

READER'S GUIDE TO *THE ETRUSCAN* FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, LIBRARIANS, & BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GROUPS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for

THE ETRUSCAN

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Point of View and Structure

1. The core of the novel is Harriet's narrative, written in the first person point of view. This document is inserted in a traditional 3rd person p.o.v. shifting back and forth among the minor characters -- Stephen, Sarah, Wimbley, and Mrs. Parsons. Our first impressions of Harriet are filtered through their thoughts, and we later discover the journal through their eyes. How does this narrative structure affect the reader's perception of the central story: Harriet's encounter with Federigo del Re?

2. In what ways are the two parts of the novel: the "psychological drama of introspection" pertaining to the London group and the "romantic mystery" of Harriet's narrative interlocked? In what ways are they remote from each other? Is there any "middle ground" between the two realms?

Characters

1. **Triangles** The novel is structured on strong personality conflicts, triangular relationships, and parallel characters, found in the 3rd person sections and in Harriet's narrative. The complexity of these triangular relationships becomes clearer as we learn more about the characters' past and as secrets are revealed. Key triangles are : Harriet-Stephen-Sarah Harriet-Stephen- Wimbley What other triangles do you note? What about parallel characters? Are any names symbolic?

2. Harriet and the Count

In what ways are Harriet and the Count diametrically opposite? In what ways are they alike? How does their mutual attraction manifest itself? Does their attraction remind you of any other literary love stories or seductions you have read about? The Count may be a Byronic hero, but is Harriet a typical ingénue?

3. Mrs. Parsons

Mrs. Parsons' entry into Harriet's house marks the beginning of a journey "downwards" into Harriet's psychic world which will be developed through her narrative. How does Parsons bridge the gap between the world of Harriet's narrative and the world represented by the London group?

Setting

1. Harriet's Etruscan Italy and Stephen's London are in strong contrast -- with Fiesole in Chapter 2 being an area of transition. Here the novel begins to move from a realistic narrative mode to a more symbolic one. What elements foreshadow this transition?
2. In what ways does Harriet's description of places in Italy (farmhouse, woods, tombs, etc) reflect her inner world?
3. As the first three chapters of the novel progress, landscape and setting become more symbolic, typical of the gothic novel. Comment on these elements

Farmhouse Tower Tomb Villa Forest
Mirrors the door of the soul

Imagery

1. Why is autumnal imagery important in the novel?
2. Comment on the plant imagery in this book: dahlias, sunflowers, pomegranates, mushrooms, trees.
3. How are these animals woven into the plot: wild boar, snakes, dog, porcupines, scorpions?

Themes

Harriet's narrative begins with a "fall" in the tombs. The prelude to this fall is recounted in flashback, when Harriet describes her visit to the British Museum and the impact that an Etruscan statue she saw there had on her. This episode might be considered a "call to initiation" (See *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell)

1. Harriet's narrative incorporates many structural elements shared by fairy tale and myth ("the animal groom" fairy tales) concerning women's initiation. In what ways is Harriet's story a successful or failed initiation?
2. What other references to myths or fairy tales do you find?
3. The illusory nature of experience is one of the themes of *The Etruscan*: how is this expressed in the novel stylistically and plot-wise?

The Ending

The novel has an open ending, and may be interpreted in many ways, corresponding to the minor characters' evaluation of it: a document in code, a fiction, the product of illusion, an indecent tale...etc. After balancing the evidence, what conclusions do you draw about the identity of Federigo del Re and his attitude toward Harriet?

A Wider View

The novel draws on two recurrent themes in American and English fiction set in Italy:

1. Italy as a place of seduction and moral intrigue.
2. the attraction between opposites and the clash between the emancipated view of women and sexuality typical of northern countries and the more archaic Mediterranean view.

How are these themes treated in *The Etruscan*?

What other novels based on these themes have you read?

For Further investigation

Is Harriet a reliable narrator?

Identify the gothic elements in plot, character, structure, setting, and imagery.

See Mirella Billa's study of the gothic, especially the chapters on landscapes and interiors: *Il Gotico Inglese*, Il Mulino Editore, Bologna 1986.

Etruscan Places

Can you find any influence of DH Lawrence's Etruscan Places in this novel?

"The door of the soul"

See also Lawrence's poem *The Ship of Death*

In what ways is the count a parody of Lawrence's masculine ideal?

Compare Harriet to the heroines of *Women in Love* and *The Plumed Serpent*

The New Woman

Harriet as a New Woman AND an American ingénue.

The character of Harriet is a composite inspired by many female characters and real persons of the era. She is an example of the New Woman. Some of the literary influences that contributed to her are Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield (and some the characters from her stories), as well as the American heroines of Henry James. What characteristics in Harriet make her an example of "the New Woman."

How do the male characters reflect patriarchal attitudes?