



Altered States

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In Anita Brookner's ALTERED STATES, Alan meets and falls in love with Sarah, a red-haired, flashy, cruel, selfish, sexy woman. After a passionate affair, Sarah leaves him with only vivid memories and an obsession. He is inveigled into marrying the child-like Angela, a woman who is almost entirely Sarah's opposite. When he deserts Angela for a few days in hopes of seeing Sarah again, Angela loses her baby, and her depression leads to her suicide. Alan grows old, tortured both by guilt for his role in Angela's life and death and by his obsession. Finally, Sarah reappears, and Alan gains some measure of peace by persuading her to do one good deed.

Even though to judge him by his treatment of Angela Alan may be a monster, he also embodies some of the conventional decencies of the civilized world; he usually tries to do the right thing and suffers when he does not. He is torn apart by his obsession with Sarah, who represents his fantasies of uninhibited, energetic, wordless, impersonal sex. Because he is almost always aware of what is happening to him, he is able to learn from his suffering. By the end of the novel, he meets Sarah as an equal and can sympathetically understand many of the other people in his life, including his dead wife.

ALTERED STATES embodies basic themes in memorable scenes and sensitively-drawn characters.

Sources for Further Study

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