

Since less than 55% of the class bothered to turn in questions (despite the reminder and detailing of what the consequences would be if I didn't get more compliance), what would have been a discussion (to help set up the assignments that follow for the next couple of weeks) is now a set of questions that must be answered for credit. Those who did turn in the questions on time will receive a five point bonus on the final grade for this activity (even those whose questions weren't terribly useful). Those who turned in the questions late in response to my reminder last class period will receive a three point bonus (all four of them-- the rest of you apparently didn't care enough to avoid assigning everyone additional work).

If I get similar compliance rates for the next set of questions (which are due Tuesday October 23), you can expect another assignment like this one as well as a quiz on the class period after the questions are due (the block day on October 24 or 25). The format of the quiz will be multiple short paragraphs.

In addition, if less than 75% of everyone in the two sections turns in this assignment (due next Friday), then if there is a quiz, it will take the form of a timed writing on the block day on October 24 or 25.

**DIRECTIONS: Choose any FOUR of the questions to answer.**

- **Each answer should be a paragraph.**
- **Any evidence should be in the form of paraphrase, as if it were a paragraph in a Q3 essay.**
- **Treat these paragraphs like you would a Q3 essay, which is to say, make sure you include enough context in setting up your evidence so that even someone who has not read the novel would understand your argument.**
- **At least one of your questions must be from the "The Story of Don Achille" and one from "The Story of the Shoes."**

The answers to these questions are due before midnight on Friday October 19. If you turn them in before the due date you will receive a small incentive bonus (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points; this is a flat deduction, not a cumulative one based on the number of days late). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not want points deducted, you may answer EIGHT of the questions instead.

### **"The Story of Don Achille"**

1. After Lila throws Elena's doll into the cellar (and Elena does the same with Lila's doll in retaliation), Elena follows Lila down the steps to retrieve them. In doing so, Lila first extends her hand for Elena to hold as they embark on their adventure together-- a gesture Elena says "changed everything between us forever" (29). While this is obviously a gesture of friendship, the image also suggests other things about the nature of their relationship. Beyond the literal meaning (summarized above), what else does the image connote about their friendship as a whole? Explain.

2. In following Lila down into the cellar to retrieve the dolls (31), Elena lets Lila take the lead in the adventure, a moment that initiates a pattern where Lila is typically the motivating force in their friendship. This suggests some level of dependence on Elena's part, yet she unquestionably gains benefit from the relationship as well (here becoming braver than she would be acting on her own). From Elena's point of view, to what extent is the reader supposed to see Elena's friendship with Lila as constructive, and to extent is the reader supposed to see their relationship as self-destructive? Explain.
3. From the beginning of the novel, violence defines the neighborhood in which Elena and Lina live, often taking the form of violent encounters between men and women. One of Elena and Lina's earliest experiences together, for example, is the bloody encounter with Enzo (35), yet there are numerous examples of men beating their wives or men and women fighting each other for the sake of the opposite sex. Considering that the novel seems to be a coming of age story that documents the two girls' evolving friendship, what is the purpose of the emphasis on violence, when it would seem so out of place in a book about childhood and growing up? Explain.
4. In the beginning of "My Brilliant Friend" the relationship between Elena and Lila is very different compared to most typical girl relationships. There is an instance where both Elena and Lila collaborated in making Enzo, a gang leader, bleed from his calf. More specifically, "it was the first contact between [them]" (35). There being other violent situations involving little girls and women fighting men, why is it that violence seems to be the medium by which their relationship unravels? Why is that Elena's and Lila's growing up relationship involves much blood and gore, things that are not associated with little girls growing up?
5. Throughout the novel, Elena and Lila are in constant competition. Elena recognizes the superiority of Lila in academics, yet is nonetheless attracted to her presence (43). This continues, as Elena comes to believe that she is, in some sense, dependent on her friend. What does this suggest about Elena's character as she is attracted to a force that so completely dominates her, and what does this suggest about her character over the course of the novel? Explain. (Note: your answer may be different if you feel that Elena is, on some level, ever able to step outside of Lila's shadow.)
6. In the novel, Lila convinces Elena to skip school, "and cross boundaries of the neighborhood." To Elena this adventure comes to symbolize a "pleasure of being free", as she describes her feelings not like the journey to Don Achille's house rather "joyfully open to the unknown" (73). However, as the journey progresses, Lila loses her nerve and insists that they return (77), a seeming contradiction to her usual fearlessness. What does this episode suggest about either the nature of Elena or Lila's relationship or about Lila's development as a character? Explain. You may include information after this episode in your explanation.

## **“The Story of the Shoes”**

7. During the New Year’s celebration on the roof terrace, Lila experiences a sensation that she calls “dissolving margins” (90-91), in which (for her) the outlines of the world seem to break down, and she realizes that she has experienced similar sensations before. Re-read the description in Chapter One of “The Story of the Shoes” and discuss what this category of experiences seems to signify for Lila (in terms of the novel as a whole).
8. In the novel, both girls seem to place big emphasis on acquiring wealth. At first the girls plan on becoming wealthy through writing stories (70); later, in the “dissolving margins” episode, Lila’s breakdown is in context of perceiving her brother as being transformed from a caring individual to “squat animal form [...] the greediest, [and] the meanest” (90); and at the end of the novel, Elena believes the means of acquiring wealth for Lila is indicative of a corrupt system (249). Choosing either Elena or Lila, describe their character arc in terms of either wealth or acquisitiveness, focusing on either the changing ways that it motivates them or their changing attitude toward it.
9. After Lila’s father refuses to allow her to continue in school, she intermittently continues to help Elena with her studies. Identify TWO plausible motives for her behavior in doing this and explain what these motives suggest about the overall nature of Elena and Lila’s friendship as a whole.
10. After Lila no longer attends school, she absorbs herself in her father’s business, designing a pair of shoes for sale in her father’s shop. Is Lila’s new obsession motivated by the same impulse as her earlier passion for learning; is it a replacement (or displacement) for earlier fervor for knowledge; or is it a way of continuing her apparent need to compete with Elena? Explain.
11. Elena’s “wealth” comes from her education, while Lila’s is through 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? Explain.
12. Throughout the book it can be argued that Elena’s and Lila’s friendship is driven by a mutual rivalry. In some way they both try to gain dominance over each other through their academic pursuits. Since such accomplishments seem to come so naturally to Lila, it comes as somewhat of a surprise for Lila to tell Elena at the end of the novel that “You’re my brilliant friend, you have to be the best of all, boys and girls” (312)-- especially considering that this is literally the only time the phrase is used in the novel (outside of the title). Given this, explain the meaning of the title in terms of its (potentially) contradictory meanings.
13. At the end of the section, 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 be trapped in that world. Re-read the passage and explain (focusing either in terms of Elena or in terms of Lila) what this seems to suggest about some larger argument in the text.