The Golden Ass

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF APULEIUS

Apuleius is best known today as the author of *The Golden Ass* (also sometimes called the *Metamorphoses*), the only full-length Latin novel from Roman times that has survived into the present. He was born in Numidia, a Roman province in northern Africa, close to where the later writer and theologian Augustine of Hippo would live. Apuleius's father was a magistrate, and this gave him a large inheritance, which allowed him to travel widely throughout his life, including to Carthage, Athens, Rome, Egypt, and Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Some aspects of Apuleius's life, including even his first name, are disputed, but in addition to *The Golden Ass*, he was also well known for giving public speeches and for some of his writings about philosophy, particularly Greeks like Plato and Socrates.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Apuleius lived in the Roman Empire, about a century after the deaths of Julius Caesar and Jesus Christ, but still long before the empire's collapse. At this point in history, the Roman Empire was about as large as it would ever be and also well consolidated, which allowed for relatively easy travel between different provinces (something that Apuleius himself took advantage of and which affects the journey of Lucius in the novel). Though Christianity existed as a religion, it would not become a major force in the Roman Empire until the conversion of the emperor Constantine, a couple centuries after the death of Apuleius. The gods who are worshipped in *The Golden Ass* and who sometimes even appear as characters are largely based on the religious traditions of ancient Greece, although there are notable influences from other parts of the world, particularly Egypt, where the worship of Isis and Osiris originated.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As *The Golden Ass* is the only complete surviving Latin novel from Roman times, some related works did not survive into the present day. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify some of the novel's influences, including *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, both by Homer and both referenced directly in *The Golden Ass*. Another predecessor to Apuleius's work is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, an earlier Latin epic poem that also deals with mythological tales of transformation. *The Golden Ass* was a major influence on Augustine of Hippo, who was also from a Roman province in Northern Africa and whose *Confessions* was a landmark of both religious writing and autobiography. Additionally, *The Golden Ass* is often credited as either an early example of or a predecessor to the picaresque novel. (Other predecessors to the picaresque genre include Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.) The picaresque genre, which involves a comedic hero going on episodic adventures, includes *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Stern, *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackery, and *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Golden Ass
- **When Written:** Late 2nd century
- **Where Written:** Numidia (Northern Africa) in the Roman Empire
- **When Published:** Late 2nd century
- **Literary Period:** Classical Roman
- **Genre:** Picaresque Novel
- **Setting:** The Roman Empire (primarily in Greece)
- **Climax:** Lucius gets a vision from Isis telling him how to turn from a donkey back into a human.
- **Antagonist:** Lucius's own greed and curiosity
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Same Old, Same Old. Though he may not have invented the proverb, Apuleius is the first known writer to record a version of the phrase "familiarity breeds contempt."

Magical Realism. While it might seem like the magical elements in *The Golden Ass* are pure fantasy, there may have been some autobiographical inspiration. Many people in Apuleius's time believed in some form of magic, and Apuleius himself was accused of using magic to win the affection of a wealthy widow. He was forced to defend himself in court, and this may partly explain why the character Lucius ends up working in a legal profession.

PLOT SUMMARY

Lucius, a man originally from the Greek part of the Roman Empire, is on a journey to Thessaly. He says he wants to tell a witty and wonderful story, but apologizes for his own poor Latin (since he grew up speaking Greek). Lucius is very interested in stories and often pauses his own story, either to recount a story he heard somewhere else or to listen to someone else telling a story. For this reason, Lucius's journey

tends to be episodic and full of stories within stories.

In an early encounter with a wayfarer named Aristomenes, Lucius hears a tale of witchcraft. Later, in the town of Hypata, he stays with a friend named Milo, who has a reputation for being a stingy host and whose wife, Pamphile, is rumored to be a witch. While staying at Milo's, Lucius begins to secretly have sex with a maid named Photis.

One time when Lucius is with Photis, they witness Pamphile's witchcraft firsthand. The two of them secretly watch Pamphile using an ointment to turn herself into a bird. Lucius is interested in getting his hands on the ointment, so he persuades Photis to help him. When Lucius tries out the ointment for himself, however, he is surprised to find that instead of turning into a bird, he turns into a **donkey**. Photis advises him that he can turn back into a human if he simply eats some **roses**, and that she'll bring him some roses in the morning. Before she can come back with roses, however, Milo's house is sacked by thieves, and Lucius (in the form of a donkey) is taken back to the thieves' cave.

And so, thus begins Lucius's journey to try to find roses and become human again. Because he is a donkey, people talk freely around him, and Lucius often witnesses or overhears some interesting stories. Perhaps the most elaborate story he hears is the story of Cupid and Psyche. An old hag who works with the thieves who sacked Milo tells the story to a hostage named Charite, perhaps as a way of comforting her. In the story, Psyche undergoes many hardships, partly because her beauty and her curiosity offend the goddess Venus. Ultimately, however, Psyche perseveres, and she is allowed to become immortal and live forever with her husband Cupid. Charite is later rescued by her fiancé, Tlepolemus, who kills all the thieves and sets Lucius off on the next leg of his journey.

Many of the stories Lucius tells or hears have less happy endings and involve unfaithful spouses getting caught in the act. All the while, Lucius is passed from owner to owner, suffering cruel treatment from just about everyone in charge of him, including the priest Philebus, the ass-boy, the baker, and the soldier. Lucius is whipped, overburdened, threatened with death, and at one point almost eaten.

The climax of Lucius's mistreatment comes when he encounters the jealous wife. She has been accused of terrible crimes and so has been condemned to be executed by being torn apart by wild animals. Before the woman is torn apart, she will be forced to publicly have sex with Lucius (who is still a donkey). Lucius, fearing for his own life if the wild animals are unleashed, decides that the only thing to do is flee.

Shortly after Lucius escapes, he has a vision of "the mother of the universe," a deity who ultimately reveals herself as the Egyptian goddess Isis. Isis instructs Lucius in how he can obtain a rose to turn back into a human, and Lucius enthusiastically accepts her help. By following Isis's instructions exactly, Lucius is able to find a rose, eat it, and ultimately be restored to human form.

After saving Lucius, Isis asks for his devotion in return, arguing that it is only fair. Lucius is happy to offer veneration and gets involved with serving the cult of Isis. Later, he is visited by Osiris, the husband of Isis, and Osiris also asks him for his loyalty and service. Lucius enthusiastically agrees. In order to prove his devotion, Lucius shaves his head, moves to Rome, and takes up a legal profession. A loyal member of the cults of Isis and Osiris, Lucius proudly displays his bald head so that everyone will be aware of his devotion.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Lucius – Lucius is the narrator of *The Golden Ass*, although his name isn't revealed until well into the first book of the novel. The title of *The Golden Ass* refers to how Lucius gets turned into a **donkey** (an ass), and much of the book's plot is driven by Lucius's attempts to turn back into a human. Lucius is a resident of the Roman Empire, although because his family is from a Greek area (Thessaly), he is more comfortable speaking Greek than Latin. Lucius is witty and good with words, but he is also sometimes overconfident, and both his curiosity and his greed can get him into trouble. When he sees the witch Pamphile use an ointment to turn into a bird, he can't resist trying to get some of the ointment to use on himself. Instead, however, Lucius ends up being transformed into a donkey. Pamphile's maid, Photis, tells Lucius that he can cure himself if he simply eats from a **rose**, but each time Lucius gets near a rose, some obstacle keeps him from being able to eat it. As a donkey, Lucius endures many hardships and is often treated cruelly by his masters, who make him bear heavy loads and whip him, sometimes even threatening to kill him. His status as a donkey also allows him to overhear the stories of others. Lucius is a collector of stories, and instead of focusing on Lucius's main story, much of *The Golden Ass* is dedicated to stories within stories that Lucius either overhears or retells for the reader. Ultimately, Lucius is saved and turned back into a human through the intervention of the goddess Isis, which inspires Lucius to devote the rest of his life to her and her husband Osiris. On the one hand, Lucius's conversion to the cult of Isis symbolizes the benefits of loyalty and faithfulness, since it is only with Isis's help that he is turned back into a human. On the other hand, Lucius's strange journey represents how humans are subject to the whims of Fate, and while some of his misfortunes are caused by his own flaws, others are simply bad luck.

Psyche – Psyche is the third daughter of a king and queen—one of the most beautiful mortals in all the world and the eventual wife of Cupid. Her story, the longest in the book, is told by the

old hag to Charite, while Lucius is also present. Apollo prophesies that Psyche will marry a snake-like being that will destroy the world. In a ceremony that combines elements of a wedding and a funeral, Psyche's parents take her to a crag, and then she's carried by the West Wind into a valley where she finds a mysterious mansion. A disembodied voice in the mansion claims to be her new husband. Psyche is happy in the mansion, but her scheming sisters convince her to try to find out her husband's identity (which she has been forbidden from doing). Psyche learns that her husband isn't a snake but is in fact the love god Cupid (who was tasked by his mother Venus with finding a pathetic husband for Psyche, but who disobeyed orders). The discovery of Cupid's identity starts a long chain of events that angers Venus, who forces Psyche to complete various seemingly impossible tasks. Ultimately, however, Psyche proves herself, and with the intervention of Jupiter, she is made immortal so that she can live with Cupid in peace. Psyche's story parallels the ups and downs of Lucius's story, foreshadowing the happy ending, but it also shows the consequences of curiosity and greed, as well as what happens when mortals dare to challenge the gods.

Cupid – Cupid is a mischievous love god who is the son of Venus and the eventual husband of Psyche. His story is told by the old hag to Charite, while Lucius is also present. When the beautiful mortal Psyche is born, a jealous Venus orders Cupid to find her someone pathetic to marry. Cupid disobeys orders and marries Psyche himself, concealing his identity. But when Psyche finds out his identity, it causes problems for both of them, and Venus learns how her son disobeyed her. Ultimately, Cupid is allowed to continue living with Psyche, after she is made immortal by Jupiter. As the god of love, Cupid represents both the pleasure of love but also the unpredictability and destruction that can ensue. Despite his story's happy ending, the story also hints at the consequences of what can happen when people are driven by love rather than logic.

Isis – Isis is an Egyptian goddess and the wife of the god Osiris. She appears to Lucius in a dream (while he's still a **donkey**), taking pity on him and telling him how he can acquire **roses** that will allow him to turn back into a man. Isis's vision proves correct, and so in gratitude, Lucius continues to serve Isis. The book ends with Lucius becoming a happy, devout member of the cult of Isis. Despite all the tribulations Lucius goes through over the course of *The Golden Ass*, the happy ending with Isis suggests that loyalty and persistence are sometimes rewarded.

Photis – Photis is the attractive maid who works in the house of Milo and Pamphile. Her hair is particularly striking to the narrator, Lucius. She has sex with Lucius on many occasions, and she is the one who first reveals the secrets of the witch Pamphile and how Pamphile uses ointment to turn herself into a bird. Photis becomes Lucius's accomplice when he steals some of Pamphile's ointment, but when Lucius tries to use the ointment, he accidentally turns himself into a **donkey**. Photis tells Lucius that the only cure for his condition is to eat from a **rose**, but before she can bring him any roses, bandits storm Milo's house. Photis enables Lucius to follow his own curiosity and in the process helps reveal the danger of too much curiosity.

Charite (The Hostage) – Charite is the hostage of the thieves who sack Milo and kidnap Lucius (in **donkey** form). She has a fiancé (later revealed to be Tlepolemus). The thieves intend to keep Charite in order to extort money from her family. The old hag, who works with the thieves, tries to comfort Charite by telling her the story of Cupid and Psyche. Ultimately, Charite is rescued when her fiancé, Tlepolemus, infiltrates the thieves' cave in disguise and kills them. Despite escaping, however, Tlepolemus eventually ends up dead, due to scheming by Thrasyllus. This causes Charite to kill herself on Tlepolemus's sword out of despair. Charite's story symbolizes the whims of Fate, as she finds herself in an unfortunate position, then gets miraculously rescued, only to meet even greater misfortune.

Old Hag – The old hag is an unnamed older woman who works for the thieves who sack Milo and who kidnap Lucius and Charite. The old hag tells the longest story-within-a-story in the entire work: the story of Cupid and Psyche. The story of Cupid and Psyche involves Psyche getting into trouble through her own curiosity, then having to go through a long and arduous series of trials before finally reaching a happy ending. In many ways, the journey that Psyche goes through resembles the journey that Lucius himself goes through, and so the old hag symbolizes the power that stories have and how they can help people better understand their own lives.

The Jealous Wife – The jealous wife is first introduced as an eccentric wealthy woman who wants to have sex with Lucius while he's still a **donkey**. Later, more of her story is revealed, and it turns out that the jealous wife has been condemned to be mauled to death by wild animals because of crimes she committed. In her story, it's revealed that she kills her husband's secret illegitimate sister, believing the sister is actually his mistress. She then procures poison and proceeds to kill her husband, as well as accidentally killing the doctor who obtained the poison in the process. As part of the jealous wife's sentence, Lucius is supposed to have sex with her in public before she is executed. Lucius, however, doesn't want to do this (in part because he's afraid the wild animals will attack him too), and so he runs away before the ceremony can begin. The jealous wife symbolizes how passion and lust can drive a person to act irrationally.

Tlepolemus (Haemus) – Tlepolemus is the cousin and fiancé of Charite. He disguises himself as Haemus in order to infiltrate the lair of the thieves who have kidnapped Charite, then tricks all the thieves into drinking a sedative and kills them. Despite his success over the thieves, however, Tlepolemus is later killed during a supposed hunting accident due to the scheming of Thrasyllus, who wants Charite for himself. Tlepolemus's story

represents the whims of Fate, showing how a capable and righteous character can nevertheless meet a tragic end.

Pamphile – Pamphile is the wife of Milo and the mistress of the maid Photis. It is an open secret that Pamphile is a witch, and one night Lucius witnesses her using an ointment to turn into a bird so that she can approach a potential lover. This is what inspires Lucius himself to try the potion, which is how he gets turned into a **donkey**, an event that drives much of his conflicts for the rest of the novel.

Milo – Milo is a man living in Hypata, who is visited by the narrator Lucius. Milo's wife is the witch Pamphile, who uses an ointment to turn into bird (the same ointment that will later turn Lucius into a **donkey**). As a host, Milo is not particularly generous and doesn't offer Lucius many amenities. Later, his manor is robbed by bandits, and Lucius is blamed, although at that point Lucius is not arrested because he's still in the form of a donkey.

The Pauper's Wife – The pauper's wife is a character in a story that Lucius hears while staying in a hostel with Philebus's group. She is married to a poor artisan, referred to as the pauper. Like many characters in the stories in *The Golden Ass*, the pauper's wife is unfaithful. Unlike some of the other unfaithful characters, however, the pauper's wife experiences no consequences for her actions. When her husband almost catches her with a lover, she has her lover hide in a jar. The pauper's wife and her lover even have sex on top of the jar while the pauper is cleaning it. The story of the pauper's wife shows that Fate is complicated and that disloyal people aren't necessarily punished for their actions.

The Baker – The baker is yet another cruel owner of Lucius (as a **donkey**). He forces Lucius to do mill work. Like many characters, he has an unfaithful partner. The baker tells his spouse, the baker's wife, a story about the fuller and the fuller's wife, where unfaithfulness has dire consequences, particularly for the fuller's wife's lover. Ultimately, the baker catches his own wife cheating and divorces her, but the baker's wife plots revenge and finds a witch, who seems to send the ghost of a murdered woman to visit the baker. Ultimately, the baker ends up dead under circumstances that look like suicide but which seem to involve the ghost that the witch sent to him. The baker embodies the complex relationship between stories and reality in *The Golden Ass*: he tells one story, only to end up as a character in another one. He represents the complex ways that humans, and particularly people in relationships, plot against each other.

Aristomenes (The Wayfarer) – Aristomenes is a traveler who has an unnamed traveling companion and who runs into Lucius on the road. Aristomenes tells one of the first stories-within-a-story in *The Golden Ass*, about an encounter with his friend Socrates and the witch Meroe. The story Aristomenes tells helps set the tone for the whole novel, and it introduces the major role that magic, witchcraft, and trickery will all play throughout.

Socrates – The Socrates who appears as a character in *The Golden Ass* is not the famous Socrates, but simply an old friend of the wayfarer Aristomenes who happens to have the same name as the philosopher. Socrates cheats on his family with an older innkeeper who is secretly the witch Meroe, and when he tries to leave, she curses him, turning him into a zombie-like living dead man. Socrates represents the dangers of both unfaithfulness and of messing with witchcraft, foreshadowing the role witchcraft will play in Lucius's story.

The Baker's Wife – The baker's wife is the unfaithful spouse of the cruel baker who owns Lucius (as a **donkey**). Her cheating is perhaps what inspires the baker to tell her the story of the fuller's wife, which demonstrates a negative outcome for infidelity. Nevertheless, in the story of her and the baker, she gets the last word. Though she is caught cheating and thrown out, the baker's wife gets help from a witch who seems to summon a ghost and coerce the baker into hanging himself.

The Fuller's Wife – The fuller's wife is the wife of a laundry worker (a fuller) and a character in the story that the baker tells his spouse, the baker's wife. Her story bears some similarities to the story of the pauper's wife, except that when the fuller's wife tries to hide her lover, he accidentally dies from exposure to sulfur (which was used for laundry). The story illustrates the potential consequences of infidelity and also provides a way to show how the baker suspects his own wife of infidelity—and perhaps is issuing her a warning.

Thrasyllus – Thrasyllus is a rich but rough-mannered young man who was one of Charite's suitors before she got engaged to Tlepolemus. Thrasyllus still holds a grudge, however, and he conspires to kill Tlepolemus when it will look like a hunting accident. Charite, however, finds out that Thrasyllus murdered Tlepolemus after she's visited by the latter's ghost. She stabs Thrasyllus's eyes out while he's sleeping, then kills herself on Tlepolemus's sword.

Byrrhena – Byrrhena is a woman in Hypata who claims to have acted as a mother figure to Lucius, although he doesn't remember much about her. She frequently offers her hospitality to Lucius, but Lucius is often reluctant to accept it. The interactions between Lucius and Byrrhena show how hospitality can often create obligations, and Lucius's wariness about accepting hospitality shows that he is cautious about wanting to be in anyone's debt, a position that he reverses at the end of the story when he gladly accepts a debt of loyalty to the goddess Isis.

The Fuller – The fuller is a laundry worker whose spouse (the fuller's wife) is cheating on him. They both appear in a story that the baker tells his own unfaithful spouse, the baker's wife. The fuller unexpectedly comes home early while his wife is with her lover. Her lover tries to hide under a wicker cage and ends

up dying of sulfur exposure, highlighting the potential consequences of trying to hide infidelity.

Meroe – Meroe is an old innkeeper who is secretly a witch. She is vengeful, particularly when it comes to sex. When Socrates sleeps with her, then tries to leave, Meroe takes everything he has and curses him to remain in an undead state where he can be killed but still get up and walk around. Meroe foreshadows the role witchcraft will play later in the story, and she is the first of many trickster characters who appear in the stories-within-stories.

Thelyphron – Thelyphron is a man who tells a story at a feast hosted by Byrrhena while Lucius is in attendance, too. He agrees to guard a corpse overnight for a widow, to protect its face from being defiled by witches. At first he appears to be successful, but as it turns out, the witches have mixed him up with the dead man and stolen his own ears and nose, replacing them with wax. Thelyphron is another character who foreshadows the role magic will play in Lucius's story, and his strange misfortune shows how humans are subject to the whims of Fate.

Osiris – Osiris is an Egyptian god and the husband of Isis. After Isis helps Lucius return to human form by finding **roses**, Lucius devotes himself to the cult of Isis. Later, Osiris also appears to Lucius and asks that Lucius pay devotion to him, too. Lucius happily agrees, shaving his head to show his renewed devotion. Lucius goes to Rome to serve both Isis and Osiris by working in a legal profession.

The Widow – The widow comes from a story told by Thelyphron at a feast hosted by Byrrhena. She appears to be mourning her husband and hires Thelyphron to help guard the corpse from witches, but in fact, she murdered her husband to get ahold of his inheritance. The widow is one of many characters who acts deceptively for the sake of her own greed.

The Pauper – The pauper is a poor artisan who falls for the tricks of his unfaithful wife. The pauper's wife manages to conceal a lover by having him hide inside a jar, and the pauper doesn't realize what's happening even after the pauper's wife and her lover begin having sex on the jar while the pauper cleans it.

Philebus – Philebus is one of Lucius's owners (when he's a **donkey**) and part of a group of priests who use religious trappings to disguise their sex work. Like most of Lucius's owners, Philebus treats him cruelly, and at one point, Lucius is nearly eaten. Nevertheless, Lucius survives to be sold off yet again.

The Three Sons – In a story Lucius hears, the three sons help their father, a farmer whose land is threatened by a greedy landlord. During fights with the landlord, one son is killed by attack dogs, and another is killed by a spear. The third son pretends to be injured, before catching the landlord off guard and killing him (though the son himself later slits his throat to avoid being captured). Despite this costly victory, the farmer is ultimately so distraught at losing his sons that he, too, kills himself.

The Farmer – In a story Lucius hears, the farmer has three sons and gets into a dispute with a greedy landlord. Though the landlord is eventually killed, the three sons die in the process, and the farmer kills himself in grief. The farmer and his story represent the tragedy that can come from greed.

The Landlord – The landlord is a greedy figure in a story Lucius overhears who tries to kick a poor farmer off the land. The farmer's three sons intervene, and though the landlord manages to kill two of the sons, he is himself killed by the third, showing that even money has its limits, particularly when someone is blinded by selfishness.

Pythias – Pythias was a school friend of Lucius who happens to run into him in Hypata while he's staying with Milo. Pythias is the first to call Lucius by name, and though the two are happy to see each other, Lucius is less happy when Pythias ruins some fish that Lucius bought in order to make a point to a shopkeeper. The brief appearance of Pythias is comic and helps to establish some of Lucius's background.

Proserpina – Proserpina is a goddess who was abducted and forced to live in the underworld. Her story isn't recounted in *The Golden Ass*, but she plays a role in the story of Cupid and Psyche when Venus tasks Psyche with going to the underworld to obtain some of Proserpina's loveliness. This is supposed to be an impossible task, but Psyche is able to achieve it.

The Stepmother – The stepmother is involved in a terrible crime that Lucius overhears (as a **donkey**) while under the ownership of the soldier. She lusts after her stepson who rejects her. After this rejection, she schemes to get revenge on him, but she accidentally poisons her biological son instead. As it turns out, however, the "poison" she received was only a sedative, so her biological son is still alive. Caught in a crime, the stepmother is exiled.

The Stepson – The stepson is part of the story of a terrible crime that Lucius hears about (as a **donkey**) while under the ownership of the soldier. His stepmother falls in love with him, but he resists, angering her. She tries to poison him, but ends up accidentally poisoning her biological son instead (although in the end, it turns out the "poison" was just a sedative given to her by a doctor who was suspicious of her intentions).

The Biological Son – The biological son is part of the story of a terrible crime that Lucius hears about (as a **donkey**) while under the ownership of the soldier. The biological son is accidentally poisoned by his stepmother (who intended to poison her stepson) and is taken away to a tomb. But as it turns out, the "poison" was only a sedative, and so the biological son wakes up alive at the tomb.

The Two Brothers – The two brothers are both enslaved and work for a rich man. One is a pastry chef and the other is a

cook. When Lucius is a **donkey**, they are arguably his most compassionate owners, feeding him well and just laughing it off when they find that Lucius has been stealing food from them.

Thrasyleon – Thrasyleon is a (deceased) member of the group of thieves who sack Milo and kidnap Lucius (in **donkey** form). One of his companions tells a story about how Thrasyleon tried to rob the gladiator Democharas by dressing up in a bear skin and acting like a bear, but the thieves are caught, and Thrasyleon is killed in the bear suit.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Thiasus – Thiasus is a wealthy freedman who becomes Lucius's owner (when he's a **donkey**) after the enslaver of the two brothers hands Lucius over as a gift. He is Lucius's owner when Lucius gets involved with the jealous wife, and ultimately, Lucius runs away from him.

The Soldier – The soldier is another one of Lucius's many owners while he's a **donkey**. He is cruel and takes Lucius by force rather than buying him, only to sell Lucius to the two brothers later.

Ass-boy – The ass-boy is briefly one of Lucius's masters (while he's still a **donkey**), right after Lucius escapes from the robbers who sacked Milo. The ass-boy treats Lucius cruelly and beats him but is soon mauled by a bear.

Chryseras – Chryseras is a money-changer in Thebes who was a previous target of the same thieves who sack Milo and kidnap Lucius (in **donkey** form). Many noteworthy thieves die during the attempted robbery, including Lamachus and Alcimus.

Lamachus – Lamachus is the deceased leader of the thieves who sack Milo and kidnap Lucius (in **donkey** form). He dies attempting to rob Chryseras, and his death causes the thieves to look for new recruits, which is how Tlepolemus manages to disguise himself as Haemus.

Alcimus – Alcimus is another high-ranking (but deceased) member of the group of thieves who sack Milo and kidnap Lucius (in **donkey** form). He dies before those events happen, during a botched robbery in Thebes.

Democharas – Democharas is a gladiator who becomes a target for thieves. During a botched robbery attempt on Democharas's manor, Thrasyleon dresses up as a bear and gets killed while still wearing the bear's skin.

Ceres – Ceres is the goddess of agriculture. She plays a minor role in the story of Cupid and Psyche, helping Psyche fulfill one of Venus's tasks, but she doesn't help too much, out of fear of offending Venus.

Jupiter – Jupiter is king of the gods. He appears primarily in the story of Cupid and Psyche, where he decides to make Psyche immortal in order to pacify Venus by giving her son a suitable match.

Juno – Juno is queen of the gods. She plays a minor role in the story of Cupid and Psyche, wanting to aid Psyche but afraid to go too far out of fear of offending Venus.

Apollo – Apollo is the god of the sun and prophecy. He plays a minor role in the story of Cupid and Psyche when he offers the prophecy that Psyche will marry an inhuman snake creature that will destroy the world.

Mercury – Mercury is the messenger god. In the story of Cupid and Psyche, he helps Venus issue a proclamation to help track down Psyche.

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.

THE POWER OF STORIES

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* is that it contains several self-contained stories nested within the main story of Lucius and his quest to transform from a **donkey** back into a human. These nested stories-within-the-story (sometimes called "inset tales") often help illuminate part of the main plot, and—in some cases—they even contain their own nested stories. The tone and content of the inset tales varies greatly, ranging from the tragic to the comic, and while some are grounded and natural, others feature extensive coincidences or supernatural elements. Ultimately, the variety of stories contained within *The Golden Ass* testifies to the wide variety of reasons for storytelling. Stories can entertain, inform, trick, act as an allegory, or act as an argument, and throughout *The Golden Ass*, they do all of the above.

Stories are important to the characters in the book. Even in unexpected moments, the characters find themselves telling long, elaborate tales, which perhaps suggests just how interested they are in trying to make sense of their lives and the world they live in. At one point in the story, for example, the baker tells his spouse, the baker's wife, a story about an unfaithful woman (the fuller's wife) who tries to conceal a lover when her husband comes home early. Instead, however, the fuller's wife ends up accidentally killing her lover. Though the baker doesn't say so directly, this story implies that he knows his own wife is unfaithful and perhaps that he is even threatening that things could end badly for her and her lover. While entertaining the audience, this story is also a means by which the baker confronts his wife's betrayal. By showing how characters like the baker navigate their world through stories, Apuleius argues that stories have the power to communicate

beliefs and illuminate truths more effectively than other forms of speech.

FAITHFULNESS AND LOYALTY

Many of the tales within Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* deal with romantic and sexual relationships, and in particular with characters who go to great lengths to try to hide their infidelity. A different but related issue is the relationship between mortals and the gods, where mortals are often asked to offer proof of their faithfulness. From the baker's wife to Psyche to the fuller's wife, one thing is clear: in both romantic relationships and religious ones, humans frequently can't be trusted to uphold their promises of faithfulness.

At the same time, the stories take a nuanced approach to the advantages and disadvantages of faithfulness. While many characters eventually face the consequences of their actions, some, like Arete and Philesitherus, face few or no consequences for their lack of faithfulness. Philesitherus is nearly caught in the act of having sex with Arete (the wife of Barbarus) by Barbarus himself and is only saved through the intervention of an enslaved man named Myrmex. Nevertheless, in the end, Philesitherus tricks Barbarus, feigning innocence when he sees Barbarus in the forum and even accusing his collaborator Myrmex of being a liar. Philesitherus displays no loyalty either in marriage or in friendship, and yet he survives without punishment, while on the other hand, in a different part of the book, the loyal fiancé Tlepolemus is assassinated by the jealous would-be lover of his wife Charite. This raises the question of what loyalty is worth.

Arguably, the final book of *The Golden Ass* does emphasize the benefits of loyalty. After suffering for many years, Lucius is finally saved from being a **donkey** by his new religious devotion to the gods Isis and Osiris. The gods directly recognize his efforts and reward him for them. Nevertheless, this theme is complicated by earlier events in the story, where innocent and loyal characters sometimes face gruesome deaths, suggesting that faith, good intentions, and honesty aren't always rewarded in life, which can be harsh and unfair.

IDENTITY, TRANSFORMATION, AND CURIOSITY

The frame story of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* is about Lucius, who through his own curiosity gets turned into a **donkey** and must find a way to transform back into a human by eating from a **rose**. Within this story, there are several episodes and inset stories that also involve transformations and changes in identity, sometimes literally (as in the case of the witch Pamphile, who can turn into a bird) and sometimes figuratively (such as when Tlepolemus pretends to be a great thief named Haemus in order to save his fiancée Charite). These episodes raise the question of what identity is and how it can change. In perhaps the most famous story in the book, Psyche is informed that she must not try to discover the identity of her new husband. When she succumbs to her own curiosity and learns that her mysterious husband is in fact the god Cupid, it enrages Venus and almost gets Psyche killed. The episode illustrates how powerful the urge to learn someone's identity can be, and yet all the transformations and concealments of identity throughout the story make identity a complicated topic. For both Lucius and Psyche, their curiosity about identity almost leads to their downfall. While Psyche is ultimately allowed to marry Cupid and Lucius is ultimately restored to his human form, they both experience many hardships along the way. Apuleius uses stories like theirs to argue that there are potential hazards associated with indulging one's curiosity, particularly when it involves discovering someone's true identity.

CONSEQUENCES OF GREED

Many of the stories in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* illustrate how greed often has consequences and can lead people to make bad decisions. The central conflict of the story—Lucius's transformation into a **donkey**—is arguably caused by his greed to experiment with the witch Pamphile's ointments and take some of her power as his own. Others face similar and even more direct consequences for greed, such as the thieves who rob Milo, only to be slaughtered themselves by Tlepolemus after they get too greedy and attempt a kidnapping—and Tlepolemus himself is later killed after claiming Milo's goods from the thieves.

In fact, much of what Lucius suffers as a donkey is due to other people's greed. He is whipped, burdened with heavy loads, and made to do arduous work, all so that others can attempt to increase their own wealth. In the final book, Lucius learns from his suffering and puts aside his own interests in order to better serve the interests of the gods Isis and Osiris, suggesting that it's possible for selfish individuals to renounce their old ways and embrace more selfless, meaningful lifestyles. Although many of the characters in *The Golden Ass* face terrible fates as a result of their lack of generosity, then, Lucius's journey shows that there are still opportunities in life for greedy people to change for the better.

SYMBOLS

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

DONKEY

The donkey represents the consequences of greed and curiosity. The protagonist and narrator Lucius

gets turned into a donkey after he tries to steal a magic transformation ointment from the witch Pamphile. Donkeys traditionally are not considered to be clever animals, and so Lucius's time as a donkey suggests he is living in ignorance—as well as perhaps being punished for his foolishness in seeking Pamphile's ointment in the first place. Notably, donkeys are also frequently associated with hard work, and while he is a donkey, Lucius is often forced to carry heavy loads, perform arduous chores, and even accept beatings. Though Lucius is not an exceptionally wealthy man, as a human he enjoyed some privileges as a free citizen, and being turned into a donkey forces him to experience life as someone at the very bottom of society. With the exception of the two brothers (who are enslaved), most of Lucius's owners treat him cruelly, illustrating how people with low social standing often get taken advantage of. Ultimately, Lucius's transformation from a donkey back into a man (by eating from a **rose**) suggests that he has suffered enough from greed and curiosity and learned from his experience as a donkey. The wisdom of Isis (who appears to Lucius in a vision) has both literally and figuratively helped Lucius regain his humanity.

ROSES

Roses represent comfort, knowledge, and beauty—the opposite of life as a **donkey**. After Lucius gets turned into a donkey by the ointment of the witch Pamphile, the maid Photis advises him that the only cure for his condition is to eat from a rose. Though Lucius suffers many hardships as a donkey, then, roses are the hope that keeps him going. At a couple points in his journey, Lucius comes tantalizingly close to eating a rose, but he is stopped at the last minute. In one case, he comes across a plant that looks like a rose, only to realize just in time that in fact it's just a poisonous lookalike—suggesting that the world contains counterfeit beauty, and one must persevere in order to find the real thing. Lucius, like many of the characters in *The Golden Ass*, is sometimes even tempted by suicide, but it is the promise of eventually getting to eat a rose that keeps him going for just a little bit longer. Ultimately, Lucius is able to eat a rose and turn back into a human with the help of the goddess Isis. In this case, the rose represents the rewards of loyalty to the gods. Such rewards have costs, however: in exchange for finally getting turned back into a human, Lucius must devote his life to the cult of Isis, as well as to the cult of her husband, the god Osiris. In spite of the difficulties, however, Lucius gladly accepts this responsibility, showing how the rewards of loyalty to the gods—symbolized by the beauty and comfort of roses—outweigh the burden of devotion.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Yale University Press edition of *The Golden Ass* published in 2013.

Book 1 Quotes

❝ Okay, let me weave together various sorts of tales, using the Milesian mode as a loom, if you will. Witty and dulcet tones are going to stroke your too-kind ears—as long as you don't turn a spurning nose up at an Egyptian papyrus scrawled over with an acute pen from the Nile. I'll make you wonder at human forms and fortunes transfigured, torn apart but then mended back into their original state.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Isis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the very beginning of the story. In it the narrator (whose name is later revealed to be Lucius) introduces himself and describes the sort of story he intends to tell. The opening establishes that Lucius will not just be a passive narrator but in fact an active participant in the story with his own clearly defined perspective. At the same time, however, Lucius's interest in stories means that he does sometimes recede into the background, particularly when other characters are in the middle of telling long stories.

Perhaps the most important part of this introduction is the reference to "human forms and fortunes transfigured." Throughout *The Golden Ass*, many characters undergo metaphorical and, in some cases, even literal transformations. Sometimes they disguise their identity or hide information, or in the case of Lucius, sometimes they literally transform into a wild animal. Lucius connects these transformations to changes in fortune, illustrating how these changes in appearance are often physical manifestations of changes in luck. Additionally, the references to Egyptian papyrus and the Nile foreshadow the role that Egyptian gods and goddesses like Isis will play in the story, although this element is not fully revealed until the very last book.

> First of all, I swear to you solemnly by this Sun above, a god who sees everything, that the story I'm telling is true—and I ought to know. To do away with any doubts you may still have, when you come to the nearest town, which is where these events took place—and they took place out in public—you'll find them under general discussion.

Related Characters: Aristomenes (The Wayfarer) (speaker), Lucius, Socrates, Meroe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is delivered by a wayfarer (whose name is later revealed as Aristomenes), one of the first characters that the narrator Lucius meets on his journey and the first character to tell a story-within-a-story. Like many storytellers in *The Golden Ass*, Aristomenes is concerned about how his audience will react, and he wants to tell his story in a way that will be compelling and convincing. This proves difficult because his story involves an innkeeper named Meroe who curses a man named Socrates to be able to rise from the dead.

While these fantastical elements might seem to give credence to the idea that Aristomenes is making up or at least exaggerating his story, in fact, later events make it clear that magic is very much a part of the world that Lucius lives in. As the first story in the book, the story of Aristomenes foreshadows many of the things that come after it, in particular the role that witchcraft and lust will play in motivating characters.

> My dinner had consisted entirely of my own reports, so I was weighed down by weariness, not food, as I returned to my bedroom and surrendered to the repose I yearned for.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Milo, Byrrhena

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

This quote from near the end of Book 1 describes Lucius's experience of staying with Milo. Milo is a poor host who doesn't offer Lucius much in the way of hospitality (when Lucius says his dinner was entirely his "own reports," he means that all he did was talk and that Milo didn't offer him any food). The meager hospitality of Milo contrasts with the overeager hospitality of Byrrhena, who seems to make Lucius uncomfortable with how aggressively she offers him things. The contrast between these two characters illustrates both extremes of how hospitality can go wrong.

Later, Milo receives a sort of punishment for his bad hospitality when he is robbed by thieves. Lucius, meanwhile, perhaps gets some new perspective on hospitality after he finds himself transformed into a donkey and forced to endure hospitality far worse than what Milo offered him. Throughout *The Golden Ass*, the level of hospitality that characters offer to guests often says something important about their deeper personality, revealing selfishness or generosity.

Book 2 Quotes

> Well, I was a curious person. The moment I heard the word witchcraft, representing my lifelong aspiration, I shrugged off any need to play it safe with Pamphile.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Pamphile, Milo, Photis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, from the middle of Book 2, highlights Lucius's curious personality, particularly when it comes to witchcraft. In *The Golden Ass*, curiosity is often portrayed in a negative light, since it is often connected to (or perhaps just a disguise for) greed. Lucius has been clearly warned by Photis about the dangers of messing with Pamphile's witchcraft. The situation is particularly precarious because Lucius is staying in the same house as Pamphile, with her husband Milo. Nevertheless, Lucius continues to be tempted by Pamphile. Perhaps it is the promise of power that speaks the most strongly to Lucius's greed. Ironically, then, Lucius's attempts to claim the power of a witch like Pamphile actually end up having the opposite effect, turning him into a donkey who is powerless against his cruel owners. This passage effectively highlights the potential dangers of curiosity and demonstrates what happens when people refuse to heed warnings and give in to temptation.

"It's true what you say," I replied. "I don't think I've felt freer anywhere else in the world. But I'm really scared of the black-magic profession lurking in obscure holes here—there would be no chance of spotting the places, and then no chance of getting away."

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Byrrhena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is from near the end of Book 2, in a conversation that Lucius is having with Byrrhena. It continues with the theme of magic and helps establish that magic is not just something that occurs in stories, but is in fact a fundamental part of the real world that Lucius lives in. Though up until this point magic has primarily been an element only in the stories told to Lucius, this passage foreshadows how magic will soon become a driving force in his very own story.

As with the previous passage, this one helps establish how Lucius's curiosity has a negative impact on his decision-making. Lucius can clearly see the bad omens around him, and he realizes that he should escape before magic traps him. Nevertheless, he says he feels free, even as he acknowledges the power of the dark magic around him. His refusal to escape even after being warned of the dangers of the black magic shows his lack of judgment and suggests that those who don't listen to clear warnings deserve the fates they get.

Book 3 Quotes

Dawn, her rose-colored arm shaking the reins over horses decked out in scarlet medallions, had just launched her chariot into the sky when Night ripped me from peaceful sleep and turned me over to Day.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, from the beginning of Book 3, recalls a famous motif in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where dawn is frequently referred to as rosy. On the one hand, the comparison of dawn to a flower like a rose suggests how each day brings something fresh, since flowers are associated with new life. On the other hand, however, there is an even more specific connection between roses and Lucius's story that will become apparent later on. After Lucius gets turned into a donkey, the only way for him to return to human form is to eat a rose. Perhaps eating a rose could be viewed as the equivalent of waking up from a dream. When Lucius is in donkey form, he is asleep and ignorant, but when he eats a rose (which is the same color as dawn), he wakes up and is enlightened as a result of everything he endured as a donkey. Thus this brief passage about dawn foreshadows many of the events that come after it.

Helplessly surveying this new body, I saw I was not a bird but a donkey. I wanted to complain to Photis, but human voice and gesture had been taken from me.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Pamphile, Photis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes right after Lucius has applied the ointment of Pamphile, believing it will turn him into a bird (as it does for her), but finding out too late that it turns him into a donkey instead. Being turned into a donkey immediately causes Lucius to lose some of his agency: he can no longer talk or act like a human would. This places Lucius in a position where he is frequently helpless and at the mercy of the various humans who lay claim to him over the course of the book.

Lucius has succumbed to his own curiosity, and perhaps even greed, by not leaving well enough alone and by seeking out the power of the witch Pamphile. Nevertheless Photis lets Lucius know that the transformation isn't permanent, and he can turn back into a human by eating from a rose. As with Odysseus's quest to return home in Homer's *Odyssey*, this seemingly simple task ends up being surprisingly complicated, full of multiple episodes and adventures.

Book 4 Quotes

These, with their abundant leaves, look like laurels, and they produce, in the semblance of scented roses, oblong little cups, not quite up to scarlet in hue; they have no scent whatsoever, but in rustic parlance the untaught common people call them laurel roses. As food, these flowers are lethal to every kind of beast.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from near the beginning of Book 4, when Lucius thinks his time as a donkey is nearly over, only to find out that the rose he was about to eat is in fact a poisonous plant. The poisonous "laurel rose" is just one of many things in *The Golden Ass* that appears to be one thing on the surface but turns out to be something much more sinister underneath. Though Lucius realizes what the flower actually is, at one point he considers eating it anyway, showing how low he has fallen by this point in the story.

Many of the stories in *The Golden Ass* hinge on deception and trickery, and often these deceptions are performed by people close to the victim, such as spouses, parents, and friends. The laurel rose symbolizes how even outwardly beautiful and helpful things might disguise more dangerous intentions, and it also suggests that Lucius is wrong to believe his journey is almost over—in fact, it's really just beginning.

In a certain city there lived a king and queen who had daughters three in number and illustrious in beauty. Though the two born first were quite gratifying enough to look at, praise and publicity on a mortal scale were held to be adequate for them. But the youngest girl's gorgeousness was so extraordinary, so remarkable that the poverty of human speech prevented any proper description or even encomium.

Related Characters: Old Hag (speaker), Psyche, Cupid, Milo, Lucius, Charite (The Hostage)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from the beginning of the story of Cupid and Psyche, which is told by the old hag (an associate of the thieves who rob Milo). The audience for the story is a hostage of the thieves (whose name is later revealed to be Charite), and since Lucius is still in the form of a donkey, he is also able to overhear the story. Of all the stories within the main story that appear within *The Golden Ass*, the story of Cupid and Psyche is perhaps the most famous and the most important (as well as being the longest, spanning part of three different books).

The beginning of the story focuses on Psyche and how she was born with such incredible beauty. While this beauty would seem to be a gift to her and her family, in fact, it quickly becomes a curse, drawing negative attention from the goddess of love herself, Venus. Praise for Psyche becomes so great that it actually takes praise away from Venus (or at least this is what the jealous goddess Venus believes). The beginning of the story shows the dangers of having too much of a good thing, and how this can lead to problems even for people who have done nothing to deserve them.

Book 5 Quotes

But the instant the lamp elucidated the secrets of the bed to which she brought it, she saw the sweetest beast, the gentlest wild thing in the world, Cupid himself, that gorgeous god, at gorgeous rest.

Related Characters: Old Hag (speaker), Cupid, Psyche

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

This passage continues a story told by the old hag and describes the moment when Psyche, at the urging of her scheming sisters, uses tricks to find out the identity of her husband (which has been hidden from her for the entire time she's been married). While Psyche had been led by her sisters to believe that perhaps she is married to a monster whose kindness is only a way to disguise his plan of eventually eating her, in fact it turns out that she's married to the gorgeous love god Cupid. At that moment, she realizes that she has been betrayed by her sisters and that,

as a result, this has caused her to betray the trust of her husband as well. The moral of the story, then, is that Psyche should have remained faithful to the wishes of her husband, but instead, she was led astray by her own curiosity.

> But from the time you were a toddler, you weren't properly socialized.

Related Characters: Old Hag, Cupid, Psyche

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

This passage (which occurs in the middle of the story of Cupid and Psyche, told by the old hag) is a quote from Venus directed at her son Cupid. On a character level, it establishes that Cupid acts irrationally and often without proper respect for authority. On a symbolic level, it has many implications for the concept of love, since as the god of love, Cupid embodies both what is good about love and what is bad. The idea that Cupid the character is not properly socialized suggests that love itself often doesn't pay attention to proper social conventions.

This is not necessarily an excuse for characters who chose to follow their lust: many of them still receive punishments that seem to suggest how excessive desire can have negative consequences. Nevertheless, the wildness and unsociability of Cupid helps provide some context for why love makes characters act in such strange ways, adding depth and perhaps even sympathy to lustful characters, even as they continue to make destructive decisions.

Book 6 Quotes

> Believe me, I'm moved by your tearful pleas, and I'd like to be of service, but I can't fall out with my kinswoman.

Related Characters: Ceres (speaker), Cupid, Psyche

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs in the story of Cupid and Psyche (as told by the old hag), is spoken from Ceres to Psyche. Psyche has just asked for help from the goddess of agriculture, Ceres, hoping that perhaps Ceres can mend the rift between her and Venus (who feels that, as a mortal, Psyche is not a suitable partner for her son Cupid). While Ceres is sympathetic to Psyche's cause, she nevertheless refuses to help because she is afraid of potentially offending Venus. This passage helps establish how the relationships between the gods are complicated, and how they get tangled up in feuds and political maneuvering, just as mortal humans do. On a more metaphorical level, this bickering among the gods suggests that the will of the gods is on some level unknowable to humans, which might explain why even people who appear to be faithful nevertheless seem to be abandoned by the gods sometimes.

> My daughter, no more moping from you. Have no anxiety for your family tree, sky-high as it is, or for your own prestige because of this marriage with a mortal.

Related Characters: Jupiter (speaker), Cupid, Psyche

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which occurs in the story of Cupid and Psyche (as told by the old hag), is spoken by Jupiter, the king of the gods, to the love goddess Venus. The other gods and goddesses have tread carefully on the issue of Cupid and Psyche to avoid offending Venus. Venus doesn't approve of the marriage between Cupid and Psyche; ironically, when Cupid was tasked with making Psyche desire an unsuitable person, he ended up getting into a marriage with someone his mother considers beneath him. Jupiter makes use of his authority as king of the gods to try to find a suitable compromise that will please all parties involved. His solution is that, if Psyche is a poor match for Cupid in her current form, then he will simply make Psyche immortal so that she can become a more suitable match. Though the story of Cupid and Psyche at times questions conventional ideas about marriage, in the end it reinforces the idea that a lasting marriage should be between social equals.

Book 7 Quotes

But *she!* As soon as she saw the young man and heard mention of a brothel and a pimp, she started to laugh and wiggle ecstatically, so I felt justified in condemning the entire sex… At that moment, the character of all women, as a class, was subject to a donkey's censure.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Charite (The Hostage), Tlepolemus (Haemus)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a moment when Lucius overhears the hostage (Charite) talking with a new leader of the thieves named Haemus. Haemus talks about selling Charite to a brothel, and Charite seems strangely excited by this idea. What Lucius doesn't realize is that Haemus is actually just a disguise for Tlepolemus, the cousin and fiancé of Charite. In his ignorance, Lucius goes too far in his condemnation, in that he blames not only Charite for being lustful but *all* women—a rather extreme position. Ultimately, the passage reveals one of the many ways that Lucius is an unreliable narrator, since he often takes what he sees and hears at face value, when in fact there is much more going on beneath the surface. Despite Lucius's openness about sex earlier, here he becomes more prudish, further showing the ways in which he is not just a passive narrator but a complicated character in his own right.

But with lamentable dispatch, Fortune (you know her by now), who was inflexible in persecuting me, headed off such a convenient dodge and set up a new ambush for me.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Ass-boy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

This section explains how, after Lucius escaped from the thieves, he thought he was free, but instead he found himself under the command of yet another cruel owner: the ass-boy. Lucius invokes Fortune, suggesting that the cruel treatment he receives is the result of bad luck. Whether this is true or not is debatable: while certain aspects of Lucius's situation are undoubtedly due to bad luck, the whole reason that Lucius was turned into a donkey was because of his own greed and curiosity.

Regardless, however, what is certainly true is that Fortune plays a role in the lives of all the characters in *The Golden Ass*, which means that good characters are not always rewarded and bad characters are not always punished—in fact, sometimes just the opposite occurs. Fortune provides a convenient way of personifying the role that luck plays in these stories, giving a concrete form to an idea that might otherwise be too abstract to understand.

Book 8 Quotes

Leave off your troublesome weeping and your wailing so alien to my brave deeds. I have taken revenge on the gore-caked annihilator of my husband.

Related Characters: Charite (The Hostage) (speaker), Thrasyllus, Tlepolemus (Haemus)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which comes from a story relayed by one of Charite's former enslaved workers, is spoken by Charite after she stabs out the eyes of Thrasyllus. The entire story of Charite, Tlepolemus, and Thrasyllus is tragic, providing a strange ending to a story that previously seemed to have ended happily. Though Tlepolemus uses his cunning to rescue Charite from the thieves, this happy ending is cut short when the jealous, scheming Thrasyllus finds a way to murder Tlepolemus on a hunting expedition so that he can claim Charite as his own. Thrasyllus's plan backfires, however, when he underestimates Charite, giving her the opportunity to punish him by stabbing his eyes out. In addition to being a brutal punishment, the eye-stabbing is also fitting, since it was Thrasyllus's eyes that caused him to desire Charite and murder Tlepolemus in jealousy. Charite's speech suggests that justice has been carried out, though overall, the bloody nature of her story undercuts any potential triumph in its ending.

Here, I remember, the greatest peril to my life was played out.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

This scene describes the moment when Lucius nearly gets eaten. A cook has prepared a different cut of meat, but when it is stolen by a wild animal, Lucius (as a donkey) is offered as the best replacement to eat. By establishing this moment as the one when he is at his greatest peril, Lucius paradoxically sets up how his fortune will actually improve in some ways over the course of the next few books, since he has already hit rock bottom.

At this point, Lucius's life is held in such low regard that he is literally treated as potential food. This could be read as a satire of how lower-class people in society were treated like animals and metaphorically "eaten" by richer people. By being trapped in the form of a donkey, Lucius is forced to empathize with the lowly and the powerless in a way that he did not back when he was still in his human form.

Book 9 Quotes

❝ At last, both tasks were completed, and the workman, beset by all misfortunes, had to carry the jar all the way to where the man who cuckolded him was staying.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), The Pauper, The Pauper's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a story Lucius hears about a poor artisan (sometimes referred to as "the pauper") who has a scheming, unfaithful wife. But while some stories in *The Golden Ass* seem to suggest that unfaithful spouses deserve punishment for their actions, this story actually seems to celebrate the ingenuity of the pauper's wife. When she is nearly caught in the act of sleeping with a lover, she crafts a clever lie, pretending that her lover is actually just there to conduct some legitimate business. The pauper is portrayed as a clueless bumbler and so his inability to catch his wife in the act is played more for humor than for sympathy. The story ends with an unqualified victory for the pauper's wife, and the pauper himself totally clueless, suggesting that unfaithfulness doesn't always have consequences, and in fact might even be worth celebrating in some cases. This view is both confirmed and challenged by the related stories about infidelity that follow it in Book 9.

❝ As the baker reviewed these indignities, his spouse, for whom insouciant arrogance was by this time second nature, called down curses on the fuller's wife in the most hateful terms.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), The Baker, The Baker's Wife, The Fuller, The Fuller's Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

This story describes the baker's wife's reaction after the baker has just finished telling her a story about the fuller's wife. In that story, the fuller's wife thinks she's clever for deceiving her husband, but in fact, her deceptions are poorly thought out, and ultimately, she ends up accidentally killing her lover. It seems clear that the baker told this story to his wife as a kind of threat, since she herself has been unfaithful to him. The baker's wife doesn't acknowledge this, however, keeping up her own deception by pretending to despise the baker's wife as much as the baker does (in order to hide her own infidelity). This passage highlights the complex relationships between all the stories in *The Golden Ass*, as well as showing how stories can have a direct impact on the lives of those who hear and tell them.

❝ But the rich man's mind was completely gone. He wasn't the least bit intimidated, or even distracted, by the presence of so many fellow citizens.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), The Landlord, The Farmer, The Three Sons

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which comes from the story of the oppressive

landlord, describes the landlord's mindset as he contemplates attempting to steal land from a poor farmer. Rather than feeling shame or even discouragement at how his fellow citizens are opposing him, he simply doubles down on his own greedy impulses by attempting to forcefully take what he wants, even if this means unleashing dogs to kill innocent people. The landlord is yet another example of how greed can motivate people to do monstrous things and how people in power often abuse their authority without any consideration of how their actions will affect the people around them. Though the story of the oppressive landlord ultimately ends with the landlord suffering a fitting death, undone by his own arrogance, arguably the whole story is so bloody that it undercuts any poetic justice, and the outcome is primarily just tragic.

Book 10 Quotes

❝ The slaves were brothers, and their master was quite a rich man. One of them was a pastry chef, who stylized breads and honeyed edibles; the other was a cook who flavored chunks of meat with succulent rubs and juices and tenderized them over the fire.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), The Soldier, The Two Brothers, Ass-boy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes two of Lucius's most generous owners, who have both been enslaved by a rich man. After Lucius's time with the cruel soldier, who seized Lucius (in donkey form) by force, the brothers are unexpectedly gracious to Lucius. They feed him well, and when they catch him stealing large amounts of human food, they just laugh and encourage him rather than punishing him.

The implication is that because the two brothers themselves know what it is like to toil under the supervision of a rich man, they better understand Lucius's situation and have more sympathy for him. Not all lower-class characters treat Lucius well: for example, the lowly ass-boy was one of Lucius's cruelest owners. Nevertheless, the kindness of the two brothers seems to be related to their relatively humble living situation. This passage establishes that hospitality does not necessarily have anything to do with how rich a person is, but rather reflects what people do with what they've been given.

❝ But these fine—in fact excellent—arrangements, made with the purest intentions, couldn't hide from Fortune, whose will was death. She prodded cruel Jealousy to head straight for the young man's house.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), The Jealous Wife

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes from a story that Lucius hears about a nameless woman who is sometimes referred to as the jealous wife. While other parts of *The Golden Ass* have discussed the role of Fortune at length, this passage offers one of the bluntest messages about Fortune in the whole book: sometimes Fortune wants death and there's nothing anyone can do about it. This passage, then, conveys the potential cruelty and randomness of life.

Nevertheless, the events of the story Lucius hears are not entirely random. The events only occur because the jealous wife is so suspicious of any potential threat that she vastly misreads the situation, assuming that her husband's secret sister is in fact a mistress. In this way, then, the passage highlights how the mysterious workings of Fortune can nevertheless be aided or carried out through humans with flawed judgment. Though Jealousy is portrayed here as a force sent by Fortune, it is ultimately just a part of the jealous wife's personality.

❝ No one believed that such a tame ass needed any special supervision, so with slow, shifty steps I moved gradually away, got to the nearest gateway, and tore out of there at a full gallop.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), The Jealous Wife

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes a pivotal moment from the end of Book 10 when Lucius (still a donkey) decides that rather than have public sex with the jealous wife, as he is scheduled to do as part of her execution ceremony, he will instead make a break for freedom. Perhaps after hearing and learning so many stories about deception, Lucius himself has learned how to practice deception for himself. Unlike previous escape attempts, when Lucius ran wildly, here Lucius makes a more measured, calculated escape attempt. He understands that the key to a good deception is to avoid even the appearance of bad intentions, and so he moves slowly and cautiously until he is sure he can get away.

Lucius's successful escape attempt suggests that he has finally suffered enough for his curiosity and greed. It also perhaps suggests that he has learned something from his time as a donkey and particularly from his previous failed escape attempts. Ultimately, Lucius's escape shows how a desperate situation can sometimes inspire quick thinking and ingenuity.

Book 11 Quotes

❝ Lo, I come to your aid, Lucius, moved by your pleas—I, the mother of the universe, queen of all the elements, the original off-spring of eternity, loftiest of the gods, queen of the shades, foremost of the heavenly beings, single form of gods and goddesses alike.

Related Characters: Isis (speaker), Lucius, Osiris

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, from near the beginning of the final book, comes when Lucius is greeted by a vision of a goddess who calls herself the "mother of the universe" before finally revealing her identity as Isis. The appearance of this Egyptian goddess may seem sudden, but in fact, it brings things full circle: At the very beginning of *The Golden Ass*, Lucius talked about "Egyptian papyrus" and the Nile, foreshadowing what would happen in the final book.

Isis instructs Lucius on where to find a rose and ultimately how to restore himself to human form. In exchange, however, she asks for his devotion for the rest of his life. Perhaps having learned from his time as a donkey, Lucius accepts this offer gratefully and does not try to question or change it. When Isis's husband Osiris makes a similar demand, Lucius simply steps up his worship to include both of them. In this way, Lucius's transformation back into human form can also be read as something like a religious conversion, and Lucius's dedication to his new religion reflects the zeal that many new converts feel.

❝ Soon, shaved to the skin again, I went joyfully about the duties of this venerable priesthood, founded in the time of Sulla. I did not cloak or conceal my baldness, wherever I went and whomever I met.

Related Characters: Lucius (speaker), Isis , Osiris

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the very end of *The Golden Ass*. In it, Lucius celebrates shaving his head and moving to Rome to practice law—all actions that he has done in order to prove his loyalty to Isis and Osiris. Though these Egyptian gods demand big changes to Lucius's life, he remains happy to make these changes, forever grateful for how Isis helped him transform from a donkey back into a human by leading him to some roses.

Lucius's happy ending seems to suggest that loyalty to the gods is rewarded and that suffering, like what Lucius endured as a donkey, is ultimately just an obstacle on the way to greater happiness. This optimistic reading, however, is challenged by earlier passages in the story, which present Fortune as whimsical and even cruel, raising the possibility that Lucius's happiness might not be as permanent as it seems. Nevertheless, the decision to end the book with Lucius's happiness seems to suggest that, at least for some faithful people who are able to resist their own greed and curiosity, there remains the possibility of a deeper happiness.

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.

BOOK 1

The narrator says that he is going to tell a witty and wonderful story. He introduces himself as someone with Greek ancestors who grew up speaking and reading Greek but who learned Latin while living in a Roman city. He announces that the story he's about to tell is based on a Greek original and asks for forgiveness if he tells the story wrong, since he is still an amateur at speaking Latin.

The beginning of the book foregrounds the role that storytelling will play by introducing the narrator character, who is himself fond of stories and eager to tell them well. Notably, his name isn't revealed until later in the book. The narrator's origin in Greece (which was then part of the Roman Empire) could reflect how the book's author, Apuleius, was interested in Greek literature and philosophy. While the author doesn't specify the time period for The Golden Ass, *it was written in the 2nd century C.E. (when the Roman Empire was at its largest point) and set not too long before the time it was written.*

The narrator says that he is going to Thessaly, a region of Greece, on business. The narrator's family is from Thessaly, and so is the famous writer and philosopher Plutarch. As the narrator rides, his white horse gets tired, so the narrator gets off and walks beside the horse. He runs into two wayfarers who seem to be having a friendly argument. The narrator asks them to share what they're talking about. The one wayfarer claims that his companion's story is total nonsense. They argue more, and eventually the other wayfarer agrees to tell his story for the narrator.

The reference to Plutarch once again reflects how the author, Apuleius, is interested in Greek writers and how they influenced The Golden Ass. *Like the narrator of the story, the two wayfarers also are not named when they are first introduced. Because identity in* The Golden Ass *is often hidden—or even capable of being transformed—the same characters are often referred to by a variety of different names.*

Beginning his story, the one wayfarer says that he travels all around Greece selling honey, cheese, and other goods for taverns. He hears a tip that in Hypata, a major town in Thessaly, a very fine cheese is being sold at a good price, so he travels there. But when he gets there, the cheese has already been bought up.

The story that the wayfarer tells is the first of many stories-within-a-story that appear in The Golden Ass *(sometimes referred to as "inset tales"). The stories-within-a-story all serve different purposes and they give* The Golden Ass *a unique episodic structure that went on to be a major influence on other episodic works that followed it, such as* The Canterbury Tales *by Chaucer and* Don Quixote *by Cervantes.*

While still in Hypata, the wayfarer happens to run into an old friend of his named Socrates. Socrates looks skinny and sickly. The wayfarer, whose name is revealed as Aristomenes, says that back home, Socrates's wife and children have already mourned him as if he were dead, and he adds that seeing Socrates is like seeing a ghost. Socrates seems embarrassed and says that he's been a victim of Fortune. Aristomenes takes Socrates to a bath to get him cleaned up, and then he gives him food and drink.

The name Socrates furthers the theme of Greek philosophy (though, here, it doesn't refer to the famous Socrates, just another man who happens to have the same name). The fact that Socrates was presumed dead but Aristomenes found him alive makes Aristomenes regard him like a ghost—this foreshadows the role that magic and the supernatural will play not just in this story but also in the book at large.

Socrates explains the cause of his troubles. He was on a business trip to Macedonia and wanted to see some gladiator games along the way, but suddenly he was robbed by bandits. Afterwards, he was taken in by an old innkeeper named Meroe. She treated him well and fed him for free, but then she "steer[ed]" him to sleep with her. Socrates was afraid of becoming trapped, so he gave the innkeeper everything the bandits left him with—including his clothes—and left. That's how he ended up in his current condition.

The layers of story go even deeper as Socrates begins his tale: Socrates is telling a story to Aristomenes, who is telling a story to the narrator, who is telling a story to the audience. Though Socrates blames Meroe for luring him into sex, it's possible that he is simply trying to cover up the role that his own curiosity and unfaithfulness played in the story.

Aristomenes scolds Socrates for cheating on his family with Meroe. Socrates fearfully asks him to be quiet, saying that the old innkeeper is a witch. He tells stories about what she has done with her powers. For example, she turned one of her unfaithful lovers into a beaver, since beavers escape predators by biting off their own testicles. She also turned a competitor innkeeper into a frog. Finally, one of her other lovers was a married man with a pregnant wife, so Meroe sewed the woman's womb shut and forced her to be pregnant forever—the fetus was still growing after eight years.

Aristomenes questions the truthfulness of Socrates's account, particularly how he tries to shift the blame for his actions to Meroe. This is an early example of how stories are influenced by the people telling them. The actions of the witch Meroe seem to clearly take the story into the realm of fantasy, but at this point it isn't clear whether Meroe actually has magical powers or whether this is all a rumor. Beavers do not actually bite off their own testicles, but this legend was widely believed for a long time.

Socrates continues his story about Meroe, explaining that the townspeople decided to stone her for her crimes, but she used her spells to overcome them, using spells to trap everyone in their houses until they agreed to let her go. Aristomenes is amazed by the story and suggests that he and Socrates make haste to get as far away as possible. But then Socrates falls into a deep sleep, and though Aristomenes tries to stay awake, he too falls asleep.

Aristomenes's reaction to Socrates's story mirrors the incredulous reaction that Aristomenes's traveling partner has to Aristomenes's stories. Many of the stories-within-a-story relate back to the main story and either mirror or invert the events that happen in the frame story around them.

Aristomenes wakes up suddenly and is thrown out of bed. His cot ends up on top of him, trapping him on his back like a turtle. Two old women are in the room, one with a sword. The one woman points at Socrates and tells her companion, Panthia, that Socrates has spread nasty lies about her. Then she points to Aristomenes and says that he has been helping Socrates plan an escape. The first woman is revealed to be Meroe.

The line between fantasy and reality continues to blur as Aristomenes is trapped in a situation that seems to be real but also has a dreamlike quality to it. While faithfulness is a complicated concept in The Golden Ass*, one recurring theme is that unfaithfulness can sometimes lead to disaster, and in this case, Socrates's decision to be unfaithful to his family seems to have disastrous consequences.*

Aristomenes is frightened as the women discuss what to do with him. They decide to let him live so that he can bury Socrates' body. Then Meroe slits Socrates's throat and catches all the blood in a vial. She reaches into his wound and pulls out his heart. Panthia puts a sponge into the wound. The two old women urinate on Aristomenes, then remove the cot. They leave.

This section is one of the first in The Golden Ass *to delve into "vulgar" topics like violence, gore, and bodily fluids. As in Shakespeare or Chaucer, the bawdy material often contrasts with the story's structurally complex or otherwise "highbrow" aspects.*

Left alone, Aristomenes wonders what will happen if anyone finds him next to Socrates's corpse. He tries to sneak out, but he runs into a locked door and has to talk with the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper doesn't want to let Aristomenes out so late at night because of all the bandits on the roads. Aristomenes points out that he's naked, so there's nothing for the bandits to take. The doorkeeper asks if Aristomenes is on the run from a crime—perhaps he slit the throat of the man he traveled in with. Aristomenes gives up and goes back to the bedroom.

By associating with Socrates, Aristomenes is now himself in danger of being accused of a crime. The story raises the question of whether Aristomenes is simply a victim of bad luck or whether, as a friend to Socrates, he bears some share of the blame for what Socrates has done.

Aristomenes contemplates suicide so that he can avoid being crucified for the murder of Socrates. He tries to hang himself from a ceiling beam, but the beam breaks and he falls on top of Socrates. The noise attracts the doorkeeper who comes in and asks why Aristomenes is still sleeping if he was in such a hurry to leave earlier. The noise is so loud that Socrates wakes up. He complains about how his sleep has been interrupted and how he really needs his sleep because he feels dead on his feet.

Some of the humor in The Golden Ass *is dark and deals with morbid topics like murder and suicide. Here, Aristomenes's despair is played as a joke, and the surprising awakening of Socrates (who should be dead after having his throat slit) adds a startling twist to the scene.*

The doorkeeper leaves, and Aristomenes and Socrates return to the road. Aristomenes looks at the place where he saw the sword go into Socrates' neck, but there's no wound. Aristomenes wonders if it was all a dream because he ate and drank too much the previous night.

Aristomenes questions if what he's seeing is even real. Perhaps this section shows the dangers of overindulgence (since he is confused because he ate and drank too much), but it also shows how the boundary between fantasy and reality is not always clear.

Socrates and Aristomenes stop to eat. Socrates eats and drinks greedily, but just as he's drinking water from a riverbank, the slice in his neck opens back up and his dead body almost falls into the stream before Aristomenes catches it. Aristomenes mourns his friend and feels guilty about his death. He willingly becomes an exile from his former homeland and lives in Aetolia instead.

The strange ending of the story confirms for Aristomenes that what he was seeing was not a dream—that his friend Socrates actually was dead, briefly resurrected, then dead again. The story establishes that in this world, magic is so powerful that it can even stop, or at least delay, death—assuming Aristomenes is a trustworthy storyteller.

When Aristomenes ends his story, his companion says it is silly and unbelievable. The narrator, however, says that the story doesn't seem impossible to him. He thanks the wayfarers for entertaining him. They turn off the main road to a little farm, while the narrator heads to an inn in Hypata.

While Aristomenes remains convinced of the truth of his story, his traveling companion seems more skeptical. The narrator, however, seems to believe the story, showing an inclination to believe in magic.

At the inn, the innkeeper is an old woman. The narrator asks her about a man named Milo. The innkeeper has heard of him and points the narrator toward Milo's lavish house. Milo has a reputation for being greedy and isn't well-liked. The narrator goes to meet him and knocks on the door, saying he has a letter of introduction from a man named Demeas of Corinth. The letter helps the narrator get invited inside to meet Milo.

The narrator often judges other characters in the story based on the quality of the hospitality they provide, reflecting the importance of hospitality in his culture. Though Milo makes some gestures toward politeness, he also is very stingy, particularly given how much he has. It soon becomes clear that the narrator doesn't like Milo, even as he remains a guest in his house.

Milo shows the narrator around his house. He says that the narrator is a prestigious guest and offers him a room. The narrator can tell the various ways Milo is stingy, but he accepts his hospitality. He drops off his things and then goes to the marketplace to look for food.

Milo isn't open about his stinginess and even tries to hide it. There is even the possibility that the narrator is exaggerating about Milo's lack of generosity. The narrator's actions are often driven by basic urges like hunger, which is why he goes to the market for food.

In the market, the narrator finds some fish he wants to buy, then haggles with the shopkeeper to reduce the price. Then the narrator runs into Pythias, who used to be a fellow student with the narrator back in Athens. Pythias greets him and uses the narrator's name for the first time: Lucius. Pythias is happy to see Lucius.

The character Pythias helps introduce the narrator (whose name is revealed as Lucius), as well as fleshing out some of his background. The fact that Lucius was a student in Athens suggests that he comes from a somewhat comfortable, educated background.

Pythias sees the fish Lucius has bought and asks how much he paid for everything. Lucius explains the price he got by haggling, causing Pythias to go over to the old man selling fish and scold him for selling such poor fish to Lucius at such a high price. Pythias dumps Lucius's basket of fish, then orders for the bad fish to be stomped to a pulp. Pythias feels that this is an effective putdown for the old fish seller, but Lucius is sad to lose all his fish.

Pythias's strange reaction to the shopkeeper selling fish shows that he is more invested in teaching the shopkeeper a lesson than he is in Lucius's welfare. In the first of many times in the story, Lucius has something he wants right in front of him—in this case, fish—only to have it stolen away from him through a strange twist of fate.

Lucius returns to Milo's house and is informed that Milo wants to see him. Lucius says he'd rather sleep than eat, but then a man comes and literally drags Lucius to the dining room. At dinner, Milo asks how Demeas is doing. Lucius is so tired that he doesn't give coherent answers, so finally Milo lets him go to bed. Lucius has still had no food as he wearily returns to the bedroom.

Milo continues to be a strange and not particularly generous host, making Lucius impatient. This section satirizes how people can be outwardly polite—as both Milo and Lucius are doing—while secretly disliking each other. Lucius goes to bed hungry, as he will many more times throughout the story.

BOOK 2

Lucius wakes up and goes out to explore the central district of Thessaly, thinking about witchcraft and how everyday objects might be illusions after the stories Aristomenes told him the previous day. He wanders around until he finally reaches a place that sells food. There, an old man spots him and calls out Lucius's name.

As is often the case, Lucius's immediate goal is to find food. As is also often true, he gets disrupted right when he is on the verge of actually eating the food. In this section, Lucius is preoccupied by the stories of magic that Aristomenes told him the other day, showing how stories can be powerful and linger in a person's memory.

The old man has his arm around an old woman wearing lots of jewelry. The old man says the woman is Lucius's mother, but Lucius doesn't recognize her. The woman clarifies that she's not actually his mother but that she was a relative of his mother's and was raised with her. Her name is Byrrhena. She says she used to care for Lucius with her own hands and then offers him hospitality.

The interaction Lucius has with Byrrhena is strange and perhaps deepens the dreamlike feel that the story already had. The fact that Byrrhena feels like a mother to Lucius but he barely remembers her suggests from the very beginning that their relationship is unequal.

Lucius addresses Byrrhena as his mother but doesn't accept her hospitality, saying that he doesn't want to offend Milo by leaving. Nevertheless, Lucius and Byrrhena walk to Byrrhena's house, which is splendid and has big pillars with goddess statues on them. Byrrhena tells Lucius to make himself at home. Then she warns him about Pamphile, a dangerous witch who is married to Milo and who becomes obsessed with every good-looking young man she sees.

The witch Pamphile was foreshadowed by the story earlier about the witch Meroe. Both witches are greedy and often seek out younger lovers, traits that they share with many of the other characters who show up throughout The Golden Ass. *While some characters face consequences for their choices, witches generally do not and seem to control the course of Fortune rather than being bound by it.*

Despite Byrrhena's warning, Lucius is actually excited to learn more about Pamphile's witchcraft. He rushes back to Milo's house. He finds it empty except for Photis, the maid, who is preparing food. Lucius finds Photis attractive and tells her that anyone who is allowed to stick his finger up her buttocks must be very happy indeed. Photis warns him to stay back because she is working the stove and could set him on fire. She says she knows how to season food and how to shake a bed.

Like many surviving ancient Roman texts, The Golden Ass *contains sexually explicit sections as well as innuendo and double entendre. Just as Lucius is often motivated by physical hunger, he is also often motivated by other urges like sex. Often this is played for humor, although it can also lead to tragic situations.*

Lucius explains his theories about female beauty and how hair is important because it's the first thing the eyes see. He likes Photis's hair because it's striking, but also because she's not too "diligent" about it. He kisses the top of her head. Photis teases him by warning him to be careful—if he eats too much of her delicious dish, he might get heartburn. Photis promises to come to Lucius's room that night.

Lucius will continue to comment on the hair of various characters throughout the story. Because hair is the first thing people see, it is an important part of identity. Photis's comment about heartburn further strengthens the connection between physical and sexual hunger, suggesting that both are strong motivating forces.

That evening, Lucius has dinner with Milo, and Photis serves them. Milo and Lucius talk about a man they both know called Diophanes who can predict the future. Milo tells a story of meeting Diophanes getting tricked in the marketplace, but Lucius finds the story pointless and boring. Lucius rushes to get back to bed.

This scene further establishes the ways in which Lucius and Milo fail to communicate with each other. The secret relationship between Photis and Lucius, which Milo is unaware of, is one of many such relationships throughout the story.

Soon after Lucius returns to his bedroom, Photis comes in. Lucius lifts up his tunic to show his genitals, then asks for Photis to take pity on him and give aid. Photis strips, and her body reminds Lucius of Venus rising from the waves. They have sex that night, then continue to have sex several times over the next few nights.

Though Venus is just used as a metaphor here, she will later appear as a character in one of the stories-within-a-story. While Lucius often experiences bad luck over the course of the story, it is noteworthy that he does sometimes get what he desires—in this case, a secret relationship with Photis. This demonstrates how Fortune can have both positive and negative effects.

One day, Byrrhena invites Lucius over for dinner. Lucius is worried about gangs that roam around town and attack people randomly, but Lucius reassures her that he'll hurry back early and that he'll take his sword with him.

Gangs and robbers are a constant threat in the story, suggesting that the relatively comfortable life of men like Lucius is always in danger of being suddenly taken away.

Byrrhena's feast is lavish, with some of the most important people in the city in attendance. Byrrhena asks Lucius how he likes the city so far. Lucius says he likes the freedom but is afraid that some black magic is lurking somewhere in the city. Some of the guests invite a man called Thelyphron to tell a story. He reclines on a couch and begins.

Byrrhena's lavish feast contrasts with the stinginess of Milo, but Lucius still seems wary of her. This seems to suggest that while too little hospitality is rude, there can also be a problem with excessive hospitality.

In Thelyphron's story, he is traveling from Miletus to see the Olympic games. He's also on the lookout for ways to make money, and he happens to run into an old man standing on a rock in the middle of the forum, offering money to anyone who agrees to guard a corpse. Thelyphron is incredulous, but the man explains that corpses have to be closely protected from witches who bite the corpses' faces as part of their sorcery.

Right away, the premise of guarding a corpse recalls the living corpse of Socrates from the story that Aristomenes told Lucius on the road. While the stories-within-a-story often have connections to other stories throughout the book, they are often most connected to the stories immediately preceding or following them.

The man explains that witches are tricky about getting past guards and that if, after a night of guarding, the corpse is missing part of its body, the guard will have to make up the difference by having a portion of his own face cut off. Thelyphron agrees to be the watchman and asks about the price, which turns out to be a high one.

The cutting off of the face relates to the issue of identity, since the face is a major part of a person's outward appearance. This passage seems to suggest that the witches are so powerful they can even steal a person's identity—after they're already dead.

The old man leads Thelyphron to the house of a weeping widow who needs someone to guard her husband's corpse. Thelyphron promises to be such a good guard that she'll need to tip him extra. They discuss the conditions of their agreement. Thelyphron asks for her enslaved workers to fetch him the supplies he'll need: a big lantern with lots of oil, plus wine and food. The woman scolds him for asking for so much food from a house that's still in mourning, but a maid does go to get a lamp.

On the one hand, The Golden Ass *explores traditional ideas of marriage and relationships by portraying faithfulness as an important concern and frequently depicting many unfaithful characters in a negative light. At the same time, the fact that so many characters have relationships with people outside of their marriages also raises questions about how stable traditional marriages are. This case of a widow trying to remain faithful to her husband's corpse is an extreme and perhaps comic example of the theme.*

Thelyphron's guard duty is easy at the beginning. A weasel comes in, and he shoos it away. But soon after the weasel leaves, Thelyphron is overcome with an urge to sleep. When he wakes up, he panics and rushes to check on the corpse, but it still seems to be entirely intact. Eventually, the widow comes in, still weeping, and does her own inspection. She thanks him and pays him.

Characters who suddenly fall asleep occur throughout the stories of The Golden Ass. *Often it is a sign of the involvement of witchcraft, but it could also be seen as another variation on the theme of characters succumbing to a kind of "hunger"—in this case for sleep.*

Thelyphron gets the sudden urge to refuse the money and says the widow should simply consider him a servant and call upon him whenever he's needed. But the whole household considers that a bad omen and suddenly attacks him and throws him out. It is only after Thelyphron gets kicked out that he realizes why what he said was inconsiderate.

Thelyphron's rejection of the money might seem like a polite gesture, but given that the woman's husband recently died, it could also be read as a greedy one (i.e., that Thelyphron is trying to take the widow's husband's place as a new husband). Thelyphron's confusion seems to suggest that he was not aware of this until after it was too late.

The corpse is taken out for a funeral procession. One of the mourners goes forward and announces that the dead man was murdered by his wife (the widow) in order to steal his inheritance for her and her other lover. He calls for vengeance against her. The woman protests and weeps. The accusing man says there is an accomplished seer in the crowd and that he can provide judgement.

This new twist reframes many of the earlier events in the story. Now, instead of appearing faithful to her deceased husband, the widow seems deceptive. While Thelyphron was earlier accused of trying to obtain the widow's inheritance, it was actually the widow herself who was scheming.

The seer places herbs on the dead man's body and prays to the sun. Suddenly, the dead man gets up and asks why he's back in the world of the living. The seer asks the dead man to tell how he died. The man says he was murdered by his adulterous wife, the widow.

Like Socrates, the widow's husband also rises from the dead, albeit temporarily. Metaphorically, this shows how dead people can impact the present, even after they're gone.

The dead man explains that while Thelyphron was guarding his body, a witch cast a spell of drowsiness on Thelyphron. Then the witch summoned the dead man, but the dead man and Thelyphron had the same name, so it was Thelyphron the guard who got summoned instead. The witch proceeded to cut off Thelyphron's ears and nose, then replace them with wax to hide what was missing. Thelyphron is horrified when the seer says this. He reaches up to check his own nose, and it falls off.

The confusion of the two men both named Thelyphron shows how identity is not always an easily defined concept. The fact that Thelyphron the guard loses part of his face only further reinforces the idea that identity is not permanent or stable and can be changed.

The crowd laughs at Thelyphron. He leaves and journeys for a long time, letting his hair grow long to hide where his ears used to be. He ends his story.

The crowd's lack of sympathy for Thelyphron shows how misfortune doesn't always generate sympathy and sometimes even inspires scorn.

Still at the party, Byrrhena invites Lucius to come to a festival the next day for the god Laughter. Lucius agrees to come. A servant lets him know it's getting late, so Lucius heads back toward Milo's. As he's going back, the wind blows out a lamp, and he's left in darkness. He feels three robbers attacking him, but he kills them all with his sword. The noise awakens Photis, who comes out to let Lucius in.

Bandits and robbers were foreshadowed earlier in the story, and this is the section where that foreshadowing pays off. The fact that Lucius does not see the attackers gives the scene a dreamlike quality, and it raises suspense over the question of who (or what) Lucius is attacking at the end of Book 2.

BOOK 3

Lucius wakes up the next day and wonders if he will be charged with the killing of those three robbers. There's a knock on the door, and suddenly Lucius is escorted down to the forum by guards. There, an elderly prosecutor is speaking. The prosecutor is part of a night watch group, and he tells the story of the previous night when he saw a young man with a sword and three corpses at his feet. The young man ran off, but the prosecutor watched him and seized him (Lucius) the next day. The prosecutor asks the crowd to vote Lucius guilty.

As with Aristomenes and the death of Socrates, Lucius also finds himself in danger of being accused of a crime that he is not guilty of. On the surface, it does seem that Lucius may have killed some men for no good reason. This whole scene raises questions about the value of a justice system that is based on external appearances, and it does not offer any easy answers about alternative justice systems.

Lucius begins a rebuttal speech. He says that it was self-defense. He embellishes the story, saying that he overheard the robbers planning to kill him. He tells of an epic battle with the robbers and then ends by crying and pleading for mercy. Lucius thinks the crowd is moved but is surprised to hear them laughing.

The truth would, in theory, be enough to exonerate Lucius, but instead he decides to tell an exaggerated story. This decision suggests that justice is based not just on facts but on the power to tell a compelling and convincing story.

Two mourning women come forward and plead that Lucius must pay the price for the youths he killed. An old magistrate rises and says that clearly Lucius must pay the price, but there is one thing left to resolve: who helped Lucius? The magistrate doesn't believe Lucius could have killed three strong young men on his own. They plan to torture Lucius until he confesses who his accomplices were.

The people of the town counter Lucius's story by telling their own emotionally charged stories. Part of the reason why Lucius isn't believed is because he's an outsider who is outnumbered, showing how justice is often shaped by communities and how people outside the community are at a disadvantage.

An old woman comes forward and asks for the bodies of the young men to be revealed, in order to show how terrible Lucius's crime was. The crowd agrees. Lucius pulls back the blanket covering the bodies and finds that instead of bodies, there are three leather bags, cut in the exact places where Lucius remembers cutting the bandits. The whole crowd laughs.

As with many episodes in The Golden Ass, *Lucius's trial contains a major twist that changes what came before it and raises questions about what is and isn't real. Perhaps in this case the fraudulent nature of Lucius's trial could be read as a commentary on how real trials also sometimes contain an element of farce.*

Milo takes Lucius back. Lucius feels humiliated and upset. The magistrates explain to Lucius that the whole trial was just part of the town's ritual to honor the god Laughter. Because Lucius composed a story for Laughter, the god will now protect him, and the city will honor him. Lucius pretends that he is cheered up.

Lucius finds out his suffering was all part of an orchestrated ritual to please a local god. While this passage could be read as supporting the idea that even seemingly unfair suffering often has a mysterious purpose, it could also be interpreted more pessimistically as supporting the idea that sometimes humans suffer despite having done nothing to deserve it.

A servant comes from Byrrhena to remind Lucius that he promised to attend her dinner party that evening, since it's still the feast of the god Laughter. Lucius uses the excuse that he has already promised to eat with Milo. After eating with Milo, Lucius is met in his room by Photis and finds that she looks like a different girl and has wrinkles. She admits that she is the one who has tricked Lucius.

Again, though Byrrhena seems to be a more generous host than Milo, Lucius feels uneasy about her excessive hospitality and returns to Milo, even though Lucius clearly does not like Milo. This suggests how too much generosity can be unwelcome or even a trap.

Photis tells Lucius she's keeping secrets about her mistress, Milo's wife, Pamphile. The mistress has been trying to seduce a young man in his 20s. As part of a scheme, the mistress asked Photis to steal some of the young man's hair from off the ground at the barber. But the young man caught her and forcefully took his hair back. Photis instead found goat hair to take back to her mistress.

Many characters in The Golden Ass *concoct elaborate schemes to fool their spouses. Arguably, the book's fixation on deceptive women reflects sexist attitudes from the time when the book was written, although it could also be argued that the active role of female characters in driving the plot is noteworthy.*

Photis explains that Pamphile began a ritual with the goat hair. Using the power of necromancy, she unintentionally created three living goatskin bags, which became the attackers that Lucius killed. Lucius is amused by this story and says he forgives Photis. They get naked and have wild sex before falling asleep.

Lucius's earlier fixation on Pamphile's hair helped establish the crucial role that hair plays as part of a person's identity. For this reason, it makes sense that a sample of a person's hair would be needed in order to perform witchcraft on them.

After several nights of sleeping together, Photis tells Lucius that her mistress (Pamphile) is going to transform into a bird in order to swoop down on the one she admires. Lucius watches. First Pamphile takes off her clothes, then she rubs an ointment in her palms, then she transforms into a bird and flies off. Lucius pleads with Photis to get some of that ointment. Photis doesn't want to get it and is afraid Lucius will fly away from her. Lucius promises to be faithful, and finally Photis agrees to get some.

Lucius is seemingly never satisfied with what he already has. Despite having sex with Photis as he desired, he finds himself yearning for even more. The story makes it clear that Lucius's interest in Pamphile and her witchy rituals is not merely curiosity but also greed and an inability to be satisfied with what he already has.

Photis gets some ointment for Lucius. He rubs it on himself, but instead of turning into a bird, he turns into a **donkey**. Photis panics but tells Lucius there's a simple cure: he just has to eat some **roses**. She doesn't currently have any roses, but she'll rush out at dawn to get some.

Lucius's transformation into a donkey shows how greed and curiosity can have unexpected consequences. Donkeys are famously not very intelligent creatures, and Lucius's transformation into a donkey could be seen as a physical manifestation of his own ignorance.

Lucius is so angry that he considers killing Photis, but he doesn't because he still needs her help to get back his human body. Still in the form of a **donkey**, he goes off to the stable. There, he sees roses at a shrine to the goddess of horses, Epona, and tries to eat some, but as he goes for them, he is caught by a stable boy. The boy hits Lucius and only stops when he hears a shout that there's a robber. Suddenly, armed bandits storm Milo's house.

Lucius's sudden urge to kill Photis shows how quick he (and other characters in the book) are to change their minds. Such rash actions can have both comic and tragic consequences, although in this case, Lucius doesn't act on them. The robbery of Milo represents a cruel twist of Fortune, setting Lucius off on an improbably long journey as a donkey.

The bandits empty out Milo's house. They steal so much that they need **donkeys** to carry the items, and so they take Lucius with them. They load Lucius down and hit him. As they go by one village, Lucius sees **roses**, but he realizes he can't eat them, or else his human body will be crushed by all the things the bandits have made him carry.

Like Odysseus in The Odyssey, Lucius seems to see the end of his journey at an early point, but in reality, he has quite a long way to go. This cruelty of seeing what he wants without being able to take it is something that Lucius endures multiple times throughout his journey.

BOOK 4

Around noon, the bandits stop with Lucius at a small village with some old people who greet the bandits with kisses and excited conversation. The bandits take some of the load off of Lucius. He looks around and finds a **rose** bush, which he rushes to eat. Right before eating, however, he realizes that the flowers are actually laurel roses, which are different from normal roses and very toxic. Even after realizing this, Lucius considers eating some of the toxic flowers, but a young man from the village stops him.

Once again, Lucius is taunted by a rose bush that nearly ends his ordeal, but in this case, it turns out the seemingly helpful plant is actually a deadly poison in disguise. Yet again, this is a case in the book where outward appearances are deceiving and help to hide a darker truth on the inside.

The bandits keep moving in the afternoon heat. While they travel, the other **donkey** collapses in exhaustion and can't be moved, even with whipping. They split the donkey's load between Lucius and a horse, then throw the donkey over a cliff. They make their way to the robbers' mountainside cave, where they live with their families. The robbers eat and drink, bragging of how they sacked Milo's house. One of them begins telling a story about how it's easier to steal from big houses because enslaved people are more likely to protect their own things than the things their rich enslavers own.

Being turned into a donkey forces Lucius to experience life the way that people at the very bottom of society do. Whereas before, he was upset if a host didn't offer proper hospitality, now he must struggle and labor to even stay alive. This change shows once again how Fortune can be fickle and how all it takes is one decision or one moment of bad luck to change a person's fortune.

The robber begins a story about arriving with a group of other thieves at the gate of the city of Thebes. They make preparations for their upcoming robbery of a moneychanger named Chryseras, and then they wait for nightfall. During the robbery, Lamachus (the leader of the thieves) is suddenly surprised when Chryseras sneaks up on him and nails his hand to a door. Chryseras then goes to his roof and calls to all his neighbors that there's a fire.

The purpose of this story with the thieves will become clearer later. In some ways, the bad luck of the expert thief Lamachus could be seen as similar to the bad luck that Lucius himself has recently experienced—or perhaps in both their cases, it isn't bad luck but the consequences of greed.

With no other options, the thieves cut off part of Lamachus's arm and flee. As a thief, however, Lamachus doesn't want to live without his hand, so he stabs himself and dies. Another thief named Alcimus tries to rob an old woman's cottage and gets tricked by her and pushed out a window, falling to his death.

As a thief, Lamachus's swift hands are a fundamental part of his identity. For this reason, it is particularly upsetting for him to lose a hand, and this is why he decides to kill himself rather than trying to find a new identity.

Mourning both Lamachus and Alcimus, the thieves give up in Thebes and go to nearby Plataea to see a gladiator named Democharas, who even fights wild animals, like bears. Lately, the bears have been dying of heat and illness. The thieves take one bear and skin it to use the fur as a disguise.

The deaths of Lamachus and Alcimus hint that this new scheme will also go badly, but the thieves are too blinded by greed to quit, despite what the consequences might end up being.

The thief Thrasyleon gets dressed up in the bear skin. The other thieves put him in a cage and offer him as a gift to Democharesh with a forged letter saying that the bear is from one of Democharesh' friends. The narrator thief suggests to Democharesh that he should set up the bear somewhere within his manor, so that it can be away from the other sickly bears. He agrees.

The disguise of Thrasyleon in bear skin is yet another case of a character changing their identity for deceptive purposes. Thrasyleon experiences the benefits of being a bear during the planned robbery, but he will also have to face the consequences. Though Thrasyleon doesn't literally transform into a bear, his situation can be compared to that of Lucius, who has in fact been turned into a literal donkey.

That night Thrasyleon sneaks out of his cage, kills the guards, then opens the gate for the other thieves. At first, the robbery seems successful, but then they are suddenly caught by an enslaved boy, who alerts the rest of the house. Someone unleashes the dogs against Thrasyleon (who still looks like a bear). He manages to fight them off at first, but they slowly overwhelm him.

In the disguise of a bear, Thrasyleon begins to act like a bear. This suggests that people often eventually become what they pretend to be, even if they pretend to be something as outrageous as a wild animal.

The narrator thief exclaims that it's a shame for a rare creature like a bear to be wasted on dogs. Thrasyleon is eventually torn apart. They don't realize Thrasyleon is a human until a butcher cuts him open the next day. Meanwhile, the other bandits escape. The narrator thief concludes his story and says that that is how they got the loot and how his three companions died. The whole gang toasts their fallen comrades.

The fact that Thrasyleon's identity as a human isn't discovered until the next day suggests how fully the bear disguise has become a part of him. Though the thieves ultimately did escape with money, the story shows that they paid a heavy cost for this benefit.

The bandits go out again at night, leaving Lucius behind. He goes to a stream to drink. The bandits come back looking uneasy and with a new pretty hostage, who is crying. The bandits are holding her hostage to extort her rich parents. The girl keeps complaining and threatens to kill herself. An old hag who works with the robbers says that if the girl does anything to threaten the robbers' ransom money, they'll burn her alive. The girl pleads for mercy from the woman and begins telling her a story.

Because Lucius is still a donkey, he is able to observe the story that unfolds between the hostage and the old hag as an outsider. While at first their story might seem like a diversion from Lucius's, in fact the old hag and the hostage are two of the most important characters in the story after Lucius. Lucius's interest in the old hag and the hostage makes sense because he has already established himself as a lover of other people's stories.

In the hostage girl's story, her cousin is a couple years older than her, and he is a distinguished citizen in his city. He and the girl are engaged. But at a family ceremony to celebrate the union, some bandits intrude and kidnap the girl, while no one else in the family resists. Later, the girl dreams that her husband has been killed by the robbers, but she wakes suddenly.

Some elements of the hostage's story bear a resemblance to Lucius's. For example, Lucius himself was on the verge of a happy occasion (eating a rose to turn back into a human) at the moment when the robbers interrupted and kidnapped him.

The old hag tells the young hostage to cheer up and promises to tell her a nice story to distract her. In the story, there is a king and queen with three beautiful daughters, with the third daughter (Psyche) being the most beautiful. People come from far away to praise the youngest daughter as if she's Venus. All around, people begin to stop venerating Venus in the usual temples and instead focus all their veneration on the girl. This angers the real Venus.

The story of Cupid and Psyche is the longest story-within-a-story in The Golden Ass, *and it is arguably the centerpiece of the whole book. In the beginning of the story, Psyche seems to anger the goddess Venus simply by being born. This shows how fickle the gods can be and how mortals don't always deserve the anger they get.*

Venus decides that she'll make Psyche pay. She sends her winged son, Cupid, to go see the girl. For revenge, Venus wants Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with someone totally inappropriate and pathetic.

Venus's decision to punish Psyche by making her fall in love with someone unsuitable emphasizes how people can make bad choices due to romantic or sexual feelings.

Meanwhile, despite Psyche's beauty, no one wants to marry her. Psyche's father, the king, is upset and makes a sacrifice to Apollo, asking for a wedding for his youngest daughter. Apollo prophesies that Psyche will marry something inhuman and snake-like that will destroy the world.

Psyche's punishment seems to be unfair—she is not a victim of her own tragic flaws but truly innocent. This shows how Fortune works in strange ways and how sometimes a person can have too much of a good thing (like beauty).

Psyche's parents dress her up in funeral clothes and lead her to a crag where she will supposedly meet her new husband. The townspeople leave her there at the crag, and she is terrified, but just then, the West Wind comes to comfort her, lifting her up and taking her from the top of the slope down to the valley beneath.

Like many characters in the inset tales, Psyche experiences a sudden reversal of fortune. Though she had been prepared for a funeral-like ritual, the Western Wind's intervention suggests that she is in for a more comfortable future than what Apollo predicted.

BOOK 5

Psyche falls asleep on the soft greenery of the valley. She wakes up refreshed and then walks around to find a mansion, which has such splendid architecture that it seems to have been built by a demigod. As she's exploring the mansion, she suddenly hears a disembodied voice who tells her that the riches she sees are all for her. Psyche continues to explore before finally going to bed.

Perhaps because Psyche put up with all her trials without complaint, she has been rewarded. Unlike many other characters, she does not initially display any signs of greediness, and so it is surprising and perhaps even ironic that she has become so spectacularly wealthy.

That night, Psyche hears a low sound in the darkness, and she fears for her virginity. Psyche's unseen new husband climbs into bed, seems to have sex with her, then takes off again before dawn. The process continues for several nights, and Psyche begins to enjoy it. Meanwhile, her parents don't know where she is and mourn her, believing she may be dead.

If the prophecy of Apollo is accurate, then Psyche's new husband is hiding himself because he's a snake-like monster. But the affectionate treatment Psyche receives seems to contradict this prophecy, raising questions about what is really true.

One night, Psyche's husband (whom she can hear but not see) warns her that her sisters are coming to find her and that if Psyche hears their voices, she shouldn't respond—otherwise, it will lead to sorrow. Psyche pleads to be allowed to see her sisters. Her husband allows it, but he warns that her sisters have a plot and will try to get Psyche to investigate his appearance, which will lead to no good. Psyche promises that nothing will ruin their marriage.

Even family members like sisters cannot be trusted in these stories—in fact, many characters are betrayed by the people closest to them. Despite her husband's warnings, Psyche is naïve and wants to see her sisters anyway.

Psyche greets her mourning sisters and invites them back to her husband's mansion. One of the sisters asks who the husband is, and Psyche lies that he's a young man who's out hunting in the fields. She sends the sisters back on the West Wind before they can ask more questions. As they leave, the sisters find they are jealous of Psyche.

Jealousy is a recurring emotion in The Golden Ass, *and it is often what motivates characters to take some of their worst actions—things they wouldn't do otherwise.*

The jealous sisters hatch a scheme to pretend that Psyche is still dead. They hide the lavish gifts Psyche gave them. Ultimately, their plan is to murder Psyche. Psyche's husband warns her of the plot. He reveals to Psyche that she is about to have a child and that if she is silent and keeps her husband's secrets, the child will be divine, but if she doesn't, the child will be mortal.

The fact that Psyche's sisters are willing to murder Psyche shows how far some people will go on account of jealousy and, in particular, how greed can motivate people. Psyche's husband is deliberately depicted mysteriously, and this means that there is reason to doubt whether or not his prophecies are accurate or just a form of trickery.

Psyche is overjoyed to learn she's pregnant. Time passes until Psyche's husband warns her that danger is at hand and that she'll have to resist being tempted by her wicked sisters. Psyche argues that she has proven her loyalty to her husband so far and that she should be allowed to at least see her sisters, and her husband finally agrees.

Psyche is caught between two different loyalties: one to her new husband and one to her old family. This story seems to suggest that the role of spouse takes precedent over the role of a sibling.

The sisters come to greet Psyche and pretend to be happy about her pregnancy. Psyche is fooled and greets them warmly. When they ask about her husband, Psyche forgets about her previous lie and says he's an old merchant. One sister notices this lie and points it out to the other. The sisters head back, jealous because they're convinced that their sister has married a god.

Psyche's inability to keep her lies straight reveals how she is innocent and naïve. Though this naïve quality is perhaps how she ended up living in such splendid conditions, it also makes her vulnerable to being taken advantage of, particularly by deceptive people like her sisters.

The sisters come to visit Psyche again. They pretend they've been crying. They tell her she's married an atrocious beast and that her husband is only keeping her around to eventually eat her and her child. Psyche is terrified and admits that she's never seen her husband's face. The sisters help her devise a plan: she'll hide a lamp and a sharp razor in her bedroom. When her husband's asleep, she'll light the lamp, then cut off his head.

The lamp in this story recalls the lamp that Thelyphron used while guarding the corpse for the widow in a previous story. In that story, the lamp provided protection and knowledge, but in this story, because Psyche is motivated by excessive curiosity, the lamp symbolizes knowledge in a more dangerous sense.

Psyche is afraid but goes ahead with the plan. When she lights the lamp, however, she finds that her husband is not a snake-like beast as prophesied, but in fact the beautiful god Cupid. Psyche is unsure what to do, and the razor slips from her hands.

By investigating the identity of her husband, Psyche has put her whole situation in jeopardy. The fact that her husband is Cupid shows that she never had anything to worry about and that her curiosity was unnecessary.

Psyche examines Cupid's belongings and, in the process, accidentally pricks her finger on one of his arrows. This causes her to fall madly in love with Cupid, and she immediately rushes to kiss him. Cupid is splashed by hot oil from the lamp and wakes up. The lamp helps him realize that he has been betrayed.

Just as Psyche is betrayed by her sisters, Cupid is now betrayed by Psyche. The hot oil of the lamp suggests passion and that Psyche has now become too passionate toward her new husband.

Cupid explains to Psyche how he ignored his mother, Venus, when she commanded him to make Psyche fall in love with the most pathetic man alive. Instead, he took Psyche as his own wife. He says that as punishment, he will simply leave Psyche alone. He flies away while Psyche watches.

Cupid disobeyed the orders of his mother Venus, suggesting that love, like the love god Cupid himself, doesn't always follow rules or behave in predictable ways.

Psyche throws herself into a river in despair, but the river is afraid of Cupid's retribution and tosses Psyche back out on a shore. There, she meets the he-goat peasant god Pan. Pan says he can tell that she is suffering from too much love but encourages her to stop mourning. He advises her to try to get on Cupid's good side because he might take her back.

Even compared to other characters in the book, Psyche seems to be particularly susceptible to the whims of Fortune. Even her attempt at suicide is thwarted by a sort of divine intervention. Despite Psyche reaching a low point in her story, Pan offers hope, suggesting that a person's past luck doesn't necessarily determine their future.

Psyche goes back to one of her sisters and tells her about how the sisters were wrong: her husband wasn't a snake but in fact Cupid. She also lies and says that Cupid divorced her and said he wanted to marry one of the sisters. The sister immediately goes to the crag where Psyche met Cupid and throws herself over the edge, but the West Wind doesn't catch her, and her body is torn to pieces on the crag. The other sister dies because of a similar trick.

While it might seem extreme that Psyche causes the deaths of her sisters, ultimately, it is the sisters' own greed and scheming that leads them to jump off the crag to their deaths.

Psyche travels widely in search of Cupid, who is in the bedroom of his mother, Venus, recovering from the wound the lamp inflicted on him. Meanwhile, Venus hears from a bird about nasty rumors going around about how she and Cupid have abandoned their duties. The bird tells Venus about Cupid's relationship with Psyche. Venus goes back to her bedroom and finds Cupid there.

Though he is a god, Cupid is still able to feel pain and be injured. The gods in these stories often stand as symbols for larger forces like love or fate. They are also very much characters who act similarly to mortal humans.

Venus scolds Cupid for disobeying her orders. She threatens to have another, better son in order to humiliate him. She talks about how Cupid has never respected her. She storms out but is greeted by Ceres and Juno. They ask her why she's angry, and Venus describes what Psyche has done. But Ceres and Juno defend Cupid, saying that he's still young. Venus doesn't want to hear this argument and turns her back on them.

The constant anger that Venus feels in this story seems to suggest the intensity of emotions brought out by love. In other stories, characters are motivated to do extreme, often violent things due to love, and so it makes sense that the love goddess herself would be so volatile.

BOOK 6

Psyche keeps herself busy looking for Cupid and trying to think of ways to make things up to him. She comes to a shrine with some wheat and barley piled carelessly in front of it, and she begins sorting the grains. As she does, the goddess Ceres comes upon her.

Psyche's interest in cleaning up near the shrine shows reverence. Despite the difficulties she has recently faced, she remains faithful to the gods.

Ceres tells Psyche that Venus is looking for her and that she has promised vengeance. Psyche falls to Ceres's feet and weeps, asking for help. Ceres is moved by her pleas, but she also doesn't want to upset Venus. The best Ceres is able to do is to leave Psyche alone.

The fact that Ceres wants to help but can't shows how complicated, even political, the relationships among gods are. It also, perhaps, attempts to provide an explanation for why even good, loyal mortals sometimes don't receive help from the gods.

Psyche continues to wander. She finds a temple to Juno and prays for help. Like Ceres, Juno also wants to help but can't because she doesn't want to upset Venus. Psyche is devastated and decides that her only remaining course of action is to turn herself in to Venus and hope for the best.

Many episodes in The Golden Ass *repeat with minor differences. For example, this section on Juno is very similar to the section on Ceres that just finished. In this case, the repetition helps emphasize how afraid the other gods are of getting on the wrong side of Venus.*

Venus steps up her search for Psyche, sending the messenger god Mercury to issue proclamations that whoever turns over Psyche will get seven kisses from Venus and one thrust of her tongue.

Venus's exhaustive search shows the depths of her determination, once again emphasizing how powerful jealousy can be as a motivating force.

One of Venus's servants sees Psyche as she comes up towards Venus's manor and immediately grabs the girl, turning her over to Venus. Venus has Psyche whipped. She declares that because of the uncertainty over the circumstances of Psyche's pregnancy, her child will be illegitimate—if it gets born at all.

Venus's harsh treatment of Psyche reflects the harsh irrationality of love. Venus has already exerted her control over the other gods by preventing them from interfering, and here she goes even further by threatening Psyche's child's future.

Venus attacks Psyche and then throws a random assortment of grains, including wheat, barley, millet, poppy seeds, lentils, and more, at her. She tells Psyche to sort everything by evening. She then leaves to go to a banquet.

This attack on Psyche recalls the earlier scene where Psyche was cleaning up grains in front of a shrine. The task Venus picks is deliberately tedious and too long to complete in the amount of time given.

Psyche is too stunned to begin sorting. Suddenly, some ants begin to help her. When Venus gets back, she's drunk and surprised at Psyche's work but says she couldn't have done it herself. But Cupid was locked up the whole time.

Just as the river helped Psyche earlier, now the ants help her, too. This seems to suggest that people like Psyche, who are faithful to and respectful of the gods, sometimes receive aid from unexpected places.

For the next challenge, Venus says that Psyche must get some golden wool from sheep that graze in the distance. At first, Psyche only goes intending to kill herself in a river, but she hears a heavenly voice warning her not to jump in a river but also warning her not to approach the sheep yet—they are savage and will kill mortals, except during the midday sun when they rest. Psyche succeeds in getting golden wool, but Venus still isn't pleased.

Psyche again receives help from nature, suggesting that perhaps the extent of Venus's rage is in fact unnatural and that the ants and the river are trying to restore balance. The killer sheep that look docile recall many other disguised killers from throughout the book, like the poisonous plant that Lucius nearly eats.

Venus offers another challenge: Psyche must go to the source of a river at the peak of a mountain and capture some of the water in a small crystal cup. Psyche goes and finds that the journey up the mountain is perilous, potentially deadly. The waters themselves tell Psyche to give up and turn back. Just then, though, an eagle from Jupiter comes by and helps Psyche get some of the water, which Psyche then takes back to Venus.

As king of the gods, Jupiter is perhaps the one who feels most comfortable overturning Venus's authority. The helpful eagle contrasts with the deceptive bird that the witch Pamphile turns into. Water can symbolize purification, and perhaps this trial symbolizes how Psyche is beginning to overcome her previous errors, like her curiosity about Cupid's identity.

Venus is angry with Psyche for succeeding and offers yet another challenge. She asks her to go take a box down to Proserpina in Tartarus, the underworld, and ask if Venus can have a day's worth of Proserpina's loveliness (since she has used up some of her own loveliness worrying about Cupid).

Proserpina lives in Tartarus because she was abducted by the god of the underworld. In some ways her situation mirrors that of the hostage, and perhaps her role in the story is to reassure the thieves' hostage (who is listening to the story of Cupid and Psyche) that her story may still have a happier ending.

Psyche believes this task is certain death and so she goes to the top of a tall tower, intending to jump off. But the tower warns her that if she goes to the underworld that way, she'll have no means of getting back. The tower tells her a better way to Tartarus. She must also take a barley-cake in each hand and two small coins in her mouth.

The food and the money are significant. In most cases, characters are driven to make bad decisions by either hunger or greed. Here, however, a small amount of food and a small amount of money are required to stay connected to the world of the living, suggesting that perhaps a more controlled hunger or desire for wealth is a regular part of living.

One coin is for Charon, the ferryman on the river of death, who will demand payment. Then, one of the barley-cakes should be used to pacify the underworld's three-headed guard dog. This will allow Psyche to make her way to Proserpina, who will give Psyche a box that she is not allowed to open. Finally, on the way back, she can use the remaining barley-cake and coin in the same way.

The underworld as described here is consistent with how the underworld is depicted in many other Greek and Roman works, perhaps most notably The Odyssey. The box that Psyche isn't allowed to open provides another test for her curiosity.

Psyche does as instructed. On the way back from Proserpina, though, she is tempted to open the box and take a tiny dab of Proserpina's loveliness. But as soon as she opens the box, she falls asleep.

Psyche is overcome by her own curiosity again, suggesting that even after the suffering she's endured, she hasn't learned from her mistakes.

Cupid, meanwhile, can no longer bear Psyche's absence. He flies to find her and sees that she has been undone by her own curiosity again. He wakes her up and instructs her to finish her task, which she does.

This time, however, Psyche is lucky enough to be rescued, perhaps in part because she has earned help by enduring her previous trials.

Cupid is afraid of how Venus has been so sober lately, so Cupid himself drinks more. One time, he gets drunk and flies to Jupiter to plead his case about Psyche. Jupiter says that Cupid has never been particularly respectful of the gods, but he is still fond of Cupid and will help him on two conditions: that Cupid learns to watch out for his competitors and that Cupid pay him back by finding a mortal woman who is particularly lovely.

The drunkenness of Cupid and Venus suggests that love itself often manifests in erratic and uninhibited ways, just like a drunk person. Before, Jupiter was the one god who openly defied Venus by sending an eagle to help Psyche, and here he defies her again—but on the condition that Cupid give him something in return.

Jupiter orders a council of the gods and proposes that they end Cupid's wild behavior by letting him settle down with Psyche. In order to satisfy Venus, Jupiter proposes making Psyche immortal so that she'll be a more satisfactory bride. They all plan a lavish wedding. Psyche and Cupid are married, and they have a daughter called Pleasure. Thus ends the old hag's story to the hostage.

The fact that Psyche must be made immortal to stay married to Cupid shows how marriage cannot endure between people of highly unequal status. The happy ending of Psyche's story (despite all the suffering along the way) is perhaps meant to suggest that the hostage's story may have a happy ending, too, despite her current suffering. On the other hand, it could be related to the larger frame story of Lucius, who seems to be undergoing a series of trials that aren't necessarily directly caused by the gods but are similar to what Psyche endured.

Lucius is sorry he wasn't able to write down the old woman's story. The bandits come back and load up Lucius (who is still a **donkey**). They make him walk until he falls. They talk about getting rid of him but decide to make him finish carrying the baggage before throwing him off a cliff.

The section once again emphasizes the precarious state that Lucius lives in as a donkey. He is forced to do hard work and threatened with death. This section highlights how poorly people at the bottom of society are treated.

Lucius tries to break free, but the old hag sees him and grabs him. The young hostage watches this, but instead of helping the older woman, she mounts Lucius. She asks the gods for help in escaping, promising to reward Lucius if he helps. They run off together.

While the hostage shares a similar goal to Lucius, the old hag tries to thwart both of them. This brief section dramatizes a struggle between older and younger generations.

Lucius struggles, but he can't stop the hostage from leading them right back to the robbers. The robbers apprehend them and take them back. They plan to slit Lucius's throat and sew the naked girl into his belly so she can be left out in the sun and eaten by worms.

Lucius's attempt to escape only makes things worse. At this point, he seems to be experiencing only bad fortune. The punishment the thieves devise for the hostage is perhaps inspired by the fate of their dead comrade Thrasyllus, who died in a bear skin.

BOOK 7

One of the robbers comes back to the cave and tells the rest of them that they're safe after sacking Milo's house because the crowd there believes Lucius is to blame for the robbery. Lucius despairs at how Fortune has deserted him lately.

The fact that Lucius is even blamed for the robbery of Milo shows just how much Fortune has turned against him lately, even to the point where it is comic.

The bandits talk about how some of their bravest men have died recently and so they need new recruits. One of them found a strong-looking young man who seems promising. The potential new recruit greets the bandits and begins to tell a story.

The earlier story about the death of the thieves like Lamachus helped to set up this scenario that introduces a mysterious and important new character into the story.

The man introduces himself as a brigand from Thrace named Haemus. He is the heir to another great robber and used to be wealthy but lost it all when Caesar took an interest in his bandit group and wiped them out. Having finished his story, he produces two thousand gold coins and makes them as an offering to the other bandits, saying he can make them much more.

Haemus is able to convince the thieves of his trustworthiness. It is unclear if this is a testament to his storytelling ability or if the thieves are just so blinded by his gift of gold at the end. Perhaps the earlier deaths of Lamachus and the others foreshadow how the promise of gold will lead the thieves to make bad decisions.

The bandits unanimously vote Haemus their leader. Eventually, he learns about the hostage and how she tried to escape on Lucius. Haemus says he hopes he doesn't offend anyone but it's his opinion that the bandits are making a mistake by killing the girl and losing a potential source of profit. They could instead make a profit and still get revenge if they sell the hostage to a brothel.

While there is no outward sign that Haemus is lying, his suggestion to avoid killing the hostage so soon is a hint that perhaps he is up to something or even on the hostage's side. He understands that the thieves are motivated primarily by greed, which is why he tries to convince them with the promise of a big payday.

The robbers agree with the plan to sell the hostage to a brothel. The girl herself seems pleased with the plan, which Lucius finds shameful. Suddenly, however, Lucius overhears Haemus speaking quietly to the girl and revealing that he is in fact Tlepolemus, the girl's fiancé (Lucius also overhears that her name is Charite).

This section makes clear what the previous sections hinted at: Haemus is just a disguise for a man who is actually trying to help the hostage, Charite. While many characters use deception for evil schemes, this section shows an instance of deception being used for good.

Tlepolemus, still pretending to be Haemus, gets the robbers drunk and possibly adds a sedative to their wine. Tlepolemus ties them all up and then takes Charite and Lucius back to their hometown, where Charite is greeted by her parents. Tlepolemus then takes Lucius back to the bandit camp with other pack animals and a crowd of helpers. Together, they throw some of the tied-up bandits off a cliff and slice the others up with swords before taking the goods back.

The bandits are once again punished for their greediness, with all of them ending up dead. Their mistake is perhaps particularly egregious because they've made it before and even witnessed several of their comrades die on account of greed. The fact that they haven't changed their ways suggests just how strong an urge greed can be.

Charite and Tlepolemus get married. Charite continues to express gratitude towards Lucius and feeds him well. They decide to reward Lucius by letting him frolic in the fields where he can impregnate some of the mares to create new mules. After some delay, Lucius is allowed to roam free.

The marriage of Tlepolemus and Charite perhaps parallels the marriage of Cupid and Psyche, since both events happen after a period of separation and trial.

The male horses are jealous of Lucius and try to keep him away from the mares. Even worse, Lucius is forced to haul wood down a mountain, and the work is overseen by a cruel ass-boy who beats Lucius. The ass-boy frames Lucius for starting a fire and for causing other trouble. The ass-boy suggests getting rid of Lucius, but then someone suggests that it might be effective simply to castrate him. Lucius would rather kill himself but doesn't have the opportunity.

Despite Lucius's seeming good luck, he soon finds that his situation is not as pleasant as promised. Once again, Lucius is forced to endure what it feels like to be at the very bottom of society, so low that he even has to accept the orders of the cruel ass-boy.

While the ass-boy has Lucius tied up to await his punishment, however, a she-bear comes out of a cave and kills the ass-boy. Lucius runs away, thinking he's finally had some help from Fortune, but he is caught and finds that he is blamed for killing the ass-boy.

Sometimes bad luck works in Lucius's favor. In this particular case, perhaps the ass-boy was a victim of his own arrogance. The victory is short-lived, however, when Lucius finds himself blamed for the ass-boy's death.

Pieces of the ass-boy's corpse are found everywhere. The boy's parents blame Lucius, and they tie him up. Then, the boy's mother sticks a burning log up Lucius's butt, forcing Lucius to defend himself with explosive diarrhea that blinds them.

"Toilet" humor is relatively common in the texts that survive from ancient Rome, including even some of the most highly regarded works. It plays a major role in many of the picaresque (satirical adventure) novels that were inspired by The Golden Ass.

BOOK 8

A young man from a nearby town, who had been enslaved by Charite, appears and begins a story about how she and her family have all died.

The sudden death of Charite and Tlepolemus shows once again how fickle Fortune can be—the two of them are struck down at what seemed to be the height of their success.

In the story, there's a young man from a rich family who nevertheless has a rough reputation and is named Thrasyllus. Thrasyllus is one of Charite's suitors and is jealous when he finds out she's engaged to Tlepolemus instead. When Thrasyllus hears that Tlepolemus has rescued Charite from the bandits, he pretends to be one of the well-wishers, all the while hatching a plot.

As with many of the stories in The Golden Ass, *the primary motivation behind this tragedy is jealousy. Thrasyllus is in many ways a twisted counterpart to Tlepolemus, using similar means of deception but for a selfish plot rather than a selfless one.*

One day, Thrasyllus accompanies Tlepolemus on a hunting expedition. They expect to be hunting docile goats, but instead they find a wild boar, which slices through their hunting dogs. Thrasyllus suggests they face the boar bravely rather than running away. Tlepolemus attacks the boar, but Thrasyllus instead uses his spear to attack Tlepolemus's horse's leg. Tlepolemus falls down and is attacked by the boar and then by Thrasyllus's own spear. Thrasyllus lets Tlepolemus die and kills the boar too.

This scene is ironic because while it seems like Thrasyllus and Tlepolemus are hunting game, in fact it is Thrasyllus who is hunting Tlepolemus. The fact that Thrasyllus kills Tlepolemus like a boar emphasizes how little he regards his supposed friend and how far he is willing to go in order to satisfy his own jealous greed.

Charite is overcome with grief. She tries to kill herself with every method that doesn't involve a weapon, but Thrasyllus does whatever he can to keep her alive. Eventually, Thrasyllus gets impatient with how long Charite mourns and confesses how he feels to her, which horrifies Charite. Charite sees that the whole thing was a plot by Thrasyllus.

In his greed, however, Thrasyllus is unable to comprehend how Charite herself is reacting to the situation. Perhaps overconfident after his seeming success, Thrasyllus underestimates the difficulty that Charite will prove to be.

One night, the ghost of Tlepolemus comes to visit Charite. He confirms that Thrasyllus assassinated him and tells her to run away from Thrasyllus. Charite shares this vision with no one. She promises Thrasyllus that she is only avoiding him because she needs to mourn her husband for the required period of time in order to avoid awakening his vengeful ghost. Thrasyllus is still impatient, so Charite pretends to give in and says that while she won't marry Thrasyllus until after the mourning period, they can meet up sooner, as long as they are discreet.

The return of Tlepolemus's ghost shows once again how people can influence the present even after death. Despite being a captive victim for much of the story, here Charite begins to show some ingenuity and craftiness. This scene suggests that perhaps deception is more acceptable when someone is forced into it by their circumstances.

Charite tells Thrasyllus how he can sneak up to her bedroom. He does so, but a nurse offers him wine laced with a narcotic and he falls into a deep sleep. Charite tells Thrasyllus's sleeping body that instead of killing him, she'll gouge his eyes out for revenge. She does so with a hairpin. Charite then goes to Tlepolemus's coffin and tells the whole town what Thrasyllus did. She kills herself with Tlepolemus's sword so that she can join him. And so the young man ends his story.

Gouging out eyes is a common punishment in Greek and Roman stories. In this case, perhaps it is fitting that Thrasyllus is punished in this way for looking greedily at Charite. Though the ending of the story is tragic, there's a harsh justice in Thrasyllus at least getting a punishment that fits his misdeeds.

The audience is moved by the young man's story. The enslaved people wonder what to do now that their enslavers are dead. They are afraid of their new enslavers and run off, and Lucius is taken along. They are warned that the way is dangerous and that there are bandits ahead, but they press on anyway. When they make it to one town, they are attacked by country people who believe they are bandits but who stop once they realize the misunderstanding.

As someone very familiar with Greek literature, the author Apuleius would have likely taken inspiration for Lucius's journey from Homer's Odyssey, *one of the most famous stories about a journey of all time. Just as Odysseus was tossed on the sea from island to island, Lucius as a donkey seems to be passed around from owner to owner.*

The humans and animals in the group recover from being attacked. They continue to travel for a while and then stop in a hamlet to rest. Lucius begins to tell the story of a notable crime that was committed in the town. An enslaved man was in love with a free woman, causing him to set his enslaver's granary on fire. The free woman was herself upset to have all that done in her name, so she hanged herself. The enslaver responded by torturing and killing the man.

The violence and injustice of the story that Lucius tells is perhaps inspired by the story he just heard about Tlepolemus and Charite. Both stories capture how sometimes human life can be ended through sudden and often unfair violence.

In another town, people try to buy Lucius. He is eventually sold to Philebus, who takes Lucius back to some "priests" who also act as male sex workers. They are disappointed to see that Lucius is a **donkey** and not a man. Lucius's new owners load him down and take him around town, using him to hold the money they make from their sex work, all while giving the outward appearance of a religious group. The priests are having sex with a young man when suddenly they are interrupted by some other men who believe Lucius is their stolen donkey. Lucius's owners run off with him again.

Although this section satirizes the hypocrisy of some supposed religious adherents, it would be wrong to interpret it as a satire of all religion, given how loyalty to the gods is rewarded in other parts of the book. The association of religion with sex work suggests that many people use religion in a transactional way to get money.

Lucius ends up on the estate of a tenant farmer, whose cook has promised to prepare a stag's leg for everyone to eat. But the stag's leg is stolen by a dog. When the cook finds out that the stag leg is missing, he recommends killing Lucius to cook his haunch instead.

Lucius finds himself in the worst danger of the journey: perhaps this section can be read as a parody of how the poor and the people at the bottom of society, like Lucius, are sometimes metaphorically "eaten" (exploited) to further the whims of the rich.

BOOK 9

Desperate, Lucius considers how he can avoid being cooked. He breaks free and destroys the master's dining room. News comes that rabid dogs have attacked the estate and that some of the other livestock are acting wild due to rabies. Everyone in Philebus's group believes this is the reason why Lucius is mad as well. They lock Lucius in a bedroom so that he can either die from rabies without infecting anyone else or recover.

Lucius's quite rational desire to protect himself is interpreted as madness by those around him. This section humorously looks at how sometimes the most reasonable course of action may look insane to people who hold different values.

Eventually, the men decide to test if Lucius is better by giving him water. Lucius drinks it normally, and they take this as a sign that he has recovered from rabies. Philebus and the other men decide to move on with Lucius and end up staying at a hostel where they hear a story about a pauper's wife, who turns out to be unfaithful. Lucius recounts the story.

This section begins a whole cycle of stories that explore the idea of faithfulness, particularly in marriage, and question what the consequences are (if any) of choosing to be unfaithful.

In the story, there's a pauper who is a poor artisan. The pauper's wife has a reputation for sneaking out at night to have sex with other men. One night, she almost gets caught, so she has her young lover hide in a jar. The husband says he's just sold the very same jar for six denarii, so the wife lies and says she's actually already sold it for seven denarii. The husband asks where the buyer is, and the wife responds that he is actually in the jar inspecting it as they speak.

The pauper's wife is a sly character, and the story does not necessarily make it clear whether she deserves to be punished for her deceptiveness or rewarded for her ingenuity. Though at times The Golden Ass *seems to uphold very traditional ideas about faithfulness (by showing unfaithful characters being punished), this interpretation is complicated by the fact that other stories seem to celebrate the cleverness of unfaithful characters.*

The lover comes out of the jar and pretends to be a buyer. The pauper's wife makes her husband clean the jar while she and her lover have sex on top of it. The husband eventually goes and delivers the jar to the lover's house. This is the end of the jar story.

The story of the pauper's wife ends up in a clear victory for her, showing that not all unfaithfulness gets punished.

Lucius's owners keep coming up with new schemes to make money. Suddenly, however, they are apprehended and accused of stealing from temples and being perverts. Lucius is taken away and sold again, this time to a baker, where he is made to do mill work. Lucius pretends not to understand the work, hoping this will get him assigned to an easier task. But then he sees people around with cudgels and suddenly starts to do the work correctly, making everyone laugh.

Despite Lucius's many changes in ownership, the people who own him as a donkey are generally all similar in that they treat him cruelly. Despite Lucius's scheming and tactics, there is no way to get out of the drudgery that the baker has prepared for him.

Lucius despairs seeing the sorry state of all the other beasts around him. He decides to tell a story about his owner, the baker. The baker is normally a sensible man, but he has one of the worst wives in the world, with nothing redeemable about her. The baker's wife is selfish and doesn't pay respect to the gods, and she is particularly cruel to Lucius. Lucius sees that the wife is cheating on her husband with a young man and that there's an older woman who helps her.

The deceptions of the baker's wife mirror the deceptions of the pauper's wife in an earlier story, although arguably the baker's wife is portrayed less favorably. Perhaps her negative portrayal is influenced by Lucius's own bad feelings towards both her and the baker, illustrating how stories can be shaped by the people who tell them.

The old woman gives the baker's wife advice by telling her a story about Barbarus, who is on the town council and who keeps a close eye on what his wife, Arete, does. The baker's wife is familiar with this couple. One day, when Barbarus has to go on a journey, he entrusts his loyal enslaved man Myrmex with watching over his wife.

A new story begins showing infidelity from yet another angle. Because the unfaithful baker's wife is the audience, the old woman's story will have interesting parallels with the baker's wife's own life.

A man named Philesitherus notices Arete and is tempted by how difficult it would be to reach her. Philesitherus confesses his passion to Myrmex and offers to pay him for his help. Myrmex is horrified at first, but eventually finds himself tempted by the money. He agrees to help.

Philesitherus is one of many characters who succumbs to temptation. His attraction in particular to getting things that are difficult to obtain highlights an interesting aspect of greed.

But that night, soon after Myrmex leads Philesitherus to Arete's bedroom, Barbarus makes a surprise return trip. Barbarus can hear them having sex and demands to be let in, but Myrmex pretends he can't find the key. He stalls until he can get Philesitherus out. But in his rush to leave, Philesitherus forgets his slippers. Barbarus finds the slippers and knows immediately what happened, but he hides the slippers away and doesn't tell anyone what he knows.

Unlike some of the husband characters, Barbarus is not a complete fool. His decision to hide the slippers he finds shows that he himself is capable of deceptive behavior and so tricking him will not be easy.

Barbarus orders for Myrmex to be chained up without saying why. By coincidence, Philesitherus happens to be walking by and is shocked to see Myrmex tied up. Philesitherus gets angry at Myrmex and falsely accuses him of making up lies. The performance is so convincing that Barbarus himself believes it. Barbarus pardons Myrmex and then asks him to return the slippers to whomever he stole them from.

Despite having solid evidence of his wife's infidelity, however, in the end Barbarus is still tricked by Philesitherus. The ending celebrates the ingenuity of Philesitherus, who despite his many mistakes and the evidence against him is nevertheless able to get away with his infidelity.

And so the old woman's story ends. The baker's wife wishes that she had a lover as capable as the one from the story.

The moral of the story seems to be that even intelligent husbands can be fooled by a little trickery—a moral that is perfectly suited to its target audience, the baker's wife.

That night, Lucius is allowed to roam free, and he sees the baker's wife attempting to cheat on her husband. But just as the wife and her young lover begin to kiss, the baker comes back sooner than expected. The wife pretends to be innocent and asks what's wrong. The baker describes how his friend's wife is unfaithful.

This scene of the baker's wife attempting to be unfaithful mirrors the story that occurred just before it, and it prompts yet another story that examines the idea of infidelity.

In the baker's story, the fuller comes home for dinner, and it turns out the fuller's wife is having sex with a younger man. The wife tries to hide her lover by having him hide under a wicker cage. The trick works at first, and they begin to eat.

A fuller is a person who cleans wool. Because the baker is the one telling the story and because he potentially suspects his own wife of infidelity, it soon becomes clear that this story will take a more negative view of unfaithfulness than some of the previous stories.

Suddenly, sulfur from the laundry business makes the young lover sneeze. The fuller thinks it is his wife who sneezed. He soon realizes, however, that the lover is hiding under the wicker cage. The fuller rages, but the baker assures his friend that the lover will die soon anyway on account of the sulfur. The baker then advises the fuller's wife to get away to give her husband some time to calm down. This is the end of the baker's story.

In this story, the characters are punished for their attempts to be clever rather than rewarded for them. It becomes clear that the fuller's wife is not as clever as she thinks, and by forgetting the sulfur, she shows she has not thought of all possibilities. The wicker cage is perhaps meant to correspond with the jar from the pauper's wife's story, and this story's negative view of infidelity provides a rebuttal to the celebration of infidelity in that earlier story.

The baker's wife calls the fuller's wife a disgrace, but she has a guilty conscience because of her own infidelity. She feeds her husband, the baker, dinner that she had originally prepared for her lover. Lucius tries to find some way to expose her deceit. He sees that the lover's fingertips are sticking out from his hiding place, so Lucius brings one hoof down on the lover's fingers, causing the young lover to cry out and get caught.

The baker's wife's response to the story is an act to attempt to hide her own infidelity. The fact that Lucius is able to see through her act suggests that perhaps she is not as successful at deceit as some of the clever wives from the previous stories.

The baker promises the young man that, unlike the fuller, he won't kill him with sulfur fumes. The baker locks his wife away and then has sex with the lover instead. Then he has the lover restrained and beaten but not killed. The baker makes plans to divorce his wife and throws her out of the house.

In this story, the baker gets the upper hand, and he cruelly uses his advantage to punish the wife and her lover. Perhaps he goes too far, foreshadowing the events that follow.

The baker's wife plots revenge. She finds a witch and begins buttering her up, asking her to either make her husband more agreeable or to send some terrible spirit to haunt him. The witch tries to change the baker's heart, but it doesn't work. Frustrated, she instead sends the spirit of a murdered woman to haunt the baker.

While the baker's wife was the one being unfaithful before, her husband's extreme revenge has arguably changed the equation, and now the baker's wife's scheming is more justified than it might have been before.

One afternoon, a strange mourning woman shows up at the mill. She seems to want to discuss something with the baker. Soon after, the woman disappears, and the baker is found dead, hanging from a beam.

This is yet another story that seems to suggest the involvement of witchcraft without directly invoking magic. Presumably the mourning woman is a ghost who prompts the baker to kill himself, but this isn't confirmed.

The baker's daughter comes from a neighboring town to mourn him. She puts many of the baker's goods up for a public auction, and this includes Lucius. He ends up being bought by a new farmer and again toils away for a full year.

Once again, Lucius finds that Fortune has sent him in a new direction, illustrating the strange way that his story is affected by the other stories occurring around him.

One night, the farmer has a visitor who is stopped by rain. The farmer offers him hospitality. In the middle of dinner, a geyser of what seems to be blood shoots up from out of the ground, but they learn that it's wine boiling up from the vats in the cellar. They see this as a bad omen.

Bad omens occur throughout The Golden Ass, *although they are not always this explicit. The stories' heavy use of foreshadowing helps set the audience's expectations while also occasionally upending them.*

The bad omen is fulfilled when the farmer learns that a greedy landlord has sacked the land of a tenant who is friends with the farmer's three sons, who are fully grown. The landlord wants to throw the pauper off the property and claim the property for himself, starting a lawsuit over where the property border lies.

All the previous stories about greed foreshadow how the landlord's greed will potentially lead him to ruin. In this case, the landlord's greed causes him to ignore justice for the sake of a quick profit.

The farmer gets some friends and associates to help testify where the property border should be. But the landlord is mad with greed and doesn't care. In fact, this only causes the landlord to double down and insist that his enslaved people will soon physically carry the farmer off the property.

This escalation of events serves to highlight how truly greedy the landlord is and how this causes him to ignore normal morality. Though he is a wealthy man with power, his behavior resembles that of the thieves from the cave, showing how greed can make a wide range of people act the same way.

One of the farmer's three sons says that the landlord shouldn't be allowed to get away with acting like a one-man government just because he has a lot of money. He argues that all free men, even poor ones, should be protected by the law. But this speech only makes the landlord angrier and more determined.

This story highlights the conflict between the rich and the poor. As someone who was recently turned into a donkey, Lucius is perhaps more sympathetic to people in the lower class than he was before.

The landlord unleashes his giant dogs to attack the crowds. Many are bitten and wounded. The farmer's youngest son trips in the confusion and is torn apart. The two surviving brothers out of the three sons help beat back the dogs with stones and then vow revenge. They try to attack the landlord directly, but he impales the one brother with a spear.

The biting of the dogs symbolizes the wild hunger and greed of the landlord. Though the cause of the three sons is just, the landlord is able to kill one of them, showing how wealth can sometimes give people the power to ignore justice.

One of the landlord's enslaved men tries to attack the remaining brother from the three sons with a rock. The attack is ineffective, but the brother pretends his hand is maimed. The brother taunts the landlord, saying he'd chop his head off if his hand hadn't been maimed. He says that the landlord can keep taking poor people's land as much as he wants, but he'll always have neighbors somewhere.

The brother who survives uses trickery to try to take the landlord down. Like Tlepolemus, the brother's trickery is motivated by a just cause, and perhaps that is part of the reason why he is successful.

The landlord is enraged and goes to strike. But he finds out that the brother from the three sons is still able to move his hand. The brother slices the landlord up many times and then cuts his own throat to avoid being captured by the landlord's remaining enslaved men.

Though the death of all three sons is tragic, the fact that the last son kills the landlord and dies on his own terms by suicide suggests that a certain sort of justice has been carried out.

The farmer is so distraught to hear about the deaths of his three sons that even the death of the oppressive landlord gives him no joy. He slits his own throat, just like his son did.

This section, however, questions the value of the justice from the previous passage, since the father of the three sons is so distraught by their deaths that any victory feels hollow.

The gardener is sad to see the collapse of the estate. He takes Lucius out and is confronted by a soldier. The gardener doesn't speak Latin, so the soldier speaks in broken Greek and tries to take Lucius away for himself. The gardener responds by attacking the soldier. The soldier is humiliated to be beaten by a gardener, so at first, he says nothing. Ultimately, however, the soldier finds a way to get the gardener locked up in prison, and he claims Lucius for himself.

Fitting with the theme of unjust violence, Lucius finds himself seized by a soldier. The soldier symbolizes the cruelty and the arbitrariness of authority that is based on violence. He bends justice to suit his own interests, getting the gardener locked up in prison.

BOOK 10

The soldier loads Lucius up with his armor and begins to travel. They stop, and the soldier leaves Lucius with an enslaved person. A couple days later, a terrible crime occurs there, and Lucius retells the story.

Even when in the service of a cruel owner like the soldier, Lucius keeps up his interest in stories, perhaps showing how stories can entertain or even help people endure hardships.

In the story of the crime, there is an unfaithful stepmother who begins to lust after her stepson. She tries to hide her extreme lust by passing it off as illness, but eventually she can't anymore, and so she summons her stepson and tells him everything. He is upset but doesn't want to provoke her with a quick refusal. He then retreats to talk the matter over with an old teacher and decides that the best option is to run away.

Like the marriage stories from earlier, this new story focuses on a woman who is unfaithful to traditional family obligations. The association of lust with illness recalls the earlier story of Cupid and Psyche where the love god Cupid was portrayed as frequently drunk.

The stepmother secures poison to give her stepson, but her biological son drinks some by accident and dies. She then uses this as an opportunity to attempt to frame her stepson. The stepson ends up on trial for murder. He is almost condemned to death, but one member of the judicial council, a doctor, tells everyone that the stepson didn't buy the poison from him.

The evil stepmother has been a stock character for a long time, and the example here comes long before fairy tales like "Cinderella" were written down (although many of these fairy tales, including "Cinderella," trace their origins back to ancient Greek and Roman stories that pre-date even The Golden Ass*).*

In fact, the doctor had suspected the poison might be used for murder, so he sold the stepmother's enslaved servant a sleeping potion instead. Everyone goes to the biological son's tomb and finds that he is still alive. The stepmother's enslaved servant is crucified and the stepmother is exiled. And so the story ends.

The confusion of poison and sleeping potions is another storytelling trope with a long history—this example comes almost a millennium-and-a-half before the famous use of a sleeping potion in Romeo and Juliet.

The soldier who owns Lucius sells him to some local enslaved people, two brothers who serve a rich man. One is a pastry chef, and the other is a cook. They bring back leftovers from lavish dinners, and Lucius eats some of them while the brothers are out. The brothers argue about which of them is stealing the food, only to catch Lucius in the act. Rather than punish him, they find this so funny that they can't stop laughing. They give Lucius some alcohol.

The fact that the enslaved brothers treat Lucius better than any of his other owners suggests that perhaps people in a low position in society have more sympathy for lowly creatures like donkeys and are less arbitrarily cruel than wealthier people. Rather than punishing Lucius for stealing food, they find him amusing and even encourage him.

The enslaver of the two brothers buys Lucius and then hands him over to a wealthy freedman named Thiasus. Thiasus treats Lucius well and even teaches him how to recline at a table. Rumors spread about what an intelligent **donkey** Lucius is.

Thiasus also treats Lucius well and as a result, Lucius is able to demonstrate some of his surprising skills. This reflects how the way people act is often influenced by the way they are treated and what expectations are set for them.

Thiasus travels to Thessaly to buy wild beasts and gladiators. He then comes back to Corinth, where crowds of people are eager to see the clever ass, Lucius. One of the visitors to Lucius is a wealthy lady who develops a lust for Lucius and pays a high price to spend a night in bed with him.

The woman who wants to sleep with Lucius is yet another example of a character motivated by lust and greed. Though her desire to sleep with a donkey is strange, this perhaps only serves to highlight how powerfully lust can act to make people desire strange things.

That night the wealthy lady comes to Lucius and gets naked. He worries about how he'll have sex with her now that his legs and mouth and penis are so much bigger. But the woman has sex with him and is satisfied enough to arrange to pay the same price for another night.

As with before, sex in The Golden Ass *can be explicit and is often played for humor. Here the ridiculousness of the situation only serves to further highlight the extent of the woman's greed.*

It turns out, however, that the wealthy lady who has sex with Lucius is a condemned woman. She has committed crimes and has been sentenced to be devoured by wild animals. Her story begins years ago, when she's still married to a young man. Her father-in-law left his wife (mother of the young man), but the wife secretly gave birth to a daughter, meaning that the wealthy woman's husband has a secret sister.

The story of the woman who sleeps with Lucius bears some resemblance to the earlier story about the lusty evil stepmother. Both stories involve complicated family relationships that center on a mother who neglects her duties to the family out of jealousy.

The mother reveals to her son that she has been hiding the existence of his sister. The son agrees to keep the secret and marries his sister off to a friend. But the son's jealous wife (the condemned woman, who is doomed to be torn apart by wild animals and who sleeps with Lucius in **donkey** form) believes that her husband's secret sister is actually his mistress. She prepares a trap, first beating the girl and then shoving a torch between her legs to kill her.

The jealous wife has been driven mad by her own jealousy and this is what causes her to murder the totally innocent sister. Like Charite, the sister is punished for things that she didn't even do, evoking the general unfairness of life for many people.

The girl's husband and the jealous wife's husband are both outraged. The jealous wife decides she needs to procure poison from a crooked doctor to give her husband. She does so, and he dies. The doctor also dies in the process. The jealous wife decides to obtain even more poison from the dead doctor's wife. She kills her baby daughter so that she won't inherit her dead father's money. She also tries to poison the doctor's wife, and succeeds, but the doctor's wife is able to tell part of her story to the governor before dying.

Poison in this story also connects it to the earlier story of the evil stepmother. In this case, the poison perhaps symbolizes jealousy, which seems to infect the jealous wife like a poison, causing her to spread destruction to practically everyone else that she encounters in the story.

Because the governor hears the story, the jealous wife is condemned to death by wild beasts. The day arrives for the gladiatorial show where the woman will be executed. It starts with a grand spectacle where attractive actors pretend to be the gods. They pantomime the Judgment of Paris. Lucius gives a brief philosophical aside about the limits of human judgment and how the Athenians condemned Socrates to death before apologizing for interrupting the tale.

The judgement of Paris is a famous scene in The Iliad, *when Paris is presented with possible gifts from several goddesses and chooses the gift offered by Aphrodite (Venus): the most beautiful woman in the world (Helen of Troy). Just as Paris causes the Trojan War with his lust, the jealous wife has caused her own destruction through lust, making the pantomime of the judgement of Paris a humorous but fitting accompaniment to the events.*

After the Judgement of Paris, they bring out the jealous wife, who is condemned to death by wild beasts. First, however, they have set things up so that Lucius, still a **donkey**, can publicly have sex with the woman—there is even a bed for them.

Though The Golden Ass *can be explicit about sex, this punishment for the jealous wife makes it clear that sex is still associated with shame in many respects.*

Lucius fears at first for his honor if he has sex with the wicked jealous wife before ultimately admitting that he fears even more for his life, since if he stays, he runs the risk of getting torn apart by the same wild animals intended for the woman. He decides to run away and makes it six miles to another town before deciding to stop for sleep.

Perhaps after hearing so many stories about deception, Lucius has finally learned how to make his own escape without getting caught. The fact that he starts talking about his honor, only to admit that his real concern was for his own life, provides a humorous example of how even noble intentions can have an element of selfishness beneath them.

BOOK 11

Lucius wakes up in terror during the first watch of the night. He takes the opportunity to purify himself in the ocean water and offer up praise to several goddesses, asking them to end his suffering. A woman with a divine form rises out of the water. She claims to be the "mother of the universe" and the "queen of all elements" and says she is moved by his pleas. She reveals her true name to be Isis.

In the last book of The Golden Ass, *Lucius finally experiences a reprieve from all the suffering that he went through in the previous books. Though Isis might seem like a character who comes out of nowhere—perhaps even an example of a* deus ex machina *(a sudden, unlikely resolution of a problem)—the theme of loyalty to the gods has been woven throughout all of the previous books.*

Isis takes pity on Lucius and promises he'll be greeted by a priest with a garland of **roses**. In exchange for the blessing, the goddess asks Lucius to devote the remainder of his life to her. She withdraws.

Like many of the other gods, Isis doesn't give help without expecting something in return, in this case, a pledge of loyalty from Lucius.

Lucius eagerly plans to follow the instructions Isis gave him. Later, a grand procession comes by, with many people offering prayers, music, and flowers in praise of different gods and goddesses. Lucius sees the priest with **roses** that Isis promised him would be there. He carefully takes a bite from the rose garland and is instantly turned back into a man.

After his long journey as a donkey, Lucius is finally turned back into a man. Befitting this happy occasion, the scene around him is a grand procession. Notably, the procession has a religious tone to it, suggesting that Lucius has been saved by his faithfulness.

Lucius is naked, so the priest (who has also been warned by an oracle) gets some clothes for him. The grand procession continues. Lucius begins to dedicate his life to the worship of the goddess Isis and befriends her priests. The priests somehow manage to get back Lucius's horse, which he hasn't seen since he left it with Photis in Hypata. Lucius increases his efforts to worship Isis and agrees to follow a prescribed diet.

The nakedness of Lucius suggests that, in a way, he has been reborn now that he is a man again. Lucius is overcome with gratitude, and the steps he takes to worship Isis suggest that he is serious about honoring the deal that Isis presented to him in his first vision of her over the water.

Lucius goes through rituals, some of which he is not allowed to describe to the reader. To better serve the cult of Isis, Lucius moves to Rome. He gets more and more involved with his new religion but still feels that he hasn't done enough, and so he also begins to worship the god Osiris, who is husband to Isis but who requires different rituals. Lucius goes further, fasting and shaving his head. He also gets involved in a legal profession in Rome, arguing cases in Latin.

Lucius's actions show that he continues to grow in faithfulness and that he is leaving behind the greed, hunger, and curiosity that defined many of his prior actions. His involvement in law perhaps recalls the earlier scene when he was falsely accused of murdering three young men while staying with Milo. It also perhaps connects Lucius to the author, Apuleius, who studied and practiced law.

At one point, the god Osiris appears to Lucius in his sleep. He tells Lucius that he has done good work so far and that he should continue to work in a legal profession. He promises that Lucius has a good future in his cult, so Lucius shaves his head again and joyfully shows off his baldness wherever he goes.

On the one hand, the ending of The Golden Ass *is relatively straightforward: after enduring many hardships, Lucius is finally rewarded by the gods and so he pledges his loyalty to them. It is a happy ending. Nevertheless, this straightforward religious reading is complicated by earlier events and by all the other characters who experienced unhappy endings, some of whom did nothing to deserve their bad endings. Ultimately, the book doesn't give a consistent answer to the question of loyalty and whether people in general get what they deserve.*

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