is “moved and altered” by Pasquale's explanations of the darker systems which move society. Lila becomes obsessed with naming people in the neighborhood who were rumored to be Fascists during the war, with calling out whose cars and homes have been purchased with dirty money, and with the shadowy presence of the Camorra.

Lila's social and political awakening marks a new chapter in her life—she has long harbored a desire to stand up to injustice and imbalances of power, but now she has a greater understanding of how these systems might be singled out or even dismantled.



Though Lila credits Pasquale with teaching her all these things about the world, she soon becomes uninterested in him. She begins devouring library **books** about World War II, the Allies, and Italian history. She tries to figure out who in the neighborhood is a Communist, who is a Camorrist, and who is a fascist. Lenù feels that this newfound knowledge “enclose[s]” her in the terribleness of the world, with no escape. Soon, Lenù observes, it is Pasquale who hangs on Lila's every word. Lenù believes that the two of them will get married and will “always be talking about these political things.” As school starts, Lenù is sad to have less time for Lila—but she's relieved to not have to think about “the sum of the misdeeds and compliances and cowardly acts” for which her neighbors are responsible.

Lila has always taken her education into her own hands—and now, she does what she has always done and focuses on teaching herself the things she wants to know. Lenù feels removed from Lila during this period, showing that just as books, language, literature, and knowledge are often a point of connection for the two of them, such things are just as often a source of division and difference.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 18

Lenù has a hard time in high school. Her class is large at 42 students, and it's one of the rare mixed-gender classes. Lenù studies hard, makes few new friends, and answers Lila's daily probing questions about what Lenù and her classmates are working on in their lessons. Lenù has noticed Lila continuing to change as the months go by. Lenù sees that Lila and Pasquale are spending more time together and becomes determined—desperate, even—to find a boyfriend of her own.

One day, Lenù notices a new student at school. He is handsome and yet there is something familiar about him. As Lenù observes him, she realizes the young man is Nino Sarratore. Nino, however, does not appear to recognize Lenù. On the way home that day, Lenù wants to tell Lila about Nino's presence at school, but decides not to—she's afraid that if Lila goes to school to try and glimpse Nino, Nino will fall in love with her.

In spite of some academic setbacks at the beginning of the year, Lenù soon begins to excel in school. She draws the attention and praise of her teacher, Maestro Gerace. Lenù attributes her success in **Greek** to her studies with Lila. Lenù's classmates—even the ones who have known her since childhood, like Alfonso and Gino—begin calling her Greco or Elena out of respect. Gino once again asks Lenù to be his girlfriend, and this time Lenù accepts him.

During Christmas vacation, while catching up with Lila, Lenù learns that Lila has been teaching herself in her spare time not just **Greek** but also English. Lenù is taken aback—she herself knows nothing of English. Lila excitedly talks to Lenù about the books she's reading—she has read the *Aeneid* in just days while Lenù has taken months to get through it. Lenù distracts Lila from talking about school and literature by telling her about Gino. Lila taunts Lenù for having “given in” to love. Lila begins talking about Melina and the hardships the poor woman is facing—Melina has become more erratic than ever, all because of her love for Donato.

Even though Lenù's new life in high school affords her time away from the neighborhood and chances to expand herself socially and intellectually, she remains tied up in competition with Lila.



In this passage, Lenù finally discovers something that she wants to keep separate from Lila. She has been sharing knowledge and stories with Lila each day—but Lenù feels the information about Nino is too delicate and precious to share. Lenù clearly feels threatened by Lila even as she tries desperately to stay close to her by sharing parts of her new life with Lila.



Lenù begins succeeding greatly—but she can't take credit for her successes on her own. She feels that without Lila, she would not be the star pupil that she is—she attributes her every achievement to Lila's influence, and, to some degree, she is right.



Lila, driven by a desire not to be left behind by Lenù, continues pursuing knowledge and learning even more fervently than ever before. She doesn't want to become less valuable to Lenù, and she wants to remind Lenù that even though she's not in school, she still has the capacity to expand her worldview on her own.



Lenù decides to tell Lila about Nino and Lila urges Lenù to tell Nino what's happening with Melina so that he will tell his father. Lila declares that she will never fall in love no matter how many men fall in love with her. Lenù asks if Marcello is still "after" Lila. Lila admits that he—and many other boys—are indeed pursuing her, but she insists that things with Pasquale are simply platonic; he is still educating her about the world "before" their generation. Lila is incredulous and outraged over how their parents' generation attempts to willfully forget "before" and kowtow to men like the Solaras. Enchanted by Lila's new knowledge, Lenù hangs on her every word. The two spend Christmas vacation together talking for hours every day about matters large and small.

Lila and Lenù's relationship reaches new levels of closeness as the girls bond over new developments in their separate lives. They have clearly missed each other—and yet the events of this passage give each of them hope that they can continue to grow closer even as certain parts of their lives diverge. Lila's contempt for male attention—and her ongoing hatred of the Solaras—speaks to her growing anger over the deep-seated imbalances in justice and power that make life for her, Lenù, and all the women of their neighborhood more difficult.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 19

Between Lenù's renewed friendship with Lila, her success in school, and her relationship with Gino, Lenù begins to feel strong and confident. She notices that when Lila talks to her about **Greek** and literature, Lila seems to be trying to prove herself to Lenù and demonstrate that she is still Lenù's "equal," a dynamic which also makes Lenù feel superior. Lila and Rino show Lenù their continued work on their fancy **shoes**—though they are proud of their efforts, Lenù is confused by the frivolous shoes. Lenù often watches Lila and Rino work on their model and test the leather against scratches and water—it is clear to her, through Rino and Lila's passion for their project, that the shoes mean everything to them.

Lenù struggles with her feelings of superiority toward Lila, even as their friendship reaches new peaks of closeness and security. Lenù feels uncomfortable being the one who is ahead in terms of tangible success—she feels as if Lila is scrambling to keep up with her for the first time. Lenù feels almost guilty about her success and how it has motivated Lila not just to study on her own, but to throw herself so entirely into the shoe project, believing it will afford her the same opportunities that Lenù's education is affording her.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 20

As New Year's Eve approaches, Rino becomes determined to set off the biggest **fireworks** display in the neighborhood—bigger, even, than the Solaras' yearly show. Lila confides in Lenù that she believes Rino has begun to count on the idea of making money from the **shoes** "too heavily." Lila notices that an aggressive, braggadocious side of Rino's personality has begun to emerge. Lila blames herself for planting a "fantasy" in her brother's head, but Lenù points out that Rino is probably trying to make a show of strength because Marcello has been hanging around the shop lately.

Rino's motivations in launching a huge fireworks display are complicated—he wants to show his dominance over Marcello Solara, who threatens his sister's independence, but he also wants to use the fireworks to signal to everyone, not just the Solaras, that the Cerulllos are moving up in the neighborhood. Lila worries about Rino contributing to the cycles of violence and shows of dominance that already rule their neighborhood.



Fireworks have long been tied to displays of wealth in the neighborhood—the wealthiest families can afford to set off grand shows, while families like Lenù and Lila's usually just buy some sparklers. Rino begins collecting money from neighbors and friends to put toward his own display, caught up in a "frenzy for grandeur"—but the Solaras continue amassing fireworks of their own, and Lenù and Lila know that Rino will never catch up.

Fireworks are a symbol of Rino's desire for social mobility—but they are also a symbol of the entrenched social rules of the neighborhood and those rules' resistance to change.



After visiting the Carracci's grocery store together one day, Lenù and Lila are surprised when Stefano follows them out of the store and invites Lenù to come celebrate New Year's at his family's house—Alfonso, his younger brother and Lenù's schoolmate, will be "pleased." Lenù says that she is going to Lila's, so Stefano invites Lila's family as well. Lila retorts that the Pelusos are coming over too, knowing that the son of Don Achille will not invite the family of his father's suspected murderer. Stefano surprises them, however, by offering to host the Pelusos happily. Lila tells Stefano she'll talk to her brother about it—if Stefano plans to supply a lot of **fireworks**.

Lila and Lenù are anxious about Rino's attempt to change the neighborhood's rules—or at least flout them—by setting off a grand fireworks display. They believe his plan will never work. However, when they realize that Stefano is also trying to change things they begin to wonder if there is really hope for a change in the status quo.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 21

Back at Lila's, she and Lenù tell Rino about Stefano's proposal. He doesn't like the sound of it and refuses to go. One afternoon, Lila reports to Lenù that Stefano also wants to insult the Solaras by making peace with the Pelusos and gathering a huge number of people together to put on a big **fireworks** display. Lila is amazed by the gesture, one that "no one would make here in the neighborhood." The girls, moved by Stefano's desire for peace, go back to Rino and explain what's happening. They beg him to unite with the Carraccis and the Pelusos against the Solaras. Soon, everyone is convinced that going to the "hated home of Don Achille" to ring in the New Year as a united front is the only thing to do.

In this brief chapter, Lila and Lenù urge others to see that unlikely as it may seem, there are people in the neighborhood who truly want to end the cycles of violence, retribution, and cruelty that have defined relationships between families over the years. Soon, a tenuous hope has gripped several families—they believe that perhaps if they really do come together in good faith, change could be possible.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 22

On New Year's Eve, Lila and Lenù, along with their families, arrive at the Carracci home. Lenù has a bit of a crush on Stefano, who is seven years older than her and Lila. She wants an older boyfriend like Stefano, Pasquale, or Enzo. Lenù hopes to attract the attention of an older boy, but all night, all of the young men are focused only on the **fireworks** and their "war of men."

Lenù believes that having an older boyfriend (rather than her current boyfriend, Gino) will allow her to feel more mature and powerful. She continues to imagine how she can use male attention to improve her own life, confidence, and circumstances.



At midnight, Lenù can hear the whizz of neighboring **fireworks** displays. Up on the roof, she helps the children present light their sparklers while the boys haul up crate after crate of fireworks. Watching them prepare, Lenù feels her neighborhood is on the verge of a "civil war." As the fireworks display starts in earnest, the Solaras, too, continue shooting off bursts of explosives. The neighboring terraces light up again and again, back and forth, as the warring groups of boys become more careless with their rockets and accidentally—or intentionally—begin launching them at one another's roof decks.

The fireworks displays, usually so joyous, quickly turn violent this year as the Solaras realize that a group of other families, led by Rino, are attempting to outdo them (and thus symbolically unseat their power in the neighborhood). It seems as if everyone's collective hopes for an end to the cycle of violence and power-grabbing are dashed.



Lenù looks over at Lila, who is “absorbed by the spectacle” of the **fireworks**. Later on in life, Lila will describe watching the boundaries of Rino’s outline break apart—for the first time, she’ll tell Elena years later, she was able to see “what he was truly made of.” At last, the Solaras’ display is done. Rino and the others cheer, believing they’ve won—but then loud pops and flashes from the Solaras’ terrace makes them believe that the display is starting up again. Only Enzo recognizes the sounds for what they are: gunshots. He rushes everyone inside as Rino, undeterred, leans over the edge of the rooftop and shouts insults at the Solaras.

In the moment, Lenù doesn’t understand what Lila is going through. By providing context from years in the future, however, Elena uses this moment to describe a major shift in Lila’s understanding of the world. Lila, so full of hope for her and her family’s ability to pull themselves up out of poverty and change their fates, points to this horrific moment as one in which she became more aware than ever of the inescapable, crushing nature of male violence.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 23

Though Lenù was unaware of what was happening inside Lila’s head during the **fireworks** display on New Year’s, in the days that follow, Lenù becomes aware of a pronounced change in Lila as her friend becomes lazy and lethargic. When Lenù meets her at the shop one day to help her open up, Lila arrives late and unmotivated—when Lenù tries to cheer her up by asking about the fancy **shoes**, Lila claims to no longer have interest in them. Lenù suspects that to Lila, money is no longer a life vest—it is “cement.”

Lila’s whole attitude about the possibility of change in the neighborhood—or, in the absence of change, at least an escape—has changed. She is despondent and miserable, unable to imagine that there will ever be a situation in which money benefits her life rather than hampering or destroying it.



Rino is eager to show the finished **shoes** to Fernando, but Lila believes the shoes are full of flaws—she wants to throw them away and start over. Rino, however, is impatient. He and Lila begin fighting as their differing opinions drive a horrible wedge between them. The climax of their fight comes on January 5th, the day of the Befana—in Italian folklore, the Befana is an old woman who delivers gifts to children. In the morning, Lila wakes up and finds a sock full of coal by her bed. She knows Rino has left it for her. Lila goes out to the kitchen and sets the breakfast table for everyone but Rino. When he arrives in the kitchen, she hurls coal at him. The two fight, but they pause their quarrel when Fernando enters the kitchen with a box containing the shoes.

Lila’s new sense of despondency extends to her and Rino’s venture with the shoes—she believes there is no point in continuing on with them now that she has seen the true, terrible, unchangeable nature of the world. Rino, however, is determined to continue on the war path—and as he does, he carelessly drags Lila into his conflict with their father.



Fernando pretends to like the **shoes**, complimenting them and praising the “Befana” for her craftsmanship and thoughtfulness. Only Lila can hear the vitriol in her father’s voice. Soon, Fernando begins kicking Rino and hurling insults at him. Rino fights back until both men wear themselves out. When the men go back to work together, they don’t talk to each other—and Lila doesn’t join them in the shop. Rino begins acting cruelly toward Lila, berating her for doing a poor job of the housework and frequently unleashing insults and cruelties at her. Lila lets Rino’s insults roll off her back. She has hidden the shoes in her room, and often takes them out to admire them when no one else is looking, lamenting all her “wasted work.”

Lila responds to the outbreak of male violence in her house by retreating into herself, protecting her precious shoes from the men who do not understand their true significance. Lila is disappointed in the turn things have taken and feels barred from the simple, pleasant work of shoemaking—and from the possibility of making money from her hard work and advancing enough to escape her terrible home environment.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 24

Lenù returns to school after Christmas break. Classes are hard, and many of her classmates drop out. Gino and Alfonso struggle to keep up, and when Gino laughs at Alfonso for crying out of frustration during class, Lenù breaks up with him. When Lenù tells Lila about the breakup, Lila confesses she's received two declarations of her own: one from Pasquale, who declared his love for her in the street and begged her to marry him, and one from Marcello Solara. Lila turned down Pasquale, thanking him for teaching her so much about Italian history—the good and the bad—but insisting she only loved him like a brother. Lila responded to Marcello's declaration (in which he told her he'd dreamed of asking her to marry him and rejoicing as she accepted) by retorting that only in a dream would she ever consent to marry him.

Lenù is impressed by Lila's impassioned refusal of the cruel Marcello—but she also worries for her friend and warns her not to tell anyone that she treated such a powerful man so badly. Nevertheless, Lila begins telling every girl in the neighborhood about rejecting Marcello in great detail. Lenù warns Lila she's made trouble for herself, but Lila insists she's going to be fine.

As Lenù confesses the loss of a partnership to Lila, Lila brags about the offers she's received. She has turned down both Pasquale and Marcello—for very different reasons—and seems to feel, in the depths of her misery about the state of the neighborhood, that there is no point in having a relationship anyway.



Lila is playing with fire—not only has she humiliated Marcello in rejecting him, but also has she begun flaunting his embarrassment all over town. In a world dominated by retributive violence, Lila is tempting fate—but she forgets that this quality is exactly what Marcello likes about her.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 25

Lila's interest in **books**, languages, and learning drops off. She never studies with Lenù anymore and insists that reading gives her a headache. Reading and studying are different for Lenù now, too; she sees reading not as an adventure, but rather the only thing she really knows how to do anymore. Still, she continues to excel in school. Maestro Gerace praises Lenù's intelligence and introduces her as his star pupil to other teachers at the school.

Professor Galiana, a woman who is rumored to be a Communist, stops Lenù in the hall one day to talk to her about one of her papers for Gerace's class. Lenù is proud to have been noticed by Galiana, but as her reputation for cleverness begins to grow, she feels oddly empty—all her intelligence proves is how "fruitful" all of her study sessions with Lila have been.

The despondency and lethargy Lila began feeling after the night of the fireworks infects every aspect of her life—she no longer has any interest in books, languages, or learning, because she feels they will ultimately get her nowhere.



Lenù continues attributing all her smarts and ideas to Lila alone. She has trouble accepting ownership of her own intellectual growth—she can't see that while motivated by Lila, her ideas are indeed her own.



Lenù becomes distressed when her new reputation and good standing with the teachers doesn't even get Nino Sarratore to notice her. She feels there is no "energy" in her learning anymore. Lenù urges Lila to start going back to **reading** and studying again, but Lila is uninterested in doing so. She reveals that Marcello Solara is continuing to pursue her. Lila worries that Marcello's attention will soon lead to fights in the neighborhood—"I make people do the wrong thing," she says sadly, citing Rino's "mania" for money and power as an example.

Both Lenù and Lila are mired in parallel but connected periods of self-doubt and confusion. Lenù feels that without Lila's enthusiasm, there is no point to her work—Lila, however, feels that whatever she does inspires the worst in people, unable to see the ways in which she's positively impacted Lenù.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 26

One April Sunday, Lenù and Lila go out into the city with Carmela, Pasquale, and Rino. Lila suggests visiting a wealthy and trendy neighborhood. As they walk down the street, they hear honking and turn to see the Solaras in their 1100—Gigliola and Ada are in the back of the car. Lenù is full of "bitterness"—she wishes that she and her friends had a car of their own. She feels poor and sad and wants to go home, but Lila's desire to continue wandering, laughing, and having fun makes her feel a bit better.

When confronted with the wealthy, luxurious lifestyle others live, Lila and Lenù have opposite reactions: Lenù becomes jealous, bitter, and depressed, while Lila becomes invigorated and motivated.



As the group arrives in the wealthy, trendy area, Lenù feels as if she is "crossing a border." All of the young, beautiful, well-dressed men and women seem as if they have come from "some other planet." Rino and Pasquale grow sullen, and the girls soon pick up on their energy. All of them start to mock the fancy dresses and shoes worn by the wealthier teenagers. Their laughter escalates and they become bolder in their statements. When Rino insults a ridiculous bowler hat worn by the girlfriend of a young man in a white pullover, the boy insults Rino back. Rino punches the boy and knocks him to the ground. The group's laughter turns to fear as the girls pull Rino and Pasquale away from the burgeoning brawl. Rino yells at Lila for bringing him to such a neighborhood and orders her, Carmela, and Lenù to head home.

This passage examines how Lenù and the rest of her friend group react to encountering an area of extreme wealth—and other young people like them who have access to luxury and refinement, who have never known the burdens of poverty and scarcity that they have. Rino and the others have contempt for these posh mirror images of themselves—and as Rino lashes out in anger at them, it becomes clear that the male violence of the neighborhood, which seeks to dominate anything in its path, has given Rino false hope that he can somehow use his anger to bend fate to his will.



Lenù, Lila, and Carmela start for home, but as they walk through the piazza, they see a group of boys with sticks heading for where they've left Rino and Pasquale. They follow the boys with sticks and find them already beating Rino and Pasquale. The girls scream for help, but no passerby come to their aid. Soon, the Solaras' 1100 pulls up. Marcello gets out and throws himself into the fight right away. Michele pulls a crowbar from his trunk and joins the fray, too. Soon, the well-dressed Naples men are beaten off. Rino asks the Solaras to bring the girls home.

In this passage, Lila and Lenù realize that they will never be able to truly outrun the male-dominated violence of their neighborhood—even if they make it elsewhere in the world, the shadows of their past will follow them wherever they go.



Jammed in the backseat, Lenù feels as if her neighborhood has expanded and begun “swallowing all Naples.” Lila is sullen the entire car ride and ignores Marcello’s attempts to talk with her. Back at the entrance of their building, a shaken Lenù remarks to Lila that rich people are “worse” than them by far. Lila doesn’t answer. Lenù adds that the Solaras are “shit,” but that the brothers at least came to Rino and Pasquale’s aid when they needed it. Lila simply shakes her head.

This passage represents yet another significant blow to Lila’s previously-held belief that money could fix anything—she now realizes that those with money are just as corrupt and violent as her impoverished neighbors, schoolmates, and friends.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 27

Lenù advances in school and gets a scholarship. Gino fails out of school, while Alfonso is told he’ll need to take his qualifying exams again in the fall. Lenù goes to Maestra Olivero to tell her the good news and to thank the woman for her initial interest in helping Lenù continue in school. During the visit, Maestra Olivero suggests that Lenù, who looks pale and unwell, spend the summer with a cousin of Olivero’s on Ischia, a nearby island. Lenù is excited by the idea but knows that her mother will never let it happen.

Maestra Olivero remains invested as ever in Lenù’s success. She knows that the road to education is a marathon, not a sprint, and she wants to ensure that Lenù looks after her physical and mental health so that Lenù can keep going.



Lenù decides not to tell Lila about the offer to vacation on Ischia—Lila is having a hard time. Marcello has stopped following her around, but after the incident in Naples, he came by the house to check on Rino, a visit which “perturbed” Fernando because of the honor it demanded in return. After the visit, Fernando complimented Rino on his wide decision to make friends with Marcello at last. Over the last few weeks, Marcello has continued trying to make peace with the Cerullos by patronizing the **shoe** shop, inviting Rino for a drive, and other shows of goodwill. Lila is perturbed by how easily Rino has been “seduc[ed]” by the dangerous Marcello.

Normally, Lenù likes to tell Lila about the exciting or new things that happen to her—but Lenù knows that things for Lila are particularly dire lately, especially the worrisome ways in which Marcello has begun to orbit Lila and attempt to get to her through her family.



One evening, Rino brings Marcello to dinner. Fernando is honored, and so is Nunzia. Lenù comes over to help Lila prepare for the dinner and warns her that Marcello is coming to ask for her hand in marriage. Lila threatens to put insecticide in the food—she says she will never accept a proposal from Marcello.

Even though Marcello is attempting to charm his way into Lila’s life, she remains resistant to him. Lila and Lenù know that there are ways to use love, sex, and partnership for their own designs—but Lila hates everything Marcello stands for and does not want to indebt herself to him in any way.



At dinner, the Cerullos are overly pleasant to Marcello, unsure of how to behave in the presence of their powerful guest. Marcello and Fernando talk about business, and Marcello tacitly suggests Fernando consider expanding his shop. He begins praising the idea of making new **shoes**. Rino becomes visibly uncomfortable. Marcello says he knows that Rino and Lila have made a pair of shoes in his exact size. He asks to see them. Rino sends Lila to get them. Lila reluctantly does so, but after she disappears to the other room to fetch them, she doesn't return. Nunzia goes to look for her and comes back to report that Lila is gone. Marcello leaves and Fernando and Rino grow furious, threatening to kill Lila when they find her.

Marcello and Rino have clearly been talking about the shoe business—and it is possible that Rino believes Marcello has the ability to make or break their family's business. Lila, however, is completely unwilling to even give Marcello the chance to get close to the shoes.



Lenù leaves to go home. Out on the landing, she hears Lila call to her—Lila is huddled at the top of the stairwell near the terrace entrance. She clutches the **shoes** to her chest and declares that she doesn't want Marcello to touch them or even look at them. Lenù encourages Lila to go home and even accompanies her to the door, hoping her presence will make Lila's parents go easier on her—but Fernando scolds and beats Lila just the same. Lila cries and declares that Fernando and Rino have become “mad beast[s].” Lenù slips out of the apartment and goes home.

Lila wants to protect the shoes—the one thing in her life she's made—from Marcello. The shoes are a symbol of her desire for more, and she wants to protect her heart's desire from corruption, violence, and cruelty no matter the cost—even when it becomes clear that her parents will punish her for her refusal to help them through a good match.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 28

Every time Lenù sees Lila over the next several days, she has a new bruise from Rino. Lila seems “resigned” to the treatment. One day, Lila tells her about taking a walk to the shop with Rino. Once there, he points out that if they can get Marcello to like and buy the **shoes**, their father will let them start making more and selling them. The Solaras, he assures her, will market the shoes and make sure they sell well. Lila insists on bringing the plan to Fernando. That night at dinner, they tell him—he agrees to put the shoes in the shop. If Marcello wants to buy them, he'll let Rino and Lila keep working on their designs.

Lila's spell of deep disenchantment and resignation continues—she feels powerless to escape her situation. It is Rino who suggests that the shoes the two of them have worked so hard on don't have to be wasted work—their father takes Marcello's approval so seriously that if Marcello buys them and markets them, Fernando will get on board. Lila must now weigh whether her hatred of Marcello is more important than her dream of making and selling her shoe designs.



A week goes by and no one shows any interests in the special **shoes** in the window—not even Marcello. Eventually, Rino drags Marcello to the shop and forces him to try them on. Marcello does so, but he doesn't compliment the shoes, and he hurries from the shop when he's done. Rino is devastated. Marcello returns minutes later and tells Fernando that he wants to marry Lila—whom he calls “Lina.”

Lenù points out that Marcello—and everyone else—calls Lila “Lina” as a way of implying that Lenù is the only one who truly knows Lila. Marcello is a pretender—he doesn't really care for Lila. If he did, Ferrante suggests, he might have purchased the shoes.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 29

Rino comes down with a violent fever and, soon after, begins sleepwalking each night. Lila and Nunzia must drag him back to bed from the front door of the apartment. Fernando tells Lila that Marcello's proposal is important and he urges her to accept it—he tells her she won't have to get married right away. Lila quietly replies that she'd rather drown herself in a pond. Lenù is stunned by the news that Lila, not even 15, has received an offer of marriage. She encourages Lila to go to “war” against her father if she has to, promising to support her.

Rino's agitated mental state reflects the heaviness of the bargain he has made—he has essentially sold his sister to the most powerful, violent man in the neighborhood in exchange for a chance at financial success.



In the middle of July, however, Lenù arrives home one afternoon to find Maestra Oliviero sitting in the living room, talking with her mother. Oliviero brings news that her cousin in Ischia invited Lenù to come spend the rest of the summer through the middle of August on the island for free, in exchange for help around the house. Lenù is shocked that her mother agrees Lenù should spend some time resting on the island. Two days later, Lenù's mother takes her to the ferry, buys her a ticket, and sends her off. As a goodbye, she warns Lenù that if she drowns in the sea, it will be her own fault. As the ferry pulls away, Lenù feels the troubles of the neighborhood—including Lila's—vanishing.

The decision to go to Ischia and the preparations for the trip are a blur in Lenù's mind, and she relays the days leading up to her trip very rapidly. Her first extended trip out of the neighborhood fills her with such excitement and indeed relief that she barely even thinks of the troubles of those she's leaving behind as she makes her way out to sea.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 30

On Ischia, in the home of Oliviero's cousin Nella Incardo, Lenù blossoms. She sleeps in the kitchen on a makeshift bed and helps out around the house as Nella cares for her paying guests—but otherwise, Lenù is free to swim, take walks, and **read**. She writes to Lila every single day and swims in the suit Nella sews for her. Lenù's first time in the water is incredible. Her mother has long told her that she used to take Lenù to the sea when she was small—now, finding she can swim quite well, Lenù finally believes her mother. Lenù eats well, practices English with Nella's guests, and feels a sense of happiness and wellbeing she has never known.

Lenù's happiness on Ischia is diminished slightly by the fact that while she writes Lila letters every single day, Lila never writes her back. Even while Lenù has the time of her life relaxing and enjoying the sun and sea, she misses Lila and longs to stay connected to her.



The only thing Lenù misses about home is Lila. She has her “old fear” that in losing pieces of what's happening in Lila's life, her own life is losing “intensity and importance.” Lila doesn't answer any of Lenù's **letters**. At the end of July, after the English family departs, a Neapolitan family is due to arrive. Nella shows Lenù a book that the head of the family himself has written—it is the book of poems by Donato Sarratore.

Lenù misses Lila terribly. Her desire to stay connected to her verges on need—she is anxious when she doesn't hear back from Lila, fearing that their lives are diverging in irreversible ways. Especially when she gets the news about the Sarratores, Lenù wishes she had Lila to talk to, gossip with, and seek guidance from.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 31

Lenù writes to Lila about her feelings surrounding the prospect of seeing her beloved Nino. She imagines all they'll do together on Ischia and believes they'll finally become a couple. When Lenù goes to meet their bus in town, however, she realizes that all of the Sarratores *except* Nino have arrived. Marisa embraces Lenù excitedly and reintroduces Lenù to her family. Lenù feels depressed by Nino's absence. While the rest of the family settles in, Marisa and Lenù walk down to the beach. They gossip, and Marisa tells Lenù that she has a secret boyfriend. She asks Lenù about Gino, but Lenù quickly tells her that she and Gino have been over for "ages."

Marisa reveals that Nino won't come to the island until his father leaves—he cannot stand Donato. Nino, she says, has no real friends and cares nothing for their family. That evening, Lenù eats dinner with the Sarratores—none of them mention anything about the past or ask any questions about the neighborhood. Lenù finds Donato warm and kind, more paternal than even her own father. Over the next several days, Lenù is heartened by how open Donato is and how quick he is to help his wife with caring for their children and completing simple tasks—unlike any other men she knows from the neighborhood. When Donato leaves the island to return to work for a while, Lenù is just as sad to see him go as the rest of his family is—yet she immediately begins looking forward to Nino's arrival.

Most of Lenù's experiences with boys, love, and sex has been based in utility—in the past, a boyfriend has been a way for Lenù to feel self-satisfied, attractive, or superior to Lila. Now, though, Lenù longs for Nino in a genuine way and is nervous to do or say anything that might push him away or make him believe she's unavailable.



Even though Lenù knows of the strife Donato caused in the neighborhood, she finds him to be a kind and alluring presence. Lenù is drawn to Donato because he represents escape from the neighborhood—just as Nino does. The fact that none of the Sarratores ask Lenù any questions about their shared past or old neighbors shows that they have chosen to forget the part of their lives involving the neighborhood and the community of people who live there.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 32

Nino arrives in the evening but shows "not the least emotion" upon seeing Lenù—Lenù believes Marisa must have called or written to him to tell him that she was there. Over the next few days, Nino is quiet and introverted. One night, when Lenù falls asleep **reading**, she wakes up with the light off and the book closed. Lenù believes Nino has tucked her in—she feels a "flare of love" for him. The two begin talking slowly and sparsely over the next few days, but Lenù is often tongue-tied around Nino, whom she wants to impress with conversations about books and reading.

One evening, Nino confesses to Lenù that when they were young, he envied her relationship with Lila—he was jealous of their close friendship yet never had the courage to try to make friends with them. He admits that as a young boy, he liked Lenù "a lot" and thought that they'd be engaged one day. Lenù blushes. When Nino asks about Lila, Lenù's answers become short and clipped as she tells him about Lila working in her father's shop. Lenù stops **writing** to Lila after this conversation.

The way Lenù feels around Nino mirrors the way she often feels around Lila. She wants to impress him—just as she wants to impress Lila. She spends a lot of time reading into the tiniest details of her and Nino's interactions for clues as to the inscrutable Nino's feelings, just as she often tries to understand what's going on in Lila's head.



Nino's complicated confession in this passage disheartens Lenù and makes her angry at Lila—she feels that Nino, like Pasquale and so many others, has only ever wanted to use her to get close to Lila. In reality, what Nino is saying is much more complex: he is speaking openly about his awe and admiration for Lila and Lenù's special friendship and expressing desire to have such a relationship—a luxury rarely afforded to young men.



One evening in August, Nino joins Lenù down by the beach after dropping Marisa off with her friends in town. He sits beside her and starts telling her about his hatred of his father. He cites Donato's cruel treatment of Melina—and the façade of a family man Donato adopts around his own wife and children—as his reasons for loathing the man. Donato, Nino reveals, is constantly unfaithful and always taking on new lovers. Lenù tries to defend the “passion” Donato and Melina shared. Nino tells Lenù that she doesn't understand him, but Lenù insists that she does. Nino kisses Lenù gently and tells her he'll be leaving in the morning, before his father arrives. Together they walk back up to the house.

Nino knows who his father is—but Lenù, who has seen facility with writing and language as a mark not just of intelligence but of moral rightness all her life, is unable to heed Nino's warnings about Donato. Lenù's idealism and innocence will soon be put to the test—and Nino will not be there to offer her warnings anymore.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 33

Lenù stays awake crying all night and doesn't fall asleep until dawn. When she wakes, she realizes she has missed saying goodbye to Nino. The days that follow are sad and difficult. Lenù finds a paper bookmark Nino has left behind and takes to kissing and licking it each night as she weeps.

The bookmark Nino leaves behind is reminiscent of books, language, and literature—symbols throughout the novel of Lila and Lenù's competitive friendship. Lenù experiences a similar relationship with Nino as she does with Lila—one that's steeped in competition and ideas.



When Donato returns for his two-week holiday, Lenù finds herself calmed by his reassuring, gregarious presence. At night, Donato plays guitar for his family and Marisa's friends. Lenù is struck by how different Nino is from his father: Donato is outgoing and warm whereas Nino is cold and withdrawn. As Lenù begins to enjoy Donato's presence more and more, she sees him as a balm not just against Nino's aloofness, but against Lila's as well. Lenù **writes** one final letter to Lila, lamenting the fact that she hasn't heard from her all summer, and then throws herself into her devotion to the entire Sarratore family, imagining that she's one of them.

Rejected by Nino and feeling further away from Lila than ever before, Lenù decides to make use of the community around her and throw herself into her relationships with the Sarratores. Lenù feels abandoned by both Lila and Nino—so she stops writing Lila letters, perhaps in hopes of inspiring in Lila the same isolation she herself feels.



Donato shares articles he's written with Lenù, and she begins to admire him even more for his “high-flown sentences” and great feeling as a **writer**. Lenù has an increasingly difficult time reconciling Nino's words about his father's cruelty and betrayals of Lidia with the man she has come to know. Lenù understands Melina a bit better—she now sees how Melina's “fragile mind” failed to adjust to the “rough normality” of life without her lover. Lenù continues clinging to her love for Nino and her sadness over missing him.

Lenù has spent her whole life in academic competition with Lila and has used language, literature, and writing to get closer to her friend. As such, she sees Donato's success as a writer not just as a mark of intelligence but of moral goodness.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 34

On the 25th of August—Lenù's 15th birthday—two important things happen. The first is that she receives a **letter** from Lila early in the morning, which she devours, struck by Lila's beautiful writing and the naturalistic way she is able to “speak” through the written word in a way that Lenù has never encountered before. There is “no trace of effort” or artifice in Lila's letter, and Lenù is “ashamed” of the “childish” letters she herself has been sending all summer.

Lila's letter states that she hasn't written so as not to spoil Lenù's beautiful vacation with her “terrible stories”—but now she feels compelled to tell Lenù what's been going on at home. She writes that after Lenù's departure, Marcello began coming to the Cerullos' for dinner every night with pastries and chocolates in tow. Lila never touched a single thing he brought and tried to act like he wasn't there at all. One morning, Marcello and a large man arrived with a big box containing a television: a gift for Lila and her family.

Lila incurred wrath from all sides: from Rino for leaving him to labor in the workshop while she pursued life as a lady and from her father for being hostile to Marcello. She even drew ire from Marcello himself, as he felt that he was Lila's fiancé already and he grew increasingly frustrated each day Lila ignored him (and even taunted him by telling him about her “nonexistent boyfriends”). Marcello threatened to kill Lila if he found out she liked someone else. Lila, terrified, could do little but continue carrying her trusty knife with her at all times.

Lila writes to Lenù of the “good and evil [...] mixed together” throughout the neighborhood. Though Marcello is a good match, the good “taste[s] of the bad and the bad [...] of the good.” Lila closes her letter by including an anecdote: a few nights ago, she writes, while washing dishes, she heard a loud noise. She turned to face the wall and realized that a copper pot hanging there had exploded—seemingly of its own accord—leaving a hole in the middle and the structure “deformed.” Lila signs off by stating that she hopes Lenù stays on Ischia forever and that she never has to return to the neighborhood again.

Language and writing are so often points of competition for Lila and Lenù—but just as often, they are points of connection. In this passage, Lenù finds herself in awe of Lila's natural way with words—but her joy at hearing from Lila is tinged with jealousy over Lila's proficiency with language and shame over her own halting past communications.



As Lila relays to Lenù the story of being wooed by the frightful and odious Marcello Solara, it becomes clear that Lila's parents—who have already thrown her life off course by barring her from school—are now seeking to use Lila and her potential union with Marcello to advance their own stations.



As Lila resists Marcello's advances, she becomes a target for violence from all the men in her life. Lila, having learned that the only way to fight violence is with more violence, readies herself by carrying a weapon at all times.



Lila is clearly beginning to fear for her life. Based on her penchant for telling fanciful stories in the past, it's unclear whether the story about the pot is an exaggeration—or whether a warning shot was fired into her apartment to frighten her. Either way, it is clear that Lila feels profoundly threatened and unable to enjoy her life as long as Marcello's influence confuses and alienates her.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 35

Lenù is disturbed by Lila's **letter**. She struggles to write back—she feels her language is insufficient and that she cannot capture her feelings about the Sarratores or about her worry for Lila. Nella and the Sarratores try to rouse Lenù's spirits, but she tells them that her friend is in trouble and that she may be returning home the next day. When everyone fusses over Lenù leaving and begs her to stay, she feels her birthday becomes "even happier."

That night, as Lenù gets into her bed in the kitchen, she stares at the pots on the wall and thinks of Lila. She rereads her friend's **letter** and clutches Nino's bookmark. After a while, she hears footsteps. Donato enters the kitchen. Lenù pulls up the covers and pretends to sleep. Donato speaks: he says he knows Lenù is awake, and he entreats her to stay. Lenù insists she must return home to her friend who needs her, but Donato replies that he is the one who needs Lenù. He approaches her bed and begins kissing her. Lenù, "immobilized," lies still as Donato caresses her breasts and moves his fingers against her underwear. Lenù is horrified by Donato's behavior—and by her own pleasure. Donato tells Lenù he loves her and asks her to take a walk on the beach with him the next day before bidding her goodnight and leaving the kitchen.

Lenù lies in bed, distressed over her failure to heed Nino's warnings about his father. Full of disgust for both Donato and herself, Lenù lies awake all night. At first light, she collects her things, makes her bed, writes a note of thanks to Nella, and leaves for the ferry. As the boat pulls away, she begins thinking of how she will tell Lila about what's happened. From the future, Elena writes that she never told Lila about the incident—this is the first time she has ever put what happened between her and Donato into words.

Lenù is sad for her friend—but she also feels threatened by the idea that Lila, in spite of a lack of formal education, is a better writer and thinker than she is. Being the center of attention on Ischia among the Sarratores makes Lenù feel better about herself.



Nino was right about his father all along—Donato is a predatory philanderer with no allegiance to his wife and family. Even though Donato's advances are nonconsensual, there is a part of her that feels a repulsive kind of pleasure. In a world where male attention of any kind represents so many conflicting things, it makes sense that Lenù has a response to Donato's lechery that confuses even her.



As Elena, narrating from the future, steps in to admit that she has never shared the story of Donato's abuse with anyone, it becomes clear that she harbors great shame about what's happened to her—and that in light of what is going to happen when she returns to the neighborhood, she won't want to share that shame even with her closest friend.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 36

When Lenù returns to the neighborhood suddenly, her mother asks her if she's done something to get thrown out of Nella's house—her father, however, is thrilled to see her and compliments her on how good she looks. The sun has tanned her skin, lightened her hair, and dried up her acne. Lenù hurries out to find Lila as soon as she can—as the two embrace in the courtyard, Lenù notices that Lila has changed in just a month. To Lenù, Lila seems to have become a woman—a woman of "unusual beauty" at that.

Lenù has consistently gauged her beauty and maturity against Lila's—now, as she returns from Ischia, she feels the rare sensation that they are both on the same page at the same time. Both of them have changed over the summer, each becoming more beautiful and mature.



Lila takes Lenù with her on a walk toward Stefano's grocery. She tells Lenù that things are getting worse each day—just last night, she says, Marcello came over and gave her a ring. She accepted it in front of her parents, but before Marcello left, she threw it back at him. He threatened and yelled at first, but soon he dissolved into tears. Fernando and Nunzia cruelly berated Lila for damaging their futures by refusing a Solara—only Rino defended Lila. That night, Nunzia found Rino in the kitchen in the middle of the night, lighting matches and passing them in front of the gas valve. Lila tells Lenù that she needs to get out of her current situation but has no idea how—she begs for Lenù's help. Lenù promises to do whatever she can.

Arriving at the grocery, Lila shows Lenù Stefano's new car which is parked outside—it is even nicer than the Solaras' 1100. Stefano, seeing the girls, peeks out and greets Lenù. He tells her she looks well and reports that he himself was in Ischia recently; though he looked for her, he couldn't find her. Stefano notices Lenù staring at the car. He tells her he's bought it for Lila, but that Lila doesn't believe him.

Stefano offers to take the girls for a ride. He heads inside to put his apron away. While he's gone, Lila confirms that Stefano recently told her that he bought the car "just for [her.]" He has been begging her to take a drive with him—but she has insisted upon waiting for Lenù's return. Lenù tells Lila how dangerous it is to run around with Stefano given everything that's happened with Marcello, but Lila insists that with Lenù present, everything will be fine. Stefano returns and welcomes the girls into the car. Lila sits in the back while Lenù takes the front. As they take off on their drive, Lenù feels calm and exhilarated by the wind—but soon begins to worry that Lila, in spite of the buffer of Lenù's presence, is setting an "earthquake" in motion.

Stefano drives the girls out of the neighborhood and into town. As the three of them drive around, Lenù overhears Lila and Stefano having furtive discussions about Lila's situation with Marcello—Lenù wonders what she has missed on Ischia and how many conversations like this one Lila and Stefano have had already. Lila jokingly reminds Stefano of the time he tried to prick her tongue—he laughs and insists it was another time. As the car returns to the outskirts of the neighborhood, Stefano asks about the **shoes** in the window, which he says are beautiful. Lila challenges him to buy them. Stefano asks how much they cost, and Lila says he should ask Fernando. Stefano makes an abrupt turn and steers the car toward the Cerullo's shop.

As Lila fills Lenù in on what she's missed, it becomes clear that Lila's situation has grown increasingly precarious. Not only does she face the threat of retributive violence from Marcello, should she refuse him—her brother Rino also seems to be harboring an intense, potentially violent sense of anxiety. Though Lenù and Lila have both tried to escape the omnipresent threat of male violence, they have ultimately found themselves in greater danger than ever.



Lenù has clearly missed more than she realized while on Ischia—Stefano has turned his attentions to Lila, and just like Marcello, he's attempting to essentially buy her affection.



In this passage, it's clear that Lila has been waiting for Lenù's return so that she can use her friend as a buffer—and an excuse—in her dealings with Stefano. Lenù knows Lila well enough to see how her unpredictable, irreverent actions will reverberate throughout their neighborhood—and have potentially devastating consequences for both Lila and Stefano.



Lenù is very out of the loop—but she's catching up fast. It's clear from this passage that Lila sees Stefano as her only chance of escaping a future with Marcello, and she is encouraging him, in spite of Marcello's power over the neighborhood and penchant for violence, to pursue her wholeheartedly. As Stefano speeds through the streets to buy the shoes, it becomes clear that he is ready to commit himself to Lila—no matter the cost.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 37

Stefano, Lenù, and Lila head into the shop. Fernando and Rino are looking at them with strange, “sullen” curiosity. Stefano asks if he can try the **shoes** on. When Rino brings them out, Stefano asks Lenù what she thinks of them, and Lenù says they’re “handsome.” Stefano asks to see the designs for the other shoes Lila and Rino plan to make, and Lila runs to fetch them.

Stefano tries on the **shoes**, stands up, and walks around. Stefano’s face becomes worried—he announces that the shoes are too tight. Fernando offers to widen them on a special machine, and Stefano says he’ll take them. Rino warns Stefano that the shoes are expensive, but Stefano insists he’ll take them no matter what. He asks how long they’ll take to stretch; Rino tells him three days. Stefano promises to return in three days and purchase the shoes. He asks if he can take the drawings with them in the meantime, and Lila “coldly” agrees.

As Lila follows Stefano out of the store, she warns him not to make “fools” of her and her family. Stefano says he’s a businessman—Lila’s designs are “unusual,” and he wants to think about him for several days. Lila tells Stefano that Marcello already tried to buy her once—no one, she says, will ever be able to buy her the way he tried to. Stefano tells Lila that he doesn’t spend a single lira if he doesn’t think he’ll be able to make a hundred more. Lenù realizes that the drive was a way for Stefano and Lila to come to a much-sought-after agreement.

Stefano’s interest in buying the shoes symbolizes his interest in buying Lila’s affections. Lila willingly allows—and even encourages—Stefano to do so, believing that if she winds up with him, she will have a better fate than if she winds up with Marcello. The shoes continue to function as a symbol of the things that Lila is willing to forgo in order to climb out of poverty.



The shoes’ tightness on Stefano’s feet is a bad omen signaling that what he and Lila are doing together is dangerous or not quite the right fit—nevertheless, Stefano remains committed not just to buying the shoes but also to investing in Lila’s family’s business wholeheartedly.



What Lila and Stefano are doing is an intricate dance of wits and wills. They know that to be together is to fly in the face of the Solaras’ control of the neighborhood on many levels—as such, Stefano wants to make sure he’s making the right move, and Lila wants to protect her honor even as she attempts to sacrifice her freedom in exchange for the protection Stefano provides.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 38

Lila’s life begins to change rapidly. Lenù accompanies Lila on frequent trips to visit Stefano at the grocery over the next several days. On their walks there, they gossip endlessly about Stefano and Marcello, plotting out the minutia of how to “make things come out right.” Lenù realizes that Lila’s plan is not just to help her family’s business by goading Stefano into buying the **shoes**, but to secure a marriage proposal from Stefano in order to escape the hated Marcello.

Lenù knows how dangerous Lila and Stefano’s plan is, but she finds herself caught up in the giddiness of the drama the arrangement inspires. There is a part of Lenù that is fascinated by such complicated plans and machinations—a part of her that is afraid of being left out of Lila’s life as she creates a new future with Stefano.



Three days later, Stefano returns and purchases the too-tight **shoes**. Stefano pays 25,000 lira for the shoes and another 20 for Lila's drawings, announcing his intention to have them framed. A few days later, he informs Fernando that he has rented the space next to the shop; if Fernando wants to expand, Stefano says, all he needs to do is say so. Lila privately tells her father and brother that Stefano is prepared to invest in a workshop for making Cerullo shoes. In all of the hubbub surrounding the possibility of expansion, the Cerullos begin behaving somewhat distractedly toward Marcello when he arrives for dinner each night.

Eventually, Rino convinces the uncertain Fernando to accept Stefano's offer. Fernando calls Stefano to the shop and tells him that if Stefano puts up the expenses, he and Rino will begin production on the **shoes** right away. Stefano says he'll pay two or three workers to join the shop and start immediately. Fernando is hesitant, insisting on employing himself the craft he has learned from his father—but Stefano insists upon having Lila's exact designs made at once. When Rino asks skeptically if Lila knows about and has agreed to all of these terms, Stefano replies that nothing can ever be done if Lila doesn't agree with it.

The Cerullos, who very recently believed that Lila's marriage to Marcello was a surefire way to improve their financial and social prospects, quickly begin to realize that Stefano is actually a better suitor not just for Lila but for all of them. The Cerullos are just as desperate to game the system as Lila is—so much so that they even begin neglecting their esteemed guest at the risk of offending him.



This passage makes it clear that Stefano has effectively taken control of the Cerullos' business. His offer to marry Lila—and take her away from Marcello's influence—comes with strings: he wants the chance to build a fortune using Lila's ideas as a jumping-off point.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 39

That night, Rino taunts Marcello about Stefano's new car—and the fact that Stefano purchased the **shoes** for 25,000 lire. Marcello laughs the provocations off. Over the next several nights, Rino continues looking for ways to insult Marcello, while Lila takes to avoiding him by staying in her room during his visits. One night, Marcello asks Nunzia if Lila likes someone else. He says Lila has been spotted at Stefano's grocery a lot, and Nunzia points out that it's the only grocery in town. Marcello says Lila was spotted in the car with Stefano and Lenù—Nunzia insists Stefano is interested in Lenù. Marcello tells Nunzia not to let Lila spend time with Lenù anymore.

When Lila reports this conversation to Lenù, Lenù throws her support behind Stefano. Lenù tells Lila that Stefano is rich—and as she does, she realizes that her childhood dreams of wealth have been reconfigured to accommodate the idea that wealth is about what kind of ease money can bring to the everyday. The more Lenù considers this idea, the more depressed she becomes. She reminds Lila of how Stefano tried to prick her tongue when she was small. Lila insists that Stefano was just a child then, and, in her voice, Lenù hears a great deal of emotion. Over the next few days, Lenù observes how deeply Lila really does appear to care for Stefano and the "pact" they are making together. Desperate not to be excised from Lila's life, Lenù clings to Lila as she and Stefano plot and plan.

As the Cerullos collectively become more disdainful of Marcello—and bolder in venturing to show that disdain—Marcello attempts to tighten his control of Lila. He has caught wise to what's going on and still believes that his influence—and the threat of the violence his family is capable of—is enough to reign her in.



While observing the courtship between Lila and Stefano, Lenù has seen Lila's pursuit of him as purely a strategical maneuver. Now, though, Lenù begins to understand that Lila does actually care for Stefano—whether that care is motivated by what he can give her or whether it comes from a deeper place of gratitude and hope for change in the neighborhood.



One day, as several workers and apprentices arrive to begin renovating the **shoe** shop and start work on some new products, Stefano arrives at the shop with a package wrapped in brown paper—he has framed Lila’s designs, and now asks Fernando permission to hang them on the wall. Once the pictures are hung, Stefano asks for Lila’s hand in marriage. Fernando, frightened, “weakly” states that Lila is engaged to Marcello. Stefano replies that if she is, she doesn’t seem to know it. Rino, too, says that Lila hates Marcello. Stefano looks around the shop knowingly. He urges Fernando to let Lila decide for herself—if she wants him, he says, Fernando must give her to him.

During all of this, Lila and Lenù have been waiting outside. Stefano calls them inside the shop. Stefano tells Lila that he loves her “more than [...] life” and asks her to marry him. Lila says she will. Fernando gasps and almost immediately asks who will tell Marcello the news—Lila and Stefano are offending “all the Solaras.” Lila insists that she will be the one to break the news.

Over the last several days, Stefano has stacked the deck indisputably in his own favor. He has essentially taken over the Cerullo family business, making Fernando beholden to Stefano—and thus to Lila, as Lila is essentially controlling Stefano with her beauty and wiles. These complicated social maneuvers demonstrate the complex and sometimes dangerous ways in which the community members make use of one another.



Lila is aware that in marrying Stefano and rejecting Marcello, she is rocking the status quo of the neighborhood and putting herself—and her future marriage—in jeopardy. However, if there’s anyone who believes they can stand up to the Solaras’ wrath, it is the stony, intrepid Lila.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 40

Two nights later, during Marcello’s nightly visit, Lila asks him to take her out for ice cream. Marcello is excited—but as soon as they are outside, Lila says she doesn’t love Marcello and is planning on marrying Stefano. Marcello threatens to kill them both, and Lila tells him to try it. Marcello begins crying and says he that loves Lila too much to do it. Lila warns Marcello that if anyone in his family—or anyone connected to them—tries to hurt Stefano or her family, she will kill Marcello herself. Marcello sobs and walks away. Lila calls out for him to send someone to come collect the television—her family, she says, has no need of it.

Lila dismisses Marcello quickly, efficiently, and indeed brutally. She is unafraid of retribution—or at least she affects a mask of bravery in hopes that it will keep Marcello from acting rashly. Lila is taking a huge gamble, the effects of which will not make themselves known until later. While Marcello may not strike back with decisive violence, there are still opportunities for him to make Lila’s life miserable in other ways.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 41

Lila is happy: in less than a month, she has gotten rid of Marcello, found a way to move forward with her **shoe** designs, and become engaged to a wealthy young man. Lila has everything, and as Lenù returns to school she is full of dread and boredom. She begins to see Lila less and less—but she sees her fellow student (and Stefano’s brother) Alfonso more often. Lenù finds her friendship with Alfonso “soothing”—they don’t talk very much, but just being around him is nice. She begins to use him to “escape” from Nino, who has, since the start of the school year, been attempting to talk to Lenù. Lenù avoids Nino at all costs, unsure of how to handle her feelings for him. Though she’s still consumed with passion for him, she cannot look at him without seeing (and feeling) Donato.

Lenù sees how happy Lila is, and she attributes Lila’s newfound comfort and happiness to the ways in which Lila has strategically used Stefano to escape her situation with Marcello. Lenù attempts to emulate Lila’s canny strategy by using Alfonso to escape from Nino. This is yet another situation in which Lenù mirrors Lila’s behavior in an attempt to replicate her friend’s actions—and achieve similar results for herself.



One day, while walking home with Alfonso, Lenù spies Donato on the railway embankment in his conductor's uniform. When she does a double take to see if it is really him, though, he is gone. In the midst of this "confusing" time, Lenù seeks Alfonso's company more and more often—but she is careful not to give him the impression that she's attracted to him. It would be "humiliating," she feels, to be with the little brother of Lila's fiancé. Nevertheless, she feels it is somehow right that the journey the two of them began when they first climbed the stairs to Don Achille's apartment has ended with the man's sons taking care of each of them.

Lenù is a sentimental person—she's very invested in the ideas of fate and destiny. She feels there is something cosmic or predetermined, then, in the idea that because her and Lila's friendship began in earnest with a visit to the fearsome Don Achille's apartment door, it is only fitting that his sons, in his absence, have taken responsibility for the two of them. Lenù is grateful for Alfonso because of how their friendship keeps her tied to both Lila and Stefano—but at the same time, she doesn't want to get too close to him and be seen as desperate to keep pace with Lila through any means necessary.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 42

Lenù becomes obsessed with making connections between her life and Lila's, pointing out the "convergences and divergences" in their paths. She notes that the better off she was in Ischia, the worse off Lila was; the happier Lila has become in the last month, the worse off Lenù has been. Lenù feels that even the physical realm is affected by this inverse proportion: though she felt tan and beautiful on Ischia, she now feels plain and dull; Lila, however, has become even more beautiful.

This passage is significant because it shows how Lenù truly thinks, at this point in her life, about the connection between her and Lila. Though their lives are barely recognizable to each other, Lenù remains devoted to the belief that their fates are still somehow intertwined in spite of it all.



Things worsen when Lenù begins to have trouble seeing the board in school and finds herself needing glasses. Lenù hates the glasses—yet when she accidentally breaks them at school she begins to cry, knowing her parents will not be able to pay to replace them. When she tells Lila what has happened, Lila takes the glasses. A few days later, Lila brings them back—Stefano took them to the city to have them fixed and he paid for everything. Lenù says she'll never be able to pay Lila back. Lila says there's no need to—now, she does whatever she likes with money.

This passage illustrates how different Lila and Lenù's lives are now—their paths have definitively diverged. Lenù must still contend with the everyday struggles of poverty and uncertainty, while Lila's life has been smoothed over by wealth and comfort.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 43

Lenù begins to feel more and more depressed about Lila's good fortune. She tries to convince herself that school is her "wealth" and begins clinging to her every success in class, large or small. In spite of her attempts to make herself feel better, she realizes, at the end of the day, she has no one to talk to about the books she's reading or the topics she's learning. She takes issues with the idea of the Holy Spirit as it's taught to her in religion class—and she wishes she could discuss and debate it with Nino or Lila.

Lenù knows that she and Lila have chosen different paths. Lila has found wealth and the opportunity to elevate her social position through marriage—Lenù, though, knows that her only option right now is to continue in school in hopes of achieving the same end through different means. However, Lenù's self-confidence has taken a decisive hit—she feels she has chosen the wrong path.



Every time Lenù tries to talk about school with Lila, though, Lila interrupts her or changes the subject. Lila accuses Lenù of “wast[ing her] time” with silly thoughts and quickly tries to redirect Lenù’s attention to the beautiful gifts of dresses and jewelry she’s gotten from Stefano. Lenù tries to get excited about Lila’s new life, but when Lila encourages her to try on the beautiful things, Lenù becomes “depressed” to realize they don’t suit her as they do her friend.

Lenù feels that Lila has surpassed her for good. Lenù was always concerned about falling behind Lila in terms of intellect or talent—now, though, Lenù realizes that Lila is living a kind of life she herself may never get to, a life that has nothing to do with books or learning.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 44

Lila’s role as Stefano’s fiancée makes her the subject of envy and ire throughout the neighborhood. Stefano’s mother Maria and his sister Pinuccia especially begin to treat Lila with suspicion and dislike. They don’t like the amount of money Stefano spends on Lila, or the fact that Lila doesn’t work now—but when they ask her to come to work in the grocery store and she readily agrees to, they don’t like that answer either. Stefano begins buying Pinuccia presents too, and soon she and Lila are in competition for Stefano’s affection. The other neighborhood girls also begin competing with Lila by trying to dress up and act like ladies—but Carmela, Ada, and Gigliola’s attempts to catch up with Lila fail.

Lila takes to her new life with ease. While others think that she is a ruthless social climber, the truth is far more complicated: Lila simply wants to be shielded from Marcello and helped to make her father’s business flourish. Lila doesn’t mind going to work—just as when she only wanted to study to learn, she only wants Stefano (and money) for certain purposes.



One night, Stefano tells Lila to invite her friends out to dinner. The dinner is held at a big restaurant—Lenù, Antonio, and Ada have never been to a restaurant and worry about how they’ll pay for the many dishes Stefano orders. They don’t enjoy the meal—and at the end, when Stefano pays for everything, they feel foolish. Antonio takes offense at being treated like a “pauper” while Lenù and Ada, intimidated by their newly-glamorous friend, feel Lila is “unsuited” to the simple ways they live, dress, and get around.

Lila’s new life alienates her from her friends. Even when she tries to bring her two worlds together, she fails to unite her past and her present—she is moving up and out of the neighborhood, just like she always wanted to, and she cannot bring her friends with her.



As Lila becomes more and more glamorous and develops an even more beautiful, voluptuous shape, Lenù begins to feel that the Lila she knew—the Lila who wrote *The Blue Fairy* and the beautiful **letter** to Lenù in Ischia, who loved books and languages so intensely—has disappeared. Lenù realizes that she and Lila are moving through two vastly different worlds. Lenù cannot stop thinking of the image of the exploded, deformed pot—she believes that Lila cannot be contained and will, sooner or later, “break everything again.”

Lenù feels that her Lila is changing too much and too quickly. She barely recognizes Lila anymore—but she also senses that the changes Lila is going through are purposeful, meant to shield her from the fear she felt when being pursued by Marcello.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 45

Lenù begins developing a crush on Antonio, who has been “discreetly” courting her for weeks. Lenù stops seeing Lila and Stefano very often—but Lila remains the central topic of Lenù’s gossip sessions with her other friends. Pasquale, still wounded by Lila’s relationship with Stefano, nevertheless jumps to the Cerullós’ defense when he hears that Silvio Solara has threatened to squash Fernando’s **shoe** business before it even begins. Lenù tries to defend Lila’s relationship with Stefano and her newfound love of shopping and glamour, but when Pasquale accuses Lila of taking advantage of Don Achille’s black-market fortune and profiting off the “blood of all the poor” of the neighborhood, it creates a rift in their friend group. Pasquale implies that Lila is a “whore” for getting engaged to Stefano, an accusation which drives a wedge between him, Antonio, and Enzo.

This short chapter shows how Lila’s decisions send ripples of tension, violence, and cruelty throughout her friend group, inspiring profound rancor among the young men she knows. Pasquale especially, but also to some degree Enzo and Antonio, feel some directive to protect Lila’s honor—they feel that in getting engaged to Stefano, she has become an unrepentant social climber obsessed only with money and control. The men don’t take into account the nuanced reasons behind Lila’s decision—and the sacrifices she has had to make in order to pursue a better life after being denied an education.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 46

Lenù feels triumphant about Lila’s good fortune—and her own part in securing it. The **shoe** shop is busy at work making Cerullo shoes, even as Fernando and Rino clash over the finer points of bringing Lila’s vision to life. Stefano encourages both men to work as hard as they can to reproduce Lila’s designs faithfully. Lenù admires how Stefano, out of plain love for Lila, has moved so many people to do the things she wants—but at the same time, she is waiting for something bad to happen. However, Lenù is surprised (and, admittedly, “disappointed”) when she realizes how easily Lila is settling into life as a fiancée.

Lenù is both envious of Lila’s good fortune and nervous that it will soon come to an end. There is a part of her that is truly happy for Lila’s dreams to begin coming to fruition—and a part of her that yearns for more on Lila’s behalf.



Gigliola, who is dating Michele, begins spreading rumors that Lila performed oral sex on Marcello every night that he came over to her parents’ house. Lenù becomes nervous about what will happen if these rumors reach Stefano. Soon, though, Lenù discovers that both he and Lila are aware of the rumors and find them laughable. Lila tells Lenù that while both she and Stefano want revenge, they have mutually decided to rise above both the Solaras and the “logic of the neighborhood” by refusing to retaliate. Lenù is astonished by Lila and Stefano’s benevolent behavior. Lenù begins to wonder if Lila is somehow trying to “leave the neighborhood by staying” and changing things from the inside out.

Lenù is continually surprised by Lila and Stefano’s failure to engage in the provocations of the Solaras. She begins to realize that the two of them really believe change is possible—and because Lila believes it, Lenù begins to believe it, too.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 47

When the rumors about Lila and Marcello reach Lenù's friends, Enzo, Antonio, and Pasquale are more indignant than Stefano himself. Pasquale is particularly outraged, threatening to take revenge against the Solaras on Lila's behalf himself. The next day, the Solaras' 1100 has been demolished and the Solaras have been badly beaten. Both brothers report being attacked by 10 men from "outside the neighborhood," but Carmela and Lenù believe that Pasquale, Enzo, and Antonio are behind the attack. The girls wait for a reprisal from the Solaras—but there is none.

As Lenù takes her end-of-year exams upon finishing her second year of high school, Lila announces to her abruptly one day that she and Stefano are to be married the following spring. On the day of the wedding, Lila will be barely 16 and a half.

It is obvious that Pasquale, Enzo, and Antonio take decisive action against the Solaras—but the Solaras, for whatever reason, choose not to pursue revenge against the three boys (at least not yet). This passage confirms that even as Lila and Stefano work to change the neighborhood, vicious cycles of male violence will continue to proliferate and threaten everyone.



Every achievement Lenù accomplishes is met with the announcement of something different—yet equally momentous—from Lila. The two girls circle each other, constantly trying to one-up and outdo each other.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 48

Lenù is upset by the news of Lila's upcoming wedding and shocked by the suddenness and finality of the fixed date—March 12th. There are still nine months until the wedding, yet Lenù fears she and Lila are speeding toward a "crossroads that [will] separate [their] lives." Lenù begins to feel that school is more meaningless than ever. She also begins berating herself for her "meager" number of romantic experiences.

When Lenù goes to school the next day, however, Professors Gerace and Galiani praise her most recent **Italian** paper and Gerace reads a passage before the final exam committee. Hearing her words come from the Maestro's mouth, Lenù is proud of her writing for the first time in her life—it is not a mere imitation of Lila's voice, but her own. Lenù is promoted to her third year with perfect grades—but her family doesn't seem to care much. Even Maestra Olivero is uninterested in the good news when Lenù goes to deliver it to her—Oliviero only wants to talk about Lila and lament the waste of Lila's mind.

Lenù feels she's constantly living in Lila's shadow even in moments of personal triumph, yet this creates within her a desire to continue getting closer to Lila rather than to shut her out.



This passage is indicative of Lenù's lifelong uphill struggle to determine what percentage of her thoughts and of her work is truly hers—and what percentage she owes to Lila. Lenù's academic achievements bring her great personal satisfaction, but with every success she has, she—and those around her—are constantly measuring her against Lila.



Alfonso is the only one who congratulates Lenù—she is grateful for his support and surprised when he hugs her and gives her a big kiss on the cheek. On the way home from school, Lenù asks Alfonso how he feels about the upcoming wedding and his new sister-in-law. Alfonso recalls the competition in which Lila “humiliated” him even though he was the son of the feared Don Achille—he remembers finding Lila’s lack of deference “intolerable” and states that if it were up to him to choose who to marry, he would choose Lenù. As they part ways, Lenù promises to meet up with Alfonso over the summer—but she reveals that the season will go by without them seeing each other even once.

Lenù looks for summer work and quickly finds that the stationer needs someone to watch her young girls and take them swimming during the day. Lenù can hardly believe that she’ll be paid to take the three girls to the beach for July and part of August. On the way home from the stationer, she runs into Antonio on the street and shares the good news with him. Antonio, excited for Lenù, asks her to be his girlfriend. Knowing that Lila is just about to “complete a definitive leap” beyond Lenù’s experience, Lenù accepts the older boy’s offer of companionship.

Alfonso clearly has affection for Lenù—and he also seems to have complicated feelings about his brother’s engagement to Lila. Lenù resists getting too close to Alfonso, however, because part of her still believes it would be humiliating to be with the younger brother of her best friend’s fiancé.



In this passage, as Lenù accepts Antonio’s offer to be her boyfriend, Ferrante shows how Lenù, threatened by the idea that Lila will soon move on without her (and surpass her in terms of romantic experience) decides to use a relationship with Antonio to stay apace with Lila.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 49

Each day, Lenù takes the stationer’s girls on the bus to the sea. She sits on the beach and watches them play, then returns with them to the neighborhood late in the afternoon. Lenù brings the girls home to their mother and then hurries off for secret dates with Antonio. At the ponds near the back streets of the neighborhood, Lenù lets Antonio touch her breasts and between her legs, and she touches a penis for the first time as she fondles him, too. During these exchanges, Lenù wonders if Lila does such things with Stefano. She comes to realize that touching and kissing Antonio doesn’t give her the same pleasure her strange encounter with Donato did, yet she sees Antonio as a “useful phantom” in conjuring those feelings on her own.

Antonio occasionally goes to the beach with Lenù and the stationer’s girls, buying them all sandwiches and entertaining the children while Lenù **reads**. One day, Lenù spots Lila at the beach looking like a movie star in big sunglasses and a glamorous swimsuit as an attendant sets up chairs for her and Stefano. Lenù hasn’t seen Lila in a long time—Lila doesn’t know about Lenù’s job or her new boyfriend. Lenù has trouble catching Lila’s eye and returns to reading, but soon, Antonio calls her over. The three of them and the girls spend the day together, and Stefano orders ice cream, sodas, and sandwiches for everyone.

Even in the midst of her sexual encounters with Antonio, Lenù thinks mostly of Lila—she is constantly comparing herself to her friend. With things like writing and school, the two can compare their progress and status openly—but when it comes to love and sex, Lenù has unanswered questions about Lila’s experiences and point of view.



Lenù knows that she and Lila are on different paths, and their encounter at the beach—one in which Lila doesn’t even spot Lenù—fills Lenù with fear that perhaps Lila will truly move on from their friendship and have no need of their relationship anymore.



While Antonio and Stefano talk, Lila urges Lenù to ask the stationer to pay her more for her work. Lenù jokes that she'll gouge Lila for prices when the time comes for her to take Lila's own children to the beach. Lila replies that she knows the "value" of time with Lenù and will pay her "treasure chests" of money. Lila asks if Antonio knows Lenù's value—and if Lenù loves him. Lenù says she doesn't. She asks Lila if Lila loves Stefano, and Lila replies that she loves Stefano more than anyone in the world—except for Lenù.

Lenù invites Lila to come to the beach with her some days for the rest of the summer, and Lila agrees to do so. At the end of the afternoon, Stefano goes to pay and realizes that Antonio has already taken care of the bill. Back in the neighborhood, Lenù scolds him for paying when he doesn't have the money to do so and asks him why he'd do such a thing. Antonio replies that he and Lenù are "better-looking and more refined" than Stefano and Lila.

In this scene, Lila and Lenù have a casual, jocular conversation which quickly turns serious when Lila declares that not even Stefano can replace Lenù in her heart. This passage speaks to the ways in which female friendship—even more than love, sex, and committed partnerships—have the power to alter the trajectory of a person's life.



Antonio clearly has a chip on his shoulder about the differences between him and Stefano. While Stefano can provide for Lila with ease, Antonio cannot do the same for Lenù—yet he is determined to show her his viability and utility as a romantic partner



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 50

Lenù begins growing fonder and fonder of Antonio. She starts feeling more attracted to him, and their "sexual games" advance, though they still haven't had intercourse. Lenù decides that when Lila starts coming to Sea Garden with her, she'll ask her about her and Stefano's sexual habits. Lila, however, never comes to Sea Garden, and in mid-August, Lenù's job is done. Lenù is slightly horrified as the stationer thanks her for all her hard work this summer and mentions Antonio—whom the children have told her sometimes came along during their day trips—but the stationer congratulates Lenù on having such a nice boyfriend and says she should let loose, since everyone knows that Lila sure does.

That night, Lenù repeats the conversation to Antonio and tells him that ever since she and Lila were little, everyone has thought that Lila is bad and Lenù is good. Antonio says that he himself sees them that way, and Lenù is touched by his response. She has been considering breaking up with him, but the reply convinces her to stay with him a little while longer in spite of her burning love for Nino. She tells herself that by the end of the month, she'll break up with Antonio. As the month goes by, however, Antonio's mother, Melina's, mental health starts to suffer again—she begins saying that she has seen Donato around town.

Even as Lenù warms to Antonio, their relationship remains secondary to her friendship with Lila—all of her sexual games with Antonio are, in a way, attempts to make sure that she and Lila continue to have common ground.



Lenù knows that she will never love Antonio the way he loves her—and yet she enjoys having him around and listening to the compliments he gives her. Ferrante shows how Lenù uses Antonio—and the concepts of love and sex more generally—to fulfill certain emotional needs of her own without actually committing to or prioritizing her relationship with Antonio.



One morning, on her way to the grocery, Lenù herself runs into Donato. He approaches her and tells her he was sad not to see her in Ischia this summer—he professes his love for her and says he can't live without her. He offers to read her some **love poems** he's written her, threatening to kill himself if she refuses to hear them. Lenù tells Donato that she has a boyfriend and never wants to see him again. Donato tries to kiss Lenù; when she ducks out of the way, he promises to bring her some poems soon. Lenù is frightened and decides to tell Antonio what's happening. Antonio is relieved to hear that his mother isn't losing her mind, but he is distressed by Donato's threats against Lenù. Lenù tells Antonio that they must confront Donato together.

Lenù, still repulsed by Donato's advances, decides to use Antonio to help get rid of Donato. Donato showing up means that Lenù has to relive their experience together. She must remember the cruel twist of fate which led the father of the boy she loves to want her, and she must remember her own abhorrent pleasure as Donato touched her—a pleasure she has not really experienced since. For all these reasons, Lenù is inclined to do whatever she can—and to use whoever she must—to get Donato out of the picture.



The next day, when Antonio and Lenù go out, they see Donato from a distance. He disappears into the tunnel, but Lenù follows him. She re-introduces him to Antonio and tells Donato that the two of them are together. Antonio tells Donato that Melina's health has suffered greatly because of Donato—if she sees him, she'll surely end up in an asylum. Antonio warns Donato to stay out of the neighborhood. Donato insists he wants to see “the places that are dear” to his heart—but Lenù, sensing the dishonesty in his tone, starts to speak up.

Lenù and Antonio seize the opportunity to bring their grievances against Donato and to try and get him out of the neighborhood. The lecherous, deceptive Donato tries to project innocence—but both Antonio and Lenù are aware of his sleazy nature and his willingness to say anything to get out of a tight spot.



Antonio cuts Lenù off. He warns Donato that if he harms Melina in any way, directly or indirectly, Donato will soon “lose forever the desire to see these shitty places again.” Donato turns pale and hurries away. Lenù is bursting with pride for Antonio—yet as they walk back toward town, she resolves to leave him after Lila's wedding.

Even though Lenù is grateful to Antonio for standing up to Donato and scaring him off, she still doesn't feel any love for him. She continues to use love and sex as a path to the fulfillment of her own personal needs.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 51

As Lila's wedding approaches, the preparations being made for it become entangled with the “rancorous birth” of the Cerullo **shoe** company. While Fernando and Rino make Lila's designs, they must also keep up with cobbler work in order to keep money coming in. Because of the pressure to provide a dowry for Lila, the men are overworked. Lila and Stefano are oblivious to the pressures facing the Cerullo family—they're busy figuring out their future home. They settle on a new apartment in a nicer neighborhood. At just 16, Lila will soon be the mistress of her own home.

Even as Lila's family continues struggling to make ends meet—and to keep up with her wealthy fiancé's demands upon them—she remains absorbed in her own personal struggles. Lila has turned to shoemaking—and to Stefano—in order to escape the strife and poverty of her family, and now that she has achieved a degree of separation, she seemingly doesn't plan on looking back.



Other tensions emerge: Lila and Stefano have trouble agreeing on a honeymoon location, and they quarrel when Stefano makes rude digs about Lila's family or expresses worry about returns on his investment in the **shoe** company. Lila always sides with her family during these disputes, and Stefano always apologizes profusely and lovingly once she bristles.

These early tensions in Lila and Stefano's relationship as committed partners portend greater difficulties to come. Stefano is clearly contemptuous of Lila when it comes to certain things—yet he hurries to mend fences when he agitates her.



One day, Lila takes Lenù to see the new apartment. It is small but luxurious, with gorgeous tile floors, a refrigerator, a telephone, and a huge bathtub. Lenù searchingly asks if Stefano and Lila ever come to the apartment alone, and Lila says they do. Lenù asks what they do when they're here, but Lila doesn't seem to understand the question. When Lenù asks if they ever kiss, Lila says they do, but when Lila asks if they do anything else, Lila states that they can't because they're not married yet. Lenù is shocked. Lila asks if she and Antonio do more than kiss—Lenù, ashamed, hurriedly says that they don't do anything else, either.

Lenù is shocked, embarrassed, and mildly horrified to realize that she has outstripped Lila in terms of sexual experience. Again, Lenù's goal has never been to surpass Lila and leave her behind—it has simply been to remain apace with Lila and not fall behind her at any cost. Realizing that in this effort she has inadvertently left Lila behind fills her with apprehension and shame.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 52

As the start of the school year approaches, Lenù stops seeing Antonio quite as much. She believes that after she returns to her studies, Lila will be fine handling the wedding preparations on her own—but as Lila navigates tense interactions with Pinuccia and Maria, who have come to see Lila as a pauper playing at being a fine mistress, it becomes clear that Lila needs an ally. Stefano urges his mother and sister to stop working in the grocery store and help Lila with the preparations full-time, at which point Lila, desperate for support, calls upon Lenù to assist her.

Lila struggles to develop a good relationship with her in-laws. Lila is indeed using marriage to Stefano as a method of escaping one kind of fate, and her future mother- and sister-in-law believe the ways in which she's using Stefano for money and comfort are unacceptable.



One day, Lenù accompanies Lila, Pinuccia, and Maria to a wedding dress shop in town. Whichever dresses Lila likes, Pinuccia and Maria disparage; whichever dresses she hates, they love. Toward the end of the nearly four-hour-long fitting session, Lenù speaks up and gently compliments Maria and Pinuccia's taste before choosing a random style. Lila stares at Lenù, her gaze impenetrable. Pinuccia and Maria are thrilled with Lenù's choice. As the women make their way home, Lila sidles up to Lenù and congratulates her on "conning" Pinuccia and Maria into liking a style Lila herself adored. Lila declares that Lenù, who is "good at making [her]self liked," must accompany her on all her wedding-planning excursions.

For so long, Lila has had to deal with being regarded as prickly, difficult, and unlikable. With Lenù on her side to mitigate things, Lila feels that she can navigate her relationships with her hostile new in-laws. This passage shows how even as their paths diverge in new ways, Lila and Lenù remain dependent on each other to make it through.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 53

Over the next several months, Lila calls on Lenù constantly to make important decisions such as the wedding favors, the restaurant, and the photographer. Lenù is surprised by how detached Lila is about her own wedding preparations. Lenù gets the impression that Lila feels "cage[d]" yet is still trying to find her own way of being.

In a time of great stress, Lila leans on Lenù to deal with the demands of wedding preparations. The two girls still clearly need each other as they navigate new, confusing, and often distressing territory.



Lenù, distracted with preparations, spends little time studying, and her grades dip—she does poorly in chemistry, math, and philosophy. One morning Lenù gets into trouble when, during a lesson in religion, she reacts loudly against her teacher’s tirades against Communists. She rails against the “superfluous entity” that is the Holy Spirit and claims that religion is “the same thing as collecting trading cards while the city burns in the fires of hell.” Lenù is sent out of class with a demerit for the first time in her life. In the hall, Lenù realizes that she has felt emboldened to say such things in class because they mirror past conversations she’s had with Lila. Lenù worries that it’s not true, after all, that school is her “wealth.” She begins to weep.

Nino appears in the hall and, seeing Lenù in distress, walks toward her. Lenù realizes there is no way to avoid him. He asks what has happened and she tells him. He disappears and comes back a moment later with Professor Galiani, who praises Lenù for her intrepidity and goes to speak with her teacher. A few moments later, Galiani emerges from the classroom and declares that Lenù can return to the lesson if she apologizes. She does so, grateful for the support of Nino and Galiani. Word of Lenù’s outburst spreads quickly through her friend group—Pasquale and Lila are particularly impressed by her outspokenness. Lenù cultivates goodwill with the teacher she offended by keeping her opinions to herself, and she soon regains her standing at school.

A few weeks later, Nino asks Lenù if she will write a short paper recounting her conflict with the religion teacher—he wants to submit it for publication to a journal he sometimes writes for. As he shows Lenù a copy of the “dirty gray” pamphlet she is transfixed—she can’t believe she might have the chance to publish something that others will read. Alfonso discourages Lenù from signing her name to the publication for fear of angering the teachers again, but Lenù is determined to show her article proudly to everyone she loves—especially Lila.

When Lenù finishes a draft of the article, she knows the only person she trusts to proofread it is Lila. Lenù brings the pages to Lila and explains Nino’s proposal. Lila is hesitant and explains she’s not capable of telling Lenù if it’s good or not. Lenù begs Lila to help her. Lila agrees and **reads** the essay. She edits it, moves some sentences around, and rewrites her edits onto a new page. Lila tells Lenù how clever she is—and then she asks that Lenù never again show her anything else she writes, “because it hurts.” Then, Lila bursts out laughing.

For so long, Lenù has clung to the idea that her success in school makes her special. Especially in recent weeks, as Lila’s wedding preparations have ramped up and blotted out all else, Lenù has tried to remind herself that at least she has school. Now, though, she fears that not only has she jeopardized her status at school—but she has come to realize that even in her own realm, her “wealth” in terms of academics and intellectualism is still inextricably tied to Lila’s influence.



Even though Lenù’s controversial ideas have gotten her in trouble with her religion professor, there are still those who support her. Her friends are proud of her for being an independent thinker—only Lenù knows that she would not have made such a stand without Lila’s influence.



Though others express reservations about Lenù publishing such a controversial article, Lenù knows that doing so will allow her to finally prove herself not just to those around her but to Lila. In her lifelong competition with Lila, Lenù will at last come out on top—with external proof of her smarts.



In this passage, it becomes clear just how deeply Lila is affected by Lenù’s successes in academics. All Lila ever wanted for herself was an education, and to have to watch Lenù shine as she comes into her own as a thinker and writer pains Lila. As a result, Lila no longer wants to study, learn, or even bear witness to Lenù’s work—though she characteristically trivializes her own pain with laughter.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 54

The next morning at school, Lenù shows the paper to Nino. He praises her writing and walks away, seeming hurt, without saying goodbye. Lenù parts from Nino feeling they've gotten "everything wrong again." On a walk home one day with Lenù and Alfonso, Nino's sister, Marisa, learns that Lenù and Alfonso are not going steady. After this, Nino's behavior toward Lenù changes—she senses Nino "hovering" around her. Lenù's feelings toward Nino, however, have changed—she worries he can't tolerate her "good qualities." The next day, when Antonio picks Lenù up from school, she entwines her fingers with his pointedly in front of Nino—she wants him to recognize that she is a better **writer** and student than he is, and that she has a "man." She has no time to pursue Nino like a "faithful beast."

Lenù's feelings and behavior toward Nino change again and again as the novel unfolds. In the past, she's spent time pining for him and concerning herself only with his opinion of her—now, though, she is determined to show him an independent side of her, a side that is fulfilled without him.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 55

Lenù asks Antonio to go with her to Lila's wedding and keep her company for the entire day—she is dreading the occasion, which is starting to feel like "a definitive break." She has another reason, too, for making this request of Antonio—she knows that the wedding will be an occasion for the girls without fiancés who are in attendance to find matches, and she doesn't want to have to worry about dressing up and impressing anyone (even though she still plans on breaking up with Antonio). Antonio, who considers Lenù the best thing that has ever happened to him, accepts her request with glee—he believes she is finally ready to make their relationship official and tell their parents about their love for each other.

Lenù continues to use Antonio for her own devices, even though she knows she doesn't love him. Partnership with a young man has practical uses, and Lenù is desperate to exploit those uses so that she doesn't have to confront the matchmakers at the wedding—or her own loneliness in the face of Lila's impending marriage.



The days pass in a haze as Lenù struggles to keep up in school while she helps Lila with preparations. All she is looking forward to is seeing her name in print in Nino's journal.

Lenù has a lot going on—she believes that she is on the cusp of greatness. Amid the significant change that's gearing up to happen in Lila's life, it seems that Lenù is seeking comfort in the notion that she can find her own path to success.



In November, the Cerullos finish their first batch of **shoes**. Upon seeing them, Lila tells Lenù that she feels a "very violent emotion," as if a fairy has granted one of her childhood wishes. Rino, Lila, and Fernando summon Stefano, Pinuccia, and Maria to see the shoes, and the Carraccis are amazed by them as well—though Stefano believes that Fernando has not been perfectly faithful to Lila's original designs, and he insists that he has invested too much money to obtain shoes that are not precisely Lila's own invention. Lila defends Fernando, but Rino supports Stefano—ultimately, Stefano gives in, and by Christmas, the shoes are for sale as they are. No one in the neighborhood buys a pair, though, due to the astronomical price.

Lila's dream has at last come to fruition—but there are wrinkles in her moment of glory as tensions within her own family and Stefano's family make themselves apparent. The shoes, too expensive to sell well in the neighborhood, are not the life-saving objects Lila envisioned them to be, and her disappointment is palpable. This portends a similar outcome for Lenù's excitement about her journal article—the one big thing she is looking forward to.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 56

Lila and Lenù are so busy with the wedding preparations that they hardly notice when Rino becomes depressed and agitated again. As the finished **shoes** sit piled in their boxes in the shop, Rino's agitation increases. He asks another shoemaker in town to display the shoes in his shop, but the man, "bound hand and foot to the Solaras," refuses him. Rino explodes in fury at the man, embarrassing his family and drawing Fernando's ire. Stefano, hearing of Rino's conflict with the other shoemaker, attempts to soothe Rino by telling him they simply have to find the right storefront for the shoes. Rino becomes determined to find a place in a wealthier neighborhood to sell the shoes.

As the date of the wedding approaches, Lila asks Lenù to accompany her to Maestra Oliviero's house to deliver a wedding invitation to her old teacher in person. Lenù knows how disappointed and sad Oliviero has been over the years to learn of Lila's failure to stay in school but accompanies Lila anyway. When Oliviero answers the door of her apartment for the girls and Lila hands her the invitation, Maestra Oliviero says she doesn't know "who this girl is" and shuts the door on them.

Stefano decides that the speech master at the wedding will be a relative of Donna Maria's—but just a few weeks before the wedding, he changes his mind. He refuses to tell Lila who the new speech master will be until he at last reveals that he has asked Silvio Solara to do the job. Lila becomes enraged and declares that she never wants to see Stefano again. She shuts herself up in her parents' house and stops participating in wedding preparations entirely. Her parents and Rino try to talk to Lila and make her understand that a Silvio is "like a bank" and that he's the only hope for Cerullo shoes to take off. Lila, however, remains immovable.

The Cerullios summon Lenù to the apartment to talk to Lila, but Lenù is tempted to convince Lila to give up the marriage for good and go back to being her old self. At the last minute, though, Lenù realizes that to resign Lila to a life in her parents' house would be cruel. When she visits Lila, she attempts to remind her that Silvio is not his sons—and if Lila lets him speak at the wedding, he'll help her and Stefano without having a huge "importance" in their married life. Lila listens to Lenù in silence, accepting what she says—but when Lenù's done speaking, Lila admits that she doesn't believe Stefano truly loves her as much as he loves his money. Lila agrees to reconcile with Stefano on the condition that Marcello stay far from their wedding. Stefano swears he will prevent Marcello from attending.

As Rino realizes that the neighborhood is controlled by the Solaras—who will never allow Cerullo shoes to be sold in any of the shops from which they collect money—his anxiety and agitation increases. Rino is powerless to change the way the neighborhood functions, and he rails angrily against his inability to do anything to further his family's fortune.



Maestra Oliviero's cruel refusal to recognize Lila—though she obviously does—hearkens back to her disappointment in Lila and her entire family due to Lila's failure to continue in school. Maestra Oliviero knows that Lila still has a chance to change her fate and put her mind to good use—and she's disappointed by Lila's decision to simply marry instead.



Lila is fully of anger at the idea of Stefano's betrayal. She has chosen to marry Stefano in part because she feels it is the only way to escape the Solaras' influence—now, though, she realizes that the idea of truly being free of them is nothing but a pipe dream.



In an attempt to keep Lila on track to marry Stefano—and secure his family's wealth—the Cerullios pull out every last stop. Lenù reasons with Lila and urges her to see that there is a way for her and Stefano to change the neighborhood and make a life for themselves without fearing the Solaras by offering them this one favor. Stefano's promise that he'll keep Marcello away, in addition to Lenù's entreaty, makes Lila feel secure in her decision once again—at least for the time being.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 57

On March 12th, the day of Lila's wedding, Lenù goes to the Cerullo house to help Lila get ready for the ceremony. When Lenù arrives, she finds Lila sitting on her bed in her underwear, her wedding dress beside her looking like "the body of a dead woman." Lila asks Lenù if she is making a mistake. When Lenù asks why Lila would think such a thing, Lila says that she was perturbed by Maestra Oliviero's failure to recognize her. Lenù insists that Oliviero is just "a mean old lady."

Lila urges Lenù to promise her that she'll go on studying, and Lenù says she'll keep going until she gets her diploma. Lila insists that Lenù must keep going in school—she'll give her the money if need be. Lenù insists that school has to end at some point. However, Lila tells Lenù that she is her "brilliant friend" and must keep on with her studies.

Lila strips and gets into the bath. Lenù is embarrassed to see her friend's naked body for the first time, but at the same time, she is stunned by how beautiful Lila is. Lenù becomes nervous as she thinks about how in just a few hours, Stefano will penetrate Lila and "disfigure her, perhaps, by making her pregnant." Lenù is overcome by "violent emotion" as she helps Lila wash herself, and she longs to embrace or kiss her. Lenù is furious at the idea that she is making Lila clean and beautiful just so that Stefano can "sully" her later on. Lenù decides that if Lila is going to lose her virginity tonight, she herself must also "find a [dark] corner" where she can make Antonio defile her at the same time.

Lenù helps Lila put on her wedding dress and the shoes that she herself has designed. As Lila looks in the mirror, she declares that the shoes are ugly. Her mind's dreams, she says, have ended up under her feet. She turns to Lenù, full of fear, and asks what is going to happen to her.

Maestra Oliviero's pointed refusal to recognize the version of Lila standing before her and offering her a wedding invitation has gotten deep under Lila's skin. Lila wonders if, in marrying Stefano, she is making herself unrecognizable to everyone around her—and perhaps even to herself.



Through Lenù's narration, Ferrante has thus far led the reader to believe that it is Lila who is the titular "brilliant friend." However, this passage makes it clear that Lila sees Lenù as the one who is "brilliant."



As Lenù helps Lila bathe, she is full of many conflicting emotions. She loves Lila and is sad—angry, even—at the idea of her being "disfigure[d]" by a man. At the same time, Lenù is afraid of being left behind as Lila embarks on a new phase of life. What Lenù feels isn't precisely jealousy—though she is, without a doubt, intensely motivated to keep up with Lila in whatever small ways she can.



Lila is getting cold feet in the hours before her wedding ceremony. She laments that her dreams have amounted to so little and that she is entering into a terrifying unknown, risking her independence for a chance at safety from Marcello and the Solaras.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 58

At Lila's wedding ceremony, as Lila walks down the aisle looking "dazzling," Lenù is distressed to realize that her own mother is looking at Lenù with regret. Lenù realizes that her parents don't see her success in school as real or important. Lenù's "bad friend" has acquired a wealthy husband, a house of her own, and money for her family. Antonio sits on Lenù's other side through the long ceremony—he whispers to her several times, but she ignores him, afraid of her mother deducing the nature of their relationship.

Lenù has been working so hard for so many years to find a way of steering her own destiny. It's therefore painful for Lenù to realize that her parents see Lila's choice as the enviable one. The idea of marriage fills Lenù herself with apprehension and something bordering on revulsion.



As Lenù looks around the church, she is stunned by how well-dressed everyone is. She knows that many people must have borrowed money for their outfits—and as she looks at Silvio Solara, the speech master, standing in front of the church next to his wife “loaded” with jewels, she realizes that everyone in the neighborhood has borrowed from him. He has replaced Don Achille, and he runs the neighborhood now.

Lenù begins to feel despondent over the never-ending, cyclical exchanges of money and power in her neighborhood. No matter who runs the show and pulls the strings, there will always be violence, extortion, and cruelty.



Lenù notices that Lila will not look at anyone but the priest—not Silvio, not her father, and not even Stefano. Lenù is full of anxiety—she wonders if Lila is making a decision with ramifications that neither of them can fully comprehend. As Lila and Stefano exchange rings and kiss, Lenù is shocked to realize that her friend is really and truly married. Lenù looks around the church, realizing that she hasn’t yet seen Alfonso—he is standing at the back with Marisa and Nino Sarratore.

Lila’s wedding ceremony takes on a surreal, hurried quality in Elena’s memory. Her recollection and retelling of the momentous occasion seems to suggest that there are difficult things in store for Lila, even though she has chosen marriage in an attempt to advance and protect herself.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 59

After the ceremony, everyone stands in the church courtyard. Lenù is shocked to realize that Alfonso and Marisa are together, and she wonders if they have made their relationship official. As Lenù spots Nino looking shabby and uncomfortable in the church courtyard, she feels that his presence adds to the “emotional disorder” of the day. She greets him perfunctorily, but Antonio grabs her and leads her off with their friends toward Pasquale’s old car so that they can all drive to the restaurant. Antonio, sensing a change in mood as they drive, asks Lenù what’s wrong; Carmela suggests that Lenù is jealous that Lila is married.

Lenù wants to spend time with Nino—she is in love with him and she feels that he represents the intellectual life she wants to lead. However, she keeps getting dragged back into her old friend group—a pattern that begins to feel more and more like a threat considering Lila’s surrender to the ordinary path of becoming a wife.



During the car ride, as Pasquale speeds along the avenues and their friends all laugh, Lenù feels completely alien. She is on a different path from them all—when she is with her old friends, she must put aside all she’s learned in school or else use it against them to mar herself as better than them. Lila, the only person who has ever mattered to Lenù, is no longer a part of their group, and now Lenù feels no kinship with these people—especially not with Antonio, whom she knows she is supposed to love.

Lila’s wedding has thrown Lenù into an existential crisis. Without Lila, Lenù feels that nothing bonds her to her old friend group or their shared past. Lenù is disdainful of the average lives her old schoolmates will lead—she wants bigger and better things, and she’s terrified of being the only person who does.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 60

As Lenù and her friends arrive at the reception, they struggle to find a place where they can all sit together. Lenù's mother calls her over and asks why "crazy" Melina's son is always hanging around her. She implies that she knows the truth about Antonio—and she demands that Lenù sit with her during the party. Lenù begrudgingly takes her seat at her parents' table. When the band starts playing, Lenù attempts to get up and go sit with her friends again, but her mother again restrains her. Lenù feels that her mother wants two things at once: to keep her near and thus confined to a life like her own, and to send her to school where she can improve her station in life. Both things, Lenù knows, are not possible at once.

As Lila and Stefano enter the room, Lenù's existential crisis deepens. She has always looked to Lila to determine how together they might escape their mothers and their neighborhood—now, though, Lenù sees that Lila has resigned herself to making the best of the directive to stay in one place. Lenù feels isolated from everyone around her. As she watches Lila dance, she laments that Lila has failed to escape—and she becomes firm in her own resolve to escape no matter the cost. When Nino, Alfonso, and Marisa enter the room, Lenù jumps up from the table and, struggling against her mother as she pulls at Lenù's dress, goes to join them at their table.

Lenù is confounded by her mother's desire to keep her close. Even as her mother supports her pursuit of an education, a move which would seem to signal that she wants better for her daughter, her mother also longs to keep her close—a fact which fills Lenù with the old fear of transforming into her mother in spite of all her efforts to escape the woman's shadow.



Lenù is disheartened to realize that Lila has taken a path which binds her to a traditional life as a wife and mother in the neighborhood of their youth. Lenù has always looked to Lila as an example of how to be and what to aspire to—now, though, she feels lost, alone, and saddened by her friend's resignation to an ordinary path.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 61

As Lenù makes conversation with Alfonso and Marisa—hoping that Nino will talk to her too—Antonio comes up behind Lenù and asks her to come sit with him. She tells him to get away and stop drawing the attention of her mother, who has figured out "everything." Lenù notices that all throughout the room, people are raising their voices—a few guests have figured out that different tables are being served different things. Not everyone is getting the same quality of wine, and some tables are getting food before others.

Trying to ignore the shouts and growing discord, Lenù engages Nino in a discussion of poverty in Naples. Lenù is struck by Nino's articulateness and his informed opinions. He urges Lenù to **read** newspapers and magazines. Lenù is embarrassed—all her life, following Lila's example, she has only read novels. As Nino and Lenù continue talking, he disparages novels and "literature," and Lenù hangs on Nino's every word. She can feel Antonio's gaze on her and knows he must be getting angry, but she cannot tear herself away from her dazzling, engaging conversation with Nino.

As the reception grows more chaotic, Lenù tries to distance herself from most of the people from her neighborhood—including her own family—by talking with her schoolmates, whose attention she believes is more important because they are more intelligent.



As young girls, Lenù and Lila bonded over language, literature, and writing—they imagined careers as brilliant novelists. For Lenù to be told that novels are frivolous is painful—but she doesn't recognize how cruel Nino is being in writing off and devaluing the ways in which Lenù has educated herself and found relief from the pressures of life in her neighborhood.



Antonio at last comes up to Lenù and asks her to dance. She begrudgingly agrees but warns him not to get too close to her. As they take their place on the dance floor, Lenù realizes how intensely she has been shutting out the rest of the party—everyone is drunk, and the festivities are in full swing. The quarrel between the bride’s relatives and the groom’s is still going—Lila’s relations feel they are getting bad wine and bad service. As Lenù looks around at her friends and neighbors, she is disgusted by their behavior and by the rote patterns of their lives—she wonders if she is still like them.

Antonio catches Lenù staring at Nino and expresses his sadness and discontent. He is angry that Lenù used him to confront Donato and now spends “hours” talking with his son, ignoring Antonio himself. Antonio points out how hard he worked to look good for the wedding, going into debt for a new suit and a haircut, only for Lenù to ignore him. He leaves her alone on the dance floor and goes out to the dance floor. Lenù knows that if she follows Antonio out to the terrace, she’ll be able to make up with him—if she doesn’t, she knows, he’ll leave her. She decides not to follow him out and instead goes back to sit with Nino, who is caught up in an intense conversation about school with Alfonso.

Lenù tries to get Nino’s attention back by asking him about the magazine and when it will come out. He tells her it is already out and has been for a couple of weeks. Lenù asks where she can get a copy. Nino says he’ll get one for her. Lenù is elated. After a brief pause, Nino tells her that her piece isn’t in the journal—there wasn’t room for it.

Lenù has begun to see herself as different from her family and neighbors. She feels that her education and the ideas it’s opened her up to separate her from them on some fundamental level—now, looking around Lila’s wedding, she fears that she will never be able to truly differentiate herself from them as long as she lives among them.



Antonio knows that Lenù has used him—and he is despondent over having been treated badly by the girl he loves. Lenù, however, has her sights set on Nino because she believes he has the power to take her out of the neighborhood and help her elevate her social, intellectual, and economic status.



Nino’s brusque, unemotional delivery of the news that Lenù’s piece will not appear in the journal shows his contempt for her—he doesn’t actually take her work or her mind seriously.



ADOLESCENCE: THE STORY OF THE SHOES, CHAPTER 62

Lenù is deeply saddened by Nino’s news about her article, but she tries to maintain a front of indifference. She looks around the room: the festivities are winding down, and Lila and Stefano are smiling and talking as they sit at their table. The dance floor is still full of Lenù’s sweaty, debauched friends and classmates; the floor is splattered with sauce and wine. Overwhelmed, Lenù tries to hold back tears. She realizes that she had been clinging to her upcoming publication as a way to confirm that she “really had a destiny” and that school would really deliver her from her fate. She recalls what Maestra Oliviero told her years ago out the plebs, and she realizes that the plebs are her friends, her neighbors, and her own family.

In this overwhelming moment, Lenù becomes despondent as she fears that her pursuit of education has been in vain. She worries she will never be able to escape her destiny to become a “pleb” and stay mired in her neighborhood forever, with no chance of bettering her circumstances.



Nino gets up to leave. Lenù tries to get him to stay a little longer by asking him to visit the bride's table with her, but he refuses and heads out the door. Lenù envies Nino for being able to come and go from the neighborhood as he pleases. Lenù fears she'll never make it out as Nino has—she feels that studying is useless.

At the height of her despair, Lenù notices a shift in the room. She looks to the doors and realizes that the Solara brothers have arrived. Lila whispers urgently to Stefano. As Marcello sits down at Lila and Stefano's table and crosses his legs, all of the color drains from Lila's face—she is “whiter than her wedding dress.” She stares at Marcello's feet with a gaze that Lenù feels could shatter the wine bottles in front of her on the table. Marcello is wearing Cerullo **shoes**. Rather than wearing the display pair, he is wearing the very pair bought earlier by Stefano—the very first pair that Lila and Rino ever made, the pair that “ruin[ed]” Lila's hands.

Lenù sees Nino—and the impassioned academic and political life he represents—as a ticket out of the neighborhood, and she laments feeling unable to follow him or to earn his respect.



As Marcello appears wearing Lila's Cerullo shoes prototype, it's implied that Marcello either purchased the shoes from Stefano at a higher price or else forced Stefano to give him the shoes for free. Either way, it's clear that Marcello and the Solaras will continue to control the neighborhood and to dictate the behavior of those under their influence. It seems that even in the face of Stefano and Lila's marriage, the Solaras will be able to retain an outsized amount of power to demand or extort whatever they want, from whomever they want it from. Lila's despair is matched only by her rage at Stefano for kowtowing to Marcello—a move she sees as a cowardly betrayal.





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