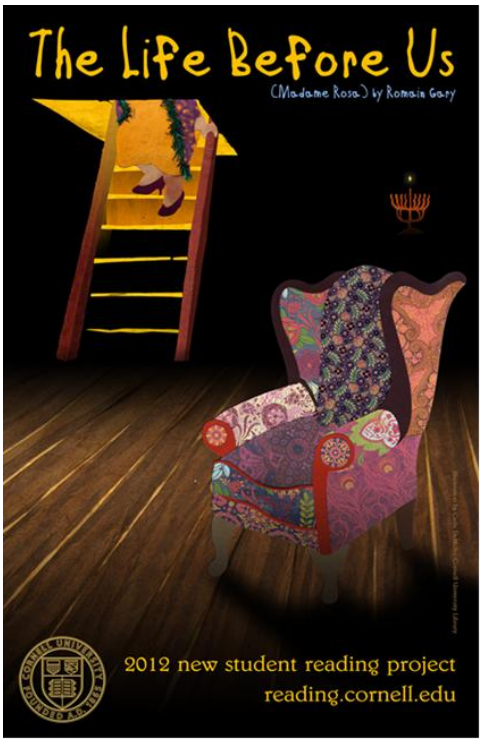

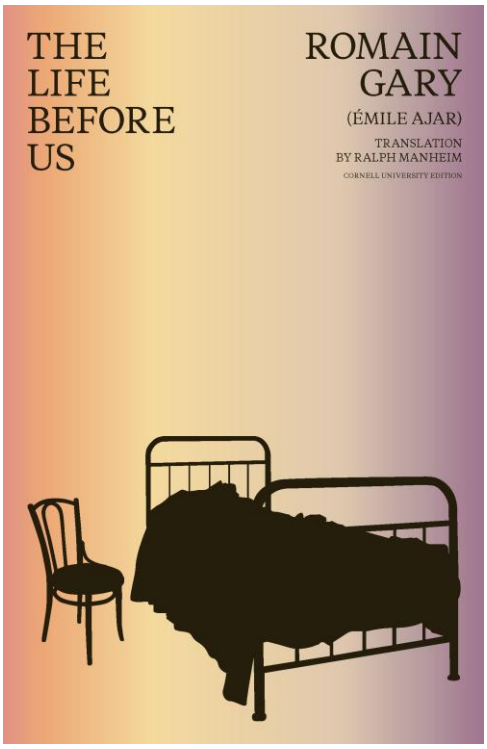

New Student Reading Project
Fall 2012
Student Essay Winners

Patrick Braga
McKenzie Klein
Larissa-Helen Mahaga-Ajala
Madeleine Ostwald
Laura Pulito
Bennett Kapili
Jocelyn Lee
Sophie Nicolich-Henkin
Callie Pina
Victor Zhao

Momo lives in Belleville, a multi-ethnic working-class neighborhood of Paris, which has been home to many immigrant groups in the twentieth century.

Essay topic: write a description of the different people you might meet in Belleville.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "There were plenty of other Jews, Arabs and blacks in Belleville, but Madame Rosa had to climb those six flights all alone" (page 1). Second, consider the question: are Momo and Madame Rosa "all alone" in Belleville? Finally, consider what it must have been like to live in Momo's neighborhood, by exploring one or more of the internet sites listed and reflecting on Momo's own experiences.

Patrick Braga

The People of Belleville

That Friday evening was quiet in Belleville. With the Jews starting their Shabbat and the Muslims, be they Arab or black, finishing Friday prayers, the only sounds that remained were the my steps on the wet cloud-colored cobblestones and the distant chatter of Wolof, Arabic, and Yiddish mixed with French. On the Rue Bisson, two white-bearded men walked out of a building. One of them wore the Star of David. I followed them to the Boucherie Halal, where they sat down and began talking about their memories of home in Tunisia (Moss). Across the street stands the Boucherie Kosher, but it was closed tonight because of Shabbat.

I carried on. A group of young black men in kaftans and mbaxanes were walking briskly toward the Parc de Belleville and signaled for me to follow them. In a thick West African accent, one of them asked, "Savez-vous par hasard ce qui s'est passé avec Madame Rosa, la vieille Juive?" – "Do you happen to know what happened with Madame Rosa, the old Jewish woman?" I shook my head and hurried through the park with them. During this run, he introduced himself as Diop; he had moved here from Senegal twelve years ago and voted for the Parti Socialiste because he barely made enough money to send as remittance to his brothers back in Saint-Louis (Ask.com). We made our way out of the park to an aged six-story building where there stood a gaggle of onlookers clumped around the entrance. They were stretching their necks and standing on their toes to have a better look of the scene. I picked out Arabs, Jews, and blacks, and a few Greeks were mixed in the group as well (Ask.com). I did happen to spy a young blonde Frenchwoman who was worried about a certain Mohammed. Amidst the confusion were three gaudily dressed women – although I could swear one of them had a rather masculine disposition, particularly given her, or maybe his, muscular physique. I could hear this muscular one crying in her deep voice to her companions, "Nous nous sommes connues quand nous nous défendions dans le Bois de Boulogne." – "We met each other when we peddled ourselves in the Bois de Boulogne."

Meanwhile, an Arab carrying his cane and a thick tome of Les Misérables was standing next to me. "Le pauvre garçon est tout seul dans le monde, le pauvre Victor." – "The poor boy is all alone in the world, poor Victor." He began reciting the Surah Al-Mulk, because the Prophet said those who recite this Surah before falling asleep will be saved from the punishment of the grave: Tabaraka allathii biyadihi almulku wahuwa 'ala kulli shayin qadiirun (Al-Qur'an). I asked, "Parlez-moi de lui. Qui est-il?" – "Tell me about him. Who is he?" From his explanations, I gathered that Victor, an Arab boy, and the late Madame Rosa were certainly not alone in terms of ethnicity. After all, a single night of Wanderlust that led me through the quartier was sufficient to reassure me that there resided in Belleville a plentiful amount of Jews and Arabs. He also told of how he had heard that Madame Rosa was supposed to travel to Israel to be with her family there, but they had all been exterminated at the German homes for the Jews; she was the last one left in her family and now she was gone too. The boy had no real family either. His mother was a whore, and his father was dead of a heart attack, and now his caretaker, whom he had grown to love and care for so dearly, was too gone (Gary 132). Victor must have had friends, I presumed, but it seems he had put so much effort into caring for the other whores' children in the nursery and for the late Madame herself that he had been forced to grow up four years earlier.

"Le pauvre Victor," I said in agreement.

"Allons-y, Momo." – "Let's go, Momo." Two police officers escorted an Arab boy out of the building. Along with the blonde, they were the only other white Frenchmen there.

Bibliography

"Al-Qur'an." *Online Qur'an Project*. Web. Aug. 2012.

"Belleville, Paris." *Ask.com*. Web. 30 April 2012.

"Belleville, Paris." Map. Google Maps. Google. Web. Aug. 2012.

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

Moss, lian. *"In One Paris Neighborhood: Jews and Muslims Live as They Did in N. Africa: Together."* JTA: Global News Service of the Jewish People. 22 Sept. 2009. Web. Aug. 2012.

"The Pleasures of Belleville, Melting Pot of Paris." Digital Journal. 1 Sept. 2001. Web. Aug. 2012.

Patrick was born in Rio de Janeiro and grew up in southwest Florida. He is majoring in Urban and Regional Studies and likely minoring in Real Estate and Near Eastern Studies. In addition to public land use policy in Western countries and its impact on private urban development, he is also interested in exploring and learning more about Maghrebi and Francophone West African cities.

Momo has several non-human friends: Arthur, the dog Super, the clown (page 67), the lioness (page 41). Each provides a special kind of companionship.

Essay topic: write an essay describing Momo's feelings for and relationship with one or more of these non-human friends.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "My best friend at that time was an umbrella by the name of Arthur" (page 48). Second, consider the question: who is Arthur, for Momo? Finally, think about what you know about friendship. This essay does not require you to consult additional sources.

Bennett Kapili

In Emile Ajar's "The Life Before Us" the protagonist is raised in an unstable boarding-house for prostitutes' children. Since other children in the apartment frequently come and go, Mohammed, nicknamed Momo, invents his own friends who accompany him at his imagination's call. Each of his imaginary friends represents a quality of life which he desires, qualities that his surroundings fail to provide. Momo's imaginary friends Arthur, the clowns, and the lioness in Ajar's "The Life Before Us" are manifestations of his desire for control, comfort, and motherly protection.

Momo's friend Arthur, an umbrella wrapped in a green rag with a face drawn in rouge, is his attempt at securing control in his life. Arthur is his "best friend at that time," which signifies that control is what Momo longs for the most (page 48). The protagonist is able to dress Arthur in whatever he chooses: Monsieur N'Da Amedee takes Momo to a "temple of fashion" and allows him to "pick whatever [he] wanted" (page 48-49). This gesture allows Momo to control the tangible aspects of Arthur, granting Momo the power to make physical changes. This event occurs during the early stages of his friendship with Arthur, which creates a relationship lying on the pretext of the essential feeling of control.

Whenever Arthur breaks, Momo has the ability to fix him. Momo's ability to fix, or rather heal his friend, empowers him with the feeling that he can mend what is broken. This spiritual feeling of being able to heal gives Momo control over emotion. The novel connects the concept of healing with emotion through the illustration of Momo's attempts to care for Madame Rosa; this is exemplified when the protagonist imagines when his keeper was young and healthy and it "brought tears to [his] eyes" (page 77). Momo's craving for control is not satisfied by his relationship with Madame Rosa because he cannot heal her; his relationship with Arthur fills this void because he knows he has the power to fix him.

The protagonist's other friends, the clowns, symbolize comfort and reassurance. Momo first sees these clowns in a department store window, as parts of a mechanized circus set; since the set is mechanical, the clowns' actions are predetermined. Momo's favorite aspect of it is "...the whole thing was mechanical and good-natured, you knew in advance that they couldn't suffer or grow old, and that nothing ever went wrong"

(page 61). The clowns' world is sheltered, safe, and without suffering, elements which Momo desires in his world. Momo begins to include them in his life so he can incorporate their qualities into his lifestyle. When the clowns appear, they often beckon Momo to fall asleep; the clowns are associated with something comforting such as sleep to reinforce the qualities they symbolize. One of the clowns places his arm around Momo while he is sitting next to Madame Rosa, depicting the gentleness that the clowns represent (page 178). Momo yearns for the comfort that the clowns have in their own lives, and attempts to create his own sense of comfort through their imagined presence.

The lioness, one of Momo's imaginary animal companions, serves as his protector and temporary matriarch. The lioness mirrors a mother: she protects her young and comforts them when needed. Madame Rosa's lack of empathy and coarseness fail to qualify her as a matriarch, so the lioness serves as a mother figure for Momo. He calls on his lioness at night before sleeping and she arrives at the door "wanting to come in and defend her little ones" (page 41). Momo includes how his animal friend licks not only his face, but all the kids' faces, because "the others needed it too" (page 41). The protagonist recognizes that all the children in the boarding-house lack parental guidance, so he shares his matriarchal lioness with them. Momo's animal companion is only a temporary boarder in his life, but her role is no less important.

Bennett Kapili is a freshman in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. He is from Hamilton Square, New Jersey and is currently studying biology. Though he has a strong interest in medical research, he is open to exploring other careers.

Madame Rosa fears the hospital, the authorities, the law, the Social Security, and even the doorbell, and takes refuge in her basement "Jewish hideaway" (page 38).

Essay topic: write a description of what Madame Rosa might have seen and done during the Holocaust.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "Madame Rosa's fear of the doorbell was really comical" (page 36). Second, consider the question: what did Madame Rosa experience at "the home for Jews in Germany" that makes her run to her basement hideaway when the doorbell rings (page 14)? Finally, explore Madame Rosa's experiences at Auschwitz by reading about the context of the concentration camps in one or more of the sites listed.

McKenzie Klein

"You don't need reasons to be afraid," Madame Rosa explains to Momo after he follows her down the six flights of stairs that lead from their dingy Bellville apartment to her sparsely furnished Jewish hideaway, located in the apartment building's basement. Madame Rosa retreats to her hideaway when she is overtaken by fear, though Momo deems many of her fears, such as her fear of the doorbell, idiotic. What Momo fails to understand is that Madame Rosa is not afraid of the doorbell itself, but rather of what may be waiting for her on the other side of the door. The Holocaust did not inflict senseless and unrelated fears upon Madame Rosa; it did, however, leave her unwilling and unable to trust those around her, and keenly aware of the cruelty of the human race.

Ultimately, Madame Rosa tries to impress upon Momo that trouble can arise from the most unexpected people at the most unexpected times, a lesson she learned one day in the fateful summer of 1942, when the French police knocked on her door at six o'clock in the morning and ordered her to pack a bag of her belongings and board a bus to the Vélodrome d'Hiver. Decades later, during one of her amnesic episodes, Madame Rosa has a flashback to that harrowing morning, and calmly explains to Momo, "They're coming to get me. They'll attend to everything. They said to wait here. They're coming in trucks and they'll take us to the Velodrome with our strict necessities" (Gary, 107). Madame Rosa's flashback, which is characterized by a sense of confidence and easiness, is a testament to her true emotions at the time of her arrest. Thus, she was, at that point in time, unaware of the horrors that were about to unfold.

During the infamous Vel' d'Hiv Roundup, which Gary suggests Madame Rosa was a part of, 13,152 Jews were arrested in Paris and sent to one of two holding centers: the Vélodrome d'Hiver or the nearby Drancy internment camp (Sayare). Madame Rosa's flashbacks and Momo's numerous references to the Velodrome suggest that she was confined in the former. The conditions in the Velodrome were absolutely horrid, for there was no food, clean water or working bathrooms (Gilbert). The little water that was available was pumped out of a single fire hydrant and came directly from the filthy Seine (Gilbert). An awful stench pervaded the Velodrome due to the lack of toilets, the sweltering summer heat, and the poor (or better yet, nonexistent) ventilation (Gilbert).

An eyewitness notes that many of the women and children gathered on the stadium benches in attempts to stay clear of the urine that covered the floor below (Gilbert).

After five miserable days, the Jews were sent to Auschwitz, the largest concentration camp complex under the Third Reich (UNESCO). Upon their arrival, Madame Rosa and the other prisoners would have been forced to undergo inspection, as was customary. Those individuals deemed strong enough for manual labor were forced to work on farms, in coalmines, or in armaments industries such as the SS owned German Equipment Works, established in 1941 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Individuals who were deemed too weak for such forced physical labor were sent directly to the gas chambers, which the Nazis disguised as showers to mislead their victims (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Madame Rosa may have also seen or experienced some of the inhumane medical experiments that the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele carried out in Auschwitz-Birkenau's Block 10 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Mengele conducted a wide variety of painful and often lethal experiments on twin children to better understand the origins of certain genetic diseases (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). He also experimented with sterilization techniques, castrations, and hypothermia on adult prisoners (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Lastly, as a firm believer in the National Socialist racial theory, he carried out a number of experiments to "illustrate the lack of resistance among Jews… to various diseases" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

Madame Rosa's terrifying experiences during the Holocaust are the basis for her seemingly inane fears, for whenever she hears the doorbell ring, she has a flashback to that fateful morning in the summer of 1942, and whenever she hears mention of the hospital, she thinks back to Mengele's horrific medical experiments. However, what is perhaps the most devastating mark of all is the general distrust that the Holocaust has left her with towards others. The betrayal of the French police and the cruelty of the Nazi soldiers have taught Madame Rosa that one never needs a reason to be afraid, there is reason enough in the unknown. After all, trouble can come from the most unexpected places.

Bibliography

"Auschwitz Birkenau." *UNESCO: United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. Web. 30 April 30, 2012.

"Auschwitz." *Holocaust Encyclopedia: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. Wed. 30 April 2012.

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

Gilbert, Adrian. "Vél D'Hiv, Paris 1942: 'These Black Hours Will Stain Our History Forever'" *The Guardian*. N.p., 21 July 2010. Web. 14 Aug. 2012.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/sarahs-key/vel-dhiv-paris-1942-world-war-two-adrian-gilbert>.

Sayare, Scott. "France Reflects on Its Role In Wartime Fate of Jews." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 29 July 2012. Web. 14 Aug. 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/world/europe/france-reflects-on-role-in-rounding-up-jews-for-death-camps.html>.

McKenzie Klein is a freshman in Cornell's College of Arts and Sciences. She grew up in McLean, Virginia, which is located just a few miles outside of Washington, DC. She plans to major in Biology and English – her two favorite subjects – and hopes to attend medical school after graduating from Cornell.

Dr. Katz asks Madame Rosa, "you love him, don't you?" (page 45). And Madame Rosa tells Momo, "I've never really loved anybody else" (page 152). But people say Madame Rosa is "a woman without a heart" (page 10). As Momo searches for his biological father he asks Monsieur Hamil, "can somebody live without love?" (page 3). But he later calls out to Monsieur Hamil "just to remind him there was still someone who loved him" (page 103). And Momo says that he gave the dog Super away because he loved him so much (page 12).

Essay topic: write an essay answering the question "what is love?" You may focus on the question of what love means for Momo, for Madame Rosa, or for both of them.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote: "Is it possible to live without someone to love?" (page 178). Next, think about love, and read about some of the ways in which love has been described in literature and in studies of psychology and human development, by consulting one or more of the sites listed.

Jocelyn Lee

The greatest love is that of sacrifice, though you may not hear Taylor Swift or Rihanna crooning such a line over the radio. Contemporary society has developed a greed—labeled as love—that asks, "What can you do for me? Can you make me happy?" Against this shallow, egocentric perspective, Romain Gary delivers a classic interpretation of the meaning of love in his book *The Life Before Us*. The protagonist, Momo, understands love to be much more than fond feelings—rather, he sees it as a commitment to serve and help another regardless of feelings or the other's worthiness. Momo's perception of the familiar sentiment burdens him with the responsibility to deny his own desires for the needs of the overweight, ugly, decrepit Madame Rosa, evoking the biblical image of sacrificial love for the undeserving—the ones who need it most.

In order to comprehend the extent of Momo's sacrificial love, however, one must first grasp Madame Rosa's deficiencies. Madame Rosa certainly craves love; she has lived "without a heart" and with "no one to look after her" for sixty-five years (Gary 10). Among her most prominent features are a face "like an old Jewish frog" (17) and a bottom "that defie[s] human measurement" (106): she has lost all the beauty and charm that in former years kept her employed as a prostitute. Further burdened by obesity, asthma, and attacks of amnesia, she suffers a rapidly declining state of health. Understandably, these afflictions threaten her mental and emotional stability. Madame Rosa cries often "for no reason" (31), flies into a rage easily, and seems perpetually jealous for Momo's heart. Additionally, her "slightly deranged" tendencies and regular bouts of hysteria exacerbate her already self-centered, volatile behavior (44). The author makes the diagnosis clear: Madame Rosa, the care-taker of a children's boarding-house, is "in no condition to take care of anybody" (50).

Her appearance and personality leave the reader repulsed. Madame Rosa is nothing short of wretched—steeped in the same indignity possessed by other luckless literary characters, such as the narrator of Shakespeare's Sonnet 29. This pariah "beweep[s] his outcast state" (Shakespeare) in much the same way that Madame Rosa spends whole days crying—her "happiest moments," according to Momo (Gary

31). They are both "in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes" (Shakespeare), and, though undeserving, need love desperately.

Miraculously for them, both characters' needs are fulfilled. Shakespeare's narrator feels refreshed and uplifted simply by remembering the "sweet love" of another (Shakespeare), and Madame Rosa becomes Momo's object of complete devotion. In small turns of fortune, these once-miserable creatures derive new hope and satisfaction in the love of another.

Yet what could prompt such love? Its objects (these characters) possess no desirable qualities. The exchange of affection is not charming, nor is it scintillating to read. The unsettling nature of the love stories lies in the one's unworthiness and the other's sacrifice or voluntary self-degradation. This juxtaposition forms the core of Gary's noble love story. The reader must first grasp Madame Rosa's unworthiness in order to fully appreciate Momo's sacrificial love for her.

Once one comprehends Madame Rosa's inadequacies, Momo's love for her seems marvelous. Momo professes that he would "promise […] Madame Rosa anything to make her happy" (119). However, his love reaches beyond words and is made manifest through his actions. Momo constantly suppresses his natural repugnance in order to hold Madame Rosa's hand, calm her fears, and keep her company. Even when she soils herself in her decrepit condition and carries a powerful stench, Momo "kisse[s] her" so that she doesn't "think she disgust[s him]" (150).

Even when better life opportunities arise, Momo remains faithful to his supposed caretaker. Many friendly, pretty women who see him on the streets buy him treats and offer him a home—but, as Momo explains, he "won't run out" on Madame Rosa because "it's not [his] style" (110). Though he realizes that his "best bet" is to find a different situation (105), he refuses to leave her. In such acts of self-denial and loyalty, Momo shows rather than tells his definition of love: looking out for another's interests above one's own.

For inspiration, Gary may have drawn from the classic biblical theme of sacrificial love. The Bible story depicts the God of the universe disgracing and denying himself to save unworthy "sinners" (Romans 5:8, New International Version), paralleling Momo's own self-degradation for the sake of love. Momo's mortal nature hardly lessens the similarity of sentiment between the stories, which hinges mainly on the contrast between the lover and the loved. The exchange of love could not be sacrificial unless one party were undeserving—a requirement met by Gary's Madame Rosa as well as the men of the Bible, who have "all […] sinned," according to Romans 3:23. The superior characters in these stories nevertheless commit to love and serve such creatures, the God of the Bible going so far as to sacrifice his only son to save them (John 3:16). Momo's statement that it's "not [his] style" to run out on the one he loves describes the situation perfectly for both himself and the biblical God (Gary 110): their love for the unworthy cannot be explained except as credit to their character.

The comparison of these stories enables the reader to better appreciate Momo's definition of love. Mankind (according to the Bible) and Madame Rosa share flaws that make them only targets for pity and disdain; yet the superior characters in each account choose to pursue committed relationships with them, denying themselves in the process. Gary purposefully adopts this classic biblical love relationship for his characters Momo and Madame Rosa, rejecting the contemporary notion that love simply entails romance and self-fulfillment. The involved sacrifice may be unpleasant, but it provides actualization to a mere profession of love: perhaps Rihanna and Taylor Swift should look to Gary's story, for they are missing out on much more than they realize.

Bibliography

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us.* Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

Holy Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005. Print. New International Vers.

Mabillard, Amanda. "Shakespeare Sonnet 29." *Shakespeare Online*. Web. 15 August 2012.

Jocelyn Lee, a freshman in the College of Arts and Sciences, hails from Boston, MA. Due to her varied interests in music, literature, writing, debate, and procrastination, she didn't plan to decide on a major until the last possible minute, but is currently considering a degree in Information Science.

Dr. Katz asks Madame Rosa, "you love him, don't you?" (page 45). And Madame Rosa tells Momo, "I've never really loved anybody else" (page 152). But people say Madame Rosa is "a woman without a heart" (page 10). As Momo searches for his biological father he asks Monsieur Hamil, "can somebody live without love?" (page 3). But he later calls out to Monsieur Hamil "just to remind him there was still someone who loved him" (page 103). And Momo says that he gave the dog Super away because he loved him so much (page 12).

Essay topic: write an essay answering the question "what is love?" You may focus on the question of what love means for Momo, for Madame Rosa, or for both of them.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote: "Is it possible to live without someone to love?" (page 178). Next, think about love, and read about some of the ways in which love has been described in literature and in studies of psychology and human development, by consulting one or more of the sites listed.

Larissa-Helen Mahaga-Ajala

The Loved Ones

Love. Many stories revolve around either its presence or absence. The pursuit of it killed Romeo and Juliet. Its unrequited form drove Heathcliff to obsession. Lily abandoned it in the pursuit of money and status. In *The Life Before Us*, Momo and Madame Rosa have an unwavering non-romantic love that makes us reevaluate what love truly is.

For the aged Holocaust survivor and the orphaned Arab, love is heavily rooted in trust. Their respective histories cause them to be very suspicious of other people, yet they have an immense amount of confidence in each other. When Momo's father comes to see him, Momo trusted that Madame Rosa would not allow him to be taken away (page 134). Additionally, Madame Rosa trusted that Momo would honor her wish to not be taken to the hospital (page 119).

Momo and Madame Rosa did not have a relationship similar to that of a boy and his grandmother. Instead, they were like partners. Momo frequently helped Madame Rosa with the other children (page 46) and attempted to earn some money for the household (page 48). Even though Madame Rosa took care of him early in his life, Momo began to take care of her as her life was ending. There was a balance in many aspects of their relationship, including their love. Neither of them was more attached than the other. This balance of love allowed it to last despite the death of Madame Rosa (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/238572).

Ultimately, Momo and Madame Rosa's love was what kept them together. Madame Rosa could have justifiably turned Momo out of the house once the money orders stopped coming (page 50). Momo could have left Madame Rosa to become a procurer (page 55) or to stay with Nadine (page 81). Neither leaving nor being left was ever an option for them. Their strong emotional connection made them hold fast to each other through it all (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/238572).

"Is it possible to live without someone to love?" So many have posed this question, but do we even want the answer? Love can drive us to succeed and help us dream. It can cause great conflicts between people. It can be what makes us get up in the morning and what makes us never awaken again. If we actually could live without this powerful force, would we not suffer? Would we not curse ourselves and each other for being controlled by the superfluous?

In my opinion, which is all I am qualified to give, love is not necessary to live. Love does not feed us, quench our thirst, or fill our lungs. I am sure that a person who does not have love could manage to live, perhaps even longer than some of the loved ones. However, we do not want to manage to live. Life is not about surviving and being the last one standing. We all want to leave our marks on the world. We hope that the books of our lives will be filled with bold, italicized, and underlined passages. In our old age, we want to look back on our lives and know that we mattered to our families, friends, and maybe even the world (http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/238572). For that kind of life, we must be pushed, pulled, ripped apart, and glued together by some force. To truly live, we need love.

Bibliography

"Favorite Love Poems." *Poetry Foundation.* Web. 7 July 2012.

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

Larissa-Helen Mahaga-Ajala is from North Plainfield, New Jersey. She is a freshman in the College of Engineering and is studying Materials Science and Engineering. She hopes to go on to earn a Master's degree and work in the textile industry.

Momo has several non-human friends: Arthur, the dog Super, the clown (page 67), the lioness (page 41). Each provides a special kind of companionship.

Essay topic: write an essay describing Momo's feelings for and relationship with one or more of these non-human friends.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "My best friend at that time was an umbrella by the name of Arthur" (page 48). Second, consider the question: who is Arthur, for Momo? Finally, think about what you know about friendship.

Sophie Nicolich-Henkin

The Importance of Non-Human Relationships in *The Life Before Us*

The Life Before Us by Romain Gary tells the story of Mohammad, a Muslim child growing up under the care of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, Madame Rosa. Throughout his childhood, Momo does not have many stable relationships; he interacts with many people, but the only one that he can truly rely on is Madame Rosa. Even she, though, has troubles of her own and other children to care for, so Momo is often left to fend for himself. He develops bonds with non-human characters, personifying them in order to create relationships that he lacks in his interactions with real people. He finds parental protection in an imaginary lioness, unconditional love in his dog, and friendship in Arthur, his umbrella.

After Madame Rosa tells Momo that lionesses are famous for protecting their cubs and that "they'd sooner be torn to pieces than give an inch of ground," (41) Momo begins to imagine a lioness taking care of him and the other children living with Madame Rosa. Though Momo is still very young at the time, he feels enormous responsibility for the other children, because he feels that "as [he is] the oldest, it [is his] duty to provide for them" (41). The lioness is the embodiment of his desire to be protected, and to have someone else take responsibility for him and his well-being. Momo "lie[s] there in the dark with [his] eyes open, and after awhile the lioness… come[s] and lie[s] down beside [him] and lick[s] [his] face without a word to anybody" (44). Momo wishes subconsciously for someone to care for him and relieve him of some of his responsibility; he dreams up the lioness because he wishes for someone to look out for him and protect him.

As much as Momo wishes that he had someone to care for him and provide him with unconditional love, he has no such figure in his life. When he sees an opportunity, he steals a dog from a kennel and brings it home, naming it Super. Momo "really [goes] overboard for that dog…[and]… [feels] important… when [he takes Super] out walking… because [Momo is] all [Super has] in the world" (12). Super values Momo in a way that he has never been valued before, and gives him unconditional love, which Momo has never before experienced; even Madam Rosa, who cares for him, receives money to do so, and always has other children to care for as well. This newfound relationship, however, allows Momo to understand the desire to protect another's well-

being over even his own. Eventually this brings him "to give [Super] a better life," (12) selling him to a lady with enough money to care for him properly, even though it means Momo losing Super for himself. His relationship with Super allows him to experience unconditional, self-sacrificing love in a way that he never has before.

Momo also does not have the opportunity to form strong friendships with his peers. The children he lives with are mainly younger than him, and while he converses with many adults, their lives and experiences are very distant from his. He therefore forms a friendship with his umbrella, whom he names Arthur. Arthur is his "best friend at the time" (48); Momo dresses him in nice clothes and even sleeps "with Arthur clutched in [his] arms" (49). When Momo feels sad, he "[takes] Arthur and [sits] on the sidewalk because [he doesn't] want to cry at home" (50). Arthur fills the emotional role of a friend in a way that no one else can, because Momo treats Arthur as an equal - someone whom he may be affectionate to and have fun with, yet also rely on when he needs emotional support. Momo personifies Arthur to create a friendship for himself, so that he may have a playmate, a companion, and a confidant.

Momo's bonds with non-human characters allow him to experience relationships that are not available from the people in his life. He expands his emotional range, learning about trust, reliance, protection, friendship, and, most importantly, love. As he grows older, his relationship with Madame Rosa also grows and she tells him: "You've always been my little man. I've never really loved anybody else" (152). The relationships that Momo has nurtured with non-humans give him the emotional clarity to understand what Madame Rosa feels for him, and to reciprocate her feelings; he cares for Madame Rosa with all his heart until the day that she dies, and past it. Momo's relationships with non-humans allow him to develop the ability to feel compassion and love, so that he may return the emotions of the woman who has given her life to caring for him, and who is the only person he has ever really loved.

Sophie Nicolich-Henkin is a freshman biology major in Cornell University's College of Arts and Sciences. She is from Brooklyn, New York and loves animals and baking.

Dr. Katz wants to take Madame Rosa to the hospital, where she believes she will be tortured (page 119). Monsieur Waloumba and his compatriots from the Cameroons are able to awaken Madame Rosa from her trance by dancing, singing, and drumming (page 117).

Essay topic: write a description of the different perspectives on healing in The Life Before Us.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "You mustn't let them take me to the hospital, Momo. Not for anything in the world" (page 151). Second, consider the question: what is the best way of helping Madame Rosa? Finally, consider different ways of healing or helping the sick, by exploring one or more of the sites listed.

Madeleine Ostwald

In his ludicrous and unorthodox attempts to "heal" Madame Rosa, Momo is relentless. He takes on the role of matchmaker in attempt to marry her off to Monsieur Hamil, enlists African drummers to bring her out of her trance, and even unintentionally gives her a shot of heroin to the backside. But perhaps his greatest act of treatment is honoring his promise to keep Madame Rosa out of the hospital. While Dr. Katz and other Belleview neighbors fight the "laws of nature" (Gary 41) that pull Madame Rosa toward her imminent death, Momo seeks only to comfort his surrogate mother in her final weeks: "In my opinion there's nothing crummier than ramming life down the throats of defenseless people who've had enough" (Gary 175).

Dr. Katz, however, stands firmly by the more traditional, science-based principles of the "Medical Association" that so terrifies Madame Rosa. He is quick to prescribe tranquilizers to calm her increasingly frequent agitation. Dr. Marcia Angell of Harvard Medical School traces "western medicine"—Dr Katz's school of thought—to its economic roots. Medicine rationalized by science requires money, which is why it flourished first in the U.S. ("The Alternative Fix"). Momo takes Dr. Katz's endorsement of electric shock treatment to Monsieur Waloumba, where the idea is reinterpreted. Monsieur Waloumba believes that a "shock" given to Madame Rosa—his in the form of terrifying dancing and fire-eating—will serve to purge her of evil spirits. In his native Cameroon, religion, not science, dictates medical treatment. Likewise, Traditional Chinese Medicine draws ideology from Taoism ("Alternative Medical Systems"). The fundamental values of a society will direct its medicine: where economic success fueled scientific medicine in the West, spiritual cultures have defined both diagnosis and treatment in terms of their faith.

As becomes clear in his chosen "treatment" of Madame Rosa, Momo's values do not fall perfectly into any of his conglomerate society's various medical ideologies. A Muslim raised by a Jew among neighbors who practice tribal religions, Momo is caught in a whirlwind of disparate faiths and struggles to define his religious identity. He also lacks the wealth and resulting education that could have drawn him toward Dr. Katz's philosophy on treating Madame Rosa's condition. But what Momo does know, unquestionably, is the power of love that provided him with a guardian in the face of conflicting religions and dwindling finances.

Medicine is merely an extension and reflection of a society's values. Momo, an individual among Paris' mix of diverse cultures, attempts healing methods ranging from Jewish prayer to Le Mahoute's street drugs to provide Madame Rosa with a sense, however unrealistic, of wellbeing. In a final act of loyalty, Momo concocts a lie to keep his guardian out of the hospital and allows her to die in her "Jewish hideaway" where she feels the most safe. He faithfully paints her now-hideous face to keep alive her dignity and connection to her youth even after she herself has died. True to his values, Momo prescribes love and devotion to the woman he has loved as a mother. Momo's treatment is unique in that it recognizes an essential difference between curing and healing. The greatest and kindest thing he could do for Madame Rosa was to heal her by restoring not her health, but her happiness.

Bibliography

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

"The Alternative Fix." *Frontline, PBS*. Web. 30 April 2012.

"Alternative Medical Systems." *School of Health Related Professions, University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey*. Web. 30 April 2012.

Madeleine Ostwald is from Portland, Maine. She is in College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and is majoring in Biology.

Momo has several non-human friends: Arthur, the dog Super, the clown (page 67), the lioness (page 41). Each provides a special kind of companionship.

Essay topic: write an essay describing Momo's feelings for and relationship with one or more of these non-human friends.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "My best friend at that time was an umbrella by the name of Arthur" (page 48). Second, consider the question: who is Arthur, for Momo? Finally, think about what you know about friendship.

Callie Pina

Friendship

Umbrellas are mysterious creatures. Not only do their spoked sides flex outward like the legs of a daddy long legs, but they can often be spotted wrestling with humans as they enter or exit a store. For most people, they are used to protect against frizzy hair or ruining a brand new pair of shoes. For Momo, however, Arthur the umbrella provides far more than a rainy day accessory. He provides a companion, a friend, and something to love.

Momo spends the majority of his time searching for love. He seeks it out on street-corners, in coffee shops, and in the eyes of passers-by. He even asks Monsieur Hamil, "Can someday live without love?" (Gary 3). If they can, he does not have to worry. If they can't, however, his life is completely dependent on the health of an old woman and the money order that she receives on an increasingly sporadic schedule. Momo's life is unquestionably teetering on a precipice between security and wild vulnerability. Without parents or a stable environment, he is left to control his own source of love and happiness.

And yet, Momo is reluctant to admit his friendship with Arthur the umbrella. He feels too old to treat an inanimate object as a friend. He claims that he needed Arthur "less to love and more to play the clown with" (Gary 48). Their relationship, however, is clearly far stronger than an act to peddle money. When Arthur is broken, Momo cares for him. When Momo needs money, Arthur provides for him. Arthur may not be able to give Momo advice or even engage in a conversation, but the silence between them is even more profound. Momo is often surrounded by people yet incredibly alone. Arthur changes that. Momo clearly recognizes that Arthur does not have the capacity to love him back-- but sometimes giving love is even more important than receiving it.

Friendship develops in many shapes and forms. Friends make the difference between loneliness and companionship. Selfishness and compassion. Fear and optimism. Despite his challenges, Momo "invents" Arthur and makes the conscious choice to choose love instead of hate. Although Arthur is non-human, he allows Momo to experience the great gift of friendship. Like Madame Rosa's Jewish hideaway, Arthur is Momo's escape-- his refuge from a world surrounded by prejudices, racism, and pain.

Umbrellas are mysterious creatures. They often sit abandoned in closets, forgotten for weeks or even years at a time. They are deemed ordinary objects with a singular purpose. Yet with a little hope and imagination, they have the potential to be extraordinary.

Callie Pina is from New Fairfield, CT and is a student in the College of Arts and Sciences. Callie is pre-med with a prospective major in Biology and Society, but she also looks forward to exploring classes in a variety of disciplines at Cornell.

Dr. Katz asks Madame Rosa, "you love him, don't you?" (page 45). And Madame Rosa tells Momo, "I've never really loved anybody else" (page 152). But people say Madame Rosa is "a woman without a heart" (page 10). As Momo searches for his biological father he asks Monsieur Hamil, "can somebody live without love?" (page 3). But he later calls out to Monsieur Hamil "just to remind him there was still someone who loved him" (page 103). And Momo says that he gave the dog Super away because he loved him so much (page 12).

Essay topic: write an essay answering the question "what is love?" You may focus on the question of what love means for Momo, for Madame Rosa, or for both of them.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote: "Is it possible to live without someone to love?" (page 178). Next, think about love, and read about some of the ways in which love has been described in literature and in studies of psychology and human development, by consulting one or more of the sites listed.

Laura Pulito

Love is Recyclable

Love is recyclable, like bottles or cardboard. It is not possible to live without love, and therefore we can love different people and even different things for sometime, and once we learn to give them up, they will be replaced naturally. However, this is often a difficult concept to grasp. Many people are afraid to let go of love because they feel that it is irreplaceable. In Romain Gary's novel *The Life Before Us,* Momo teaches us that while love is an essential component of our lives, it can be replaced without being destroyed.

Young Momo is literally older than his years, especially when it comes to his respect for letting go of the people and things that he loves dearly. Momo's love is selfless because he understands that he will find someone or something to love regardless of his current feelings. His almost premature decision to sell his beloved dog, Super, to a better home immediately illustrates his consciousness when it comes to the significance of letting love go. He knew that Super would live a better life elsewhere, and although he would be lonely for awhile he would at least know that Super was living a better life than the life that he had to offer. "I had a lot of surplus stored up inside me, and I gave it all to Super. I don't know what I'd have done without that dog, it was really urgent....So when Super started growing on me, emotionally speaking, I decided to give him a better life" (12). Many children Momo's age would not have done the same, because they would cling to their pride and joy and overall their comfort, all of which Super provided. Momo's motives were truly in favor of Super. People can be "driven to sell love for peace" or to "trade the memories" for their own benefit, as described in the poem *Love Is Not All,* but Momo is on the opposite side of the spectrum; he continuously places himself and his own needs last because his love is selfless and he has internal faith that he can replace what he gave up.

Momo's relationship with Super foreshadows his last days with Madame Rosa. While Madame Rosa is perhaps the dearest thing he has in his life, and the easiest thing for him to love, he realizes that she is suffering and he respects her desire to die instead of being forced to live. Her wants and needs become the priority, not his desire to keep her around. He will find someone else to love later, and he knows this. Meanwhile he will not stop loving Madame Rosa, even after she can no longer do anything for him and has instead become completely reliant on Momo himself. Momo and Madame Rosa change places as Momo becomes the caretaker. The ultimate favor Momo can do for Madame Rosa after she has kept him, loved him and cared for him for fourteen years, is to release her by letting her die peacefully. He will later seek love and affection from another, namely Nadine and her family, while Madame Rosa remains in his heart. "I think Monsieur Hamil was right when he had his brains that it's not possible to live without someone to love, but I don't promise you anything, we'll have to wait and see. I loved Madame Rosa and I'll keep going to see her. But I don't mind staying with you for awhile...." (182). By the conclusion of the novel, it becomes clear that Momo has thoroughly processed and accepted what he had seemed to naturally understand even before he had four years suddenly tacked onto his life. He knows that the love he had for Madame Rosa, and even Super, has not gone away because love is not concrete nor physical. The love he had for them simply changed forms; it was recycled. He can love Nadine at the same time because she will now give him everything that Madame Rosa and Super once gave him, but her love will never replace theirs.

Ultimately, Momo's character demonstrates selfless love at its most prominent state. Considering his age, his lifestyle and its harsh circumstances, his ability to let go of love is remarkable and speaks well of him. Momo sets an example for all of us; his strength reminds us not to lose hope and feel alone in the world, because while it may be true that we cannot live without love, it is not true that love can only exist once. It can always return and its memories played backwards in our hearts as we simultaneously move forward and seek new love.

Bibliography

Edna St. Vincent Millay. "Love Is Not All." *Poemhunter.* Web. 20 August 2012.

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us.* Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

Laura Pulito grew up on a small farm in Brownfield, Maine and is studying agricultural sciences with a concentration in education and communication. A few sentences worth of fun facts: She has always been passionate about the outdoors, food systems and the environment and their impact on our culture. She enjoys running, Nordic skiing, writing, art, and cooking. She would someday love to pursue agrijournalism or perhaps travel to teach people about sustainable farming methods.

Momo has several non-human friends: Arthur, the dog Super, the clown (page 67), the lioness (page 41). Each provides a special kind of companionship.

Essay topic: write an essay describing Momo's feelings for and relationship with one or more of these non-human friends.

In writing your essay, first consider this quote from the novel: "My best friend at that time was an umbrella by the name of Arthur" (page 48). Second, consider the question: who is Arthur, for Momo? Finally, think about what you know about friendship.

Victor Zhao

A one-eyed, inanimate umbrella with mismatched clothes would seem an odd choice for a best friend, but that is precisely the case for Momo in *The Life Before Us* by Romain Gary. Gary's description of the decrepit Arthur is simultaneously hilarious and pitiful. But the subtle reality is that it is also a tremendously revealing and brilliantly insightful glimpse into the character of Momo himself. Arthur's dingy state reflects both the squalor within which Momo lives and the tremendous loneliness and isolation that entraps him. It is from this unique combination of setting and circumstance that a friendship is born.

Arthur's strange appearance casts him as a misfit, much like Momo himself. Like Momo, an Arab boy living with a Jewish woman with black neighbors, Arthur does not fit in. Furthermore, Arthur, like Momo, is a strange amalgam of distinct parts. While Arthur is described as "a one-legged man, with one blue and white basketball shoe, a pair of trousers, a checked jacket on a hanger that I'd tied on with string and a round hat," Momo doesn't know who his parents are, practices Islam but speaks Yiddish, and interacts with both the white middle-class lady Nadine and the black transvestite prostitute Madame Lola (48). More than any other character in the novel, Arthur is the one that Momo identifies with. It is Arthur – not the lioness, not the blue clown, not Moise or Banania or the ever-rotating cast of children at Madame Rosa's, not even Madame Rosa herself – who Momo truly considers to be his friend.

When Momo is at his most vulnerable, he has nowhere to turn but Arthur. With Madame Rosa's physical and mental health in rapid decline and Moise still too young to fully grasp the gravity of their situation, Momo is left to assume the role of breadwinner and problem-solver. It is a role that is overwhelming for a child of his age, even after he grew four years in one strange, miraculous day. Arthur is to Momo what Momo is to Madame Rosa; he is someone to talk to, someone to share the enormous burden of supporting the household with. Even Momo admits that he "needed [Arthur] less to love than to play the clown with" (48). There is little doubt that Momo does, in fact, love Arthur, at least on some level. But even more than that, he relies on Arthur for help in getting through life's problems, just like Madame Rosa relies on Momo increasingly as she ages. He sleeps with Arthur clutched close to his chest because he is afraid every night that it will be Madame Rosa's last. When he's "afraid to go home" or

when Madame Rosa falls into another one of her mental lapses, Momo escapes with Arthur (64). Like every good friend, Arthur is there when he is needed the most.

But their relationship extends beyond even that. In Arthur, Momo sees a version of himself. He takes care of Arthur the way he wishes someone else could have taken care of him. "It's true that if you've got something weird that doesn't look like anything else you can't help hoping it will do something for you," Momo says, showing a wisdom and maturity beyond his fourteen years. He understands that he is different and that in many ways, he does not belong. But he also understands that the people he interacts with – Madame Lola, Monsieur Hamil, Dr Katz, Monsieur Waloumba, and, of course, Madame Rosa – have all reached out to him and cared for him in a way that transcends racial and cultural barriers. He sees what they have done, out of nothing more than the kindness of their hearts and a shared view on the human condition, and is determined to do that himself. Caring for Arthur is his way of thanking and emulating the people around him.

In Arthur, Momo finds himself. He is determined to do for Arthur what others have so graciously done for him. Yes, a cynic may say that Arthur is be nothing more than an umbrella dressed up in old clothes passing off as a source of amusement for a poor Arab boy living with a dying Jewish woman. But perhaps he is more than that. Perhaps, amid poverty and squalor and desolation, true friendship has been found.

Bibliography

Gary, Romain. *The Life Before Us.* Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: New Directions, 1986.

Victor Zhao is a freshman in the Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management specializing in Applied Economics and Finance. Prior to attending Cornell, he had lived all his life in Brooklyn, NY and was a student at Stuyvesant High School in New York City. In his spare time, he enjoys reading, writing, and playing sports.