



The Season of Lillian Dawes

By Katherine Mosby
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Introduction Most of us, at some time in our lives, will encounter someone who fascinates -- even obsesses -- us. We hunger for information about this person, titillated by the mere mention of a name or the glimpse of a face. Such an infatuation can set loose our imagination, so that the object of our affection achieves, in our minds at least, mythic status. We imbue these people with qualities they may not possess. Their presence, even the mere fact of their existence, overpowers us -- whether they know it or not. *The Season of Lillian Dawes* offers a riveting portrait of a young man in the throes of such an enchantment.

The orphaned son of a wealthy lawyer, Gabriel Gibbs has been entrusted to the care of his older brother Spencer after being kicked out of prep school. In his Greenwich Village apartment Spencer sets out to educate Gabriel in the ways of the world. This education takes the form of late-afternoon soliloquies delivered while Spencer soaks in the tub; private tutoring from Spencer's eccentric friend Beckwith; and aimless afternoons spent in the library, coffee houses, and movie theaters of Manhattan. Thus occupied, Gabriel is ripe for some excitement, and it comes to him in the form of the

mysterious Lillian Dawes.

Unlike most of the people Gabriel has met in Manhattan -- people who try to appear worldly, wealthy, and gay, when in fact they are disillusioned, narrow-minded, and bored -- Lillian Dawes stands out like a fresh cut flower. She is enigmatic without being aloof; sounds intelligent without showing off; and acts kindly to those whom others choose to ignore. Lillian carries with her an air of melancholy that touches Gabriel with its world-weariness, even if he doesn't understand why. It doesn't take long for Gabriel to become bewitched by this unknowable woman. Unfortunately, he isn't the only man drawn to Lillian. Spencer, too, is swept up in her aura and soon he and Lillian are a couple. Together Spencer and Lillian possess enough charm, good humor, and warmth to light up any room. They complete each other. But Lillian and Spencer aren't completely honest with each other, and the secrets they keep are powerful enough to destroy their relationship. *The Season of Lillian Dawes* explores how Gabriel's obsession becomes a life lesson about the difference between appearance and reality, about truth and deception, and about the importance of holding onto one's principles no matter what the cost. Over time, most of us will relinquish our obsessions with the unknowable other: either because of disappointment, or because we move on. For Gabriel, however, Lillian becomes a symbol that resonates throughout his life. Can these symbols endure? Katherine Mosby leaves us wondering, hoping that they can.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the novel is titled "*The Season of Lillian Dawes*"? What are some of the various meanings for the word season, and how do they pertain to this story?
2. Why did Mosby tell the story through Gabriel, instead of through Lillian or even Spencer? Is he a reliable narrator? Is he, as his name suggests, a "bearer of truth?"
3. Lavinia tells Gabriel, "I've never made a fetish of the truth, my dear . . . The truth is overrated. It's the refuge of the dull and unimaginative and most of the time it's a big disappointment, while a lie worth telling or well told is, well, a kind of gift." How does this statement apply to Lillian? To Spencer? To Gabriel? How important is the truth to you?
4. Having taken on the role of Gabriel's guardian, Spencer also takes responsibility for his younger brother's education as well as his moral development. Is Spencer a good role model for Gabriel? Is his "bohemian" lifestyle appropriate for a teenager?
5. Why do you think Gabriel is so drawn to Lillian, even before he meets her?
6. After learning about archetypes from Spencer, Gabriel starts to regard all the women he encounters in classical terms, identifying Hadley, for instance, as a witch. The only woman he can't classify is Lillian. Why is that? Does Gabriel's infatuation with Lillian cloud his judgment? Or is she truly extraordinary and beyond classification?
7. Like Lillian, Spencer is the kind of person who draws people to him; they are fascinated with him and seem to like him without even knowing him. What makes him so likeable? If you met Spencer do you think you, too, would be charmed by him?
8. Lillian, it turns out, is a master of trompe l'oeil painting, a style that depicts objects with photographic detail, and which is often used as a transformative method of interior decorating. Why is it significant that Lillian would develop a talent for this kind of artistic expression?
9. After Lillian leaves Clayton's house, Gabriel discovers a scrap of paper on which she has written the words Schadenfreude and Weltschmerz, German terms that have found their way into the English lexicon. Discuss the meanings of these words. What do they mean to Lillian? How do they foreshadow other events in the novel?
10. In Lillian, Aunt Lavinia recognizes a kindred spirit and strives to protect her. Why is this, and why doesn't she reveal Lillian's secret to Spencer and Gabriel?
11. Spencer tells Gabriel that "It is a feature of modernity to be handicapped not by our abilities to do, but by our abilities to see, in the grand sense that renders the fulfillment of meaning. Hence the frustration that leads to decadence, paralysis, and futility." He also says that the cure for this "modern condition" is literature and love. Discuss this passage and its meaning for Gabriel, Lillian, and Spencer. Who of these characters would you characterize as "modern?" And how are each of their lives affected by literature and love?
12. Mosby's characters spend time in venerable Manhattan icons: the Plaza Hotel, Rumpelmeyers, Central Park, even checker cabs. How is New York, a city that Spencer says will "break your heart a thousand times a day," a character in the novel?
13. Discuss the epigraph, a quote from Flaubert. How is it appropriate for this novel?
14. Why does Gabriel, in the novel's first paragraph, describe himself as a witness to a tragedy? What was the tragedy, and whom did it involve?