

CHARACTERS

ELENA GRECO (called **LENÙ**), a young girl growing up in 1950s Naples

RAFFAELLA CERULLO (called **LINA** or **LILA**), Elena's best friend and rival

FERNANDO CERULLO, Lila's father; a shoemaker

RINO CERULLO, Lila's brother; later involved in the family shoemaking business

DON ACHILLE CARRACCI, at one time the real power in the neighborhood; he has ties to organized crime

STEFANO CARRACCI, Don Achille's son; he becomes the grocer in the family store after his father's murder

DONATO SARRATORE, a conductor and sexual libertine

NINO SARRATORE, Donato's son; aspiring intellectual

MELINA CAPPUCCIO, a mentally unstable widow who conducts an affair with Donato Sarratore

ANTONIO CAPPUCCIO, Melina's son, later a mechanic

ENZO SCANNO and **PASQUALE PELUSO**, friends of Elena and Lila

MARCELLO and **MICHELE SOLARA**, sons of the owner of the bar-pastry shop; both incredibly wealthy by the standards of the neighborhood

MAESTRA OLIVIERO, Elena and Lila's teacher

PLOT

Elena Greco receive a phone call from Rino, petty criminal and son of Elena's childhood friend Raffaella (called Lina by most and Lila by Elena). His mother has gone missing, and he is hoping that she is with Elena in Turin, despite the fact that he knows his mother has never before left Naples. Elena, who has known Lila for over sixty years, recalls Lila's oft-expressed desire to disappear without a trace, and indeed, when Rino goes through his mother's residence, Lila has taken everything: clothes, papers, computer, photographs of herself-- even going so far as to cut herself out of photos with others. Exasperated, Elena begins to narrate her memories of her friendship with Lila.

Growing up in the 1950s, Raffaella and Elena, known to each other as Lila and Lenù, are elementary school students in a working-class neighborhood in Naples. An intricate social web dictates the lives of adults and children alike: everyone knows everyone's business, custom is king, and the possibility of violence looms always. Observing her from afar, Elena becomes fascinated with Lila for her daring in resisting authority and her intelligence in school.

When they are seven years old, Lila throws Elena's doll into the basement of Don Achille, the local gangster whom all of the neighborhood children are taught to fear. Elena follows suit, doing the same to Lila's doll. Despite their fear of Don Achille, they approach his door, and ask for their dolls back. He tells them that he does not know what has happened to their dolls, and sends them away with money instead. This event ends up solidifying the girls' relationship. They become best friends-- anchored to one another by their intellect and their dreams for the future.

When Melina Cappuccio's husband dies, she is treated kindly by the conductor and part-time poet Donato Sarratore. The relationship eventually flowers into an affair, and Melina begins to wage a passive aggressive against Donato's wife Lidia. The children take the part of Lidia, except for Lila who is a partisan of Melina. Eventually Lidia will force her husband to move the family away from the neighborhood, and Melina seems to literally go mad, throwing items out the window at the departing family. Eventually Donato will send Melina a book of his poems dedicated to her.

When the girls are still very young, they scheme together to skip school and go farther away from the neighborhood than they ever have before. After they've traveled a couple of miles, they get caught in a rainstorm. Elena is willing to continue their journey, but Lila is adamant that they return home. Elena realizes that, despite the bravery Lila exhibits at home, she is extremely uncomfortable with the idea of leaving the neighborhood.

Though Lila is the best student in primary school, her father, the shoemaker Fernando Cerullo, refuses to spend the necessary money to study for her to attend middle school. Elena's father, however, is more supportive, and Elena begins taking private lessons with her teacher Maestra Oliviero. At first Lila studies on her own, and in this way even exceeds the progress of Elena, but when Elena passes the admission test, it marks the beginning of a major divergence in their lives. Elena proves a good student, and though at first Lila again manages to study many of the same subjects on her own, she eventually loses hope, and Elena surpasses her. Eventually Elena will be only one of two children from the neighborhood to go on to high school.

During a cacophonous display of fireworks to celebrate the New Year, Lila experiences a disturbing sensation, which she describes as "dissolving boundaries." The people around her seem to lose their shape and are revealed to be not stable beings, but fragile compositions of matter, liable to spill out of themselves at any moment. At the time, Lila does not tell Elena about her experience, but this is a sensation that will recur and haunt her throughout her life.

After Elena advances in school without her, Lila's passion for learning transforms into a passion for making money, and to that end, she designs a new type of custom shoe that she and her brother Rino want her father to

manufacture (his business, to this point, consisting solely in the repair of old shoes). Fernando Cerullo vetoes the plan, pointing out that they live in a poor neighborhood where nobody can afford such luxuries. Undeterred, Rina and Lila conspire to construct a prototype themselves. Showing their work to their father, however, only angers him further.

As Lila comes of age, she blossoms into a great beauty and attracts the attentions of eligible men in the neighborhood. At first, it appears that her family will coerce her into marrying Marcello Solara, a local tyrant with mob connections. Belonging to the wealthiest family in the neighborhood, he and his brother Michele are practically a law unto themselves. Instead, Lila settles on Don Achilles' son Stefano Carracci, the proprietor of the town's thriving grocery store after his father's murder by the carpenter Alfredo Peluso (father of Elena and Lila's friends Pasquale and Carmela). Stefano agrees to invest in the shoemaking venture to please his future wife and purchases the prototype shoes that Rino and Lila had constructed. Wedding preparations begin.

Elena's old teacher Maestra Oliviero arranges for Elena to take a working holiday on the island of Ischia. Elena blossoms in the new environment and is excited when she learns that Donato Sarratore's family will also be vacationing there, since Elena has formed a crush on the conductor's son Nino (who is the only other person from the neighborhood who is still attending school). Nino, however, is avoiding his family because of conflict with his father, so Elena sees him less than she would like. Elena learns part of the reason for this estrangement when Donato Sarratore sexually molests her in the middle of the night, prompting Elena to leave for home the next day.

Partially in competition with Lila, Elena begins dating Antonio Cappuccio and allows their relationship to become sexual-- going as far as she dares, and fighting the urge to let him take her virginity. But while Elena is physically attracted to Antonio, she is more attracted to the mentally captivating Nino Sarratore. At Lila's wedding, Elena ignores Antonio in favor of Nino. For her, marriage is a distant prospect, and she realizes for the first time that her education (and the doors that it has opened up for her) has alienated her from the neighborhood-- now understanding how shabby both it and its inhabitants truly are. The novel ends as Elena gazes at Lila, who is angry and beautiful in her wedding dress. Stefano is revealed to have betrayed Lila when Marcello Solara shows up at the wedding wearing shoes that Lila had labored to make and that Stefano had purchased. For Stefano, concessions to the Solara family-- necessary for continued peace and prosperity in the neighborhood-- have trumped his loyalty to Lila. Elena knows Lila will never forgive Stefano's betrayal, and that her marriage is effectively over the day it began.

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

Class

- Social and economic class helps to determine one's life chances.
- This is true in terms of material comfort, happiness, and the potential to achieve goals.
- Rich and poor are held to two different sets of expectations and standards for behavior.

Gender

- Men and women are held to a completely different set of standards, almost always to the disadvantage of females.
- Patriarchal dominance constrains the potential growth of individuals (especially women).
- In this context, it is most often felt through the ever-present threat of male violence
- Women are forced to compromise themselves if they are to survive in a male-dominated world.

Solidarity

- Both friendship and love contain within them elements of attraction and repulsion, cooperation and competition.
- Both, however, are rooted in personal loyalty between individuals-- the unifying element that transcends differences.
- Without connections to others, there is sterility, alienation, and even the threat of madness.

Identity Formation

- Identity is formed in response and in resistance to the stimuli of daily life. Circumstances dictate the development of one's personality.
- One self-actualizes through strength of will by leading a purposeful life. This process, however, is largely a defense against the outside world.
- The threat of personality dissolution (or even madness) lurks behind a veneer of normality. The chaos and violence of the world always threatens to intrude upon even the most well-ordered life.