

Art



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF YASMINA REZA

Born in France to a Russian-Iranian engineer father and a Hungarian violinist mother, Yasmina Reza attended drama school and worked as an actress before rising to prominence as a playwright in the late 1980s with two back-to-back successes: 1986's *Conversations After a Burial* and 1989's *Winter Crossing*. Reza's smash success came with the 1994 premiere of *Art*, which debuted in France and quickly inspired productions in England and America. For the three major productions of *Art*, Reza earned a Molière award for best production, an Olivier for best comedy, and a Tony Award for Best Play. Reza's success continued with 2006's *God of Carnage*, originally staged in France; the play once again made a splash in the U.K. and the United States, earning Reza yet another Olivier and Tony. A 2011 film version co-written and directed by controversial director Roman Polanski brought Reza to even further prominence. The author of several novels and a biography of former French president Nicolas Sarkozy, Reza's searing, satirical work often explores the dark underbelly of the bourgeoisie and the anxieties that come with friendship, parenthood, and social niceties.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early 1990s were a time of economic prosperity and growth in the United States, but in France, the economy was depressed. In 1992, France had just signed the Maastricht Treaty, one of two treaties that would form the constitutional basis of the European Union. France was experiencing a moment of decline but gearing up to enter an era of globalism and openness, and the anxieties in these shifts are reflected in the pages of Yasmina Reza's play. As Marc and Yvan struggle to understand how their friend Serge could have purchased a two-hundred-thousand-franc painting, their anxieties are compounded by the fact that not only was the painting absurdly expensive, but it seems to be about nothing. As Marc and Serge engage in a battle of wits and words, their overt pretentiousness and their conflicting ideas about the nature and value of art are placed on display. There is something uniquely French about the fight they have—as residents of Paris, a place deeply steeped in its rich and complex artistic history, and as members of the upper or at least upper-middle class, Serge and Marc see themselves as part of a tradition of aesthetic appreciation—but refuse to see how they are also part of a tradition of grandiose displays of wealth, self-aggrandizement, and the pretentious inflation of egos as a result of over-engagement with often meaningless art.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Contemporary art is a fertile subject for drama, and plays about both artists' and consumers' relationships to art have achieved great success on Broadway, the West End, and beyond. Stephen Sondheim's 1984 musical *Sunday in the Park With George* originally starred Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters (as the obsessive, visionary pointillist painter Georges Seurat and his mistress Dot). Unable to understand Georges' work, Dot grows frustrated with her partner's pretension and aloofness and ultimately abandons him—though pregnant with his child. Also similar is the 2009 play *Red*, which originally opened in London and starred Alfred Molina as abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko and Eddie Redmayne as his assistant. In 1959, while Rothko is hard at work on a series of commissioned paintings for the exclusive Four Seasons restaurant in New York City, his assistant questions him as to his motivations for taking on the project, which his assistant sees as vapid and commercial, while Rothko wrestles with his own values and ideals about the nature of art, what it should do, and for whom it should be. In real life, Rothko, after viewing the restaurant space in which his paintings were to be hung, refused to finish the commission and returned his cash advance to the commissioners. Additionally, Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch* is a novel that revolves around several characters' complicated relationships to a single painting, and how it comes to affect them over the course of several years.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Art*
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama; comedy; absurdist theatre
- **Setting:** Paris, France
- **Climax:** After a long, savage night of verbally and physically fighting over Serge's controversial acquisition of a two-hundred-thousand-franc, all-white painting, Serge urges his friend Marc, who was "disturbed" by Serge's purchase, to desecrate the painting by drawing on it with one of their friend's Yvan felt-tipped pens, as Yvan looks on in horror.
- **Antagonist:** The Antrios

EXTRA CREDIT

Whiteout. Although the all-white painting Serge acquires is fake—as is its painter, the renowned "Antrios"—there are some very famous and very controversial all-white paintings in several important and well-respected galleries today. The San

Francisco Museum of Modern Art is home to one of Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 series *White Paintings*, a collection of modular all-white paintings featuring two-, three-, four-, and seven-panel pieces, which were conceived by the artist as art that "looked untouched by human hands." The real-life inspiration for Antrios may very well be Robert Ryman, whose white paintings—which stretch back to the 1970s, the same time Serge says his Antrios was created—have sold for sums as high as \$15 million dollars as recently as 2014, and a retrospective of Ryman's all-white, "intellectual baggage"-inducing work was shown in New York City in 2015.



PLOT SUMMARY

As the play begins, Marc addresses the audience and explains that his good friend Serge—a successful dermatologist whom Marc has known for over fifteen years—has recently bought a **painting**. The painting is four feet by five feet, and it is entirely white save for a few faint diagonal lines running through it. Serge has been lusting after the painting for months, and Marc is going over to Serge's flat to take a look at it. At Serge's, the two men examine the painting and each separately feel a series of "wordless emotions." When Marc asks Serge if the painting was expensive, Serge reveals that it cost him two hundred thousand francs, though he tells Marc that he actually got it for a bargain—it was done by a famous painter named Antrios. When Serge asks Marc what he thinks of the painting, Marc tells him he thinks it is "shit." Serge addresses the audience directly to explain that Marc is an intellectual and an "enemy of modernism" who simply cannot understand the painting. Serge becomes angry with Marc, and urges him to explain exactly why he thinks the painting is shit. Marc cannot back his feelings up, but steps forward to address the audience, revealing that he is deeply unsettled by the "ridiculous" painting. To calm his nerves, he plans to go visit their friend Yvan, and discuss the painting with him.

At Yvan's, Marc comes across his friend down on all fours, searching for the cap to one of his special felt-tip pens. Marc and Yvan discuss Yvan's impending wedding to his fiancé Catherine, and then Marc begins telling Yvan about Serge's new purchase. Marc rails against how ridiculous the painting is, while Yvan asks how much it cost and who the painter is. Yvan has never heard of Antrios, and is astounded and concerned to hear that the painting cost two hundred thousand francs. Yvan ultimately decides, however, that as long as the painting makes Serge happy and isn't hurting anyone, it's fine for him to have bought it. Marc insists that the painting is hurting him personally. Moreover, he's upset that Serge seems to have lost his sense of humor about himself—and about art—entirely. Yvan assures Marc that he will go over to Serge's apartment, see the painting for himself, and get Serge to laugh.

At Serge's flat, Serge and Yvan sit in the common room—which

is now devoid of the Antrios—discussing the upcoming wedding. Serge asks Yvan if he has seen Marc recently; Yvan lies and says he has not. Serge admits that he saw Marc the other day—Marc left upset, though, by Serge's newest purchase. He asks if Yvan wants to see the piece of art that has "ruined" him, and goes to fetch the Antrios. As Yvan considers the painting, he begins to really like it. Both men discuss the "magnetic" pull the painting has. Serge reveals the price to Yvan, and after a moment of silence, both burst out laughing. Serge confides that Marc hated the painting, and responded humorlessly to it. Serge, however, doesn't blame Marc for overreacting to the painting—he believes Marc doesn't understand modern art at all, and asks Yvan to agree with him on his belief that their beloved Marc has begun to "atrophy." Yvan remains silent.

At Marc's apartment, Yvan fills Marc in on his recent visit to Serge's. Yvan tells Marc that the two of them laughed over the painting, and Marc is shocked. Yvan reveals that he actually liked the Antrios, and that it inspired feelings in him; he argues that there is a "system" at work behind the piece. Marc derides Yvan and laughs at him, accusing him of "parroting Serge's nonsense." Yvan warns Marc that he notices Marc has become bitter over the years. Marc leadingly asks Yvan to describe the feelings he felt looking at the painting, and whether it made him happy. Yvan addresses the audience, revealing that though the painting didn't make him happy, he's not a very happy person to begin with. Marc then steps forward and in his own monologue wonders why he is so bothered by Serge's obsession with modern art, and then vows to stop attacking Serge over the Antrios. He promises himself that he will be on his best behavior with his two friends the next time he sees them.

Marc and Serge are alone in Serge's apartment, and Serge tells Marc that Yvan liked the Antrios. Marc asks to take another look at the piece, and Serge fetches it from the other room. The two men stare at the painting, and neither says anything. Serge suggests they not let themselves get "bogged down" by their feelings about the piece. Changing the subject, Serge suggests Marc alleviate some stress in his life by reading a book by Seneca, the Roman philosopher. He describes it as a "masterpiece" and an "incredibly modern" text. Marc circles back to the painting, though, revealing that he has been thinking a lot about Serge's purchase, but has decided to be happy for him. He apologizes for his initial overreaction to the painting, and notes that he has been tightly wound. Serge again urges Marc to read Seneca. Marc is annoyed by this, and says so. Serge apologizes for being obnoxious and superior.

Marc asks Serge where he is going to hang the painting, and whether he'll frame it; Serge replies that it would be ridiculous to frame the painting, as the artist would not want the canvas interrupted. Marc teases Serge for responding to his question so pretentiously, but to avoid arguing, changes the subject and asks what movie they'll go to see once Yvan arrives—Yvan is

running close to half an hour late. Serge expresses his extreme upset at Yvan's lateness, but Marc accuses Serge of taking out his own suppressed frustrations with Marc on the poor Yvan. Serge, now addressing the audience, admits that he is frustrated with Marc, and wonders why the Antrios has put such a strain on their friendship. Marc steps forward into a monologue and expresses similar concerns. He thinks that the Antrios is just the latest development in a long history of small grievances between the two friends, and is both angry and afraid that Serge has come to value art and modernist ideals over friendship.

The doorbell rings and Yvan blusters in, in crisis mode. There is a stressful development in the wedding planning—Yvan and Catherine are fighting as they struggle to figure out whose names to include on the invitation. Yvan's mother is now involved in the fight, and he feels pressure on all sides to please all the women in his life. Marc snidely suggests that Yvan, to relieve his stress, read the book by Seneca. Serge and Marc begin arguing about the book, but Yvan insists that after his day he cannot handle any more fighting. He suggests they all head out for dinner. Marc and Serge argue about this, too, unable to decide on a restaurant. Yvan threatens to go home if the fighting continues. Marc and Serge then descend upon Yvan, telling him that if things are so stressful he should just cancel the wedding entirely rather than allow himself to be bossed around by Catherine. Yvan attempts to change the subject by bringing up the Antrios, telling Serge that he was thinking of him the other day when, at his stationery company job, they had to print several posters by an artist who paints white flowers on white backgrounds. Serge, offended, retorts that the Antrios is not white. The three begin to fight about the painting—when Yvan attempts to backtrack and state that he loves the Antrios, Marc becomes upset and even offended. Yvan again threatens to leave, but the petty fighting only gets worse. Yvan, unable to take anymore, walks out the door. Marc offers to leave as well. Serge chastises Marc for having upset the sensitive Yvan, and Marc, in a moment of true reflection, wonders what any of the three of them even have in common anymore.

The doorbell rings, and Yvan blusters back in. He says that he realized on the way downstairs that Marc, due to his "insane aggression," was deeply in need of help. Yvan reveals that the other day, during a session with his therapist, he discussed Marc and Serge's relationship, and his therapist gave him the answer to their problems. Marc and Serge are upset that Yvan would have brought them up in therapy, but agree to hear what the therapist said nonetheless. Yvan produces a piece of paper from his jacket pocket, and when the other two tease him for making notes, he assures them that the material is complex. The note is slightly confusing, but essentially posits that if two people depend on each other too heavily and build their lives and personalities around one another, the friendship will fail.

Serge tells Marc and Yvan that he is exhausted from fighting. Yvan agrees and suggests they all go to dinner, but Serge insists Marc and Yvan go alone. Yvan begs the two to stop fighting, but Serge accuses Yvan of being self-righteous. Serge, seized by a sudden impulse, removes the Antrios from the room. Marc teases Serge, but Serge asks Marc if he has considered that he and Yvan have a genuine attachment to the painting, and whether he knows that his words are actually hurtful. Serge tells Marc that, for instance, when Marc began dating his current girlfriend Paula, Serge saw how much Marc loved her and spared Marc from his own opinion that Paula was "repellent." Marc and Serge begin physically fighting one another, and Yvan intervenes, but one of the other two strikes him in the ear. Serge fetches Yvan a compress, and while Yvan nurses his injured ear, he laments how violent and cruel his two friends have become. Serge and Marc begin arguing about the painting again, and it is revealed that the crux of the issue between them is that Marc sees Serge's purchase of the Antrios as an act not only of independence from Marc and his opinions, but defiance of them, causing Marc to feel abandoned and betrayed.

As Marc and Serge speak frankly and calmly for the first time all evening, Yvan applauds the fact that his therapist was right, and it is Yvan who has finally mediated the other two's argument. Marc chastises Yvan for holding himself apart from the other two, reminding him that he is just as culpable in all this as any of them. Yvan becomes frustrated, and asks why the three of them even see each other anymore if they hate each other so much. Yvan tells Marc and Serge that all he wants to be is their friend, even if he has to return to his role as the "joker" of the friendship. The men all share a moment of silence. Yvan asks if there is anything to eat—he is starving. The three men silently share a bowl of olives. Yvan laments the dissolution of their friendship over a tiny white square. Serge leaves the room and fetches the Antrios. He returns with it, and asks Yvan if he can borrow one of his felt-tipped pens. Yvan hands the pen to Serge, who then tosses it to Marc and urges him to deface the Antrios. Yvan begs Marc not to, but Marc leans toward the painting and draws a tiny skier in a woolly hat sliding down a slope. After a long silence, Serge suggests they all go out to eat. Yvan addresses the audience while, in the background, Marc and Serge use cleaning supplies to remove the skier from the Antrios. Yvan reveals that at dinner that night, Marc and Serge suggested they enter a "trial period" of reconciliation, and the phrase moved Yvan to tears. In the days since the dinner, Yvan has found himself crying uncontrollably and nearly constantly. Serge moves away from the cleanup, dries his hand, and steps forward. He reveals that once he and Marc had finished cleaning the painting and restored it to its pristine white, he asked Marc if Marc had known that felt tip pens were washable before he drew on the Antrios. Marc said he hadn't, and Serge said he hadn't either. In reality, though, Serge had known, and

so his gesture to Marc is revealed to have been a hollow one. Serge cannot tell Marc that he knew the ink would wash off, but also feels guilty beginning their “trial period” with a lie.

Marc steps forward and begins to describe the Antrios. Under white clouds, white snow is falling on a white mountain. A skier glides downhill before disappearing back into the landscape. The painting, Marc says, represents a man who moves across a space and then disappears.



CHARACTERS

Marc – An engineer and an intellectual, the pompous Marc is a self-proclaimed aesthete who, somewhat contradictorily, has trouble seeing the meaning in much of modern art. When his friend Serge buys a two-hundred-thousand-franc all-white **painting** by the obscure artist Antrios, Marc’s world begins to go topsy-turvy as he reckons with the fact that his attempts to educate Serge in the ways of art appreciation and aesthetics have, in his estimation, failed completely. Marc attempts to rope his and Serge’s mutual friend Yvan into the fray, but when the meek, easily-influenced Yvan feels a connection to the painting, Marc grows even more upset. One night, as the three friends prepare to go to dinner, an enormous fight unfolds, and Marc finds himself, Serge, and, to some extent, Yvan locked in a cruel, nasty battle of wits and words. Marc feels “abandoned” by Serge’s choice to buy the Antrios, and must reckon with how deeply his belief that he was acting as a mentor and an influence to Serge formed the crux of his identity. Now that it has been debunked and Serge has struck out on his own in a grandiose way by making such an exorbitant and controversial purchase, Marc feels a void open up inside him as he wrestles with the fact that he may have metaphorically created a monster by leading Serge into his world. Marc is pompous, egoistic, and codependent, and as the play progresses, his arc ties in with themes of cruelty and betrayal as well the nature of art and meaning.

Serge – Serge, a well-to-do dermatologist who is divorced from his wife and is only occasionally allowed to see his children, has relied for years on his close friendship with Marc and, to a lesser degree, Yvan, to provide him with company and comfort. When Serge, influenced by Marc’s aesthetic obsessions but desirous of making a statement about his artistic tastes that is entirely his own, purchases a two-hundred-and-twenty-thousand-franc all-white **painting** by the obscure artist Antrios, he (perhaps unknowingly) sets up an enormous test, which it seems his and Marc’s friendship may not pass. Marc is disgusted by the Antrios, seeing its confusing blankness and even more confusing expensiveness as an egregious slap in the face of art itself. Serge himself seems privately unsure about the painting, but once Marc begins railing against it, Serge finds himself doing everything he can to defend his prized possession and his grand statement about his aesthetic values—which

seem unclear to everyone but Serge, and which he does not really bother to elucidate. After a long, drawn-out fight that escalates from verbal abuse into physical violence, the meek Yvan succeeds at last in calming his two friends down enough that they can see the cruelties they are inflicting on each other. Serge, understanding how low the two have sunk, invites Marc to use one of Yvan’s felt-tipped pens to defile the Antrios by drawing on it. Marc draws a tiny skier in a woolly hat, and then, without much discussion about the defacement, the three of them go out to dinner. After the meal, Marc and Serge work together to clean the painting, and Serge reveals in a monologue to the audience that he knew all along that the pen was washable—Marc, however, did not. Serge, who has burned his oldest friendship to the ground in order to build it back up again, now knows that the new era in their friendship is beginning on an act of self-sacrifice that wasn’t self-sacrifice at all; it was simply a lie.

Yvan – The meekest of the trio, Yvan works at a stationery company that belongs to his fiancée’s uncle. He is drawn into the argument between Marc and Serge as a kind of referee when Marc, having become upset by Serge’s acquisition of the two-hundred-thousand-franc all-white Antrios **painting**, asks Yvan to take a look at the painting and confirm how ridiculous and offensive Marc thinks it is. Yvan, however, finds himself moved by the painting. He is then caught between his two more ego-driven, competition-hungry friends as they attempt, during a long night of fighting and arguing, to one-up one another and get to the root of how completely differently they see the painting. This time, Yvan appoints himself the referee in the situation—which draws Marc and Serge’s ire and resentment, and causes them to call him out for being an “amoeba,” always waffling or refusing to take a stand. Furthermore, they mock his masculinity because he seems to be going through with a marriage that he finds exceedingly stressful, mostly to appease the women in his life. Despite this, Yvan provides the most valuable statement of the night when he references a theory posited by his therapist when he brought up Marc and Serge’s tumultuous friendship to the doctor—he reveals that his therapist ventured that if two people bind their identities up in one another’s opinions, there can be no healthy growth and no independence. This is exactly the position Marc and Serge have gotten themselves into—Marc, believing Serge sees him as a “mentor” in the art world, has grown to love the fact that Serge was largely dependent on Marc’s ideas and opinions, and now that Serge has severed himself from this unspoken contract in an attempt to assert his individuality and feed his own ego, the fallout is devastating. As the play ends with Serge inviting Marc to deface the Antrios by drawing on it with one of Yvan’s pens—in order to prove that Serge loves Marc more than the painting—Yvan looks on in horror, amazed at the small and large acts of betrayal and cruelty that have escalated over the course of the evening. In the play’s coda, Yvan reveals to the audience through a direct address that he has, in the weeks since the

trio's fight, found himself constantly on the verge of crying uncontrollably, overly sensitive in the wake of having witnessed such emotional violence and unable to withstand any "rational argument" that arises in his day-to-day life.



THEMES

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ART AND MEANING

Yasmina Reza's contemporary farce, *Art*, centers around one man's acquisition of a two-hundred-thousand-dollar white **painting** by an obscure artist named Antrios. When the well-off dermatologist Serge purchases the canvas—painted entirely white—for such an exorbitant price, his two closest friends, Marc and Yvan, find themselves wrestling with the aesthetic, intellectual, and existential questions that the essentially blank canvas raises. Reza casts a satirical eye on the world of art and culture, using her characters' circular, spiral-like dialogue to explore the fine line between meaning and meaninglessness. The play ultimately suggests that while there's much to poke fun at in the world of art, and while some works may seem devoid of meaning, the beauty of art is that it takes on significance via the experiences, associations, emotions, and interpretations of those who view and discuss it.

The painting is described as a four-by-five-foot canvas that is completely white save for some small, barely discernible off-white stripes that run through the middle of the canvas. Since the play is a send-up of artistic and intellectual pretension, the meaninglessness of the painting, in its exaggerated minimalism, is immediately evident to the audience, if not to all the play's characters. Reza has chosen a virtually blank canvas onto which her characters will, over the course of the play, project their sadness, rage, insecurity, and ennui.

Serge, whose aesthetic pretensions have been shaped and encouraged by Marc, is very proud of his acquisition. Marc, by contrast, sees Serge's purchase as a twisted, ridiculous, and pathetic inversion of his own ideals about art, and is deeply "disturbed" that Serge would spend so much on something so ostentatiously void of meaning. He thinks Serge's attempts to ascribe meaning or beauty to the painting are futile, ridiculous, and upsetting. When Marc spends some one-on-one time with his and Serge's third wheel, Yvan, Marc warns him of how ridiculous the painting is. When Yvan and Serge meet privately a few days later, however, Yvan finds himself deeply affected by the painting, despite Marc's description of it as ridiculous and

devoid of meaning. Yvan finds the colors of the painting "touching," and describes a resonant magnetism emanating from the canvas. The revelation that Yvan did not immediately see the painting as ridiculous sends the fragile Marc into a tailspin. He is distressed that Serge's vain and vapid pretension has now affected Yvan as well, and cannot believe that his friends—whom he'd thought had absorbed his high-minded and carefully-constructed intellectual ideas about art—have strayed so egregiously from what he has taught them.

The ensuing fallout between the trio is less about the painting than it is about the three old friends realizing that their ideas, values, and dreams have diverged so dramatically that they have become unrecognizable to each other, and the men are deeply hurt by their emotional estrangement from one another. Reza then uses the friends' cataclysmic fight to comment on the ways art takes its meaning from the experiences and emotions that people project onto it. The "blank canvas" of the painting, a pretentious and practically useless aesthetic object, becomes a vehicle for a massive reckoning between the three men as they argue, and their feelings about the painting turn out to reveal volumes about their feelings toward one another.

In *Art*'s final moments, Marc—who has spent the entire play railing against his friend's pretentiousness, stilted aestheticism, and blind allegiance to the "concept" of art—describes at last how he himself sees the Antrios. In doing so, he reveals that the meaningless "piece of shit" that has threatened his fifteen-year friendship with Serge actually does mean something to him. The painting, to Marc, "represents a man who moves across a space and disappears." Though this statement is open to interpretation, Marc possibly sees himself as the disappearing man, and realizes that his ideals and values have been nothing but pretension all along, and that it is time for him to reevaluate what is meaningful and allow the pretentious parts of himself to fall away. In another reading, it's possible that Marc sees Serge as the disappearing man—his friend's values have changed so much that he has become a stranger to Marc entirely, and has disappeared into a world Marc can't ever fully understand. By demonstrating the ways in which one piece of art slowly takes on different meanings for Serge, Marc, and Yvan, Reza argues that although art has no inherent meaning in itself alone, humanity continues to value and celebrate art because of the deep meaning it takes on when human perspective and emotion are applied to it.



EGO, COMPETITION, AND MASCULINITY

Serge, Marc, and Yvan—men in the middle of their lives who have been friends for over fifteen years—are, at the start of the play, all experiencing private crises that are deeply connected to their feelings of self-confidence. As Reza delves into the lives of her three main characters and explores the insecurities that fuel competition between them and drive them apart, she argues that for these

three friends—and for healthy relationships between people more generally—the more prideful, competitive, and egotistical aspects of their personalities must be cast aside if any real empathy, care, or change is to be possible.

Reza suggests that Serge's acquisition of the **painting** by the artist Antrios was, in part, an attempt to prove himself to Marc, and to best Marc at his own game: art appreciation. Though it isn't stated outright at the start of the play, it is later revealed that Marc has, for a long time, seen himself as Serge's mentor in art and aesthetics, and thought Serge saw him the same way. "You congratulated yourself on my peculiarity, on my taste," Marc says to Serge, highlighting the ways in which their friendship has served to stoke his ego. At the start of the play, Serge is prepared to reveal his recently-acquired painting to Marc, and hopes, in doing so, to assert his own point of view as a vital, strong, and valid one. In this way, Serge's sense of self—including his ego and his pride—is wrapped up in the painting. As Serge attempts to prove himself to Marc—his model for what self-assuredness in the realm of art appreciation should look like—his big, gutsy move backfires, leaving Serge to reflect on the ways in which his ego and self-esteem have been hurt by Marc's disapproval.

Serge is a success in his own right. He is a dermatologist with a private practice, and is clearly doing well enough for himself that buying a two-hundred-thousand-franc piece of art is within reach. Nevertheless, Serge's financial and professional successes are not enough for him. He needs both to stake his claim on his identity as an aesthete and have that claim validated. When both of those things are denied to him, Serge's world begins to crumble. Serge continues to insist that the painting is valuable, meaningful, and beautiful as the play goes on, and eventually, as the friends tear each other apart in order to prove to one another that each of them is right about the Antrios, it becomes clear that the Serge's attempt to impress his friends has been an utter failure. When Serge buys the Antrios, Marc finds his own personality—and his confidence in it—threatened by his friend's outlandish spending and grand but bizarre ideas about what constitutes good, valuable art. When Serge reveals the painting to Marc for the first time, Marc is immediately and deeply "disturbed." Marc believes himself to be knowledgeable about art in a very serious way, and his faith in his own closely-held opinions is the crux of his oversized ego. Marc feels he has an intuitive and unassailable palate when it comes to art, and Serge's purchase of a meaningless, pretentious object is, in Marc's view, a direct assault on everything around which Marc has built his personality.

In one of the play's many climaxes, Serge insults Marc's girlfriend Paula, calling her "worse than repellent." This—the condemnation of his partner—is a direct affront to Marc's ego, and one that is carefully calculated by Serge. Marc's ego has been threatened throughout the entire play by Serge's

extravagant acquisition, but now Serge brings the underlying issue of their fight to the fore by criticizing Marc's personal choices—and presumably his masculinity as well, in that he is only capable of securing a "repellent" partner—explicitly rather than implicitly. This moment is the final straw in their argument, and Reza uses it to point out the varying ways such attempts to assert superiority over others in the interest of inflating one's own ego only lead to undignified competitions.

Yvan is the "weakest" of the trio, and the man with the smallest ego. Marc calls him an "amoeba" at one point, and over the course of the play both Marc and Serge suggest that Yvan has no backbone, no opinions, and no constitution. Yvan is on the verge of being married to his fiancée, Catherine—whose uncle secured Yvan a much-needed job at his stationery company—and as the play unfolds, Yvan wrestles with what his impending marriage means for his own sense of self. On the one hand, he is marrying a seemingly successfully woman, but on the other hand, he is submitting himself to the will of another, when his own will is already weak enough. Yvan is assaulted on both sides by cruel taunts and apathetic advice from Marc and Serge, both about his approaching wedding and his status as a man in general. Yvan is the one member of the trio who does not seem all that concerned about art. The stage directions reveal that the only piece of art in his apartment is a "daub"—an aesthetically unpleasant painting executed with little skill or purpose. Having good taste in art is not a point of pride for Yvan in the same way it is to Marc and Serge, and so Yvan has had to struggle to piece together what he is proud of about himself in other ways. As the play unfolds, it is revealed that Yvan has been unsuccessful in this endeavor—he has struggled to find work, only having secured a job through his fiancée's uncle, and has allowed his fraught relationships with others to cloud his understanding of himself—his passions, desires, and opinions. Serge and Marc point this out to him, and urge him to cancel his wedding altogether and make his own choices based on his own desires, but the sensitive Yvan recoils at this advice. His role as peacemaker, "referee," and observer to Marc and Serge's battle of wills is symbolized when he attempts to break up a physical fight between the two men and winds up getting punched. As Yvan sits in the corner and whines about his possible concussion, the other men tease him, and he begins to realize that he does not lack a point of view, a sense of self, or a desire to compete—he simply finds himself wounded by the egos of others time and again, and has therefore sought refuge in the denial of his own ego.

At the end of the play, Marc, Serge, and Yvan all recognize that they still have a lot to learn about themselves, and about each other. They are all complicated men who struggle to feel secure and self-confident in their own ways. Marc, who had earlier in the play stated that he would be on his "best behavior" around his friends, but who quickly reneged on that resolution, at last puts his ego aside in order to seriously consider what the

Antrios symbolizes, and to seek to find some meaning or narrative in it. Serge remains deeply attached to the painting, but has begun to consider how his defensiveness has wounded his relationship with Marc, and how he might learn to value human relationships over physical possessions. Yvan has at last found the courage to make a self-assured statement of his own when he says that “nothing beautiful in the world has ever been born of rational argument.” As the friends resolve to be kinder to one another, better to themselves, and more critical of their petty attempts to display superiority, the play ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that they have begun to learn what it means to quiet their egos and swallow their pride.



FRIENDSHIP AND CODEPENDENCE

The fifteen-year friendship between Serge, Marc, and Yvan that lies at the center of the play is bitter and broken, but spellbindingly intimate. As the play unfolds, the audience’s view of the trio’s friendship is not unlike a Roman ruin; something great was there once, but has now fallen into disrepair and exists only as a shadow of its former self. Those who look upon the ruins can perhaps imagine what it looked like in all its splendor, but at the end of the day, only a pile of rubble remains. As Marc, Serge, and Yvan willfully deny the unhealthy codependence at the center of their friendship, which has rotted it from the inside, things between them devolve until they explode in a cataclysmic battle that leaves no stone unturned, no wound unexamined, and no memory untarnished. By staging the dissolution—and, finally, the tentative renewal—of an old and complicated friendship, Reza argues that codependence is a killer, and only through individuality and mutual respect can friendship truly thrive.

Yvan is the beating heart of the trio. His concern for the survival of Marc and Serge’s friendship, at several points, outweighs his concern for the survival of his own friendship with either of them. Yvan is conflict averse, and so his love of Serge’s **painting** is seen by Marc as an attempt to ingratiate himself to Serge and defuse any tension. Both Marc and Serge have difficulty seeing Yvan as a person with agency; Marc describes him as an “amoeba,” and Serge describes him as a spectator beset by inertia. Although his kindness, gentleness, and easy demeanor have been a welcome and valued part of their friendship in the past, as tensions come to a head, Marc and Serge urge Yvan to stop being obsequious and learn to think, act, and live independently of them. Yvan is torn apart by his friends’ fighting, and as the play unfolds it is revealed that he has been concerned about Marc and Serge’s friendship for much longer than they’ve even been aware there has been strife between them.

When Yvan reveals that he has been speaking to his therapist about Marc and Serge, Marc and Serge are not just taken aback—they’re angry. Yvan pulls from his jacket pocket a set of notes he took during the therapy session in which he discussed

Marc and Serge. The note is comically complicated, but is revealed to hold a nugget of truth about the complex and often toxic friendship Marc and Serge share.

Yvan’s therapist has posited that if two people live independently of one another, and figure their identities and their choices out for themselves without relying on the other, then a healthy friendship can grow and thrive. However, if one person makes choices or holds ideals based on what they believe the other person wants or expects of them, the friendship’s foundation will rot and crumble under the weight of disappointment and eventually anger. Though Marc and Serge at first tease Yvan mercilessly for psychoanalyzing them and parroting his therapist, it soon becomes clear that the advice has resonated with both Marc and Serge. Marc eventually admits that he has changed aspects himself, in the past, to appeal to Serge, and this moment makes way for a major breakthrough when Marc admits that he has indeed been too dependent upon Serge and Serge’s opinions of him.

Marc and Serge’s codependent dynamic is strange, unhealthy, and destructive. They have molded their personalities to please and impress one another in constant, escalating displays of what they believe to be their intellect, good taste, wealth, and masculinity. Marc, who values art and aesthetics above all else, has always felt secure in his ability to best Serge in the arena of understanding, appreciating, and analyzing art. The fact that Serge is more financially and professionally successful is seemingly of little import to Marc. However, when Serge purchases the Antrios, all of Marc’s insecurities flood to the surface. Marc is incensed that Serge, whom he saw as inferior to him in terms of his artistic sensibility, has bought a piece of art without Marc’s advice. Marc feels that the painting is ridiculous, and believes that Serge has purchased it as a display of wealth and as a slight against all that Marc has taught him. For Marc, the idea that Serge could have made this decision *not* in relation to him is maddening, and leads to an enormous fight. Marc himself admits that he sees Serge’s independence as “violence,” and expresses his feelings of having been abandoned and betrayed.

The drawn-out argument in which Marc, Serge, and Yvan find themselves ultimately dismantles the codependent tendencies that exist between the three of them, but not before laying bare the foolish expectations, small betrayals, and emotional letdowns that have rotted the men’s friendship from the inside out. In the end, Serge allows Marc to draw on the Antrios using one of Ivan’s felt-tipped pens. In this moment, Marc understands both that Serge loves him more than he loves the Antrios, and that Marc’s need to hurt and embarrass Serge in order to be reminded of this is a mark of codependency at its most toxic and destructive. Serge, in a monologue delivered to the audience, reveals that he knew all along that felt-tip pens were washable, thus rendering the gesture of self-sacrifice and reconciliation meaningless. He knows it would have been

wrong to reveal the truth to Marc, but also feels it is wrong to have started a new chapter in their friendship with a lie. Though the two have agreed to move forward in their friendship as independent individuals, this lie binds Serge to Marc in a resurgent pattern of codependency which, the play implies, they may never be able to fully break.

The play suggests that codependency is a blight when it comes to developing healthy friendships. As Reza explores the ways in which her trio of characters are codependent, she shows that they all need to reassert their individuality and stop leaning on one another to function not just as individuals, but as a loving group of friends. The question of whether they can accomplish this goal, however, is left hanging in the air as the stage lights dim.

CRUELTY AND BETRAYAL



On the flip side of friendship and love, there is cruelty and betrayal. The world of Reza's play is rife with resentment, animosity, and frustration, which results in a climactic battle of wits and words between the trio of friends at its center. Marc, Serge, and Yvan hurl snide digs and outright insults at one another repetitively and circuitously throughout the play. However, in the play's final moments, Marc and Serge agree to a "trial period" of renewing their friendship, demonstrating the ways in which a relationship broken down by cruelty and betrayal can ultimately be given a chance to start anew, and allow the former adversaries to get to know each other all over again, step by small step.

The instances of cruelty and betrayal in the play are so many, and often so minuscule, that they are nearly impossible to count. As the men's small cruelties toward one another begin, they mostly center around the all-white **Antrios painting**, which has become a blank slate onto which the men project their fear, insecurity, desire, and anger. Marc describes the painting as a "piece of shit," and in a more subtly cruel way as "nothing" or "invisible." These assaults against the painting are, gradually, revealed to be implicit attacks against Serge himself. Marc feels that Serge is nothing but the product of his own influence and tutelage, and attempts to cruelly tear Serge down by first decimating the painting.

Another way the men choose to hurt each other is through attacks on one another's romantic partners. These betrayals of trust and cruel words move the arguments about the painting from the realm of the abstract to the realm of the real. The men are no longer attacking a meaningless piece of art: they are attacking one another's lives, decisions, and romantic vulnerabilities. When Yvan complains of stress surrounding his impending wedding, Marc and Serge immediately pile on him and attempt to cruelly discount Yvan's masculinity by asking him how he allows himself to be bossed around by the women in his life, when really Yvan is attempting simply to make everyone happy and keep the peace. The men see Yvan's

conciliatory instincts as a sign of weakness, and cruelly attack him, urging him to cancel his wedding altogether to avoid being beaten down or stripped of his manhood any further. Later on, Serge, in a moment of utter cruelty, turns an emotional argument about art, aesthetics, and loyalty into an attack on Marc's girlfriend, of whom he has never once before spoken badly. Choosing to attack the way in which Paula, Marc's beloved, waves away her cigarette smoke, Serge describes Paula as "worse than repellent." Because Marc has cruelly attacked the Antrios as a meaningless and ugly waste of space, Serge attempts to save face, reassert his own superiority, and bring Marc down by cruelly attacking the object of Marc's affection—his girlfriend.

As the men stoop to new lows in their attempts to level one another to the ground, Reza shows their arguments growing more and more inane, pretentious, and confusing. As the subject matter of their argument devolves into tangential digs at Roman philosophers and French poets, the acidity and cruelty of their remarks increases exponentially, and soon the men are physically fighting one another. As their cruelty reaches an unbearable fever pitch, Yvan attempts to illuminate how "brutal" Marc and Serge are being toward one another in an impassioned monologue, but the other two disregard his feelings and accuse him of working himself up into a state.

The act that "saves" the men's friendship is itself an act of cruelty. Serge offers Marc the chance to deface the Antrios with a felt-tipped pen. By allowing Marc to maim something dear to him, Serge hopes that the trio will hit rock bottom and thus have nowhere to go but up, back to the surface of civility, empathy, and kindness. At the end of the play, Marc and Serge agree to a "trial period" as they renew their friendship—and so while things are still tentative, it seems as if Serge's gesture was effective. In a small twist, Serge, in a monologue to the audience, reveals his gesture to have been a ruse—he knew all along that he would be able to wash the ink off the Antrios, and is now conflicted about whether or not he should tell Marc the truth. In a way, then, Serge's grand gesture towards Marc is shown to be its own act of betrayal. Reza uses this twist to complicate her argument by showing that betrayal often begets more betrayal, but that, in some cases, betrayals may paradoxically save a friendship.

In the play's climax, Reza shows cruelty and pain to sometimes be a necessary step in healing. Outright cruelty can be ugly, but it can also be cathartic, making way for healing and renewal. When a friendship becomes toxic, the participants must sink to their lowest depths and exorcise all the demons within their relationship, she argues, before being able to move on. At the end of the play, it is uncertain what fate will ultimately befall the trio, but at the very least, having begun to build trust in each other again, they are optimistic about the future of their friendship.



SYMBOLS

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



THE ANTRIOS PAINTING

When successful dermatologist Serge acquires a two-hundred-thousand-franc painting by the slightly obscure artist Antrios, his life is thrown into turmoil as his best friend, the pretentious aesthete Marc, becomes “disturbed” by Serge’s extravagant purchase, which he believes Serge has made in order to assert his own status as a deep appreciator of fine art. To make things worse, the painting—a five-foot by four-foot piece—is almost completely white, with only a few off-white diagonal lines running across it. Marc finds the painting so ridiculous that he recruits their friend Yvan to go to Serge’s on his own and have a laugh at it, but Yvan finds himself surprisingly touched by the strange work. As Marc struggles to understand how his two best friends can possibly believe such a ridiculous painting is beautiful, valuable, or worth its exorbitant price, the three friends find themselves embroiled in a long, drawn-out fight at Serge’s apartment during which they air their many grievances with one another, their insecurities about themselves, and their complicated ideas about the nature of art, intellect, and commerce.

The painting, then—a literal blank slate on which the men can project their issues and egos—is a catalyst for an unveiling of all the strife and ill-will between the friends, and a symbol of the emptiness that has rotted its way through their fifteen-year friendship. The painting, like the men’s relationship, is both full and empty, ridiculous and wonderful, valuable and invaluable, meaningless and deep. What’s the point in staying friends, Yvan points out, when everyone hates each other so much?

Friendship, like art, is only as good as its materials. If there is no love, no respect, no independence, and no empathy, friendship becomes something empty and inscrutable. The “blank” Antrios appears, at first, as an empty canvas, and reflects the sorry state of affairs in the men’s friendship. By the end of the play, after the trio have hashed out their beef with one another over the course of one hellish evening, the once-skeptical Marc is at last able to describe what the painting contains: he sees within it a skier, skiing down a white mountain through a white haze of snow, until he “moves across [the] space and disappears.” As Marc realizes that, in spite of his fear of connecting with the painting, he has been able to intuit its meaning all along, he also comes to understand that he himself is the disappearing man, who has lost himself in his pretensions over the years and allowed his friendships and his values to atrophy until they have gone past the point—possibly—of no return.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *Art* published in 1997.

Scene 1: At Serge’s Quotes

••• SERGE: My friend Marc’s an intelligent enough fellow, I’ve always valued our relationship, he has a good job, but he’s one of those new-style intellectuals, who are not only enemies of modernism, but seem to take some sort of incomprehensible pride in running it down... In recent years, these nostalgia-merchants have become quite breathtakingly arrogant.

Related Characters: Serge (speaker), Marc

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Marc has just arrived at his friend Serge’s house to take a look at the painting Serge has just acquired—a vintage canvas by a painter named Antrios, which is five feet by four feet and almost completely white, and which cost the enormous sum of two hundred thousand francs. Marc does not approve of the painting—he is confused by it, and as his visit with Serge goes on, he becomes more and more disturbed and outwardly vexed not just by the painting’s presence but by Serge’s attachment to it. In this quotation, Serge steps forward to address the audience and argue his side of the scene—he loves Marc, but he understands that his friend is “arrogant” and opposed to modernism, to innovation, and to looking outside the world of his own opinion or point of view. It should be said that this monologue is comically ironic, as Serge, too, is guilty of being “breathtakingly arrogant” when it comes to his own pretensions where the Antrios, and modern art in general, are concerned.

¶¶ MARC: It's a complete mystery to me, Serge buying this painting. It's unsettled me, it's filled me with some indefinable unease. When I left his place, I had to take three capsules of Gelsemium 9X which Paula recommended because I couldn't begin to understand how Serge, my friend, could have bought that picture. Two hundred thousand francs! He's comfortably off, but he's hardly rolling in money. Comfortable, no more, just comfortable. And he spends two hundred grand on a white painting. I must go and see Yvan, he's a friend of ours, I have to discuss this with Yvan. Mind you, Yvan's a very tolerant bloke, which of course, when it comes to relationships, is the worst thing you can be. Yvan's very tolerant because he couldn't care less. If Yvan tolerates the fact that Serge has spent two hundred grand on some piece of white shit, it's because he couldn't care less about Serge. Obviously.

Related Characters: Marc (speaker), Yvan, Serge

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4-5

Explanation and Analysis

As Marc leaves Serge's apartment, he becomes overwhelmed by anxiety and desperate to understand how Serge could have made the aesthetically empty and also financially risky decision to purchase the Antrios. Because everything in this play is so subjective, it's impossible to say if Marc is telling himself that Serge is only "comfortably off" to soothe his own ego, when in reality Serge is much wealthier than Marc says. As Marc's anxiety begins to spiral and worsen, he resolves to involve his "tolerant" and relatively opinionless friend Yvan. He sees Yvan as a kind of blank slate, and hopes to use Yvan as reflective surface through which he can understand what is happening to his friend Serge. Again, Reza is playing with irony here, as Marc loathes the "blank slate" of the Antrios but craves the blank slate of his friend Yvan's noncommittal tolerance.

Scene 2: At Yvan's Quotes

¶¶ YVAN: As long as it's not doing any harm to anyone else...

MARC: But it is. It's doing harm to me! I'm disturbed, I'm disturbed, more than that, I'm hurt, yes, I am, I'm fond of Serge, and to see him let himself be ripped off and lose every ounce of discernment through sheer snobbery.

Related Characters: Marc, Yvan (speaker), Serge

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

As Marc and Yvan discuss Serge's purpose, Yvan remains neutral in the conflict—he believes that as long as the painting makes Serge happy and isn't doing harm to anyone, he and Marc should just let him be. But Marc insists that the painting is not just offensive but painful to him personally. Marc, however, cunningly frames his "disturbed" attitude toward the painting as personal concern for Serge—not revealing the truth behind his worry, which is that Serge has surpassed and outstripped him both financially and aesthetically. Yvan is the neutral third party, at least in this early stage of the play, which is both frustrating and exciting to Marc. It will be hard, but Marc wants to try to sway Yvan to appreciate his point of view—that Serge has deteriorated into a snobbish and foolish version of his former self, and has made an irresponsible and highly upsetting decision.

Scene 3: At Serge's Quotes

¶¶ SERGE: You know Marc's seen this painting.

YVAN: Oh?

SERGE: Devastated.

YVAN: Oh?

SERGE: He told me it was shit. A completely inappropriate description.

YVAN: Absolutely.

SERGE: You can't call this shit.

YVAN: No.

SERGE: You can say, I don't get it, I can't grasp it, you can't say "it's shit."

YVAN: You've seen his place.

SERGE: Nothing to see. It's like yours, it's... what I mean is, you couldn't care less.

Related Characters: Yvan, Serge (speaker), Marc

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 14**Explanation and Analysis**

In this exchange, Serge and Yvan—who have just spent some time together considering the Antrios—discuss Marc’s violent reaction to the piece. Yvan has found himself drawn to the canvas for reasons he cannot explain—he knows that Marc hates the painting, but finds himself pulled to it and unable to support Marc’s position anymore. As Marc and Serge play a far-apart, competing game of tug-of-war, with Yvan in the middle, they each try to manipulate their changeable friend to see things from their point of view. Yvan has agreed with each of them separately, and Reza is laying the groundwork for an impending battle that will pit Marc and Serge against one another, with Yvan helplessly stranded in the middle of his arrogant friends.

 SERGE: I don't blame him for not responding to this painting, he hasn't the training, there's a whole apprenticeship you have to go through, which he hasn't, either because he's never wanted to or because he has no particular instinct for it, none of that matters, no, what I blame him for is his tone of voice, his complacency, his tactlessness. I blame him for his insensitivity. I don't blame him for not being interested in modern Art, I couldn't give a toss about that, I like him for other reasons ...

YVAN: And he likes you!

SERGE: No, no, no, no, I felt it the other day, a kind of ... a kind of condescension ... contempt with a really bitter edge...

YVAN: No, surely not!

SERGE: Oh, yes! Don't keep trying to smooth things over. Where d'you get this urge to be the great reconciler of the human race?! Why don't you admit that Marc is atrophying? If he hasn't already atrophied.

Related Characters: Yvan, Serge (speaker), Marc**Related Themes:**    **Related Symbols:** **Page Number:** 15**Explanation and Analysis**

Just as Marc earlier tried to force Yvan to see that Serge had been taken in by snobbery and pretension, in this passage, Serge attempts to get the easily-influenced Yvan to admit that Marc, too, has begun to deteriorate (or

"atrophy") into a shadow of his former self. Serge is trying to get Yvan in the middle while also urging him not to act as a mediator. Both Marc and Serge are interested in the blank-slate quality their friend offers, but only want to use him to reflect their own point of view back to them—not to try and help them achieve actual communication or reconciliation.

Scene 4: At Marc's Quotes

 MARC: He wasn't laughing because his painting is ridiculous, you and he weren't laughing for the same reasons, you were laughing at the painting and he was laughing to ingratiate himself, to put himself on your wavelength, to show you that on top of being an aesthete who can spend more on a painting than you earn in a year, he's still your same old subversive mate who likes a good laugh.

YVAN: Mm hm... You know...

MARC: Yes...

YVAN: This is going to amaze you...

MARC: Go on...

YVAN: I didn't like the painting ... but I didn't actually hate it.

MARC: Well, of course. You can't hate what's invisible, you can't hate nothing.

YVAN: No, no, it has something ...

MARC: What do you mean?

YVAN: It has something. It's not nothing.

Related Characters: Yvan, Marc (speaker), Serge**Related Themes:**    **Related Symbols:** **Page Number:** 17**Explanation and Analysis**

As Marc and Yvan rendezvous privately once again, after Yvan has had the chance to take a look at the Antrios painting, Marc expects that Yvan will side with him and agree that the painting is ridiculous, and that Serge has been corrupted by snobbery. When Yvan attempts to tell Marc that the Antrios made him feel something, however—that he did not see it as a ridiculous, offensive, and disturbing purchase—Marc realizes that his opinions, and thus his ego, are perhaps under greater attack than he imagined. Marc is beginning to feel as if he has lost control of his friends' opinions, which he thought he had some

governance over. The realization that he never did, or at least does not any longer, is a nasty shock for him.

 MARC: Why do I have to be so categorical? What possible difference can it make to me, if Serge lets himself be taken in by modern Art? I mean, it is a serious matter. But I could have found some other way to put it to him. I could have taken a less aggressive tone. Even if it makes me physically ill that my best friend has bought a white painting, all the same I ought to avoid attacking him about it. I ought to be nice to him. From now on, I'm on my best behavior.

Related Characters: Marc (speaker), Serge

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Marc's ego has been bruised, but he still has enough of a rational mind to see that perhaps his attempts to berate Serge and manipulate Yvan have been heavy-handed and wrong, and have only worsened the situation. In this passage, he resolves to try and tamp down his outrage and be a good friend to both Serge and Yvan going forward. It's important to note, though, that Marc doesn't say anything about resolving his feelings or dealing with them—he simply plans to be "nice," rather than kind, and on good behavior rather than interested in and empathetic towards his friends' appreciation of the controversial Antrios.

Scene 5: At Serge's Quotes

 SERGE: He is getting on my nerves. It's true. He's getting on my nerves. It's this ingratiating tone of voice. A little smile behind every word. It's as if he's forcing himself to be pleasant. Don't be pleasant, whatever you do, don't be pleasant! Could it be buying the Antrios? ... Could buying the Antrios have triggered off this feeling of constraint between us? Buying something... without his backing? ... Well, bugger his backing! Bugger your backing, Marc!

Related Characters: Serge (speaker), Marc

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

As Marc and Serge sit at Serge's flat waiting for Yvan to arrive, the two find themselves nitpicking one another's words and snidely making digs at one another's choices. Serge knows that there is a palpable strain between him and Marc, and resents Marc's attempts to be pleasant—in other words, to be on his "best behavior." It's almost as if Serge would rather Marc rail against him than suppress his feelings and allow them to trickle out in the form of caustic, passive-aggressive remarks. As Serge attempts to get to the bottom of what has caused this new strain on their relationship, he realizes that Marc is angry that Serge has made a decision without him and his "backing." This enrages Serge, who does not feel he needs—or has ever needed—Marc's approval to make decisions about his own life.

 MARC: Could it be the Antrios, buying the Antrios? No—it started some time ago... To be precise, it started on the day we were discussing some work of art and you uttered, quite seriously, the word deconstruction. It wasn't so much the word deconstruction which upset me, it was the air of solemnity you imbued it with. You said, humorlessly, unapologetically, without a trace of irony, the word deconstruction, you, my friend. I wasn't sure how best to deal with the situation, so I made this throwaway remark, and I said I think I must be getting intolerant, and you answered, who do you think you are?

What gives you the right to set yourself apart, Serge answered in the bloodiest possible way. And quite unexpectedly. You're just Marc, what makes you think you're so special? That day, I should have punched him in the mouth. And when he was lying there on the ground, half-dead, I should have said to him, what sort of friend are you, Serge, if you don't think your friends are special?

Related Characters: Marc (speaker), Serge

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

As Marc, in a private monologue, attempts—just like Serge—to figure out the root of the constraint between them, he looks back on their relationship to see what went wrong, and where. He sees that it is not the purchase of the Antrios, but Serge's earlier slide into pretension and condescension which first put a rift between them. During their argument about the nature of pretension, Serge asked Marc what made him "special," and Marc was deeply hurt by Serge's inability to see or understand what makes his friends special. Marc reveals himself to be motivated by deeper pain and fear than simply the dislike of Serge's pretension, and shows how deeply hurt he is by Serge's rejection of his old self, and old friendships, in favor of "setting himself apart" by becoming an aesthete and pseudo-intellectual.

•• SERGE: There's no problem, except for you, because you take pride in your desire to shut yourself off from humanity. And you'll never manage it. It's like you're in quicksand, the more you struggle to get out of it, the deeper you sink.

Related Characters: Serge (speaker), Marc

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the incensed Serge reveals the flip side of Marc's argument in the previous quotation. Serge didn't think Marc deserved to set himself apart and hold himself above the attempt to engage in aesthetic or intellectual discourse, and Marc interpreted this as Serge refusing to see Marc as "special." Here, Serge reveals that he feels Marc's attempt to differentiate his own pretensions from Serge's pretensions is actually Marc attempting to shut himself off from all of humanity—Serge sees his own pretensions as more valuable and less ridiculous than Marc's. This is the crux of the two men's problems with one another. They are so wrapped up in their egos and convinced of the righteousness of their own opinions that they are constantly, through their attempts to one-up each other, hurting and alienating the other person in a never-ending cycle of condescension and isolation.

•• YVAN: "If I'm who I am because I'm who I am and you're who you are because you're who you are, then I'm who I am and you're who you are. If, on the other hand, I'm who I am because you're who you are, and if you're who you are because I am who I am, then I'm not who I am and you're not who you are..." You see why I had to write it down.

Related Characters: Yvan (speaker), Serge, Marc

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41-42

Explanation and Analysis

Yvan reveals to Marc and Serge that he has brought them up in his session with his therapist, whom Marc and Serge find ridiculous. Despite their protests, Yvan shares something his therapist said about the relationship between the two. Though comically obtuse and labyrinthine, what this note actually details is the danger of codependency. If one forms their own opinions and ideals in a friendship and allows the other friend or partner to do so as well, then the two will each genuinely be who they are and allow the other to be as well. If not, however—if one's opinions and ideals are influenced by another and never given room to grow, blossom, or change independently, then the two friends or partners will only be reflections of one another, and the falseness and claustrophobia of the friendship will rot it from the inside. Yvan sees the advice as profound, and it is, but Marc and Serge are so victimized by this exact problem that they are unable to see the truth of what Yvan has revealed to them.

•• MARC: It's true I can't imagine you genuinely loving that painting.

YVAN: But why?

MARC: Because I love Serge and I can't love the Serge who's capable of buying that painting.

SERGE: Why do you say buying, why don't you say loving?

MARC: Because I can't say loving, I can't believe loving.

SERGE: So why would I buy it, if I didn't love it?

MARC: That's the nub of the question.

SERGE: (to YVAN) See how smug he is! All I'm doing is teasing him, and his answer is this serenely pompous heavy hint! And it never crossed your mind, [Marc,] for a second, however improbably it might seem, that I might really love it and that your vicious, inflexible opinions and your disgusting assumption[s] might be hurtful to me?

MARC: No.

Related Characters: Serge, Yvan, Marc (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Marc is so self-absorbed, so consumed by his ego, so convinced of the veracity of his opinions that he cannot imagine that anyone could love the *Antrios*. Though Serge—and Yvan—have repeatedly professed their genuine love of and connection to the painting, Marc has continued to condescendingly berate it as an object of pretension and a symbol of the dulling or deterioration of his friends' opinions and ideals. Serge tells Marc, in this passage, that he is genuinely hurt by Marc's "inflexibility" and "disgusting assumptions," but even in the face of this genuine emotional plea, Marc remains staunch, detached, and cruel in his condescension.

•• MARC: Do you think what you just said about Paula?

SERGE: Worse, actually.

MARC: Worse, Serge? Worse than repellent?

SERGE: Aha! When it's something that concerns you personally, I see words can bite a little deeper!

MARC: Serge, will you explain how someone can be worse than repellent...

SERGE: No need to take that frosty tone. Perhaps it's—let me try and answer you—perhaps it's the way she waves away cigarette smoke. What appears to you a gesture of no significance, what you think of as a harmless gesture is in fact the opposite, and the way she waves away cigarette smoke sits right at the heart of her repellentness.

Related Characters: Serge, Marc (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Serge flips the tables on Marc, who has been berating him for liking the "piece of shit," "nothing" *Antrios*. Serge has a genuine attachment to the painting, and for hours now—days, even—Marc has done nothing but belittle the painting as stupid, ridiculous, and repellent. Sick of the abuse, Serge now, in an attempt to level the playing field and give Marc a taste of his own medicine, invokes Marc's girlfriend Paula as an object of "repellentness" just for the sake of showing Marc how much it hurts when something one loves is dragged through the mud because of an arbitrary perceived deficiency. This insult feels even more personal to Marc, however, since it threatens his masculinity as well as his aesthetic taste, and it ultimately leads to the physical fight between the two men.

•• MARC: There was a time you were proud to be my friend... You congratulated yourself on my peculiarity, on my taste for standing apart. You enjoyed exhibiting me untamed to your circle, you, whose life was so normal. I was your alibi. But...eventually, I supposed, that sort of affection dries up... Belatedly, you claim your independence. But I detest your independence. Its violence. You've abandoned me. I've been betrayed. As far as I'm concerned, you're a traitor.

SERGE (to YVAN): If I understand correctly, he was my mentor! And if I loved you as my mentor...what was the nature of your feelings?

MARC: I enjoyed your admiration. I was flattered. I was always grateful to you for thinking of me as a man apart. I even thought being a man apart was a somehow superior condition, until one day you pointed out to me that it wasn't.

SERGE: This is very alarming.

MARC: It's the truth.

Related Characters: Serge, Marc (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which forms in many ways the heart and the crux of the extended argument between Marc and Serge, Marc reveals that he reveled in the knowledge that Serge was entirely codependent upon him for his opinions. Serge's pride in showing Marc off inflated Marc's ego and gave him a sense of accomplishment, and now that Serge has grown independent, Marc is no longer given the distinction of having made Serge into who he is today. Marc, no longer able to glean a sense of pride from Serge's appreciation of him, feels abandoned, suddenly struck by a lack of the affection and reverence that had fueled him for so long. Serge is outraged to find that Marc thought this way about their friendship, and is "alarmed" by Marc's admission that Marc was most grateful, out of anything in the wide scope of their friendship, for Serge's "flattery."

•• SERGE: Why can't you learn to love people for themselves, Marc?

MARC: What does that mean, for themselves?

SERGE: For what they are.

MARC: But what are they?! What are they?! Apart from my faith in them I'm desperate to find a friend who has some kind of prior existence. So far, I've had no luck. I've had to mold you... But you see, it never works. There comes a day when your creature goes off and buys a white painting.

Related Characters: Marc, Serge (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

There is a fundamental crack in the friendship between Marc, Serge, and Yvan. The men, who once (seemingly) loved one another for who they were, now find their friendship rent asunder by their inability to accept the changes that they have each undergone. Marc—his fragile ego and sense of self on the verge of being obliterated by Serge's purchase of the Antrios painting—reveals that his love for his friends is and perhaps always has been conditional, based on the presumption that he would be able to "mold" them into people he wanted to love and to be around. He laments the failure of his ability to make his friends into the people he has wanted for them to be, and condescendingly and cruelly refers to Serge as a "creature," less than human, who has gone off and defied everything Marc wanted him to be.

•• YVAN: I'm not like you, I don't want to be an authority figure, I don't want to be a point of reference, I don't want to be self-sufficient, I just want to be your friend Yvan the joker! Yvan the joker!

SERGE: Could we try to steer clear of pathos?

YVAN: I've finished. Haven't you got any nibbles? Anything, just to stop from passing out.

SERGE: I have some olives.

YVAN: Hand them over.

Serge reaches for a little bowl of olives and hands it to him.

SERGE (to MARC): Want some?

Marc nods. Yvan hands him the bowl. They eat olives.

Related Characters: Yvan, Serge, Marc (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

As the cruelty of the evening subsides and makes way for devastating emotion, Serge finds himself almost unable to stand any real display of sadness, longing, or sensitivity. He has been so numbed to these things by the hours of discord that Yvan's plea for peace is repellent and even offensive to him. Nevertheless, something about Yvan's emotional crescendo breaks through, as the friends relax their anger and enjoy a small bowl of olives together. The olives are a metaphor for peace, in some measure at least, having been achieved at last—not a literal olive branch, but still a symbol of an exhausted agreement between the three to cease fighting and begin to mend.

moved to tears by any kind of tenderness now, having witnessed such cruelty and callousness, and at the same time is so exhausted by his friends' attempts to rationalize that cruelty to one another that he can no longer bear rational thought of any kind. Yvan, as always, just wants the best for his friends—but his ability to act as a go-between, a mediator, or a referee has been completely obliterated by his new sensitivity to argument and conflict.

 SERGE: When Marc and I succeeded in obliterating the skier, with the aid of Swiss soap with added ox gall, recommended by Paula, I looked at the Antrios and turned to Marc:

"Did you know ink from felt-tips was washable?"

"No," Marc said... "No, did you?"

"No," I said, very fast, lying. I came within an inch of saying yes, I did know. But how could I have launched our trial period with such a disappointing admission? On the other hand, was it right to start with a lie? A lie! Let's be reasonable. Why am I so absurdly virtuous? Why does my relationship with Marc have to be so complicated?

Related Characters: Serge (speaker), Marc

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 62-63

Explanation and Analysis

Serge's gesture of allowing Marc to draw on the Antrios seemed to be one of love and desperation combined. As Serge realized that the painting was destroying his and Marc's friendship—and their relationship with Yvan, as well—Serge volunteered to allow Marc to deface the painting that was effectively breaking them apart. In this private monologue delivered to the audience, however, Serge reveals that he knew all along that the ink would wash off—and implies that if he hadn't, he would never have let Marc draw on it. Thus, it remains unclear if his relationship with Marc is actually more valuable to Serge than the Antrios. He wonders why their relationship is so complicated, and laments that he still is unable to see whether he values his own opinions and pretensions more than actual human connection. Furthermore, it's possible that Marc too was lying in saying that he didn't know the ink was washable, but we don't see his confession and so

Scene 6: At Serge's Quotes

 YVAN: The day after the wedding, at the Montparnasse cemetery Catherine put a bouquet and a bag of sugared almonds on her mother's grave. In the evening, thinking about this tribute, I started sobbing in my bed. I absolutely must speak to Finkelzohn about my tendency to cry, I cry all the time, it's not normal for someone my age. It started, or at least revealed itself at Serge's, the evening of the white painting. After Serge, in an act of pure madness, had demonstrated to Marc that he cared more about him than he did about his painting, we went and had dinner. Over dinner, Serge and Marc took the decision to try to rebuild a relationship destroyed by word and deed. One of them used to expression "trial period" and I burst into tears. I can no longer bear any kind of rational argument, nothing formative in the world, nothing great or beautiful in the world has ever been born of rational argument.

Related Characters: Yvan (speaker), Serge, Marc

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of the momentous fight on the night of the white painting, Yvan has found himself susceptible to if not random then at least uncontrollable bouts of crying. He is

cannot know.

•• MARC: Under the white clouds, the snow is falling. You can't see the white clouds, or the snow. Or the cold, or the white glow of the earth. A solitary man glides downhill on his skis. The snow is falling. It falls until the man disappears back into the landscape.

My friend Serge, who's one of my oldest friends, has bought a painting. It's a canvas about five foot by four. It represents a man who moves across a space and disappears.

Related Characters: Marc (speaker), Serge

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As the play concludes, Marc steps forward to finally, after all the fighting and all the pain, offer up his interpretation of what the Antrios represents. Marc has resisted feeling any attachment to the painting or even seeing it as a viable piece of art, but now, he reveals that it does mean something to him—and has possibly held meaning for him all along. The disappearing man Marc perceives in the white haze of the painting could represent any—or all—of the three friends. Marc has disappeared into his own ego and self-pity; Serge has disappeared into his pretensions; Yvan has disappeared into a marriage which ostensibly strips him of what little agency he had. All three men have moved across the “space” of their friendship and disappeared out of it, leaving a blank space where something beautiful and meaningful once was. That blank space is not totally empty, though; there is a potential there, the potential to be filled, restored, or changed.



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.

SCENE 1: AT SERGE'S

Marc, alone on stage, addresses the audience. He explains that his friend Serge has recently bought a new **painting**. The canvas is about five feet by four feet, and the painting is entirely white. If one squints, one can make out a few fine white diagonal lines. Marc explains that Serge is one of his oldest friends. Serge is a successful dermatologist who is "keen on art." The past Monday, Marc explains, he went over to Serge's to see the "white painting with white lines" that his friend had been lusting after for several months.

At Serge's house, the white **painting** sits at floor level. Serge looks at it excitedly. Marc looks at the painting, too, and Serge looks at Marc as Marc looks at the painting. During a long silence, the two of them experience "a whole range of wordless emotions." Marc asks Serge if the painting was expensive, and Serge answers that it cost him two hundred thousand francs. Marc is outraged, but Serge assures him that the owner of the famous Huntingdon Gallery would "take it off [his] hands" for two hundred and twenty thousand.

Serge asks Marc what he thinks of the **painting**, but Marc does not answer. Serge suggests Marc look at the painting from a different angle in order to see the lines. Marc asks Serge the name of the painter, and Serge tells Marc that the painter is named Antrios. Marc, flabbergasted, remarks aloud that he cannot believe Serge spent two hundred thousand francs on the painting, which is "shit."

Serge steps forward and addresses the audience. He tells them that Marc is "intelligent enough"—he is an aeronautical engineer—and that while Serge has always treasured Marc's friendship, he knows that Marc is a "new-style intellectual," an enemy of modernism, and an arrogant nostalgia freak. Serge returns to his place beside Marc.

Reza uses direct address frequently throughout the play in order to allow her three main characters to communicate how they are really feeling. Because so much of the play is about pretension, ego, and pride, Marc, Serge, and Yvan are not always able to reveal their innermost thoughts to one another, and therefore seek confession to and perhaps even validation from the audience.



The painting Serge has acquired is almost entirely white, and was exorbitantly expensive. As these two facts sink in, Marc questions how his friend could have possibly thought it a good idea—let alone a rational one—to spend such a sum on something that seems, to Marc, completely devoid of meaning or intention.



It becomes clear right away that Marc is having a violent emotional and intellectual reaction to the painting, unable to believe that Serge would have spent so much on something which Marc believes to be essentially worthless. Serge, however, was clearly proud and excited to share his acquisition with his friend, and this tension will become the crux of the action as the play unfolds.



Serge thinks that Marc is smart, but afraid of modern art and reluctant to engage with it. Serge knows this about Marc, and thus possibly—probably—could have anticipated that Marc would have a negative reaction to the painting, but decided to share it with him nonetheless.



Enraged, Serge asks Marc what he means by “shit.” Marc urges Serge to have a sense of humor. Serge tells Marc that if he’s going to call something shit, he needs to have some principles or standards by which he’s calling it “shit.” Serge berates Marc for never having had any interest in contemporary painting. He tells Marc that because he has no interest and therefore no knowledge of contemporary painting, he cannot possibly assert that the **Antrios painting** is shit. Marc replies, once again, that the painting is shit.

Serge steps forward again. It’s fine, he says, that Marc doesn’t like the painting, but what hurts Serge is the way in which Marc reacted to the art with “no warmth,” and immediately dismissed it with a hateful, pretentious attitude.

Marc steps forward and addresses the audience. He explains that he is both mystified and unsettled by Serge’s having bought such an expensive, ridiculous painting. Marc reveals that when he left Serge’s place, he had to take three capsules of Gelsemium—a homeopathic remedy for anxiety which his girlfriend, Paula, recommended. Marc is nervous because though Serge is “comfortably off,” he is not a wealthy man, and to spend two hundred francs at once is an irresponsible decision for someone in his income bracket.

Marc says that he must go see Yvan, a mutual friend of his and Serge’s, and discuss the painting with him. Marc says that Yvan is more tolerant, but that when it comes to relationships, tolerant is the worst thing one can be. Marc thinks that Yvan is tolerant “because he couldn’t care less.” If Yvan tolerates the fact that Serge has spent two hundred thousand francs on “white shit,” Marc says he will know that Yvan does not truly care about Serge.

SCENE 2: AT YVAN’S

At Yvan’s house, a “daub” hangs on the wall—an intentionless, thoughtless painting executed without any skill at all. Yvan is on all fours, looking for something beneath a piece of furniture. He turns to the audience to introduce himself. He tells the audience that he is a little tense at the moment because after having spent his life working in textiles, he has just begun a new job as a sales agent for a wholesale stationery business. Yvan states that though his professional life has “always been a failure,” he is getting married in just a couple of weeks to a wonderful girl from a good family. Yvan resumes his search.

Serge wants to defend his decision to purchase the Antrios by couching his defense in his superior knowledge of modern art. Marc, however, sees this as pretension, and calls Serge out on trying to defend something that is objectively worthless.



Marc sees Serge’s purchase of the painting and defense of it as pretentious, whereas Serge sees Marc’s hatred of the painting as pretentious. More than that, Serge is genuinely hurt that Marc could have dismissed the painting—an extension of Serge’s opinions, choices, and interests—so callously and cruelly.



Marc tries to explain that the reason behind his impassioned negative reaction to the painting is his concern that Serge will ruin his finances by purchasing something so extravagant—but this seems to only be a small part of Marc’s honest opinion about the purchase. There is something deeper that is unsettling Marc, and though he does not express it to the audience here, it will be revealed in time.



Marc believes that his reaction to the painting is the only rational or even possible one. He thinks that if Yvan “tolerates” Serge’s decision, then Marc himself will know that he is the only one who really cares about Serge.



Yvan, who will come to provide both temperance and comic relief as the play unfolds, is shown to be someone seemingly indifferent about art, judging by the second-rate painting hanging from his wall. Yvan sees himself as something of a failure and a joke, and his view of himself fuels his codependence on Marc and Serge alike.



Marc enters Yvan's flat, and asks what he is doing. Yvan explains that he is looking for the top of his pen. Marc tells Yvan to get up off the floor, telling him his pen cap doesn't matter. Yvan insists that it does, and that his pen will dry out without it. Marc gets down on all fours to help Yvan look, but after a minute or so, Marc straightens up and suggests Yvan just buy another one. Yvan protests that the cap belongs to a special felt tip pen that can write on any surface, and it's valuable to him.

Marc asks Yvan if he plans to stay in the flat once he marries his fiancée Catherine, and Yvan asks if the flat is suitable for a "young couple." Marc laughs, implying that Yvan and Catherine are not all that young. Marc then asks Yvan if he's lost weight. Yvan says that he has, and then laments that he cannot find his pen cap once more. Marc tells Yvan that if Yvan keeps looking for the pen cap, he is going to leave. Yvan promises to stop, and offers Marc a drink.

Marc asks Yvan if he has seen Serge lately. Yvan says he hasn't, and Marc reveals that he himself just saw Serge yesterday, and that Serge has bought a new **painting**. Marc explains the painting to Yvan, telling him to imagine a white canvas, five feet by four feet, with a few fine white lines toward the bottom. Yvan asks how the white lines can be seen if the painting itself is white. Marc, getting upset, attempts to explain how ridiculous it is that the lines are just barely a different shade of white than the rest of the painting.

Yvan asks Marc to calm down. Marc tells Yvan to let him finish, and then asks Yvan how much Yvan thinks Serge paid for the piece. Yvan asks who the painter is, and Marc tells him the name: Antrios. Yvan has never heard of the painter, and asks if he is "fashionable." Marc, frustrated, tells Yvan that it doesn't matter who the painter is: he wants to know what Yvan himself would pay for a white **painting** with off-white stripes. Yvan tells Marc he wouldn't pay anything. Marc asks Yvan to venture how much Serge would've paid; Yvan guesses ten thousand francs. Marc makes him keep guessing figures until he arrives at two hundred thousand francs, at which point Yvan asks if Serge has gone crazy.

This passage does a couple of things. It serves to show how Marc is condescending of Yvan's attachment to an inanimate object, just as he is with Serge's attachment to the Antrios. This is hypocritical, though, because though Marc does not want to admit it, he too is driven mad by the same inanimate object he purports not to understand Serge's obsession with.



The audience never got to see Marc and Serge's friendship pre-Antrios, and get a glimpse of what it had been before the painting came between them. In this passage, though, the audience is able to see what Marc and Yvan's friendship ordinarily looks like—a little teasing, a little combative, but genial and intimate as well.



Marc can hardly contain his news about the Antrios—he barely even asks Yvan how he's doing before immediately beginning to describe the painting and upsetting himself in the process. Depending on the production, a director may or may not play with what the Antrios actually looks like, giving Marc's hysteria the potential to be deeply relatable or completely unfounded.



Marc, as an appreciator of art, should know that many factors go into determining the aesthetic and monetary value of any painting. Though Yvan's questions about the painter, Antrios, are totally valid, Marc dismisses them as unrelated—to him, the crux of the issue is that the painting is white, and thus devoid of meaning, and therefore valueless. Yvan, who had been prepared to defend Serge, is also put off by the exorbitant price.



Yvan thinks for a moment, and then says that if the **painting** makes Serge happy and if he can afford it, then there's no harm in his having bought it. Marc is upset that Yvan cannot see the seriousness of the situation. Marc points out that now Serge sees himself as a collector and a great connoisseur of art. Marc asks Yvan if this upsets him, but Yvan says that as long as Serge is happy, he's happy. Yvan says once more that as long as Serge isn't doing any harm to anyone, the purchase is fine, but Marc counters that Serge is actually doing harm to him. Marc is deeply disturbed and even hurt by watching his dear friend get ripped off and lose "every ounce of discernment through sheer snobbery."

Yvan tells Marc that Serge has always been an exhibition freak. Marc counters that once Serge had a sense of humor, at least, and now can't even laugh at himself. Yvan promises Marc that he will get Serge to laugh.

Marc, embroiled in the competitive yet codependent dynamic of his relationship with Serge, hates that Serge now sees himself as a collector, or as a person with great (and independent) taste. This is a point of contention for Marc, whereas Yvan simply wants both of his friends to be happy. Marc insists that the painting hurts him personally—and as the play unfolds, the audience will come to understand why.



SCENE 3: AT SERGE'S

Serge and Yvan are together in Serge's flat. The **painting** is not on the wall. Yvan asks Serge how he's been, and Serge says nothing is new, though he's glad to see Yvan, who never calls. Yvan remarks that Serge's apartment looks sparse and monastic. Serge laughs, and agrees. Serge then asks if Yvan has seen Marc lately—Yvan lies, and says he hasn't. Serge volunteers that he saw Marc a few days ago. Yvan asks if Marc is all right, and Serge replies that he is—more or less. Yvan asks if Serge has been out at all and seen any interesting films or art. Serge replies that he cannot afford to go out—he is "ruined." Yvan feigns intrigue. Serge offers to show Yvan something special—he leaves the room and returns with the Antrios, which he sets down in front of Yvan. Yvan considers the painting—he really likes it.

Serge explains that it is a piece from the 1970s, and though the artist is going through a "similar phase" now, the **painting** is a vintage one. He asks if Yvan likes it. Yvan says that he does. They both remark on how the painting is plain but nonetheless magnetic. Yvan asks about the price. Serge replies that it cost him two hundred thousand francs. Yvan replies that the price is "very reasonable." After a moment of silence, Serge bursts out laughing and then so does Yvan. Serge remarks on how "crazy" it was of him to spend two hundred grand. They laugh back and forth for several minutes before calming down.

Though Yvan points out that Serge has always been a little bit pretentious and desperate to make his taste known, Marc insists that this new development is far worse.



Serge and Yvan are also shown to have a genial and intimate relationship, though before Yvan has even seen the painting, it has already begun to affect their relationship, too. By lying to Serge about having not seen Marc recently—and by coming to Serge's flat with an alternate agenda in mind—there is already the rift of a small lie between them. When Yvan sees the painting, however, he finds that his allegiance lies with Serge after all—he appreciates the Antrios and doesn't understand what all Marc's fussing was about.



Marc and Yvan's respective visits with Serge and the Antrios go very differently. Yvan feels a magnetic pull toward the painting, and appreciates it as an aesthetic object, whereas Marc did not. Because Yvan appreciates the painting, he is willing to entertain the idea that it was worth its exorbitant price. It is only because he and Serge find themselves on equal footing in this that Serge is able to willfully admit that the price of the painting was insane, and perhaps he himself was insane to purchase it. Serge does not feel judged by Yvan, though he did feel judged by Marc, and this rendered any conversation about the painting impossible between the two of them.



Serge tells Yvan conspiratorially that Marc has seen the **painting**, and was “devastated” by it. He reveals that Marc described the painting as “shit.” Yvan argues that Marc’s taste is “classical,” and it makes sense that he wouldn’t understand the painting at all. Serge complains that Marc had no sense of humor at all about the painting—with Yvan, Serge feels comfortable laughing, but around Marc he is a “block of ice.” Yvan agrees that Marc has seemed gloomy lately.

Serge tells Yvan that he doesn’t blame Marc for not reacting well to the **painting**—Marc has not gone through the “apprenticeship” one needs to understand and become sensitive to modern art—but that he felt hurt by Marc’s condescension and contempt. Serge warns Yvan not to try to smooth things over between him and Marc, and then asks Yvan to concede that Marc is “atrophying.” Yvan is silent.

SCENE 4: AT MARC’S

On the wall of Marc’s flat there is a painting of a landscape seen through a window. Yvan and Marc are in the living room discussing Yvan’s recent visit to Serge’s. Yvan tells Marc that he and Serge had a good laugh over the **Antrios**, and Marc is shocked. Yvan assures Marc that it was a genuine, spontaneous laugh the two of them shared. Yvan adds that it was Serge who laughed first. When Marc asks why, Yvan posits that Serge sensed that Yvan was about to laugh first, and laughed to put him at ease. Marc tells Yvan that this means the laugh was not a genuine laugh—it wasn’t a laugh for the right reason.

Marc argues that Serge was not laughing because his **painting** was ridiculous—he was laughing to “ingratiate” himself to Yvan. Yvan meekly agrees. There is a silence, and then Yvan gently tells Marc that while he didn’t like the painting, he didn’t hate it. Marc tells Yvan that one can’t “hate nothing.” Yvan, however, asserts that the painting is not nothing—it is a work of art, and there is “a system behind it.” Marc begins laughing. Yvan continues asserting that the painting is an intentional and even affecting work of art, but Marc accuses him of “parroting Serge’s nonsense.”

This passage shows that there is more troubling Marc and Serge’s relationship than just the acquisition of the *Antrios*. There is something wrong in Marc and Serge’s codependent friendship that prevents them from having a sense of humor around one another—everything is a standoff, a competition, a battle. With the genial, agreeable Yvan—with whom Serge is less competitive and prideful—things are easier.



Serge surely knows about the artless painting hanging on Yvan’s wall, and so his description of Marc as uneducated in the realm of modern art to another of his uneducated friends belies Serge’s pretentious nature. Serge, in this passage, attempts to turn Yvan against Marc by pointing out how Marc has declined—just as Marc attempted to regard Serge in the previous scene. As Yvan realizes that his friends are using him to battle one another, he reflects silently on what has become of their friendships with one another.



Marc’s painting is a landscape, a sort of sentimental and nostalgic piece that Marc is certainly nonetheless proud of. As Marc reckons with what has transpired between Serge and Yvan, he attempts to explain away his jealousy of the fact that Serge and Yvan actually bonded over the *Antrios* by stating that Serge could not have been genuine—he must have been coddling the poor Yvan.



Marc attempts to make Yvan feel useless or stupid, but Yvan tries to stand by his feelings about the painting. Marc dismisses Yvan’s opinion out of hand by describing the painting as “nothing.” Marc is attempting to be cruel to Yvan because he is angry that Yvan is not taking his side—Marc, who clearly has codependency issues certainly with Serge and to a lesser degree with Yvan, feels that his friends are against him.



Yvan tells Marc that he's getting bitter, and that it's unattractive. Marc tells Yvan that he hopes to become more offensive the older he gets. He berates Yvan for attempting to see something of value in Serge's **painting**, and then orders Yvan to describe the feelings he experienced while looking at the painting. Yvan accuses Marc of trying to deny that Yvan is capable of having an opinion of his own about the painting. Marc asks Yvan to look him in the eye and tell him that he was moved by Serge's painting. Yvan cannot. Marc asks Yvan if the painting made him happy.

Yvan steps forward and addresses the audience. He says that of course the **painting** didn't make him happy, but also says he's not the kind of person who can say he's happy "just like that." He begins to try and think of a recent occasion on which he was happy, but he cannot.

Serge steps forward out of nowhere. He tells the audience that the **painting**, "objectively speaking," is not white. It has a whole range of greys, he says, and even some red. He argues that he would not like the painting if it were white. The flaw in Marc's thinking, Serge says, is that Marc believes the painting to be white. Yvan, on the other hand, can see clearly that the painting is not, in fact, white. Serge says that he ultimately doesn't really care what Marc thinks of the Antrios.

Marc steps forward, and, alone in his own monologue, wonders aloud why he is so bothered by Serge being "taken in" by modern art. Marc wishes he had used a less aggressive tone with Serge, or approached a discussion of the **painting** in a different way. Even though he is "physically ill" over the painting, he concedes that he should stop attacking Serge over the piece of art. He vows, from now on, to be on his best behavior with his two friends.

Yvan remembers, perhaps, what Serge said about Marc's having "atrophied," or deteriorated and devolved into a lesser version of himself, and tells Marc that he has become "bitter." Marc leans into this accusation and turns it into a point of pride. Marc still believes he can control Yvan's thoughts and opinions, and as Yvan finally sees this, he tries to stay firm on his own opinion before at last encountering a question he cannot answer.



Marc has assigned an arbitrary marker of value to the painting—if it could make Serge, Yvan, or even Marc happy, perhaps it would be worth something. This sends the self-reflective Yvan into a tailspin, as the Antrios forces him to confront his own inability to feel joy.



No one is at Serge's flat needling him about the painting—he is slightly defensively attempting to explain it to the audience, perhaps because he knows things are getting ridiculous, or feels compelled to validate his own perception of things.



Marc, after a botched encounter with the sensitive Yvan, begins to realize that his behavior regarding the Antrios has been more than a little bit over the top. Note that his vow at the end of this monologue is not to be kinder or more empathetic, or to try to see the Antrios through his friends' eyes—it is simply to deceive them by acting like a better version of himself.



SCENE 5: AT SERGE'S

Marc and Serge are at Serge's apartment. Serge tells Marc that Yvan liked the **Antrios**. Marc asks to take another look at it, and Serge excitedly goes to fetch it from the other room. When he returns, he places it in front of Marc, and the two consider it. After a moment, Serge tells Marc that they need not worry about the painting. He picks up a book from his coffee table—*De Vita Beata*, by the ancient philosopher Seneca, a text which describes happiness as the pursuit of reason—and asks if Marc has read the “masterpiece.” Serge tells him that the text is “incredibly modern,” and perhaps the only text in the canon of literature and philosophy one needs to read. Serge explains that lately, as he is so busy juggling his relationship with his ex-wife and his children, whom he sees only rarely, that he is drawn to the “essentials.”

Marc jokes that this is evident from Serge's choice of a **painting** that eliminates form and color. Serge teases Marc back about the landscape hanging in Marc's own apartment, disdainfully describing the painting as “pretty.” Marc confesses to Serge that the other day, while driving, he found himself wondering whether there was something deeply poetic about Serge's “surrendering to [the] incoherent urge to buy.” Marc apologizes for being thin-skinned, tightly-wound, and for overreacting to Serge's purchase. Serge urges Marc to read Seneca as a balm against his anxiety and tension.

Marc points out that he is “capable of being really annoyed” by Serge's telling him to read Seneca. Serge admits to being superior and obnoxious, but also argues that Marc has misread his tone—he wasn't meaning to be superior, but instead genial and helpful. Serge tells Marc that Marc has just completely lost his sense of humor—even Yvan, he says, agrees with him. Marc is hurt by this. He takes a homeopathic capsule, and Serge teases him for doing so. Serge asks Marc if he thinks Yvan has lost weight; Serge speculates that the wedding is “eating away at [him.]”

Marc asks Serge where he is planning to hang the **painting**. Serge says he hasn't decided. Marc asks Serge if he is going to have the painting framed, but Serge laughs, and tells Marc that the painting is not “supposed” to be framed—the artist would not want the painting interrupted. Marc teases Serge for referring to Antrios as “the artist,” but then quickly changes the subject, asking what they are going to go see at the cinema that night. Serge laments that it's now eight, and everything decent will already have started. He cannot believe that Yvan is always late. Marc suggests leaving without Yvan and going to dinner. Serge agrees, but then asks Marc what he meant when he made fun of him for saying “the artist.”

In this passage, it seems as if Marx and Serge are both trying to bridge the gap between them by being more considerate of the other. Marc volunteers to give the painting another look, and Serge, though excited, insists that ultimately it doesn't matter—he wants to move on from the painting and bond about other things. His attempt to change the subject, however, is yet another venture into pretension—though an unintentional one. Serge is trying to share some things about his life with his old friend, but Serge has become much more wrapped up in lofty ideas about art and literature than he ever was before, and this rubs Marc the wrong way.



Marc and Serge can't even have a normal conversation anymore—any dialogue between them, however banal, is full of slights, digs, and small cruelties about the choices the other has made in his life.



Serge points out the crux of the problem between himself and Marc. Because there is some sort of underlying tension between them, they have lost their senses of humor with one another, and now even well-meaning, helpful advice is perceived as condescension, pretension, or competition.



Marc cannot stop drawing attention to the Antrios—it is all he can think about. When his seemingly well-meaning question is answered by a seemingly well-meaning response, there is still something about Serge's answer that rubs him the wrong way, and he attempts to needle Serge yet again for speaking in a way he sees as pretentious.



Marc tells Serge that he thought Serge referred to “the artist” as if he were a god. Serge counters that, for him, Antrios is a god. Serge exclaims that at the famous Pompidou museum, there are three Antrios pieces—but his, he says, is better than any of them. Serge then swiftly changes the subject, telling Marc that if Yvan doesn’t show up in the next three minutes they should head to dinner. Marc accuses Serge of being jumpy. Serge admits he’s irritated by Yvan’s lack of punctuality. Marc then points out that Serge is simply taking out his own anger at Marc, who is getting on Serge’s nerves, on the poor Yvan. Serge tells Marc that Marc is not getting on his nerves.

Serge steps forward and addresses the audience. He admits that Marc is, in fact, getting on his nerves—the tone of Marc’s voice is ingratiating and irritating, as if Marc is forcing himself to be pleasant. Serge wonders if the **Antrios** has triggered feelings of “constraint” between the two friends—if Marc is angry that Serge has bought something without consulting him.

Marc steps forward and addresses the audience. He, too, wonders whether the purchase of the **Antrios** has driven a wedge between him and Serge. He feels, though, that the rift started some time ago, when the two of them were discussing a piece of art and Serge unironically used the term “deconstruction.” When Marc needled Serge for his humorless use of the pretentious term, Serge grew angry, and asked Marc what he thought made him so special. Marc now feels that on that day he should have punched Serge in the mouth and asked him, once he was lying “half-dead” on the ground, what sort of friend he was if he didn’t think his friends were special.

The doorbell rings. It is twelve minutes past eight—Yvan is over half an hour late. Serge lets Yvan in, and Yvan enters, in crisis mode. In an extended monologue, he describes the problem he’s currently facing: both his and Catherine’s stepmothers want their names on the wedding invitations. While Catherine adores her stepmother, who brought her up after her birth mother’s death, Yvan despises his stepmother. Catherine wants her stepmother’s name on the invitation, but Yvan does not want his stepmother’s to be—his mother is still alive. This has created a problem with Yvan’s father, who does not want his name on the invitation if his wife’s is not as well.

Marc and Serge find themselves struggling to get to the root of the problem between them. What keeps happening between the two is that Serge says something Marc finds ridiculous and then challenges, but which Serge, when challenged, professes to truly and sincerely believe. As the two sense a pattern emerging, Serge attempts to change the subject, and deflect away from the fact that he is as upset as he is with Marc.



Serge understands the bitterness underlying all of Marc’s statements about the Antrios. The prideful, egotistic Marc, who believes his opinions are the only valid ones, is upset that Serge has struck out on his own.



While Serge feels that all of their problems are due to Marc’s anger over the Antrios, Marc feels that he has been watching Serge devolve into pretentiousness and egoism for a long time now. The two of them have been struggling to relate to one another with a sense of humor for a while—they have both grown so caught up in their egos that they can no longer laugh with one another, take themselves less than seriously, or see one another as special and valued.



Yvan serves to distract from the breakthrough Marc and Serge were seemingly about to make as they privately confronted their issues with one another. Yvan’s drama concerning his wedding invitations is something that is happening in real life and stands to deeply affect him and those he loves, whereas everything Marc and Serge have been arguing about is, more or less, abstract pretension.



When Yvan suggested excluding all parents' names from the invitation and simply printing his and Catherine's, Catherine argued that it would be disrespectful to her parents—who are paying for the wedding—to leave them off the invitation. Yvan called his mother just before leaving the house to warn her that his stepmother's name would have to appear on the invitation, and begged her not to make things difficult, but she took offense and expressed her anger at having been left out of much of the wedding planning. Yvan hurried off the phone.

Catherine, who had been sitting beside him in the room and had only heard his half of the conversation, asked what was going on. When Yvan revealed that his mother was being difficult about the wedding, Catherine became angry all over again, and insisted Yvan dial his mother back and demand that she "rise above her vanity" and stop making things more difficult for the two of them. When Yvan called his mother back, she lambasted him for getting married at all and thus forcing her to spend an entire evening with her ex-husband and his new wife. Yvan told his mother she was being selfish, and then attempted to get off the phone by explaining to her that he was late to meet some friends.

Serge asks what happened next. Yvan reveals that nothing happened—nothing has been resolved, and after a brief "mini-drama" with Catherine, he left the house to come meet the two of them. Marc asks Yvan why he lets himself be bossed around by so many women. Serge tells Yvan he's lost weight, and Yvan answers that of course he has—he's stressed beyond belief. Marc snidely suggests that Yvan read Seneca's *De Vita Beata*—he tells Yvan that it's a masterpiece. Serge pettily tells Yvan that Marc hasn't even read it. Marc tells Serge he only described it as a masterpiece because Serge himself had.

Serge and Marc begin fighting about Serge's use of the words "masterpiece" and "modern." Marc takes issue with Serge's use of the word modern as a compliment. Serge accuses Marc of needling him incessantly. Yvan tells the two other men that if they spend the whole night fighting, it will "finish" him. He attempts to change the subject by asking what they should do now that they have missed all the movies. Marc, however, leadingly asks Yvan if he is "taken" with Serge's **painting**. Yvan admits that he is, and says that he gathers Marc isn't. Marc suggests heading out for dinner. Serge and Marc argue briefly and passive-aggressively about where they should go, and attempt to put Yvan in the middle. Yvan says he'll go wherever the other two would like, and then Serge and Marc lay into him about his lack of opinions.

Yvan's story about being caught between the many women in his life offers evidence of him as someone who is so desperate to please the people he loves that he often finds himself actually hurting them—and himself. Yvan is not egoistic in the same way Marc and Serge are, but others' conception of him is very important to him, and he wants to always be seen as doing the right thing.



Yvan's attempts to calm down both his mother and Catherine backfire. Yvan is attempting to keep everyone's opinions of him just as they have always been, but by trying to please everyone he winds up pleasing no one, and just gets his mother and Catherine agitated. This debacle foreshadows what is to come as he hops out of the frying pan and into the fryer, arriving in the midst of Marc and Serge's similarly petty fight.



Even a joke between friends is blown out of proportion as Marc, parroting Serge's advice to him when he himself expressed feelings of stress and anxiety, is called out as being rude and pretentious.



In this passage, the three friends struggle momentously over nothing. Marc made a joke to Yvan that Serge construes as an attack—and it is. Everything Serge says sets Marc on edge. Yvan's attempts to defuse the tension only result in his two friends piling on him, and cruelly berating him for always trying to be the nice one and avoid conflict. Just as Yvan, in attempting to do some conflict resolution with his mother and Catherine, found himself at the center of an attack, so too does he find himself fending one off now.



Yvan proclaims that he has put up with enough abuse for one day, and will go home if the two don't stop it. Marc asks Yvan where his sense of humor is, and leadingly questions Yvan as to whether he thinks that he, too, has lost his sense of humor. Serge announces that he isn't even hungry, and offers to give Yvan some advice about his problems with the women in his life. Serge warns Yvan that Catherine is "hysterical," and that if he lets himself be bossed around by her, he is in for a "hideous" future. When Yvan asks what he should do, Marc suggests he cancel the wedding, and Serge agrees.

Yvan, distressed, tells the other two men that he can't possibly call off the wedding—he only was able to obtain his job at the stationery business through Catherine's uncle, who is the owner. Moreover, Yvan tells Serge that Serge, not having had great success in terms of romance, is not the person Yvan would turn to for matrimonial advice. Changing the subject, Yvan asks Serge where he plans to hang the **Antrios**. Serge says he does not know.

Yvan tells Serge that he thought of him yesterday at work, when they printed five hundred posters by an artist who paints white flowers against a white background. Serge counters that his **Antrios** is not white. "Of course not," Yvan says, conciliatorily agreeing. Marc jumps down Yvan's throat, asking him to say what color he thinks the painting is if not white. Yvan describes the various colors he can see within the painting. Marc asks Yvan if the colors in the painting "move" him. Yvan says they does. Marc tells Yvan that he is an "amoeba," and attacks him for being an "obsequious ass-licker."

Marc asks Yvan how he could, in front of him, describe the colors as touching. Yvan tells Marc that he needs to stop wanting to control everything—Yvan maintains that he finds the colors touching. Serge tells Marc that Yvan is entitled to his opinion, but Marc replies that he is not. He accuses Yvan of lying about finding the colors moving. Serge asks Marc who he thinks he is to try and legislate others—Marc despises everything and everyone, and takes pride in "not being a man of [his] time." As Marc and Serge resume their arguing, Yvan stands up to leave. Serge tells Yvan that if he leaves, he is "giving in" to Marc. Yvan hesitates, torn.

Yvan, sensing that the pattern of cruelty he just escaped at home has followed him here to Serge's, threatens to end the evening. Marc, bringing up Yvan's earlier criticism of him, asks Yvan what has happened to his sense of humor in a cruel and direct dig. Even the advice Marc and Serge give to Yvan is full of cruelty and indifference—they are being as mean to him as possible because it is easier to direct their cruelty at him than it is to direct it at one another.



In a twist of events, rather than attempting to change the subject to personal matters to defuse the tension surrounding the Antrios, the conversation has taken such a nasty and frightful turn that Yvan uses the controversial Antrios as a distraction to take the heat off of himself for a moment.



Yvan's attempt to connect with Serge fails—Serge has become very sensitive to anything he perceives as criticism of the Antrios. Yvan, who does not want to offend anyone or draw any more attention to himself, attempts to simply agree as a way of shutting things down, but Marc, hungry for conflict and validation of his own opinions, will not let the moment slide. When Yvan takes Serge's "side," Marc erupts and begin cruelly berating Yvan's natural need to be liked.



It is unclear whether Yvan really likes the painting, or whether he is just saying so—he could be trying to ingratiate himself to Serge, or he could simply have stated an opinion which he didn't believe, but now because his lack of opinion is being called out, he feels the need to stick with it no matter what the cost. As Marc and Serge's argument picks up on a new thread, Yvan finds himself itching to leave more and more, though his friends weaponize this impulse, too, against him.



Marc and Serge debate what it means to be “a man of one’s time.” Serge argues that a man of his time is someone who is representative of his era. When Marc asks him to elaborate, though, Serge explodes, and tells Marc that if he were indeed a man of his time he would make contributions to the human race and “play his part in the dynamic of evolution.” Marc asks Serge if Serge believes that he himself is a man of his time, and if Yvan is. Marc asserts that Yvan cannot possibly be a man of his time, what with the terrible art hanging from his mantelpiece. Serge warns Marc that the more he tries to struggle against being of his own time, the deeper he will sink into it. He orders Marc to apologize to Yvan. Marc, however, tells Yvan that he is a coward. Yvan leaves.

Marc, realizing that meeting up this evening was a bad idea, suggests he himself take his leave as well. Serge tells Marc that he is a coward for attacking Yvan, who is incapable of defending himself. Marc apologizes to Serge and confides in him that he no longer has any idea what he and Yvan ever had in common. Serge asks Marc if he has any idea what the two of them have in common. Marc warns Serge that that question could take them “down a very long road,” and Serge invites him to “lead on.”

After a brief silence, Marc apologizes again for upsetting Yvan. Serge reveals that the painting of Yvan’s that Marc insulted was painted by Yvan’s father. Marc points out that Serge, too, berated the painting, and together the men consider how they have hurt their friend.

The doorbell rings, and Yvan enters, manic as he was before. He announces that the elevator was full, and so he took the stairs, all the while thinking about how he’d like to return to Serge’s flat with a gun and blow Marc’s head off for calling him an amoeba. Once at the ground floor, however, Yvan realized that he hadn’t been in therapy for six years for nothing—he realized that “some deep malaise” has to be underneath Marc’s “insane aggression,” and has returned to help Marc.

Yvan tells Marc and Serge that just the other day he was discussing the two of them with his therapist, Finkelzohn. Serge asks why Yvan was discussing them, and Yvan reveals that he was concerned because Marc and Serge’s relationship seemed strained. Marc and Serge are upset that Yvan discussed them with his therapist, but Serge nevertheless urges him to reveal what Finkelzohn said about them. Yvan pulls a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. Marc is incredulous that Yvan took notes. Yvan defensively proclaims that he wrote down what the therapist said because it was complicated, and then begins to read off of his notes.

This argument represents one of the central things the play is lampooning. None of the friends can even agree on what the phrase “a man of one’s time” means or signifies, and the phrase itself seems to be inherently devoid of meaning. The men endlessly debate which of them is or is not a man of their time, and weaponize the title against one another despite its completely vague and arbitrary nature. Their only interest is in hurting and demeaning one another in service of their own egos. Yvan, perhaps realizing on some level that this is what is happening, removes himself from the situation—just as it was back at home, his instinct in the face of conflict is to flee.



Marc and Serge, realizing how badly they have hurt their sensitive friend, seem poised on a moment of real connection and reconciliation, though Marc and Serge both admit that there is a lot of muck for them to wade through before they come to an answer about what their friendship even means now, and how to continue it.



The two share yet another moment of connection when they realize that they have wounded Yvan by insulting something he loves. His friends forgot, in the heat of their egoistic, pretentious fight, that the trashy, “meaningless” piece of art they were condescending to is an object of love and meaning for Yvan.



Yvan, the eternal people-pleaser, cannot just let this fight go. He realizes how disturbed his friends have become, and despite his earlier failure, he feels as if he is the only one who can fix it. All Yvan wants is for everything to go back to the way it was, and he—somewhat egotistically—believes that he can get things there.



Marc and Serge pretentiously dismiss therapy as a joke, and are angry that Yvan would have brought him up in his sessions with his therapist. Again, all Yvan wants to do is help, but when he reveals that he plans to try to help them through proxy advice from his therapist, his friends condescend to him once again.



"If I'm who I am because I'm who I am and you're who you are, then I'm who I am and you're who you are. If on the other hand I'm who I am because you're who you are, and you're who you are because I'm who I am, then I'm not who I am and you're not who you are" is what the slightly confusing note says.

The note is, for comic effect, written in circuitous, childlike language. What it actually says is that if two people base their personalities and opinions off what they believe another person desires or expects of them, the relationship will not be viable, and will be based on lies and falsehoods.



Marc sarcastically tells Yvan that he is a "lucky man" to be getting advice from Finkelzohn. Serge, jumping on board with the sarcasm, asks Yvan to make them each a copy of the note, as it might come in handy for future reference. Yvan sheepishly puts the note back in his pocket, and tells his friends that they are wrong—the advice is in fact very profound. Marc tells Yvan that his therapist has turned him into a "pudding." Yvan mutters about how all of their strife stems from Marc's inability to believe that Yvan likes the **Antrios**.

Serge suggests they all change the subject—he has no interest in discussing the **painting** any further. Marc accuses Serge of being touchy, but Serge argues that he is simply exhausted—and, frankly, is growing bored with both Marc and Yvan. Yvan suggests they all go out to eat, and Serge suggests Marc and Yvan go alone. Yvan complains that the three of them are so rarely together, and Serge suggests that that is "just as well" judging by the way the night has gone.

Yvan begs his friends to calm down and get along, but Serge tells Yvan he is only "adding fuel to the fire" by behaving self-righteously. Marc takes one of his anti-anxiety supplements. Seized by a sudden impulse, Serge picks the **Antrios** up and takes it away into the next room. He returns immediately. Marc remarks that he and Yvan are not worthy of looking upon the painting, and Serge says he's right. Marc tells Serge that he's probably just afraid that he will soon start seeing the painting through Marc's eyes. Serge attempts to quote Paul Valery, a French poet and philosopher, but Marc warns him not to quote Valery. Serge points out that Marc was the one who introduced him to Valery in the first place, but Marc insists he doesn't "give a fuck" about Paul Valery.

Serge asks Marc what he does give a fuck about, and Marc replies that he cares about Serge's spending two hundred thousand francs on a "piece of shit." Yvan begs Marc not to start up again, but Serge is already readying his own argument. Serge rails against Marc for refusing to believe that he or Yvan could have a genuine attachment to the **painting**, and accuses him of trying to sow discord in the trio's friendship. Marc admits that he cannot love the Serge who's capable of buying that painting—and as for loving, he can't believe that anyone could ever love that painting.

Though the advice is indeed profound, Marc and Serge either do not realize this or refuse to accept it. Instead of thanking Yvan for attempting to help them or applauding him for attempting to work through something difficult in therapy, they berate him for allowing himself to be influenced by yet another outside force.



Though it is clear that things are devolving deeper and deeper into cruelty and even outright madness, Yvan still wants to believe that there is something to salvage, but Serge is beginning to think that there is no way forward for the three of them.



Even Serge's decision to physically remove the object of contention from the room does not defuse the tensions surrounding the implications of his purchase of the **Antrios**. Though Serge has removed the painting, he continues to spout what Marc sees as pretentious nonsense despite the fact that he himself introduced Serge to the very concepts Serge is now attempting to discuss. The two men's clashing egos have caused them to cast aside things they once held dear and now only relate to one another through condescension and cruelty.



The painting is so wildly offensive to Marc that he refuses to believe that anyone could love it, and argues that even if Serge and Yvan truly do love it, he does not want anything to do with anyone so pretentious, or stupid, or a combination of the two that they would see any value in the **Antrios** at all.



Serge asks Marc if he ever considered that Serge truly loved the **painting**, and that his words might be hurtful to Serge—Marc says he hasn't. Serge tells Marc that long ago, when Marc asked Serge what he thought of Paula, Serge chose not to say that he "found her ugly, repellent, and charmless." Yvan accuses Serge of lying to make Marc feel bad, but Serge insists that he actually feels even worse about Paula than what he just said. Serge points out that when the subject concerns Marc, Marc understands how words can "bite."

Marc asks Serge how someone can be "worse than repellent," and Serge references the way Marc's girlfriend Paula waves her cigarette smoke. Marc tells Serge that what he is doing is "very serious." Serge continues to berate the manner in which Paula waves away her cigarette smoke. Yvan accuses Serge of exaggerating. Serge points out that Yvan must agree with him—he is not opposing him, just claiming exaggeration. Marc tells Serge to take back everything he's just said, and Yvan backs Marc up. Serge refuses. He tells both of his friends that they are "a pair of fossils." Marc throws himself on Serge, and Yvan rushes forward to try and tear them apart.

In trying to strike each other, Marc or Serge—it is unclear who—strikes Yvan. Yvan removes himself from the struggle, groaning and clutching his head. Serge leaves the room and comes back right away with a compress. As Yvan holds the ice to his head, he tells Marc and Serge that they have both gone completely insane—two old friends, educated people, have chosen to demolish not only each other but everyone the other holds dear.

Marc asks Serge why he wouldn't have told him at the time how much he hated Paula—and why, in fact, Serge told Marc that the two of them were a "perfect match." Serge feigns ignorance, but Marc points out that Serge is, by proxy, calling Marc himself "worse than repellent." As the two of them argue back and forth, Yvan screams that he is in agony, and wonders if he has a concussion. Serge and Marc offer him alcohol and aspirin, but he wants neither, and urges them to just get back to their argument.

Serge points out that while he does not like Paula, he does not resent Marc for spending time with Paula; whereas Marc does not like the **Antrios** and resents Serge for having acquired it. Marc says he believes that Serge has replaced him with the Antrios, "and all it implies," while he himself never replaced Serge with Paula. Serge, confused, asks Yvan to "translate" what Marc is saying, but Yvan proclaims that he has tuned out—both men are "insane."

Marc purports to be personally hurt by the painting, but has not considered that Serge might too be hurt by Marc's outright dismissal of it. In an attempt to level the playing field—or in just a cruel, desperate means of proving his own point—Serge reveals that he has always hated, or is pretending to have always hated, Marc's girlfriend Paula. Serge is attempting to equate Paula and the Antrios, demonstrating that when one's friend loves something, one should not attack it.



This passage implies that Serge doesn't truly hate Paula, but is simply searching for the most ridiculous way in which he can upset Marc. By pointing out something meaningless and inconsequential about Paula that has purportedly rendered her "repellent" in Serge's eyes, Serge points out how ridiculous it is that Marc has chosen to detest the Antrios, and bring their friendship crumbling to the ground, over his dislike of certain aspects of the painting. This backfires, however—perhaps because it also involves an attack on Marc's masculinity—sending the evening spinning into even greater turmoil.



Yvan's emotional interference in the fight between Marc and Serge is physically manifested as bodily interference in this passage. Just as Yvan's attempts to verbally or emotionally soothe his friends have backfired, so too does his attempt to physically intervene and calm the two of them down.



Marc, growing increasingly nitpicky and pedantic as the evening wears on, and in a last-ditch attempt to pull on each and every loose thread in his and Serge's relationship, uses Serge's attack on Paula to extend the attack, by proxy, onto himself. It is almost as if Marc wants to see how bad he can force things to get, and how low he can bring everyone else's ego down.



Marc's deepest hurt is finally revealed—he has never come across anything that is more important to him than Serge, but Serge has (seemingly) at last come across something that is more important to him than Marc. This isn't exactly true—the most important thing to each of them seems to be his own self—but Marc's hurt is nonetheless palpable in this moment.



Marc tells Serge that back when he judged things by Marc's standards, he never would have bought the *Antrios*. Serge wonders if there ever even was such a time. Marc urges Serge to remember the times when Serge was proud to be Marc's friend, and even "congratulated himself" on having such an interesting friend with such good taste. Serge has since claimed his independence from Marc, but Marc sees Serge's independence as violence, abandonment, and betrayal.

Serge asks Marc if Marc thought he was Serge's mentor—Marc says that he did. If he loved Marc as a mentor, Serge argues, then Marc must have loved him only as a disciple and an adherent. Marc admits that he enjoyed being admired by Serge, and that seeing himself through Serge's eyes made him feel good about himself. Marc bemoans the fact that now Serge prizes far-away, godlike artists and obscure concepts like "deconstruction" over Marc's friendship.

Yvan urges the two to make up—there is still time to salvage the evening and enjoy one another's company. Marc admits that the deterioration of his and Serge's relationship is his own fault—he has pulled away from Serge recently, and allowed Serge to fill the gap with useless knowledge and pretentious obsessions. Marc laments having left Serge—and Yvan, too—"unchaperoned." In the absence of his care and grooming, Serge has become a pretentious aesthete and Yvan has become a "timid" man who is throwing away what little originality he once had by getting married.

Serge asks Marc why he can't just love people for who they are. Marc asks who friends even are apart from their other friends' faith in them. Marc has attempted to mold Serge and Yvan into people he has faith in, but somewhere along the way, he has failed. Yvan gleefully announces that Finkelzohn had been right about Marc and Serge's relationship. Marc tells Yvan to stop refereeing as if he is not also "implicated" in this massive fight.

Marc tells Yvan that he cannot stand Yvan's desire to put Marc and Serge on the same level—the two of them are not equal, Marc says, and now Yvan must choose between the two of them who he will remain friends with. Yvan announces that he has already chosen, implying that he has chosen Serge. Serge says he does not need a "supporter." Yvan, frustrated and angry, asks why the three of them even see each other—they clearly hate each other. He clarifies: he does not hate either Marc or Serge, but the two of them hate each other. Yvan laments the fact that he was looking forward to a fun evening with his friends and getting away from the dramas of his life.

Marc's actual pain is revealed in this passage—he loved that Serge loved him so much, and celebrated him, and stoked his ego. Now that Serge has amassed his own opinions and developed an overinflated ego of his own, Marc is left all alone, feeling as if he has invested time and love in a person who was only ever looking to glean what he could from him and then surpass him.



Serge points out that though Marc purports to feel betrayed by Serge, Marc has, for a long time, loved Serge for the wrong reasons in the first place. Marc wanted to be the one with the power, which he saw as the power to impress, to influence, and to educate, while Serge's only purpose in Marc's life was to validate his ability to do these things.



Marc now feels that Serge and Yvan, by moving on to other things in their lives—Serge with modern art, Yvan with his fiancée Catherine—have estranged themselves from Marc's useful advice and become people he no longer recognizes—in other words, people he no longer controls. This is no basis for friendship, obviously, but Marc's sense of having been betrayed is genuine, despite his unhealthy reasons for it.



The problem with this trio is that they all see friendship so very differently. Marc, who has been railing against Serge for seeing himself as a collector, is revealed to himself be a "collector"—of friends with traits that appeal to him because he has helped to engender them.



Marc and Serge again bully Yvan, first forcing him to choose between the two of them and then rejecting him when he does. Yvan cannot understand why his friends are so desperate to drag him down along with them, or why things have devolved between them all to the point that they have. Yvan does not see himself as involved in the fight in the same way as Marc and Serge, but the other two find his desire to keep himself on the fringes of the battle as an unbearable attempt at appearing saint-like and blameless.



Serge points out that Yvan is only making “I” statements and only talking about himself. Yvan argues that “everybody talks about themselves.” Serge accuses Yvan of fucking up the evening—Yvan is outraged. He asks how he ruined things. Marc reminds him that he arrived nearly an hour late, did not apologize for his tardiness, and immediately proceeded to “deluge [them] with [his] domestic woes.” Serge adds that all evening Yvan’s “inertia” and desire to be a spectator to the argument has driven him and Marc even deeper into their rage.

Yvan, overwhelmed by his friends’ piling on him, says he could burst into tears. Marc and Serge both urge him to go ahead and cry. Marc points out that Yvan has every reason to cry—he is marrying a horrible woman and losing his two best friends. Yvan points out that Marc and Serge are the witnesses at his wedding, and asks what he will do without them. Serge tells him to find someone else. Yvan says that their names are already on the invitations. Marc tells Yvan not to panic—they will come to his wedding. “But what you ought to do,” says Serge, “is cancel [it.]”

Yvan bursts into tears. He tells his friends that they are being brutal, and asks why they couldn’t have saved their fight for after his wedding, which they now seem desperate to ruin despite its already being a catastrophe. Yvan regrets having been the jester and the “fool” of their friendship for the last fifteen years, only to be left “solitary as a rat.” Marc tells Yvan to stop getting himself worked up into a state. Yvan tells Marc that he is the one who got Yvan into a state in the first place. Marc again tells Yvan to calm down. Yvan says that he cannot. All he wants is to be their friend. Serge asks politely if Yvan wouldn’t mind steering clear of pathos, or unnecessary emotion.

Yvan asks if there is anything to eat—he is so hungry he feels as if he is about to pass out. Serge points out a bowl of olives on the table. The three men have a silent moment together in which they all share the bowl of olives. In the quiet, Yvan reflects on how their friendship has reached an “apocalypse” because of a little white square. Serge pedantically argues that the **painting** is not white. Yvan begins laughing uncontrollably, and calls the painting a piece of white shit, and an “insane” purchase. Marc begins to laugh, too. Serge leaves the room and returns with the Antrios. He asks Yvan if he has one of his “famous” felt-tip pens on him.

The pedantries are piling up and becoming almost unbearable as the friends needle one another back and forth about every little thing. The momentous fighting Serge and Marc have done over the course of the evening obviously far outweighs anything Yvan has done, but in an attempt to take the blame off of themselves, they instead pile on Yvan and accuse him of fueling their fight through his spineless refereeing, when all he was trying to do was help.



In one final dig at Yvan, his friends attempt to level him by telling him that his life choices have all been wrong. Yvan is so codependent on both of them that he does not want to have a wedding without them. Yvan is left feeling utterly alone, wondering if his friends truly feel this way or if they are simply trying to drag him down to their level. Either way, Yvan has been abused far too much for one evening, and appears on the verge of a total breakdown.



Even Yvan’s impassioned pleas to his friends no longer register with Marc and Serge—they have been numbed and dulled by the excruciating fighting all evening, and now any show of real emotion is more than any of them can handle, process, or understand. Yvan has seemingly only ever wanted to give love and be loved, and despite Serge’s rejection of Yvan’s plea in this passage, it’s clear that on some level Yvan’s pain is getting through.



As the exhausted friends share a bowl of olives, it seems as if they have reached a place of peace. Olive branches are, after all, a symbol for extending a hand in peace and goodwill. However, at the slightest provocation, they begin quibbling again, and suddenly Serge realizes what must be done to once and for all stop the fighting over this absurd object that has come to consume all three men’s lives and consciousnesses.



Yvan asks if Serge plans to draw on the painting. Serge simply demands the pen once again. Yvan goes through his jacket pockets and hands Serge a blue pen. Serge takes the top off the marker, examines its tip, then puts the top back on. He throws the pen to Marc, and urges him to “go on.” Marc doesn’t move. Serge urges him more firmly. Marc approaches the **painting** and removes the cap from the felt-tip pen. Yvan urges Marc not to do it—he tells both men that they are insane.

Marc leans toward the **painting** and draws along one of the faint diagonal lines. Serge does not say or do anything to stop him. On the slope Marc has drawn, he adds a tiny skier in a woolly hat. When he has finished, he examines his work. Serge and Yvan are stony and expressionless. After a long silence, Serge proclaims that he is starving, and suggests they all go out to eat. Marc smiles, caps the pen, and throws it back to Yvan.

SCENE 6: AT SERGE'S

After dinner, the men are back at Serge's apartment. The **Antrios** hangs on the back wall. Marc is in front of it with a basin of water into which Serge is dipping a piece of cloth. Their sleeves are rolled up—they are hard at work cleaning the painting while Yvan watches from the couch. Various cleaning products—stain removers, sponges, and rags—surround them. Serge finishes cleaning the painting, and the Antrios is once again totally white. Serge steps back and contemplates the painting.

Yvan remains in his seat, but speaks to the audience as if he is alone on stage. He reveals that the day after his wedding, he went with Catherine to the graveyard so that she could put her bouquet and a small bag of almonds on her mother's grave. Yvan slipped away to cry, and, later that evening, he began sobbing in bed. He notes that he must speak to his psychiatrist about his tendency to cry, which has become worse—nearly uncontrollable—after the night of the enormous fight at Serge's.

Yvan says that after Serge, “in an act of pure madness,” at last proved once and for all that he cared about Marc more than the **painting** by letting him draw on it, the three of them went out to dinner. Over the meal, Serge and Marc decided to try as hard as they could to rebuild their fractured relationship. Upon hearing one of them use the phrase “trial period,” Yvan burst into tears. Yvan says that he can no longer bear any rational arguments—“nothing great or beautiful in the world” has ever been born of rationality.

Yvan is the only voice of reason in the room at the moment, but by this point Marc and Serge have learned not to listen to Yvan's fruitless attempts to intervene between the two of them. It is as if Marc and Serge are speaking their own language in this passage, as the mostly silent gestures and permissions between them express their mutual desire to end the absurdity they have descended into by cancelling out with an even grander, more absurd final act.



The cataclysmic fight between the friends had to end somehow. This radical gesture proves to Marc that Serge sees the painting as being as disposable and ridiculous as he has said it was all along, making room in the friendship once again for the idea that people are more valuable than art and ideas.



Marc and Serge come together in an ego-less moment for really the first time in the entire play in pursuit of a common goal. Their cleaning-up of the painting is symbolic of the necessary cleaning up and clearing out of their friendship in order to make room for the people they have become rather than the people they once were.



Something has shaken loose in Yvan following the night of the big fight. As Yvan, from the future, relays this information about what has transpired within him in the weeks since the fight, he remains seated in a scene in the past, representing his inability to let go of what transpired over the course of that fateful evening and how it has continued to affect him weeks later.



Yvan is disturbed by how rationality governs the world. The act of compassion he witnessed between Marc and Serge—Serge's allowing Marc to deface the Antrios—was utterly irrational. The conversation over dinner, however, was rational and calculated, as the men considered how they might repair their friendship, and this return to a cool, removed rationality after witnessing such a radical, irrational display of empathy was more than the sensitive Yvan could bear.



Serge dries his hands. He cleans up around the flat, emptying the basin of water and putting away cleaning supplies. He looks at the painting once more before turning to address the audience. He reveals that after he and Marc had, at long last, succeeded in “obliterating” the skier, he asked Marc whether Marc had known that the ink from felt-tips was washable. Marc said he had not. Serge said he hadn’t either—but reveals now that he was lying. He was very close to saying yes, but knew that he could not have “launched [their] trial period” with such a disappointing admission. Now, though, he wonders whether it was right to start it out with a lie. Frustrated, Serge wonders why his relationship with Marc has to be so complicated.

The stage lights narrow on the **Antrios**. Marc approaches the painting. He describes it gently. Under white clouds, he says, snow is falling—though one can’t see the clouds or the snow, or the earth’s white glow beneath them. A single solitary man glides downhill on skis and then disappears into the landscape. Marc repeats his first lines: his friend Serge—one of his oldest friends—has bought a painting. The canvas measures about five feet by four. The painting, Marc finally says, represents a man who moves across a space and then disappears.

Serge attempted to end the cruelty and betrayal between him and Marc by allowing Marc to deface the *Antrios*, thus proving to Marc that he valued their friendship over the expensive painting. However, this is revealed, in a twist, to have been a sham—Serge knew that the ink would wash off, and that the painting would be okay. If he hadn’t known the ink would wash off, it’s implied, he would not have committed such a radical act. This ostensibly healing gesture is then revealed to be one final betrayal, as the audience is left to wonder if Serge really does value his friendships over proving his aesthetic superiority.



Marc’s gentle, almost ethereal description of the *Antrios* in this passage displays how far he has come in his ability to look past his hatred of the *Antrios* and see it as an object of both meaning and value, but also demonstrates how he perhaps remains disappointed in himself, in Serge, or in both of them. Depending on one’s interpretation, Marc’s description might refer to himself, a man who has allowed himself to “disappear” by getting so caught up in his own pretensions, or it might represent Serge, a man who has similarly disappeared into himself to the detriment of his friends.





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