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# *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

by

**Irving Stone**

**1961**



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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The novel is mostly set in Florence and Rome, though Bologna also provides the background for some parts of the novel. Michelangelo was born in the land of the marble cutters, Settignano near Florence as Irving Stone has described it “*It was said of Settignano that its surrounding hills had a stone heart and velvet breasts.*” Having spent his infant years in this township, Michelangelo had developed such love for the marble that nothing less than sculpting on the white stone could ever give him pleasure.

The childhood and youth of Michelangelo is spent in Florence. Michelangelo is proud of this city “*compact within its walls, immaculately clean, a self-governing Republic, inspired of art and architecture, growing rapidly without poverty, proud of its tradition, revered throughout Europe for its learning and justice.*” The city flourishes under the reign of Lorenzo de Medici and artists like Michelangelo get inspired to .....

### LIST OF CHARACTERS

#### Major Characters

**Michelangelo Buonarroti** - The great sculptor of Italy, whose life is a saga of agony and ecstasy. He loves marble and is happiest when he is carving on it. As a man, he is kind and generous but forthright in his manner.

**Francesco Granacci** - A talented painter groomed under Signor Ghirlandaio, he is a true friend to Michelangelo and helps the sculptor in times of trouble. He is sensible and practical and believes in living life to the full.

**Lorenzo De Medici** - Michelangelo’s patron and admirer, he encourages the artist to unfurl his talent as a sculptor. A lover of art and literature, he likes being in the midst of scholars and artists. A kind and a generous man, he is a good father and a friend.

**Contessina** - The beautiful daughter of Lorenzo Medici, she charms Michelangelo with her beauty and innocence before becoming his friend. She is an admirer of art and appreciates Michelangelo as a sculptor. Even after she gets married and becomes the mother of three children, she retains her friendship with Michelangelo.

#### Minor Characters

**Lodovico** - The greedy father of Michelangelo, he keeps demanding money from him till he breathes his last. He is selfish and insensitive to the feelings of Michelangelo.....

Additional minor characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Michelangelo is the protagonist of the novel as the book traces the life of the artist from a thirteen-year-old prodigy, to a ninety-year-old legend. Lorenzo Medici nurtures his talent and encourages him to carve exquisite statues like ‘*Madonna and the Child,*’ ‘*David*’ and ‘*Hercules.*’ As his.....

**Antagonist** - The antagonists are the artists who are jealous of Michelangelo’s talent and try their best to defame him. Torrigiani is among the first of his enemies; while Bramante and Perugino are.....

**Climax** - All his antagonists hurt him physically and mentally and cause hurdles in his artistic career. They hamper his progress as an artist and cause him anguish. A few precious years of.....

**Outcome** - Michelangelo overcomes the obstacles in his way and gets the better of his adversaries. His friends and admirers also help him to get out of his problems. With his determination and dedication, he establishes himself as the greatest sculptor of Italy and one of the best in the world. The novel ends.....

## SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The novel opens with a picture of Michelangelo at the age of thirteen, contemplating to enroll himself as an apprentice to Ghirlandaio, the great fresco painter. Ghirlandaio accepts him as his student and also agrees to pay him stipends. Michelangelo starts sketching earthly figures, pulsating with life. However, his heart is towards marble and he longingly sits on the marble steps of the Duomo admiring the carved images in it. Soon an opportunity arises to fulfill his desire. Ghirlandaio chooses him and Granacci to send them to the marble garden to learn sculpting.

Michelangelo becomes an apprentice to Bertoldo and learns the basics of working on the marble. Bertoldo is a hard taskmaster. He makes Michelangelo draw innumerable figures and mould them in wax and clay before giving him the marble to work on. However, Michelangelo works secretly on the marble to fulfill his cravings. Lorenzo Medici spots his talent in the marble garden and invites him to the palace to start his career as a sculptor.

Life at the palace is the best period of Michelangelo's life as an artist. Lorenzo treats him as a member of his family. He introduces the teenager not only to his family members but also to the members of the Plato academy. Michelangelo gets inspired to carve beautiful marble figures and also to read the works of Greek scholars and poets. Thus he sculpts wonders on marble like the 'Madonna and the Child,' 'David,' 'Hercules,' and 'The Battle of the Centaurs.' He is happy living under the shadow of Lorenzo. He enthusiastically carves on his favorite marble and feels delighted in the company of Contessina. However, the.....

## THEMES

'Art surpassing life' and 'The agony and ecstasy of an artist' are the two significant themes of the novel. Michelangelo waits for years to get recognition and understanding of his creativity. He works for many rulers and acts according to the whims of different religious heads. He meets both the good and the bad and witnesses their end. He is kept away from the marble and forced to work in other mediums. He experiences prolonged agony during the time he is separated from his favorite stone. He lives on hope.....

## MOOD

The mood of the novel is serious as it traces the life of Michelangelo as an artist; from a teenager to an old man of ninety. The artist experiences both agony and ecstasy as he waits for commissions from fanatical rulers and carves on beautiful marble slabs. He is kept away from the object of his desire for.....

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Irving Stone was born on July 14, 1903 in San Francisco to his Jewish parents, Charles Tennenbaum and Pauline (Rosenberg) Tennenbaum Stone. After completing his school education, Irving joined the University of California, Berkeley for his graduation and acquired his degree in 1923. The next few years he spent in the University of Southern California pursuing his post-graduate studies. In the meantime, he had also started teaching economics to the undergraduate students of the university. And after completing his higher education, he worked as a lecturer in different departments of the University. Earlier in 1948 he was a visiting Professor of Creative Writing, at the University of Indiana and later on in 1961, at the University of .....

## LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Irving Stone has earned a name for himself as a writer of 'bio-history.' 'Lust for Life', 'Sailor on Horseback' and 'Agony and Ecstasy' are a few of his works that can be grouped under this category. Stone defined 'bio-history' as "bring history to life in terms of the tremendous human stories that have made history". With the publication of 'Lust for Life' in 1934, the contemporary biographical novel was regenerated. Stone's interest in people and his intention to set the historical records straight made him write on such.....

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES**

### **Chapter 1 - The Studio**

#### **Summary**

Michelangelo accompanies his friend, Grannaci to the studio of the renowned artist, Ghirlandaio. Since Grannaci is the student of the latter, he volunteers to introduce his thirteen years old friend to his master. Michelangelo requests Ghirlandaio to make him his pupil and also grant him a stipend in order to appease the anger of his father. Ghirlandaio, impressed by the forthright manner of the boy accepts the latter as his student.

Michelangelo observes other students doing sketches and tries to copy the originals of his master. His earthy and expressive portrayal of men impresses Ghirlandaio. His talent invokes the envy of other students but Michelangelo continues doing his work with dedication. However, his hand craves to cut stones and carve statues. His fellow-artists at the studio mock at him but Michelangelo sets his mind on working on the marble ultimately. One morning, he reaches his birth town, Settignano, to meet his childhood neighbors and observe them cutting stones. The Topolinis invite him to join them in their work. Michelangelo is excited working on the marble. His hand moves eagerly to carve figures on the white stone. Later, he visits the quarry along with his friends to gain knowledge about the stones.

After spending a day at Settignan, Michelangelo goes back to the studio. Ghirlandaio looks agitated in his anxiety to paint the required figures on the fresco of the chapel. Michelangelo tries his hand at drawing some of the figures but Ghirlandaio disapproves of them as too crude for divine presentation. However, the master painter detects talent in the boy and allots him place at the back of the studio. He also asks Michelangelo to pose as his model for the biblical figures. Michel starts work with the assistance of Grannaci and Maradius. Later, he visits the Chapel and works on the top of the scaffold. He paints gods and goddesses of his vision and invites more criticism than praise.

One morning Grannaci enters the studio calling for Michelangelo. He drags the boy to a park near by. Michelangelo is surprised to behold the sight in front of him. The garden is filled with sculptors working on the marble. Grannaci informs him that Lorenzo Medici had turned the garden into a school for sculptors. Bertoldo, the renowned sculptor was to impart training to the students. Michelangelo is in a daze. The stones, the sculptures and the carvers mesmerize him and he is drawn towards them. He requests Grannaci to introduce him to Bertoldo. Grannaci asks his friend to be patient and wait till he finished his contract with Ghirlandaio.

#### **Notes**

Irving Stone traces the artist in Michelangelo at thirteen. Born to aristocratic parents, Michelangelo is discouraged from pursuing art as a profession. His father, Lodovico, sends him to a school to make him a learned man. When Michelangelo shows no interest in studies, he desires to make the boy a merchant. However, Michelangelo shows no interest in business. Only stones and images make him ecstatic and he spends his free time sketching himself and his surroundings. His friend, Grannaci takes note of his talent and introduces the boy to Ghirlandaio, the great master of fresco painting. Though Michel is more interested in sculpting than painting, he agrees to become an apprentice to Ghirlandaio and learn the intricacies of the art from his teacher.

Michelangelo's talent invokes the jealousy of a few of his classmates and provokes criticism from Ghirlandaio. At a tender age, Michelangelo feels rejected. However, when Ghirlandaio provides a place for him in the studio and allows him to paint a section of the ceiling of the Chapel, he is more than content. Little words of appreciation and tiny gestures of recognition make Michelangelo happy.

Michelangelo works at the studio but his heart craves to sculpt the marble. Thus, he walks towards Settignano instead of the studio one morning and tries his hand at cutting stones along with the Topolinis. His desire is partially quenched and he feels refreshed to visit the studio next morning. More temptations are in store for him.

A few days later, Grannaci takes him to the marble garden to show him the sculptors under the training of the great Bertoldo. Michelangelo is excited and becomes impatient to start working on the marble. His hand itches to touch the marble and carve out images on it. However, he has to wait till he completes his contract with Ghirlandaio. Thus, with a heavy heart, he turns away from the garden to walk into the studio.

It is ironic that Michelangelo is born to a miserly and mercenary man like Lodovico who fails to appreciate the value of fine arts. Disappointed with his father's attitude and his progress at Ghirlandaio's, he turns to the Topolinis for moral support. The Topolinis understand him better than his parents and thus, he visits Settignano to give vent to his feelings. In this place of his birth, he gets the opportunity to fulfill his desire of carving on the stone slabs. He also walks to the quarry to look at the stones and gain knowledge about the quality of the slabs. Touching the marble and working on it is therapeutic to Michelangelo. A day's stay at Settignano refreshes him and gives him the impetus to continue his routine at the studio. Later, the hope of working in the marble garden one day makes him pursue his work at the studio with devotion. Michelangelo loves and lives for the marble and he is prepared to do anything in order to get the object of his desire.

Irving Stone gives an authentic picture of an adolescent who experiences agony at being kept away from his ambition and feels ecstatic observing the sculptors practicing his choice vocation at the marble garden. Book I brings alive the emotions and feelings of a thirteen year old child prodigy who is forced to spend time doing uninteresting things and is compelled to restrain his longings due to the force of circumstances. Michelangelo desires to break away from the shackles binding him to escape into a world of chisels and stones.

## **Chapter Two - The Sculpture Garden**

### **Summary**

Though apprenticed to Ghirlandaio, Michelangelo keeps visiting the garden and observes the other students working on stone. Ghirlandaio assigns him work and allows him to paint on the scaffold of the church. At the end of a year of his apprenticeship, Ghirlandaio throws a party in his honor. The master painter also announces his intention to send two of his students to the Medici school for learning the art of sculpting. When Michelangelo expresses a desire to join the school, Ghirlandaio releases him and Granacci from his tutelage.

Michelangelo is excited about the prospect of entering the sculpture garden. When he visits the garden with his friend, the students and the teachers welcome him. The cordiality of the students and the free atmosphere in the garden is conducive to learning. Bertoldo is not only a good teacher but also a good human being. He helps his pupils and also makes them laugh by cracking jokes. However, he is a strict disciplinarian when it comes to work. He begins Michelangelo's training by testing the boy's skill at drawing. He convinces the boy about the importance of drawing, in sculpting figures and makes him draw innumerable figures.

Grannaci is unhappy with his new assignment. Interested in painting, he considers sculpting tedious. However, he encourages Michelangelo to pursue his ambition. In fact, he speaks to Lodovico on Michel's behalf and seeks the elder man's permission to learn sculpting. Lodovico dislikes the idea of Michelangelo joining the sculpting school since it promises no return of money. And at the end of six months, as Michelangelo is still at the stage of drawing figures, he asks his son to quit the scene at the earliest. Michel becomes restless. Whenever he finds the garden deserted, he works secretly on discarded marble pieces. Once while he is carving on a small slab of stone, Contessina, Lorenzo's daughter visits the garden and commends his work. The charming girl's words of appreciation delight him and he gifts her the carved piece. He likes Contessina and feels jealous whenever she pays more attention to others. When Contessina absents herself from the garden, he looks distressed.

Michelangelo admires Torrigiani for his good looks and talent. He is happy, befriending the handsome youth and copying his work. Bertoldo chides Michelangelo for imitating Torrigiani's sketches and persuades him to

evolve his own style. He makes the boy work on wax and clay before introducing him to stone. He also takes Michel to the palace to show him the statues and carved figures adorning the place. Michelangelo is fascinated by the stone marvels around him and desires to create wonders like them. He is particularly attracted towards a Greek faun, though he finds it lacking in expression.

As days pass into months, fear grips his heart. The thought of his father stopping his work at the garden frightens him. In a troubled state of mind, he visits the garden early one morning and starts carving a faun on a slab of marble. At the end of three days, as he is giving finishing touches to his creation, Lorenzo enters the garden and observes his work. He is impressed by the sculpture and commends the boy on his work. Later, he calls Michelangelo to the palace and offers him a job under his roof. He wants the boy to sculpt figures of his liking and uphold the great tradition of the stone art. He speaks to Lodovico and seeks the permission of the latter to keep Michelangelo in the palace. He also secures a job for Lodovico. Lodovico is happy with the bargain and Michelangelo looks forward to brighter days.

## Notes

Irving Stone succeeds in recreating the longings, desires and disappointments of Michelangelo as he waits to carve on the marble. Michelangelo enters the Medici school with great expectations but is disappointed with the slow progress of his work during the course of his training. Bertoldo is a good teacher but a hard task-master. He starts training Michelangelo by asking him to draw figures. The next few months, he makes the boy draw different kinds of figures and criticizes the latter for making mistakes. Michelangelo is disappointed and turns to Torrigiani for moral support. He admires Torrigiani for his charming looks and copies the art of the latter unconsciously. When Bertoldo warns him from imitating Torrigiani, Michelangelo feels guilty and concentrates on his own style.

Michelangelo observes others doing work on stone and taking part in competitions. He feels cheated. His father's taunts further agitate him and he becomes restless. Bertoldo, understanding the boy's dilemma, makes him work on wax models. After acquainting him with wax, he asks the boy to mould clay. Michelangelo finds everything new and educative but waits impatiently to work on the marble. At the end of almost a year, when he finds the prospect of working on the marble a distant dream, he starts visiting the garden secretly and begins carving on the white stone. The vision of the Greek faun haunting him, he starts carving a faun of his imagination. As he sits giving finishing touches to his creation, Lorenzo Medici pays a surprise visit to the garden and applauds the boy for his impressive work. Lorenzo invites him to the palace and gives him a commission to carve out statues of his liking.

Michel's longing is fulfilled at last! Irving Stone beautifully expresses the boy's feelings on achieving his aim. *"For him the milky white marble was a living, breathing substance that felt, sensed, judged. ... He was not frightened, or even startled. He recognized it for the simple truth. It was his primary need that his love be reciprocated. Marble was the hero of his life, and his fate. Not until this very moment, with his hand tenderly, lovingly on the marble, had he become fully alive. For this was what he wanted to be all his life; a white marble sculptor, nothing more, nothing less."*

Michelangelo's longing and desire to carve in marble could not have been expressed any more explicitly!

The atmosphere in the garden is quite different from that in Ghirlandaio's studio, even though its apprentices appear similar to the students at the studio. The Medici school is uninhibited and allows the students to learn and execute their work leisurely. The trainees are taught to perfect the art and not to commercialize it as it is done at Ghirlandaio's. So the students are initiated into the art of sculpting slowly. They are taught to master the skill of drawing and molding wax and clay models, before trying their hand at sculpting on stone. Bertoldo, unlike Ghirlandaio, is in no hurry to complete his job; he is only interested in imparting intricacies of the art to

his students and making them excel in their work. Thus, he makes Michelangelo undergo severe training, before allowing the boy to carve on the marble. And he succeeds in his mission. He moulds Michelangelo into superb craftsmen and sculptor of repute.

Lorenzo's character gets unfurled in this part of the book. All the while, people had spoken of him as a man of great wealth and admirer of art. In this book, he presents himself as a lover of art, admirer of talent and a humanitarian. After observing Michelangelo's talent, he is convinced that the.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Michelangelo Buonarroti** - The protagonist of the novel, Michelangelo's life is a saga of struggle and success. A child prodigy, he finds it difficult to make his mercenary father understand his desire and need to paint and sculpt. However, he manages to become an apprentice to Ghirlandaio and later, to Bertoldo at the marble garden. Born with a natural talent, he is impatient to go through the training process before he can paint and sculpt. And once he gets the opportunity to chisel on the marble, he is ecstatic. Lorenzo is his first patron and with his encouragement, he begins his career as a sculptor. At the tender age of fifteen, he possesses the sensitivity of a mature artist. Thus, he carves out a moving image of Mother Mary experiencing the conflicting emotions of love and anxiety as she feeds infant Jesus.

Michelangelo's journey from a teenaged sculptor and creator of '*Madonna and Child*' to the eighty year old painter of '*Last Judgement*' is a long and strenuous one. He enters the palace of Lorenzo Medici at the age of fifteen and goes on to carve inspired pieces of sculpture like '*Madonna and Child*,' '*David*' and '*The Battle of Centaurs*.' Under the reign of Il Magnifico, he feels safe, secure and free to give expression to his ideas in the medium he loves best. However, after the death of his patron, he feels lost. His journey from.....

Additional characters are detailed in the complete study guide.

### PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The plot of *Agony and Ecstasy* can be traced through the normal course of situation, generating circumstances, rising action, climax and denouement. As the novel opens in book one, Michelangelo finds himself at the studio of Ghirlandaio as the apprentice to the great fresco painter. He observes his teacher and senior students painting and draws various figures expressing the attitude of man. Ghirlandaio detects his talent and gives him special assignments. However, Michelangelo's heart is not in painting. His hand craves to carve. At the end of one year, when Ghirlandaio offers to send him and Granacci to the sculpture garden in book two, Michelangelo is delighted. He gets initiated into the art of sculpting and learns its finer techniques from Bertoldo, the renowned sculptor.

His entry into the sculpture garden generates circumstances that take him to the palace in book three. Lorenzo encourages his talent and inspires him to carve such beautiful sculptures as '*Madonna and Child*,' '*David*,' and '*The Battle of Centaurs*.' Michelangelo is happy and contented doing what he desires most. However, Lorenzo's death in the latter part of book Three creates a crisis in the life of the artist. He feels threatened by Savonarola's fanaticism and escapes to Bologna. From book four, action rises in.....

### THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Michelangelo loves marble as much as he does his life and working on the white stone transports him to a state of ecstasy. However, the irony of fate is that he is kept away from the object of his desire and made to experience agony. '*Agony and Ecstasy of an Artist*' is thus the major theme of the novel.

At the age of thirteen, Michelangelo feels trapped living under the roof of his mercenary father who thinks of nothing but money. Thus, he convinces Ghirlandaio to pay him a small sum of stipends and.....

## **OTHER ELEMENTS**

### **IRONY**

The title of the novel itself is ironic. Michelangelo's life as an artist is one of agony and ecstasy. Whenever he is forced to do work against his will and kept away from the marble, he is in agony. However, when he returns back to work on the marble he is ecstatic. His artistic career spanning a period of seventy-seven years is strewn with hurdles. Through sheer talent, integrity and discipline he crosses these hurdles and succeeds in carving a niche for himself in the world of painting, sculpture and architecture. At the end of his life he is fully.....

### **COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS**

More characters can be contrasted than compared in *Agony and Ecstasy*. However, there are certain situations in Michelangelo's life that can be compared. Michelangelo spends a year at Ghirlandaio's and a year more at the sculpture garden learning the techniques of fresco painting and sculpture respectively from great masters. His teachers in both the places resemble each other to some extent. Both Ghirlandaio and Bertoldo are experts in their field and take pleasure in training youngsters in their art. They are affectionate towards their students and encourage them to do their best. They are also disciplinarians. They train the students step.....

### **Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo**

Both Leonardo and Michelangelo are Florentine artists' par excellence. Both are great draftsmen and creators of realism. However, the comparison stops with that. Leonardo is senior to Michelangelo and had earned his reputation as an artist much before Michelangelo. He had left Florentine and gone over to Milan eighteen years before. Still, he is held in esteem in Florence and given a place of honor. He is given choice commissions and handsome stipends. However, he turns down the offer to carve the Duomo pillar because he considers sculpture an inferior art. Being sophisticated and smart, he hates spoiling his hands and clothes chiseling hard stones. Leonardo is proud of his looks and snobbish in his behavior. Thus, he provokes the wrath of Michelangelo. Michelangelo is jealous of Leonardo's looks and personality. He feels conscious of his.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS**

- 1) How does Michelangelo become a student of Ghirlandaio?
- 2) Does he enjoy his work at the studio? If not why?
- 3) How does Michelangelo gain entry into the Sculpture Garden?.....

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