

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Time Traveler's Pen Pal

A romance short story by C.R. Lang

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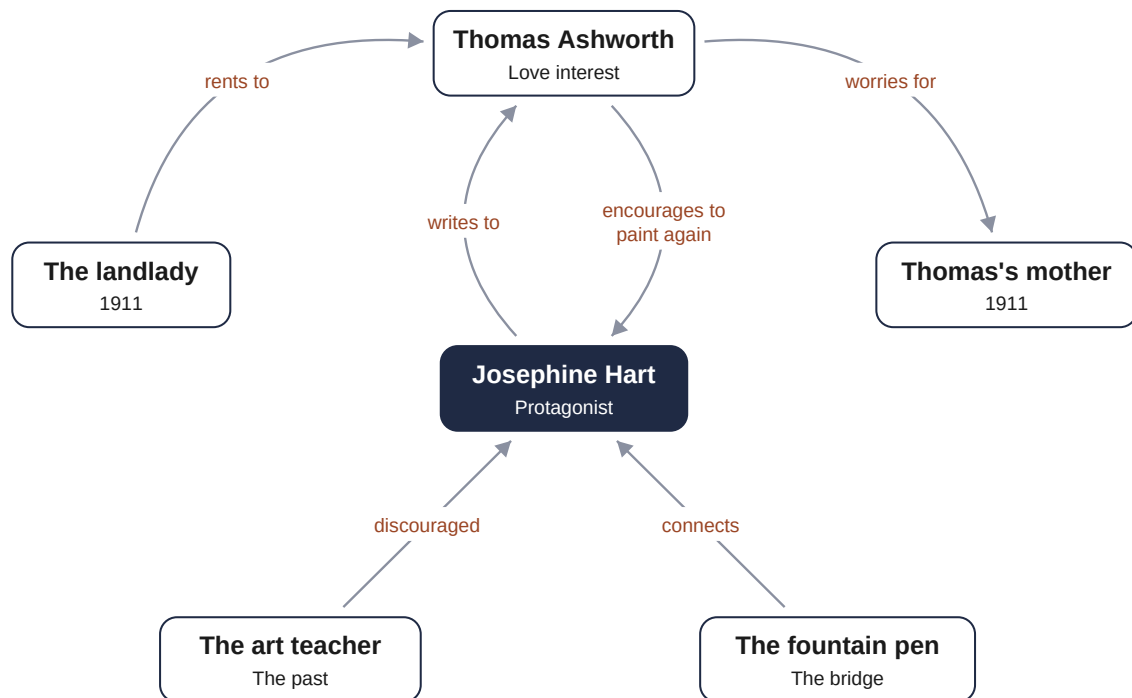
About the story

A restoration archivist buys an old fountain pen at an estate sale and finds herself writing to a shipping clerk in 1911 Charleston. As they fall in love across a century, she discovers how little time he has left.

This guide assumes everyone has finished the story, so it discusses the ending.

Character map

The main character is in the dark box. Arrows show who acts on whom.



Who's who

Josephine Hart (Protagonist). Thirty-four, a restoration archivist who stopped painting after a teacher called her work ‘competent.’

Thomas Ashworth (Love interest). Twenty-nine, keeps ledgers in Charleston in 1911, and wants to be a poet.

The fountain pen (The bridge). Two dollars at an estate sale. Carries words across 113 years.

Thomas's mother (1911). Her cough has returned, and the doctor won’t meet his eyes.

The landlady (1911). Disapproves of Thomas’s candles.

The art teacher (The past). Called Josephine’s work ‘competent,’ and she stopped painting.

Themes to look for

Time and mortality. Thomas has five months left. Is love worth having if you know when it ends?

The careful life. Josephine has built a life ‘out of careful, preserving things.’ Her choice is the first thing she ever wanted that wasn’t careful.

Being truly seen. ‘Competent is the word people use for what they cannot bear to praise.’

Ordinary mornings. Thomas asks for the ordinary, not the wonders. Intimacy is built from small things.

Discussion questions

- 1 Thomas asks for ‘something ordinary,’ not the wonders of the future. Why do you think the ordinary matters more to him?
- 2 How does Thomas’s reaction to the word ‘competent’ change Josephine?
- 3 Josephine hides what she found in the cemetery register for a week. Was that kindness or fear?
- 4 Thomas says he has had more in three months than in twenty-nine years. What makes these letters so powerful for both of them?
- 5 Weigh what Josephine gives up against what she gains. Would you make the same choice?
- 6 Thomas writes, ‘Come, Josephine. Or do not, and I will love you either way.’ Why does that freedom matter?
- 7 Why does Josephine sign the watercolor before she picks up the pen?
- 8 The story ends before we learn what happens. Does she arrive? Does it matter?
- 9 Is this a love story, a ghost story, or a story about learning to live?

Craft corner

For writers in the group: two ways to look at how the story is built.

Epistolary. Much of the story is told through letters. What does the format allow that ordinary narration wouldn’t?

Open ending. ‘The room, quietly, began to turn toward morning.’ What do you picture next?

Try this together

Write a short letter to someone a hundred years in the past describing one ordinary morning in your life. Read a few aloud and talk about what someone from 1911 would find strange, or familiar.

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