Roman Fever

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDITH WHARTON

Edith Wharton was born Edith Jones, the only daughter of a wealthy and powerful family in the upper echelons of New York society. She spent much of her childhood and adolescence touring and studying in Europe. She married Edward Robbins Wharton at the age of 23. Despite restrictions placed on her due to her gender, Wharton published a successful nonfiction book, *The Decoration of Houses*, in 1897. A lover of architecture, gardening, and the decorative arts, Wharton devoted a great deal of time and care to designing "The Mount," her home in Lenox, Massachusetts. During the ten years she lived at The Mount, Wharton wrote some of her most important works of fiction, including *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *Ethan Frome* (1911). Following her divorce in 1913, Wharton moved to France, where she devoted herself both to writing and to humanitarian causes. She was awarded the French Legion of Honor for her service to the country during World War I. Wharton continued to write and publish extensively throughout her life, and in 1921 became the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. She was also the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Yale University, and to receive full membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Wharton died in France in 1937 at the age of 75.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wharton was living in Paris when World War I began in 1914. Rather than return to the relative safety of the United States, she chose to stay in Europe in order to offer humanitarian assistance and to report on the events of the war from the frontlines. Although "Roman Fever" does not deal directly with the war, readers can be certain that Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade have felt its effects in their own lives. Some of the differences Mrs. Slade perceives between the Rome she knew in her youth and Rome as it appears to her in middle age may be testaments to the ravaging mental and emotional impacts of the war. Separately, the history of the disease known as Roman Fever (a particularly deadly strain of malaria) is also important context for understanding the story. Rome has a long history of being afflicted by periodic outbreaks of Roman Fever—one of which is even credited with helping to bring about the fall of the Roman empire in the fifth century AD. In Wharton's story, Mrs. Slade takes inspiration from a grim story about an outbreak of Roman Fever that afflicted a previous generation.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Wharton's cutting take on the lives of the upper classes owes a debt to the social novels of the Victorian era, most notably the work of Jane Austen. Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* both portray a similarly convoluted game of courtship involving duplicitous characters. Additionally, many of the short stories and novels of Wharton's close friend and contemporary Henry James—most notably *The Portrait of a Lady*—chronicle the lives of Americans in Europe during this same historical period.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Roman Fever
- **When Published:** 1934
- **Literary Period:** Realism
- **Genre:** Short Story, Realistic Fiction
- **Setting:** A terrace in Rome, Italy
- **Climax:** Alida Slade reveals that she was the author of a love letter Grace Ansley received many years before the story begins.
- **Antagonist:** Although the story follows the thoughts of Mrs. Slade more closely than those of Mrs. Ansley, neither character is quite sympathetic enough to be called the protagonist—making it difficult to name one of them antagonist. Each of the two women sees the other as an antagonist, and therefore the spirit of competition that exists between them could be seen as the story's clearest antagonist.
- **Point of View:** Third person limited, restricted mostly to Mrs. Slade's perspective.

EXTRA CREDIT

Roman Fever in History. "Roman Fever," the particularly deadly strain of malaria from which Wharton's story takes its name, may have played a role in the collapse of the Roman empire. Some historians speculate that a rash of deaths from malaria may have contributed to social instability in ancient Rome, leaving the city (and, by extension, the vast and powerful empire) vulnerable to attacks from foreign invaders.

Keeping Up With The Joneses. Wharton's father, George Frederic Jones, was descended from a family of substantial wealth and social prestige. The idea of "keeping up with the Joneses"—an idiomatic expression that describes the pressure many people feel to compare their material possessions to those of their neighbors—is thought to have originated as a reference to Wharton's paternal relatives.

PLOT SUMMARY

Two middle-aged women, Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade, stand together on the terrace of an upscale restaurant in Rome, admiring a view of the city. From below, they overhear the voices of two younger women—their daughters, Barbara Ansley and Jenny Slade—joking that they should "leave the young things to their knitting." The women laugh at their daughter's perception of them, but a moment later Mrs. Ansley sheepishly takes out her **knitting**,confirming the accuracy of her daughter's joke. Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade decide to spend the rest of the afternoon on the restaurant terrace, and they settle into two basket-chairs near the parapet.

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley discuss the beauty of the view and speculate about their daughter's plans; they believe Barbara and Jenny have been invited to fly to Tarquinia for the evening, in the company of two young Italian aviators. Privately, Mrs. Slade reflects on the differences between Barbara, who has a dynamic and compelling personality, and Jenny, who is more prudent and reserved. She is surprised by the fact that Mrs. Ansley and her late husband, Horace—both of whom she considers dull—could produce such a "brilliant" daughter. Mrs. Slade thinks about her own late husband, Delphin, and the full, often glamorous life they shared before his death. She thinks of her son, who died in childhood, and wishes that her own "perfect" daughter were more charming and vivacious, like Barbara Ansley. All the while, Mrs. Ansley continues knitting beside Mrs. Slade, thinking that Mrs. Slade's life had been full of failures and mistakes. The two women sit in silence, thinking about their long friendship and their perceptions of one another.

The afternoon wears on, and Mrs. Ansley suggests going to play cards at the Embassy. Mrs. Slade, lost in thought, determines that she will stay on the terrace, and Mrs. Ansley stays as well. Mrs. Slade talks, somewhat absentmindedly, about the many different meanings Rome has held for different generations of American women. For their grandmothers, the threat of **Roman Fever** made the city frightening after dark. By contrast, she and Mrs. Ansley, when they visited Rome together as young women, had no fear and even enjoyed the sense of danger that came with being out at night. Mrs. Ansley, apparently absorbed in her knitting, does not offer a satisfying response to these comments, and Mrs. Slade becomes frustrated.

Mrs. Slade recalls a story Mrs. Ansley had told her during that previous visit to Rome, decades earlier: how her Great-Aunt Harrie, possessive of the man she loved and afraid that her sister would compete for his affection, had sent her sister on a nighttime errand during an outbreak of Roman Fever. Harriet's sister had caught the fever and died as a result. Prompted by this story, Mrs. Slade recalls how Mrs. Ansley herself had become very ill after going out late one night during their long-ago visit to Rome, supposedly to see the sights. Mrs. Ansley deflects Mrs. Slade's questions about her illness, but Mrs. Slade persists. Soon, Mrs. Slade reveals that she knows the real reason Mrs. Ansley went out late on the night she fell ill: she had received a love letter from Delphin, who at the time was engaged to Mrs. Slade, confessing his love for her and requesting that she meet him at the Colosseum. Mrs. Ansley is shocked when Mrs. Slade begins quoting the letter, and even more so when Mrs. Slade admits that it was she, not Delphin, who had written the letter. Mrs. Slade explains that she had felt threatened by Mrs. Ansley's beauty and sweetness, and was concerned when she realized that Mrs. Ansley was in love with Delphin. Mrs. Slade says she had wanted Mrs. Ansley to fall ill so that she would be "out of the way," and that she had hoped the disappointment of arriving at the Colosseum and not finding Delphin there would eliminate her feelings for him.

Mrs. Slade, seeing how devastated Mrs. Ansley is made by the revelation that Delphin's letter was not authentic, cruelly goes on to tell her that she had laughed at the idea of Mrs. Ansley waiting outside the Colosseum for someone who would never come. However, Mrs. Ansley corrects Mrs. Slade after this comment. She tells her that she did not have to wait for Delphin because he *had* come to the Colosseum on the night proposed in the letter. Mrs. Ansley had written a response to the letter Mrs. Slade had sent, confirming that she would meet him. Mrs. Slade is stunned, and admits that she had never considered the possibility that Mrs. Ansley would answer the letter.

By this time, darkness has fallen. Mrs. Ansley announces that the terrace is too cold for her, and stands to leave. As she gathers her things, she tells Mrs. Slade that she is sorry for her. Mrs. Slade protests, saying that she does not know why Mrs. Ansley should feel sorry for her. Although she had been "beaten" in her long ago plot to thwart competition from Mrs. Ansley, she had enjoyed twenty-five years of marriage with Delphin, while Mrs. Ansley had gotten nothing from Delphin except "that one letter that he didn't write." Mrs. Ansley, now walking toward the stairs to leave the terrace, turns back to Mrs. Slade and tells her: "I had Barbara."

CHARACTERS

Alida Slade — A confident and charming middle-aged socialite. While visiting Rome in the company of her daughter, Jenny, she encounters her old friend, Grace Ansley, who is traveling with her daughter, Barbara. Mrs. Slade's charming personality and social intelligence made her a good match for Delphin, her now-deceased celebrity husband, but her confidence in social situations proves to be out of proportion with her actual power to captivate and control others. Mrs. Ansley captures this tension when she aptly describes Mrs. Slade as being "awfully brilliant; but not as brilliant as she thinks." Mrs. Slade relishes drama and excitement, and wishes that her prudent daughter, Jenny, would "fall in love—with the wrong man, even" just so

that she might have a scandal to occupy her time. Although she thinks of her husband only fleetingly, there is a sense that her craving for excitement and stimulation is a way of distracting herself from the pain of widowhood, and from the devastating loss of her son, who "died suddenly in boyhood." In her interactions with Mrs. Ansley, Mrs. Slade displays tangled and often contradictory feelings of jealousy, superiority, and affection. She clings to a limited view of her old friend as being dull and emotionally shallow, incapable of feeling or thinking as intensely as Mrs. Slade does herself. However, during the course of their conversation, Mrs. Ansley destabilizes Mrs. Slade's sense of superiority, first with subtle insinuations that Mrs. Slade's charmed life may not be all that it seems, and then with a string of revelations about events that have defined her life in ways she hadn't realized.

Grace Ansley – A middle-aged socialite, Mrs. Ansley is the widow of Horace Ansley and lifelong friend of Alida Slade. Mrs. Ansley appears at first to be Mrs. Slade's opposite: reserved and self-effacing where Mrs. Slade is confident and entitled, mild where Mrs. Slade is bold, and rational where Mrs. Slade is sentimental. However, during the course of the afternoon, Mrs. Ansley reveals herself to be a more complex and morally ambiguous character than Mrs. Slade has been willing to believe during the course of their friendship. When Mrs. Slade reveals that she—not her husband, Delphin—had been the true author of a love letter Mrs. Ansley received during a trip to Rome decades earlier, Mrs. Ansley's unexpectedly emotional reaction reveals her deep and authentic attachment to Delphin. When Mrs. Ansley finally discloses that her affair with Delphin had produced a child—her daughter, Barbara—it becomes clear that Mrs. Slade has dramatically underestimated Mrs. Ansley throughout their friendship. Throughout much of their conversation on the restaurant terrace, Mrs. Ansley works on her **knitting**. This activity, which Mrs. Slade initially interprets as evidence of Mrs. Ansley's lack of emotional and intellectual depth, becomes symbolic of the ways in which her placid and innocent demeanor masks her passionate, secretive, and complex inner life.

Delphin Slade – Mrs. Slade's late husband and Jenny Slade's father, who during his life was a corporation lawyer and, according to Mrs. Slade, a celebrity in New York society. During their marriage, Mrs. Slade acted as a powerful complement to her husband, playing host to his colleagues and accompanying him to social events that were intertwined with his professional success. This fast-paced, high-stakes social life was a source of pride and pleasure for Mrs. Slade, who feels that widowhood is dull in comparison to her married life. Mrs. Slade had been engaged to Delphin when she and Mrs. Ansley visited Rome as young women, and had felt extremely protective of her relationship with him. At the end of her conversation with Mrs. Slade, Mrs. Ansley reveals that she and Delphin had an illicit encounter at the Colosseum during their long-ago visit to Rome, which produced her daughter, Barbara.

Barbara Ansley – The daughter of Mrs. Ansley, also called "Babs." Her effervescent personality and slightly irreverent behavior inspire envy in Mrs. Slade, who sees herself as being similarly socially gifted and wishes that her own daughter, Jenny, would display some of Barbara's more interesting qualities. Mrs. Slade expresses at multiple points in the story that she does not understand how two such uninteresting people as Mrs. Ansley and her husband, Horace, could have produced such a dynamic child. At the end of the story, Mrs. Ansley reveals that Barbara is really the daughter of Delphin Slade.

Jenny Slade – Mrs. Slade's daughter and only surviving child. She is prudent, respectful of her mother, and beautiful. However, she lacks the "brilliant" qualities—the sparkling personality—that Mrs. Slade had hoped for in a daughter. Mrs. Slade sees Jenny as being "perfect" and an "angel," but often wishes she were more like the less beautiful but more vivacious Barbara Ansley.

Horace Ansley – Mrs. Ansley's late husband, whom she married just two months after her encounter with Delphin Slade at the Colosseum. After Mrs. Ansley reveals that Delphin is the true father of Barbara, her daughter, it becomes clear why she had married Horace in such a rush: she had been pregnant with another man's child. Though they belonged to the same social circles, Mrs. Slade thinks of Horace Ansley as a "nullity," a person of little importance or worth.

Great-Aunt Harriet – The "wicked" great-aunt of Mrs. Ansley who, according to family lore, sent her sister out on a nighttime errand during an outbreak of **Roman Fever**. Harriet had hoped her sister would sicken and die, and in fact she did. By arranging her sister's death, she eliminated competition for the affections of the man they both loved. Decades later, the story of Harriet's scheme to get rid of her sister serves as the inspiration for Mrs. Slade's scheme to get Mrs. Ansley "out of the way" of her engagement to Delphin by luring her to the Colosseum late at night.

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.

COMPETITION IN FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

Though Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are lifelong friends, their relationship is constrained by mutual feelings of intense jealousy. They see one another as

opponents, competing for power and stature—both within their friendship and in society more broadly. Mrs. Slade wishes her daughter, Jenny, were as vivacious as Mrs. Ansley's daughter, Barbara, and she reveals her insecurity through snide comments that disparage both Barbara and her parents. Reflecting on her past, she remembers jokes she made to other society women at Mrs. Ansley's expense. The conversation between the two women, which makes up most of the story, itself feels like a competition rather than an exchange between friends, as when Mrs. Slade describes Jenny as an "angel" and Mrs. Ansley responds curtly that Barbara is an "angel" as well.

As in many relationships between women, the devastating effects of competition on these two women's relationship can be seen most clearly in their interactions they have about the men in their lives. As a young woman, Mrs. Slade perceives Mrs. Ansley's exceptional beauty as a threat to her relationship with her then-fiancé, Delphin, so she plans a cruel trick: she uses a forged letter to lure Mrs. Ansley to the Colosseum at night, with the hope that Mrs. Ansley will fall ill as a result.

The friendship between Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade is not the only intimate relationship in "Roman Fever" that is damaged by jealousy over the attention of a man. The story of Mrs. Ansley's Great-Aunt Harriet—a woman so determined to win the man she loves that she orchestrates her own sister's death by sending her on a nighttime errand during an outbreak of **Roman Fever**—directly inspires Mrs. Slade's plot against Mrs. Ansley. In yet another instance of competition between women, while Mrs. Slade is sitting on the terrace she imagines that Barbara must be using the favorable contrast between herself and Jenny to charm an eligible Italian bachelor. Although there is no sense that Barbara will endanger Jenny as Mrs. Slade endangered Mrs. Ansley, the notion of young women manipulating one another to secure the love of a man recalls the more dramatic crimes of older generations. Each generation of women learns vicious and vindictive behavior from their mothers and grandmothers, who teach their daughters that winning and keeping the love of a man is more important than honoring moral principles.

It is worth noting that, although Mrs. Slade's behavior was more obviously immoral than Mrs. Ansley's, both women are guilty of moral wrongdoing. Mrs. Ansley acted selfishly and dishonestly when she decided to meet Delphin at the Colosseum, betraying the trust of her friend. After discovering her pregnancy, Mrs. Ansley rushes into a marriage with Horace, and goes on to convince him that Barbara is his daughter. This lie becomes the foundation for the rest of her life. The real depth of Mrs. Ansley's cruelty emerges in the final moments of the story, when she reveals Barbara's true paternity to Mrs. Slade. Readers can imagine the pain and guilt that Mrs. Ansley might have felt at having to raise her lover's child with another man, and at having to keep such an important truth hidden for decades. However, the final lines of the story do not speak to any of the real sadness of the situation. Instead, she uses the truth as a weapon to wound her friend, to undermine Mrs. Slade's marriage to Delphin, and to gain the upper hand in their conversation. Though she seems to be the victim of Mrs. Slade's vindictive behavior, Mrs. Ansley is also guilty.

KNOWLEDGE AND DENIAL

On the surface, it seems as though Mrs. Ansley's revelation at the end of the afternoon—that she had an affair with Delphin and became pregnant with Barbara as a result—upends everything Mrs. Slade believes about her marriage, her friendship with Mrs. Ansley, and herself. However, closer investigation suggests that hearing Mrs. Ansley's version of events does not change Mrs. Slade's fundamental understanding of her friend as a threat; rather, it strips away a fiction to which Mrs. Slade has clung for years, and confirms the troubling truths she has suspected—and suppressed—since her youth. Although she disparages Mrs. Ansley in her thoughts throughout the afternoon, Mrs. Slade admits that she has always been aware of and threatened by her friend's subtle power. In a sudden moment of truthfulness, she tells Mrs. Ansley: "I was afraid; afraid of you, your quiet ways, your sweetness … your … well, I wanted you out of the way, that's all." Despite this understanding, Mrs. Slade's powers of self-deception are powerful. She does not recognize—at least, not until Mrs. Ansley tells her explicitly—the depth and authenticity of Mrs. Ansley's feelings for Delphin, or the ways in which their attraction to one another shaped her life.

The tension between knowledge and denial extends beyond Mrs. Slade's understanding of her marriage and her friendship with Mrs. Ansley. Mrs. Slade admits she has a taste for drama. She misses the fast-paced life she shared with Delphin and seems unduly frustrated at the absence of scandal and adventure in the life of her daughter, Jenny, as if desiring a distraction from the sorrows and struggles of her life as a widow. Her desire for Jenny to "fall in love—with the wrong man, even" seems inextricably intertwined with the sadness and uneventfulness of her widowhood. She longs to live vicariously through her daughter so that she can avoid confronting her own loneliness and sorrow after having lost a partner. In addition to the difficult but expected death of her husband, however, is a profound tragedy that Mrs. Slade acknowledges only briefly: she refers, in her thoughts, to the "agony" of losing her son, who "died suddenly in boyhood" a number of years before the beginning of the story. Mrs. Slade observes how the grief she feels at losing her husband amplifies the grief she feels when she returns to the memory of her son: "after the father's death, the thought of the boy had become unbearable." In large and small ways, Mrs. Slade's thoughts and behavior suggest that she is desperate to avoid confronting the painful realities of her life.

NOSTALGIA

Even before their conversation turns to the romantic dramas of their youth, Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade are each concerned with the past. The symbols of ancient Rome that provide the backdrop for their afternoon—the Forum, the Colosseum, and the Palatine Hill—evoke an atmosphere of faded splendor, and Mrs. Slade's rapturous comments about the view reveal her longing to exchange her difficult present for a simpler and more satisfying past.

Mrs. Slade's longing for the past is, at least in part, a reflection of the anxieties that accompany the major life transition in which she has found herself. Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade are both recent widows. Mrs. Slade notes how the deaths of their husbands during the same short period of time cause the two women to resume their friendship after a long stagnation. Although she does not talk about the loss of her husband, and limits even her private thoughts to glib remarks about the "dullish business" of widowhood, it is clear that widowhood is difficult for Mrs. Slade. The fact that her grown daughter, Jenny, is approaching a point where she will marry and begin a family of her own adds to her feelings of loneliness and frustration. Mrs. Ansley, by contrast—who speaks relatively little and whose inner thoughts are mostly inaccessible to the reader—seems content on the surface. However, she reveals her frustration and sadness in subtle ways. She makes a remark that it is the "collective modern idea of Mothers," rather than anything specific about herself and Mrs. Slade, that leads Barbara to joke about the two older women **knitting** while she and Jenny escape on a romantic adventure. Mrs. Ansley's remark reveals her own sense that she is becoming obsolete.

Despite her rueful comments about her own irrelevance, Mrs. Ansley's attitude toward the past presents a marked contrast to that of Mrs. Slade. Unlike her friend, Mrs. Ansley seems comfortable with her memories, and is not attached to an overly romantic view of the past. She does not appear sentimental about her memories of Rome—as Mrs. Slade observes, she is able to knit calmly even while gazing at the beautiful view of the city—but she still acknowledges the power of those memories when she agrees that it is "the most beautiful view in the world" and "always will be." Her more measured response seems to suggest that she is at peace, content with her decisions and not burdened by the same feelings of hatred and jealousy that Mrs. Slade has harbored for decades. This may be because Mrs. Ansley never had the luxury of denying her past: her daughter, Barbara, presented a daily reminder of her affair with Delphin and its impact on her life. Therefore, she arguably has a fuller and more mature understanding of her life than Mrs. Slade, and so is not attached to a nostalgic ideal.

THE ARTIFICE OF HIGH SOCIETY LIFE

Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade belong to the upper echelons of society. Both women are beneficiaries of exceptional wealth and privilege, with Mrs. Slade even describing her husband as a "celebrity." Although jealousy and betrayal are hardly exclusive to the upper class, the petty and indirect ways in which the two women manifest their barely-repressed resentment of one another reveal a culture that not only permits but encourages artificiality and duplicity. Mrs. Slade, for instance, recalls making gossipy jokes about the police raiding the Ansleys' home, and the obligatory "exchange of wreaths and condolences" that followed the deaths of their husbands. She also recalls being "blind with rage" when she forged the letter from Delphin, and concedes that Mrs. Ansley may be right when she points out that Mrs. Slade has "always gone on hating [her]" since they were young women. However, the two women have maintained polite social connections for decades despite these roiling tensions; their conversation on the roof seems to be the only direct confrontation they have ever had.

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley pass the afternoon on the terrace of an upscale restaurant, where Mrs. Ansley's **knitting** offers her a veneer of civility and innocence as Mrs. Slade repeatedly makes thinly-veiled attacks. The beautiful sights that surround them mirror the careful facades of respectability that these two members of the upper class must maintain in their dealings with one another. As the afternoon fades into evening, a team of waiters begins preparing the tables for dinner: exchanging faded flowers for fresh ones, straightening chairs, and rushing to deal with a disheveled tourist who becomes a momentary blight on the elegant scene when she arrives in search of a lost elastic band. The scene on the terrace becomes a figure for the lives of upper-class people more generally, who strain tremendously to avoid conflict and maintain an appearance of easy elegance. As Wharton illustrates, this system is both toxic and unsustainable. As the two women reveal the dark truths that they have hidden and repressed throughout their relationship—about Mrs. Ansley's affair, Mrs. Slade's deceit, and also the jealousy, pity, and hatred they feel for each other—it becomes clear that their lives are built on unstable foundations. Lies are the heart of their most essential, identity-forming relationships—with their children, spouses, and friends. When Mrs. Slade allows a small amount of honesty into the relationship, she unwittingly forces all of the other painful truths to the surface, and in doing so undermines her entire sense of herself and her life.

SYMBOLS

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

KNITTING

One of Mrs. Ansley's first actions in "Roman Fever" is to withdraw from her bag "a twist of crimson silk run through by two fine knitting needles." She takes out the knitting in response to an overheard comment from her daughter, Barbara, which suggests that she and Mrs. Slade—both middle-aged, and no longer available for the romantic adventures that Rome offers foreign tourists—have little to do with themselves except knit. Mrs. Ansley seems content to confirm this stereotype of middle-aged women, and even seems to embrace it, telling Mrs. Slade, in reference to the splendors of Rome, "sometimes I get tired just looking—even at this." Throughout much of the rest of the conversation, Mrs. Ansley holds her knitting on her lap. At certain uncomfortable points in the conversation—when Mrs. Slade begins to reminisce about their visit to Rome as young women, for example—the knitting gives Mrs. Ansley a preoccupation to hide behind, allowing her to avoid the kind of direct engagement that might give away her long-held secrets. Mrs. Ansley's knitting frustrates Mrs. Slade, particularly as she attempts to draw Mrs. Ansley into more intimate conversation. She even sees it as a sign of emotional and intellectual shallowness, marveling as she admires the splendid view from that terrace at the fact that Mrs. Ansley "can knit—in the face of *this*!"

Mrs. Ansley's knitting represents the repression, indirectness, and deceit that are the heart of Wharton's portrayal of high society life. Knitting gives her a veneer of civility and respectability, thereby preventing Mrs. Slade from recognizing that Mrs. Ansley is immersed in deep memories of her own, including memories of romantic and sexual betrayals that have shaped the lives of both women. The appearance of dull conventionality protects Mrs. Ansley from suspicion. When Mrs. Slade finally raises the subject of the love letter Mrs. Ansley received from Delphin—and of her subsequent late-night visit to the Colosseum to meet him—Mrs. Ansley allows her knitting to fall to the ground. Its displacement from her lap marks a dramatic shift in the characters' dynamic: in this moment, Mrs. Ansley's polite mask slips, and she reveals her true self—filled with passion, pity, and fear.

ROMAN FEVER

The term "Roman Fever" refers to a particularly deadly strain of malaria. The disease itself plays a key role in Mrs. Ansley's story of her Great-Aunt Harriet, who—according to family lore—once ordered her younger sister on a nighttime errand during an outbreak of Roman Fever in order to expose her to the fatal disease and, in doing so, eliminate competition in her pursuit of the man they both loved. (The risk of catching malaria is highest at night, when the mosquitos that transmit the disease are most active.) This is the story that inspires Mrs. Slade's plot to get Mrs. Ansley "out of the way"—and, in doing so, to secure her relationship with her then-fiancé, Delphin—during their visit to Rome as young women.

In addition to being an essential plot device, the concept of Roman Fever evolves over the course of the story into a metaphor for the destructive potential of romantic and sexual passion—and of the jealousy and competitiveness those feelings may inspire. Just as Roman Fever sickens the body, the figurative "fevers" of passion and jealousy destroy relationships between people who should be held together by bonds of love, loyalty, and respect. Great-Aunt Harriet betrayed her familial bonds when she plotted against her sister, while Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley betrayed their bonds of friendship—Mrs. Slade by callously endangering her friend's life and Mrs. Ansley by agreeing to meet Delphin at the Colosseum. Furthermore, Delphin betrayed the bonds of his engagement to Mrs. Slade by having an affair with Mrs. Ansley. Consumed by their emotions—emotions that become more intense in the romantic foreign setting, hence the specifically "Roman" quality of Roman Fever — these characters abandon essential moral values and act without regard for social mores or expectations. Moreover, if Mrs. Slade had trusted Mrs. Ansley instead of treating her with suspicion and trying to get her "out of the way," perhaps she would never have sent the forged letter from Delphin, in which case Mrs. Ansley and Delphin may never have met. In this sense, Mrs. Slade's faithless treatment of her friend, Mrs. Ansley, has the unintended effect of setting in motion the very affair she had so feared would take place. The consequences of Mrs. Slade's actions are part of the overall effect of this "fever," and in this sense Wharton seems to be using Roman Fever also as a symbol to critique the way that competition among women spawns distrust and animosity between them like a sickness, destroying lives and relationships.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Roman Fever and Other Stories* published in 1997.

Section 1 Quotes

❝ As they leaned there a girlish voice echoed up gaily from the stairs leading to the court below. "Well, come along, then," it cried, not to them but to an invisible companion, "and let's leave the young things to their knitting … After all, we haven't left our poor parents much else to do."

Related Characters: Barbara Ansley (speaker), Grace

Ansley, Alida Slade, Jenny Slade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In Barbara Ansley's lighthearted joke, Wharton shows the impact of middle age and widowhood on Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade. In their daughters' eyes, the two women are no longer active participants in life's many dramas and adventures. Instead, they are passive observers of life. Barbara's joke suggests that young people are the vital center of the world, and that older people rely on their children to keep themselves occupied. This view of middle age, which Mrs. Ansley notes is a common one—calling it "the collective modern idea of mothers"—may explain why memories of the past hold so much enchantment for the two of them.

"After all, it's still the most beautiful view in the world."

"It always will be, to me," assented her friend Mrs. Ansley, with so slight a stress on the "me" that Mrs. Slade, though she noticed it, wondered if it were not merely accidental, like the random underlinings of old-fashioned letter-writers. "Grace Ansley was always old-fashioned," she thought.

Related Characters: Alida Slade (speaker), Grace Ansley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Slade readily perceives the unusual emphasis in Mrs. Ansley's speech as evidence that she is stuck in a bygone era, because this interpretation fits with the picture of Mrs. Ansley that Mrs. Slade has held onto throughout their friendship. Nuances in inflection are one way that people communicate their meaning, and Mrs. Ansley's emphasis on the word "me" may be far from random—indeed, later events in the story will reveal that Mrs. Ansley has a complicated history in Rome, and that the city is the setting for some of her most important experiences—but Mrs. Slade is attached to her perception of Mrs. Ansley and is therefore not able to discern the underlying meaning in her friend's words.

"Moonlight—moonlight! What a part it still plays. Do you suppose they're as sentimental as we were?"

"I've come to the conclusion that I don't in the least know what they are," said Mrs. Ansley. "And perhaps we didn't know much more about each other."

Related Characters: Grace Ansley, Alida Slade (speaker), Jenny Slade , Barbara Ansley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

Even at this early point in their conversation, when none of the many secrets between them have surfaced, Mrs. Ansley pushes back against Mrs. Slade's sentimental memories of their youthful visit to Rome. Unlike Mrs. Slade, Mrs. Ansley seems willing to confront difficult truths about both the past and present, including the limitations of their lifelong friendship (which never yielded real intimacy or understanding) and their inability to access the minds of their daughters, who are coming of age in a different world than the one they knew as young women. This is one of the first signs of the substantial and strong personality that lies beneath Mrs. Ansley's placid and conventional exterior.

In living up to such a husband all her faculties had been engaged; now she had only her daughter to live up to, for the son who seemed to have inherited his father's gifts had died suddenly in boyhood. She had fought through that agony because her husband was there, to be helped and to help; now, after the father's death, the thought of the boy had become unbearable. There was nothing left but to mother her daughter; and dear Jenny was such a perfect daughter that she needed no excessive mothering … She wished that Jenny would fall in love—with the wrong man, even; that she might have to be watched, out-manoeuvred, rescued.

Related Characters: Alida Slade (speaker), Jenny Slade , Delphin Slade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This is the only moment in "Roman Fever" when Mrs. Slade makes reference to the son she lost, and to the excruciating pain that loss caused her. In comparison to this personal tragedy, all of Mrs. Slade's demonstrations of cruelty might

seem to pale in importance: her irritation at Jenny's "perfect" behavior, her subtly snide remarks about the Ansley family and the prospect of Barbara's marriage with the Italian aviator, and even her eventual revelation of the cruel trick she played by sending Mrs. Ansley a letter in Delphin's name. The fact that Mrs. Slade devotes relatively little thought to the memory of her son's death—though it clearly still affects her—suggests that her preoccupation with social dramas is a way of numbing herself against the pain of that loss. In this moment, Mrs. Slade shows the authentic version of herself that she masks so carefully at other times: she is a deeply wounded woman.

Section 2 Quotes

❝ Mrs. Ansley had resumed her knitting. One might almost have imagined (if one had known her less well, Mrs. Slade reflected) that, for her also, too many memories rose from the lengthening shadows of those august ruins. But no; she was simply absorbed in her work.

Related Characters: Alida Slade (speaker), Grace Ansley

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This thought occurs to Mrs. Slade at the end of a meandering comment on the differences between Barbara and Jenny's personalities, and the surprising fact that two staid and respectable people like the Ansleys should have produced a child as unconventional as Barbara. In this moment, as at other points in the conversation, Mrs. Ansley uses her knitting as a shield against the unpleasantness of her interaction with Mrs. Slade. As Mrs. Slade veers uncomfortably close to the sensitive subject of her daughter—who, of course, is not the product of her marriage with Horace Ansley, but of her affair with Delphin Slade—her apparent absorption in her work allows her to avoid engaging too deeply with Mrs. Slade's questions and reminiscences.

❝ Mrs. Slade broke off this prophetic flight with a recoil of self-disgust. There was no one of whom she had less right to think unkindly than Grace Ansley. Would she never cure herself of envying her? Perhaps she had begun too long ago.

Related Characters: Alida Slade (speaker), Grace Ansley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

On the surface, Mrs. Slade seems to think relatively little of Mrs. Ansley. Though she admires Barbara, she has few kind words to say about her old friend and often dismisses her out of hand. The revelation that Mrs. Slade is plagued by feelings of envy—that, in fact, she feels inadequate, rather than superior, when compared to her friend—casts their entire conversation in a new light. Mrs. Slade's rude remarks and frustrations reveal themselves as manifestations of her deep insecurities. In a narrative filled with secrets and unspoken pain, Mrs. Slade's acknowledgement of the enduring jealousy she seldom allows herself to confront emerges as a powerful example of honesty and self-discovery.

❝ "Oh, yes; Great-aunt Harriet. The one who was supposed to have sent her younger sister out to the Forum after sunset to gather a night-blooming flower for her album. All our great-aunts and great-grandmothers used to have albums of flowers."
Mrs. Slade nodded. "But she really sent her because they were in love with the same man—"
"Well, that was the family tradition. They said Aunt Harriet confessed it years afterward. At any rate, the poor little sister caught the fever and died."

Related Characters: Alida Slade (speaker), Grace Ansley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis

The story of Great-Aunt Harriet inspires Mrs. Slade's plot against Mrs. Ansley. In addition to its function in the plot, the story speaks to the long history of women betraying and tormenting one another for the sake of men. By sending her younger sister on a deadly nighttime errand, Harriet forsakes their family bonds—implying that all the love and shared history that exists between sisters cannot compare in importance to the potential love she might share with this man. As a young woman, Mrs. Slade forsook her friendship with Mrs. Ansley in order to secure the love of her fiancé.

The two women's friendship never developed into an intimate one because they saw each other, always, as competitors. Although it is never stated explicitly, Mrs. Slade senses that Barbara Ansley will treat Jenny with a similar callousness as she attempts to secure a relationship with the Italian nobleman. Wharton seems to be pointing out the ways in which, generation after generation, women behave with senseless cruelty toward one another in response to a culture that forces them to define their worth in relation to men.

Mrs. Slade waited nervously for another word or movement. None came, and at length she broke out: "I horrify you."
Mrs. Ansley's hands dropped to her knees. The face they uncovered was streaked with tears. "I wasn't thinking of you. I was thinking—it was the only letter I ever had from him!"

Related Characters: Grace Ansley, Alida Slade (speaker), Delphin Slade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley exchange these words immediately after Mrs. Slade reveals that it was she, and not Delphin, who wrote the letter inviting Mrs. Ansley to the Colosseum. The interaction highlights the disparity between Mrs. Slade's perception of the world and an underlying reality that she is not yet able to grasp. A shocked silence precedes Mrs. Ansley's unveiling of her tear-streaked face, and Mrs. Slade takes Mrs. Ansley's intense reaction personally by assuming that it means Mrs. Ansley is "horrified" by her. In reality, Mrs. Ansley's reaction is a reflection of her feelings for Delphin. Although their affair is many years old, she still cherishes memories of him and feels connected to him, implying that perhaps he was the love of her life. The real impact of Mrs. Slade's revelation is not its impact on Mrs. Ansley's feelings about her old friend, but on her memories of her lost lover. Mrs. Slade, blinded both by egotism and by willful self-deception, does not consider the possibility that the relationship between her friend and her husband may have been significant enough to inspire Mrs. Ansley's tearful reaction.

"I don't know why you should be sorry for me … After all, I had everything; I had him for twenty-five years. And you had nothing but that one letter that he didn't write."
Mrs. Ansley was again silent. At length she turned toward the door of the terrace. She took a step, and turned back, facing her companion.
"I had Barbara," she said, and began to move ahead of Mrs. Slade toward the stairway.

Related Characters: Grace Ansley, Alida Slade (speaker), Barbara Ansley , Delphin Slade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

The disclosure of this final, devastating secret—that Barbara Ansley is really the daughter of Delphin Slade—reveals the true depth of the lies and betrayals that have defined both women's lives. Mrs. Ansley shares the truth of Barbara's origins as part of a power play, shocking Mrs. Slade and then promptly exiting the conversation. However, even as her revelation destabilizes her friend's sense of superiority, it undermines her own carefully constructed façade. Beneath her staid and respectable exterior, Mrs. Ansley carries memories of passion and danger—and even deeper, beneath those memories, one can imagine that she carries the grief and pain of watching a man she loved devote his life to another family while she raised their child without him.

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.

SECTION 1

One the terrace of an upscale restaurant in the heart of Rome, two American women — Alida Slade and Grace Ansley, both "of ripe but well-cared-for middle age" — lean against the parapet, admiring the spectacular view below. From their position, the two women can see both the Palatine Hill and the Roman Forum.

The first lines of the story create a picture of opulence. Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are notable in being "well-cared for," a description that hints at their wealth and leisurely lifestyles. The view from the restaurant terrace is of the tallest of Rome's famous "Seven Hills," believed to be the birthplace of the city's founders, and the center of the ancient city's social and political life. Thus, the backdrop of the story evokes a nostalgic image of Rome at the height of its power, reflecting the characters' own nostalgia for their younger days.

From the nearby stairs, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley hear the voices of their two daughters, Jenny and Barbara. Barbara, Mrs. Ansley's daughter, jokingly refers to their mothers, saying to Jenny that they should "leave the young things to their **knitting**." Jenny gently reprimands her, insisting that the two older women are not literally knitting. Barbara remarks that their mothers have little else to do. The two girls disappear, laughing, down the stairs. Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade exchange good-natured remarks about their daughters' unflattering perceptions of them, and Mrs. Ansley confirms the truth in Barbara's joke when she removes her knitting from her purse. She does this sheepishly, but admits that she has had "a good deal of time to kill" during this visit to Rome, and that she sometimes gets "tired just looking" at the splendor of the city.

Mrs. Ansley refers to "the collective modern idea of Mothers," a stereotype that characterizes middle-aged women as passionless bystanders, with nothing to interest them except the lives of their children. She is aware of the ways in which she fulfills that stereotype, but does not seem anxious about doing so. This is the first appearance of the knitting that Mrs. Ansley will hold through much of her conversation with Mrs. Slade. By taking it out of her handbag immediately after hearing Barbara's comment, she seems content to confirm that she is safe and predictable, someone whose actions others can easily anticipate.

It is late afternoon, and as the two women stand at the parapet, the few other people lunching on the terrace gather up their things to leave. Mrs. Slade suggests that she and Mrs. Ansley stay on the terrace, and pushes two chairs close to the parapet, facing the Palatine Hill. She comments that the view from the terrace is "still the most beautiful view in the world." Mrs. Ansley agrees, saying "[i]t always will be, to me." Mrs. Slade notes how her friend emphasizes the word "me." Silently, she compares this unusual feature of Mrs. Ansley's speech to the seemingly random underlining seen in old letters, and tells herself, "Grace Ansley was always old-fashioned."

Mrs. Ansley's unusual emphasis on the word "me" implies that she sees some difference between her experience of Rome and the experience of Mrs. Slade. It hints at the possibility of the unspoken truths that will come to light later in the story, but Mrs. Slade is too committed to her existing understanding of Mrs. Ansley—reflected in the comment that Mrs. Ansley is "old-fashioned," a code for stodgy and boring—to realize that Mrs. Ansley's inflection may reflect to a thought or emotion that is inaccessible to her.

Mrs. Slade begins to reminisce about the time she and Mrs. Ansley spent in Rome when they were young. Mrs. Ansley is distracted, and remarks anxiously that the head-waiter seems to be wondering about their decision to settle on the terrace. Mrs. Slade casually calls the waiter over, and explains that she and Mrs. Ansley would like to spend the afternoon on the terrace, admiring the view. She offers him a tip, and the waiter warms instantly, assuring the two women that they are welcome. He encourages them to stay for dinner, reminding them that there will be a full moon that night.

There is a telling contrast between the self-effacing behavior of Mrs. Ansley's, who appears concerned that their presence may be inconvenient or obnoxious to the waiter, and the entitled behavior of Mrs. Slade, who correctly assumes that her money will allow her to do what she pleases. Although both women seem to be wealthy and likely have similar experiences, Mrs. Slade seems to feel a degree of confidence in herself—and also a sense of entitlement—that Mrs. Ansley lacks.

Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley discuss their daughters' plans for the evening. Mrs. Ansley believes that Barbara and Jenny have gone out with two "young Italian aviators" who had invited them to fly to the nearby city of Tarquinia for tea. She remarks that they will probably stay late, in order to fly back by moonlight. This prompts Mrs. Slade to comment on the enduring power of moonlight, and to ask whether Mrs. Ansley believes their daughters are "as sentimental as we were." Mrs. Ansley answers that she does not know what their daughters "are." She adds that she and Mrs. Slade, when they were young, may not have known one another as well as they believed. Mrs. Slade concedes that this may be true.

Though Mrs. Ansley appears passive and mild in the early pages of the story, her comments during this part of the conversation reveal the first hint of a sharper edge to her character. Tarquinia is an ancient city famous for its extensive catacombs, and this association adds a dark undertone to Mrs. Ansley's description of the young women's glamorous and romantic adventure. When Mrs. Slade invites Mrs. Ansley to reminiscence about their younger days, Mrs. Ansley refuses to express nostalgia and instead speaks frankly about two uncomfortable truths: that she and Mrs. Slade may not really know their daughters, and that, despite their long history, they have never really known one another, either. That Mrs. Ansley is willing to acknowledge these things suggests that she is more complex than those around her are willing to recognize.

Mrs. Ansley's comment prompts Mrs. Slade to reflect silently on their long friendship. She remembers how stunningly beautiful Mrs. Ansley was as a young woman. Mrs. Slade thinks that Mrs. Ansley was much more beautiful than her daughter, though Barbarais more charming and "effective" than her mother was. Mrs. Slade wonders how Barbara developed such a compelling personality, given how stodgy and dull Mrs. Ansley and her husband, Horace, were. Mrs. Slade recalls the years when she and her husband lived across the street from the Ansleys, and remembers a joke she once made at Mrs. Ansley's expense while in the company of other society women.

Mrs. Slade is clearly invested in maintaining a particular image of Mrs. Ansley, which she has held onto through much of their relationship. She feels superior to Mrs. Ansley, insofar as she senses that she has a rich and dynamic life—both a social life and an inner life—that Mrs. Ansley does not. However, she is not secure in that sense of superiority. At other points in their friendship, she has felt the need to disparage Mrs. Ansley in front of other women in order to confirm that she is better liked and more interesting. Just as Mrs. Ansley's hidden strength has begun to emerge, Mrs. Slade's hidden vulnerability is becoming visible as well.

Mrs. Slade reflects on how she and Mrs. Ansley both lost their husbands around the same time, and how those losses revitalized the friendship they had shared during their youth. She thinks about the excitement and glamour of her life with her late husband, Delphin, a corporate lawyer and a celebrity in New York society whom she often accompanied to critical social events in the United States and abroad. Unlike the many wives of important men who become "frumps," Mrs. Slade notes that she always took pride in her good looks and charm, and in being "equal in social gifts" to her husband.

Mrs. Slade's reflections on her life with Delphin reveal the qualities that are most important to her. She prides herself on her compelling personality and social graces, and sees these as cornerstones of the satisfying life she once shared with Delphin. She enjoys the feeling of social power—hosting and being hosted by elite people, the feeling of positive attention focused on her—and of the admiration her vibrant personality inspires in others. A great deal of her sense of self-worth seems to come from feeling superior to others, Mrs. Ansley included.

After her life with Delphin, widowhood feels very dull to Mrs. Slade. Since her son died in childhood—a fact that Mrs. Slade finds "unbearable" to think about—caring for Jenny is her only remaining responsibility. However, Jenny is "perfect" and never gets into any trouble that requires "excessive mothering." Mrs. Slade thinks her life might be more interesting if Jenny were more like Barbara, vivacious and daring rather than responsible and safe.

This is the only moment in the story when Mrs. Slade alludes, even in her thoughts, to the private tragedy of her son's death. Although the central drama of the story focuses on her relationships with her husband and Mrs. Ansley, the brief interruption of a profound unspoken loss hints at deep emotions that Mrs. Slade, and others like her, mask with gossip and scandal.

Sitting beside Mrs. Slade, Mrs. Ansley thinks about her own impressions of her friend. She believes Mrs. Slade is "awfully brilliant, but not as brilliant as she thinks she is." Mrs. Ansley considers the ways in which Jenny is different from her mother, noting that Jenny lacks Mrs. Slade's "vividness." Mrs. Ansley believes Mrs. Slade's life has been filled with "failures and mistakes," and she feels pity for her friend.

The vast majority of the events in "Roman Fever" are told from Mrs. Slade's perspective. Here, Mrs. Ansley's thoughts become briefly accessible to readers. It is surprising, given that Mrs. Slade has just been reflecting on the pleasures and successes of her life with Delphin, that Mrs. Ansley should feel sorry for her friend. This moment highlights the tension between the way people see themselves and the way others see them. Mrs. Slade knows her own mind and experience—things Mrs. Ansley cannot grasp—but it is clear that Mrs. Ansley also has a unique perspective on Mrs. Slade's life that may not be visible to Mrs. Slade herself.

SECTION 2

For a long time, Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade sit in silence on the terrace. The intimacy of this silence makes Mrs. Ansley uncomfortable, and when the bells chime at five o'clock, she reminds Mrs. Slade that the American Embassy is hosting Bridge games that evening. Mrs. Slade, lost in thought, says she will stay on the terrace rather than going to the Embassy. Mrs. Ansley insists that she does not want to leave the terrace either, and takes out her **knitting**. As her friend becomes engaged in activity, Mrs. Slade remains sitting motionless in her chair.

In keeping with their earlier interaction with the waiter, Mrs. Slade's reaction to the quiet moment reveals a confidence and sense of ease that Mrs. Ansley seems to lack. While Mrs. Ansley attempts to match her behavior to that of Mrs. Slade by insisting that she does not want to go to the Bridge game when it seems clear that she is uncomfortable on the terrace and wishes to leave, Mrs. Slade, by contrast, is completely absorbed in her own memories and does not seem to feel obligated to Mrs. Ansley. During this time, Mrs. Ansley's knitting functions like a shield, giving her something with which to occupy herself and stave off the discomfort of the moment.

Mrs. Slade makes a long, contemplative comment about the ways in which each generation of women visiting Rome has a different experience of the city. Their grandmothers were preoccupied with anxieties about **Roman Fever** that was common in those days, and fear of the disease kept their mothers from going out at night. When they were young women, she says, there was no threat of Roman Fever, and they were willing to disobey their mothers by going out at night. In fact, they relished the danger inherent in doing so, and readily disobeyed their parents. Mrs. Ansley continues **knitting** as her friend speaks, barely acknowledging Mrs. Slade's comments. Mrs. Slade notes silently that it is "like her" to focus on knitting rather than on the beautiful city before them.

Mrs. Slade describes the thrill of going out at night without mentioning explicitly the romantic and sexual exploits that those excursions made possible, but her references to disobedience—coupled with her earlier comments about moonlight and its role in the lives of young lovers—make her meaning clear. The threat of Roman Fever (a particularly deadly strain of malaria) stands in for the dangers of unrestricted sexual passion. Mrs. Slade's feels disdain at the sight of Mrs. Ansley knitting, believing that she is too prudish and emotionally limited to think deeply about the city and their time in it. This confirms what she has long believed about Mrs. Ansley and about herself.

It occurs to Mrs. Slade that Barbara must intend to win over one of the young aviators, who is a member of the Italian nobility. She realizes that Jenny cannot compete with Barbara for the young man's affections. Turning to Mrs. Ansley, she voices her amazement at the fact that two "exemplary characters" — meaning Mrs. Ansley and Horace — could have produced a child as "dynamic" as Barbara. This comment causes Mrs. Ansley to set down her **knitting** and remark, without looking at her friend, that Mrs. Slade seems to "overrate" Barbara. Mrs. Slade insists that she envies her friend, and that she wishes Jenny had been "brilliant" like Barbara instead of being an "angel." Mrs. Ansley remarks that Barbara is an "angel" as well, and resumes her knitting while Mrs. Slade makes another attempt to explain her comments about the two girls. Mrs. Slade wonders briefly whether Mrs. Ansley is as absorbed in memories as she is herself, but quickly dismisses the idea, thinking that her friend has nothing to trouble her and must simply be absorbed in her knitting.

Their brief exchange about Barbara is a conversational power struggle between the two women. Mrs. Slade does not like the idea of her daughter acting as a foil to highlight Barbara's unique appeal, which is humiliating to her as well as to Jenny, and she manifests her anger in snide comments to Mrs. Ansley. Her remarks about Barbara's "dynamic" personality clearly imply that she thinks Mrs. Ansley and Horace are too dull to have raised such an interesting daughter. Mrs. Ansley ignores this insult, but when Mrs. Slade suggests that Barbara is less well-behaved than Jenny, Mrs. Ansley stands up to Mrs. Slade by correcting her description of Barbara. Notably, she putts down her knitting as she does so, as if momentarily lowering her façade of civility.

Mrs. Slade tries to imagine the kind of life Mrs. Ansley will have if Barbara marries the Italian aviator: living in Rome among her grandchildren, surrounded by members of Roman high society. She berates herself for thinking such petty and unkind thoughts about her friend, and wonders whether she will ever stop envying Mrs. Ansley. Standing up, she looks at the Colosseum bathed in evening light, but she finds the beautiful sight stressful rather than calming.

Bored and dissatisfied by her own widowhood, Mrs. Slade feels agitated by thoughts of Mrs. Ansley enjoying a rich and happy life well into old age. Her internal question about whether she will ever cease "envying" Mrs. Ansley comes as a surprise after so many disparaging thoughts about her friend. It becomes clear in this moment that Mrs. Slade's boldness and sense of entitlement mask deep insecurities and anxieties.

Mrs. Slade asks Mrs. Ansley whether she is afraid of catching **Roman Fever** or pneumonia, recalling that Mrs. Ansley has always had a sensitive throat. The two women begin discussing Mrs. Ansley's Great-Aunt Harriet, who—according to family lore—once sent her younger sister on an evening errand during a trip to Rome in hope that she would catch Roman Fever. The two sisters were in love with the same man, and Harriet hoped her sister would catch the illness and die— which, in fact, she did.

Aside from its shocking conclusion, the story of Great-Aunt Harriet is in many ways the story of a typical rivalry between young women. Neither Mrs. Ansley nor Mrs. Slade remarks on how terrible it would be to murder one's own sister in order to secure the love of a man. Their cavalier treatment of the subject suggests that they, too, believe that romantic relationships and male validation are life-and-death matters, and it is therefore not unthinkable to them that a young woman should prize a man's love over her own sister's life.

Mrs. Slade tells Mrs. Ansley that she was frightened by the story of Great-Aunt Harriet when she and Mrs. Ansley visited Rome as young women. Mrs. Slade suggests that she was "too happy" at that time—she was engaged to Delphin—and was easily frightened as a result. She goes on to say that, though **Roman Fever** was no longer a threat during that visit, she realized after hearing Harriet's story that the cold air in the Forum and the Colosseum could still bring on a deadly illness. Mrs. Ansley expresses confusion at her friend's comments and insists that she does not remember that time well, but Mrs. Slade goes on.

Mrs. Slade reveals the fragility of her self-conception when she suggests that the happiness she felt during the period of her engagement to Delphin caused her a great deal of anxiety and fear. For all her apparent confidence, she hangs her hopes for long-term happiness on a man. At this point in the conversation, Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are engaged in a battle for control over the situation: Mrs. Ansley is attempting to avoid discussing that time in their lives, and Mrs. Slade is pushing the subject vigorously despite her friend's efforts to end the discussion.

Mrs. Slade recalls how, on that long-ago visit to Rome, Mrs. Ansley had become very ill after staying out late one night. Mrs. Ansley says little in response, and her friend continues speaking about the illness and the late-night sightseeing that supposedly caused it. Soon, Mrs. Slade bursts out that she has "always known" why Mrs. Ansley went out late that night. She accuses Mrs. Ansley of going to the Colosseum in response to a letter from Delphin, in which he expressed his love for her and urged her to meet him there in secret. Mrs. Ansley stands up from her chair, and her **knitting** falls to the ground as Mrs. Slade begins to recite from the letter.

This revelation—that Mrs. Slade knows intimate details about a secret Mrs. Ansley has kept for decades—eliminates all pretense of politeness, and reveals the conversation as the power struggle it has been since its beginning. Mrs. Slade initiates this change, but Mrs. Ansley has no choice except to change her conduct in response. Her knitting—the mask of feminine politeness that has protected Mrs. Ansley throughout the story—has fallen away. This leaves Mrs. Ansley with no choice but to face her friend honestly.

Mrs. Ansley says she burned the letter about which Mrs. Slade is speaking, and that she does not know how Mrs. Slade can know what the letter said. Sneering, Mrs. Slade reveals that it was she, not Delphin, who wrote and sent the letter. Mrs. Ansley responds with a shocked silence, covering her face with her hands. After a moment, Mrs. Slade asks whether she horrifies Mrs. Ansley. To this, Mrs. Ansley replies: "I wasn't thinking of you. I was thinking—it was the only letter I ever had from him!"

From Mrs. Slade's point of view, she is the most important actor in the story of the letter and its consequences. After sharing the truth about her deceit, she naïvely expects Mrs. Ansley's reactions to center on her. Therefore, when Mrs. Ansley says that she is thinking about Delphin and their relationship in the wake of Mrs. Slade's revelation—not of Mrs. Slade and her feelings about her—she strikes a blow to Mrs. Slade's expectations that, by making this revelation, she would gain an upper hand in the competition.

Although she continues to taunt her friend, Mrs. Slade realizes that her own feeling of rage is fading. She feels suddenly guilty at the thought that she has caused Mrs. Ansley pain over something that happened so long ago. Eager to justify her actions, Mrs. Slade explains that she knew Mrs. Ansley had been in love with Delphin, and that she wanted Mrs. Ansley "out of the way"—sick and bedridden—so that she could not steal him away from her before they were married. Seeing Mrs. Ansley's devastation and realizing that she must have cared very deeply for Delphin, Mrs. Slade is filled with a new wave of rage and jealousy. She reminds Mrs. Ansley that she married Horace only two months after the evening at the Colosseum, and says she has always believed that Mrs. Ansley's marriage to Horace had been an attempt to "[get] ahead" of her and Delphin by marrying first. Mrs. Slade, citing this theory as evidence, claims that Mrs. Ansley never actually cared for Delphin. Mrs. Ansley concedes that it must have looked that way to Mrs. Slade.

Mrs. Slade is not yet able to reconcile her long-held beliefs about Mrs. Ansley with the truths about their shared history that are beginning to emerge. She has concocted her own unlikely explanation for Mrs. Ansley's rushed marriage to Horace, ignoring the fact that much more likely and reasonable explanations exist for a young woman to marry quickly, and uses this explanation to support her beliefs about the relationship between Mrs. Ansley and Delphin. Although Mrs. Ansley has not confronted Mrs. Slade with the full truth yet, it is clear that Mrs. Slade feels defensive and afraid as she perceives the depths of her friend's feelings for her own late husband.

Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade sit together in silence while, all around them, the waiters from the restaurant begin to prepare the terrace for dinner. They bring fresh flowers, trays, napkins, and flasks of wine to the tables. A woman appears, looking for the elastic band she uses to hold together her tattered Baedeker travel guide, which she claims to have lost while lunching on the terrace. The Seven Hills become dark.

The waiters' straightening up of the terrace reflects the impulse, in polite society, to make everything appear clean and orderly. This can only be accomplished by eliminating evidence of the past, the way the waiters remove faded flowers from the afternoon. The woman reappearing from the lunch hour, by contrast, is a figure of the past creeping into an orderly present, creating a surprising amount of chaos with her presence.

Mrs. Slade tells Mrs. Ansley that writing the letter was intended as a cruel joke, and that she enjoyed the image of Mrs. Ansley making a fool of herself as she waited for Delphin at the Colosseum. To this, Mrs. Ansley replies that she did not wait, because Delphin met her at the Colosseum just as the letter had said he would.

When Mrs. Ansley reveals that Delphin did, in fact, meet her at the Colosseum, the tenor of the conversation shifts instantly and dramatically. Throughout their conversation, Mrs. Slade has seemed to be the more powerful one: confident, aggressive, and knowledgeable. Now, Mrs. Ansley reveals significant secrets of her own.

Shocked, Mrs. Slade asks how Delphin could have known that Mrs. Ansley would be at the Colosseum, since he never saw the letter. Mrs. Ansley reveals that she sent Delphin a letter in response to the once she received, confirming that she would meet him as he had asked. When she arrived, he was waiting for her. Mrs. Slade is stunned, and says she had never expected that Mrs. Ansley might write back.

Throughout their friendship, Mrs. Slade has perceived Mrs. Ansley as being passive and ineffectual. In responding to Delphin's letter, Mrs. Ansley took an active role that Mrs. Slade—in her very limited perspective on her friend—was not able even to imagine.

Mrs. Ansley remarks that the terrace is cold, and that they had better leave. She tells Mrs. Slade she is sorry for her. As Mrs. Slade gathers her things, she says she does not know why Mrs. Ansley should be sorry for her. After all, she says, though her scheme with the letter went wrong, she still had twenty-five years of marriage with Delphin, while Mrs. Ansley had nothing from him except "that one letter that he didn't write."

Mrs. Ansley is no longer the mild-mannered knitter deferring to her charismatic friend. Rather, she has become a powerful and decisive actor in the story. Whereas earlier she allowed Mrs. Slade to determine whether they would remain on the terrace or leave, she now announces her departure without asking her friend's input. She is able to tell Mrs. Slade that she feels sorry for her, a condescending remark unlike anything she has said up to this point. Mrs. Slade clearly wants to grab this power back, and she attempts to do so when she compares her long marriage with Delphin to Mrs. Ansley's experience with him, which she assumes was short-lived and meager.

Mrs. Ansley takes a step toward the door of the terrace. Then, she turns back to face Mrs. Slade. "I had Barbara," she tells her and then walks toward the stairway.

Mrs. Ansley's revelation—that Barbara is, in fact, Delphin's daughter—is the final blow both in their conversation, and in a lifetime of competition between Mrs. Ansley and Mrs. Slade. Mrs. Ansley's remark explains why she had to marry Horace so shortly after her meeting with Delphin at the Colosseum: she had been pregnant, and wanted others to think the child was Horace's although it was Delphin's. The revelation constitutes a major revision to Mrs. Slade's entire life story as she knows it, but it also has major implications for Barbara and Jenny, who Mrs. Slade now understands to be half-sisters. With Mrs. Ansley's final remark, the characterizations of the two women have now reversed: Mrs. Ansley's complex inner life reveals itself while Mrs. Slade is passive and silent.

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