

## The Story of Don Achille

### The Relationship between Elena and Lila

- Since even from the beginning the two girls compete against one another, is this even a friendship in the usual sense of the word? Are they friends, or are they rivals? If they are somehow both, to what extent does the rivalry undermine their relationship?
- Why is Elena attracted to Lila when Lila is so damn mean to her? Why does Elena always let Lila take the lead role in their relationship? What explains the most obvious exception to this general rule, when the two girls skip school to visit the sea, and Lila insists upon returning (when Lila is usually the adventurous one) (73)? Why is Elena (the stereotypical “good” girl) so attracted to Lila (the stereotypical “bad” girl) and vice versa?
- In some ways the relationship between the two girls brings out the best in them (as when they have the confidence together to face Don Achille), but in others ways it causes stress (as when they become jealous of one another). Is the relationship meant to be seen as healthy or unhealthy? How is this dynamic manifest when Lila attempts to academically keep up with Elena once Elena starts at the middle school?
- Why is the episode with the dolls and the subsequent confrontation of Don Achille given so much attention? Why does this catalyze the two girl’s friendship?

### Conflict

- How does the girl’s social environment shape who they become? Do they acquiesce to these external oppressions, or do they overcome them?
- Why is there more conflict with Elena and her mother than there is with Elena and her father? Why is her mother not more supportive of her daughter, even after Elena clearly shows great academic progress? How is this related to Elena’s mother’s discomfort with Elena’s puberty, calling her growing breasts “indecent” and seemingly being ashamed that her daughter begins to menstruate (102)?
- Why is there such an emphasis on the violent nature of their surrounding? Even before their friendship begins, the girls fend off a violent encounter with Enzo, and in the neighborhood husbands and fathers casually beat their wives and children (and nobody seems to care).
- Why does Lila’s father not agree to his daughter continuing her schooling? Is he just a bad man, or is there some sort of social context that explains his reaction? Is his occasional physical abuse of Lila and Rino evidence of his sinister nature?

### Enzo

- Why does Enzo pretend to be less intelligent? Why does he not attempt to complete his education? Why does he prefer leading his “gang” of rowdy boys? Why does Enzo throw rocks at Elena and Lila? Is he a bad kid?

### Maestra Oliviero

- Why does she remain such a patron of Elena, and why does she lose interest in Lila when she is no longer able to continue her education? Why does she take such an active hand in the lives of her most promising students? If it’s because she’s nice, why does she cut off Lila so definitively? Is there something in it for her? Why is she so dismissive of Lila’s creative efforts (*The Blue Fairy Book*)? What is the significance of her discussion of the plebs that Elena flashes back to at the end of the novel?

## **Don Achille**

- Why is everyone so afraid of Don Achille? He seems reasonable enough when the girls confront him. People also seem to patronize him and want access to his (almost certainly) illegal goods. What is the source of his power? Why does the section end with the murder of Don Achille? How does this create closure? How is this related to the relative rise in status of other families (such as the Solara brothers or his son Stefano)?

## **The Story of the Shoes**

### **The Relationship between Elena and Lila**

- Elena's chosen path to future success comes from her education, while Lila's comes from material gain. Lila is envious of Elena's education, while Elena is jealous of Lila's status (219), indicative of both the two paths the girls take and their increasingly different perspectives on life. How does this increasing divergence between the two come to define the nature of their friendship? Why do they continue to compete when they seemingly have so little in common anymore?

### **Elena**

- Why does Elena continue to doubt herself, even as she is able to achieve so many things that Lila cannot (e.g., 259)? Why does she continue to value Lila's opinion, even when the life paths of the two girls diverge so much? Why does she continue to compete with her (e.g., acquiring a boyfriend when Lila becomes engaged) even when they no longer seem to be in direct competition?

### **Lila**

- Why does Lila shift her focus from education (including her ambition to become a writer) to the shoes? Was education ever important to her, or was it always just a means to an end? What do the shoes themselves signify? Why does she later abandon interest in them, seeing them as a childhood fantasy? How is this related to her acquiescing to cultural norms for women (aspiring to be a housewife and learning to play a supporting role in Stefano's family business)? Is Lila's character arc that of a strong, independent personality transforming into a docile, dependent personality?
- What is significant about Lila's desire to disappear? Why does she experience episodes where she seemingly loses all sense of self and identity? Is this related to Lila's increasing conformity over the course of the novel (as when she accepts a mostly arranged marriage)?
- Does Lila love Stefano? She says yes, but should we take that at face value? If we should, why is she so prudish about her sexuality in the relationship (waiting for the marriage before anything happens)? On the other hand, if Stefano is just a means to an end, why did she reject Marcello? Wouldn't he have accomplished her goals just as well?
- Why does Lila call Elena "my brilliant friend" (312)? Why is this significant? What does it say about Elena, and what does it say about Lila?

### **Fernando Cerullo (Lila's father)**

- Why is Lila's father so opposed to Lila and Rino's plans? Why does he not modify his position after the shoes are complete? Why does he become more enthusiastic later when Stefano shows an interest?

## **Rino**

- Rino changes from someone who is Lila's biggest supporter (wanting her to continue her education and encouraging her design ambitions) to someone obsessed with status (needing to have the biggest firework display or valuing the patronage of first Marcello and later Stefano more than his sister's feelings). He even becomes threatening toward Lila when she does not respond to Marcello's overtures. What explains this change?

## **The Solara brothers**

- Marcello professes to love Lila (even sobbing when Lila rejects him for Stefano), yet he shows up with Lila's shoes (knowing this would upset her). Did he ever truly have feelings for her? Why does he later try to intimidate her, even threatening to kill both Lila and Stefano (252), when earlier he had been so supportive (putting up with Lila's crap and buying expensive items for her household)? Why is he seemingly unable to take "no" for an answer?

## **Donato Sarratore**

- When he is first introduced in the novel, he seems kindly (with Melina being the crazy one who misinterpreted his kindness). Later, he is revealed to be a serial womanizer who sexually assaults Elena. What explains this shift in perception? What is his purpose in the novel? How is he able to get away with brazen assaults against women with nobody calling him out on his bad behavior?

## **The Ending**

- At the end, Elena experiences an epiphany about the insignificance and insularity of the world in which she and Lila had grown up (334). This suggests a level of maturation on Elena's part, yet Lila (who does not have a similar revelation) seems to be still trapped in that world. What does this seem to suggest about some larger argument in the text.
- What is significant about Marcello Solara wearing the shoes that Lila had made? How did he get them, and why does he wear them to the wedding? Why would Stefano let Marcello have them in the first place? Why would Marcello even want them, since presumably they would remind him of his failure to secure Lila as his wife? How will Lila react to seeing them on Marcello's feet?