Black Dogs Study Guide

Black Dogs by Ian McEwan

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Black Dogs is a fictional memoir of two people who are very much in love, yet complete opposites of one another. June and Bernard Tremaine's story is told by their son-in-law, Jeremy, forty-three years after the pivotal events of their honeymoon, which caused this young couple to live apart from each other for the remainder of their days.

Young, idealistic, and naïve British communists, June and Bernard join the Party the same week they get married. They had waited until after the end of World War II to do both things, and their future plans are to spend their lives in the pursuit of an idealistic, communist utopia on earth through their involvement with the practical politics of socialism Both come from the British upper class and are cultured, educated, and polished, but have little experience getting their hands dirty in life.

Their honeymoon takes them across war-torn Europe, and the couple sees the war's devastation first hand for the first time in their sheltered lives. A confirmed atheist, Bernard reacts with hopelessness and despair, taking refuge in idealistic political platitudes. Along the way, June has a terrifying encounter with two vicious black dogs, which become the instrument of her conversion to belief in God. This day marked the beginning of the end for the two loving souls, who were always to remain married and in love, but forever to live apart, carrying on their argument as to the existence of God even beyond the grave. It is up to the narrator, Jeremy, to sort their story out and heal the longstanding rift in his family.

Preface

Preface Summary

The narrator, Jeremy, tells us that ever since his parents died in a car crash when he was eight years old, he has searched for substitutes in his friends' parents. Jeremy has been successful in finding parental stand-ins over the years, especially as a teenager, when most of his peers preferred to ignore their own folks. From this pool of rejected parents, he was able to obtain, as a seventeen year old, affection, company, home-cooked meals, advice, and even money. At home he lived with his sister, Jean, and her new husband, Harper. The young couple fought viciously, neglecting Jean's three year old child, Sally. Jeremy felt a responsibility to look after Sally, and indeed recalls it as being good for him to take care of the child. "I never had any doubts about it: at some level you remain an orphan for life; looking after children is one way of looking after yourself." (pg. xii)

On those unpredictable occasions when Jean would remorsefully try to make it all up to Sally, Jeremy would be left alone, and that's when the blackness set in. To fill the void, Jeremy would head down over to a friend's house, certain that the friend would be out at the pubs or with a girl. When the parents answered the door, Jeremy would pretend to be looking for his friend, but really had come for the inevitable invitation to come inside and spend the evening with the parents. From these occasions, Jeremy profited greatly; most of his friends' parents were cultured, educated, and financially well off. Despite their own children's thoughts to the contrary, they were all interesting people, and Jeremy picked up knowledge of music, other cultures and different languages. Best of all, they treated him like an adult, offering him drinks and cigarettes.

Meanwhile, Jeremy's friends were jealous of his home life. Jeremy had no one telling him where to go or what to do. The only problem with Jeremy's home life, according to his friends, was that annoying little girl Jeremy was always stuck with. Jeremy could not understand his friends' rebelliousness, which he considered "the very antithesis of freedom, a masochistic lunge at downward social mobility." (pg. xv) Jeremy saw school as his way out of that miserable home, and worked fanatically to be accepted at Oxford. The narrator feels both guilty and grateful that he did not realize at the time that Jean's and Harper's violence extended to Sally. Had he known, he might not have left.

He did get out. Unfortunately, he took his problems with him. He was a depressed, sad student, and wound up leaving school. Leaving became his pattern, and for years he left his homes, his jobs, his friends and his lovers, seeking solace on occasion by befriending someone's parents. This sad pattern finally ended for Jeremy in his mid-thirties, when he met and married Jenny Tremaine. This, he believes, is when his life began. "I should have learned from my experience with Sally that the simplest way of restoring a lost parent was to become one yourself, that to succor the abandoned child within, there was no better way than having children of your own to love. And just when I no longer had need of them, I acquired parents in the form of in-laws, June and Bernard

Tremaine." (pg. xx) To his wife's annoyance, he became instantly fascinated with her parents.

June and Bernard started out together as communists, until each went their separate way. Bernard was a rationalist, a man who believed in science rather than spirituality. He eventually gave up communism, and replaced it with thirty years of social and political reform. June, on the other hand, became a believer in God in 1946 through an encounter with two dogs. The dogs caused her to believe in the existence of evil. Those beliefs were incompatible with communism, so she left the Party. Bernard and June's lives expressed contrasting beliefs. Jeremy, who came to love them both, does not believe their opposing views could have both been true. "To believe everything, to make no choices, amounts to much the same thing, to my mind, as believing in nothing at all." (pg. xxii) The narrator concludes his Preface by apologizing to his wife and her brothers for writing such a revealing, personal narrative about their parents, but he feels the story of June and Bernard is worth telling.

Preface Analysis

The author uses the conceit of narrator as author. The man we know so far only as Jeremy introduces himself as both narrator and author of what is purportedly a biographical memoir of his fascinating in-laws. However, his story is meant more as an exploration of two very opposite viewpoints about politics, about God, and about life in general. The narrator has constructed a book about opposing belief systems, and his main characters, June and Bernard Tremaine, each represent diametrically opposite beliefs. There is Bernard's belief that life is mechanical and every problem has an ingenious mechanical solution. June, on the other hand, started out with that belief, but was converted to God by an experience she had while on their honeymoon. We know already that the couple lived separate lives, and we also know they never stopped loving each other. The narrator also intimates that his own life experiences of losing love (his parents), then being redeemed by finding love (his wife and children), have caused him to accept June's point of view over Bernard's. Both points of view held attraction for him, because of the darkness and loss which marked his young years. The book tells the story of the narrator's tentative journey to acceptance of a divine presence in his life.

Part 1

Part 1 Summary

June Tremaine kept a framed picture by her bed of her and Bernard, taken only a day or two after their wedding in 1946, a week before their honeymoon would take them to Italy and France. The young couple is radiant, dressed in their business clothes, since because of the war their offices had not given them permission to leave immediately. They are not just leaving for their honeymoon, they've resigned their posts for good, which means they are free to officially join the communist party. "Beyond all their hopes for a sane, just world free of war and class oppression, they feel that belonging to the Party associates them with all that is youthful, lively, intelligent, and daring. They are heading off across the Channel to the chaos of Northern Europe, where they have been advised not to go." (pg. 5) The young couple in the picture is so optimistic about their future together; June could not have known that within a few short days she would be resigning from the Party, and ultimately, from her marriage.

Bernard looks just the same as he does now, forty-three years later: tall, large hands, feet, and jaw, big ears, and a good-natured smile on his face. June, however, now looks nothing like the sweet, jolly young girl in the picture. Jeremy believes she kept it by her bed to remind herself and others of the beauty she once had, before time carved a tree of wrinkles into her once pretty face.

Jeremy remembers his visits to June in the nursing home in 1987 as always being accompanied by rain. Perhaps he just remembers it that way because the atmosphere at the home was so depressing. It had not been June's first choice as a hospice, but the details of June's return to England five years ago after her diagnosis of leukemia had been a logistical nightmare. The entire family, Bernard included, had been devastated and had thrown themselves into making arrangements, pursuing mystical cures, fighting the insurance company, whatever it took. At the time, all this vigorous motion seemed purposeful and necessary, but in 1983 when Jenny gave birth to their first child, she and Jeremy realized that all the drama surrounding June's condition was just a vortex of nervous energy which they had mistaken for efficiency.

On this particular visit Jeremy is remembering for us, June had survived her diagnosis for five years. She could have stayed in her house in France, he thinks. "But the flat had been sold, the arrangements were in place, and the space she had made around her in life had been closed off, filled in by our worthy efforts." (pg. 8) Upon returning to England, she had moved in with Bernard while waiting for the nursing home to come through, and worked on a book she hoped to finish. After, in the nursing home, she said her life had been usefully simplified, allowing her the peace to meditate and contemplate her life and death.

Jeremy was not so placid about her dying; he resented it bitterly. For two years he'd been coming alone to visit her, as Jenny and her mother couldn't stand to visit much.

Over this time, Jeremy slowly began to evolve a vision of a memoir he would write about June and Bernard's life. The rest of the family was against the idea, not wanting him to stir up painful, personal memories of their parents' differences. They shouldn't have worried, for Jeremy was not very successful in getting June to discuss her and Bernard's personal affairs in detail. June insisted on her dignity and required others to take her seriously. She had even persuaded the nurses in the home to treat her as a cultured, civilized individual instead of just another fading old patient. June confided to Jeremy that her secret was from Lao-tzu's *The Way of Tao*, which counsels, "'The Way of heaven excels in overcoming though it does not contend.'" She then quoted, "'Of two sides raising arms against each other, it is the one that is sorrow-stricken that wins.'" (pg. 13) Jeremy hated that book full of smug paradoxes.

On this visit, he searches for a way to get her talking about her past. His tentative question sets her off on Bernard, whom she mocks for wanting to discuss Eurocommunism with her when he'd visited her a month before. Jeremy steers her back, and soon she is discussing how she came to transform her life. She begins in 1938, when she spent an idyllic month with a family in France who taught her to cook. When she got back to England, she received a bicycle for her eighteenth birthday, and joined the local Socialist Cycling Club. She was young, pretty, and having fun in the club, which was full of idealistic, bright young people who wanted to make a positive difference in the world. Youth, optimism, and bicycling along the Thames—that was her impression of communism. Eight years later she finally joined the communist party, and that was when she realized that it was not what she was looking for at all.

Eight years later, in 1946, the pivotal event of her life had taken place while hiking across the France with Bernard on their honeymoon. They came to an ancient burial site, called the Dolmen de la Prunarède, atop a hill overlooking the River Vis. The young couple sat and stared at that vista as if it were life itself opening up for them. June told herself she had never been so happy, knowing they were on their way home to start a life together. Instead of savoring the moment, they discussed and planned a long hike along the route which stretched before them. A sense of unease troubled June, even through her newlywed joy. She didn't want to go forward into that vastness with Bernard, she wanted them to return to England. She was moved by the sacred site upon which they stood, and felt separated from the beauty of the moment by their rambling talk of socialist idealism. She felt that these discussions about helping other faceless people were a wedge which kept the two of them from fully experiencing the supreme happiness of that moment.

Yet she told herself to stay and to "enjoy" the trip, reminding herself she loved Bernard and these few days of adventuring would please him. She tried to convince herself that political adventure was what she wanted, not a home and a baby. Back in 1987, June thinks bitterly of Bernard's belief that attending to the present is self-indulgent. He refuses to sit in silence and really think about his life, or the effect his life has on his loved ones. "He's never known a single moment's awe for the beauty of creation. He hates silence, so he knows nothing." (pg. 20) June is bitter because she's never stopped loving Bernard. That love manifests itself in bitterness and in jealousy of the cleaning woman who comes out to his house. As the older woman drifts into sleep in

her room at the nursing home, Jeremy thinks with nostalgia of that brief time when she and Bernard were happy together. He watches her doze, and reflects on the different viewpoints which kept the two lovers apart from each other.

He once asked Bernard about the first time he met June. Bernard didn't remember a first encounter; June had become a familiar presence at his office for several weeks before Bernard actually began to notice her. Her job was useless, he thought, because she supplied English translations of French documents, while everyone in Bernard's office spoke French, too. So he dismissed her presence until one day someone mentioned that she was beautiful. He took note of her, discovered she was indeed quite beautiful, and he gradually began to look forward to her weekly deliveries. By the time he worked up the courage to ask her to lunch, he felt lucky that she would be seen with a big, gangly guy like him.

June's account of their first meeting was quite different. While delivering documents to the Senate House one day, she'd seen Bernard, through the door of his office. His tall, rangy figure was stretched out with his feet on his desk, and she was surprised to instantly discover that she had a physical "type" she was attracted to, and that he was it. To add to the challenge, his eyes had flicked over hers dismissively - not the reaction she usually got from men. She began to find excuses to visit his office area, but Bernard refused to notice her. Out of desperation to get his attention, and needing an excuse to stick around the area after delivering her documents, she developed a flirtation with one of his colleagues. She even went so far as to spill tea on Bernard's desk one day, but he just mopped it up without looking up at her. Finally one day she marched into his office having made up her mind to get a date with him. This was, coincidentally, the same day Bernard had decided to get a good look at her. Much to her surprise, he stared her up and down. She got him to suggest lunch by dropping a gentle hint.

The narrator reflects how odd it is that they never compared notes about their first meeting. He thinks June would have enjoyed hearing Bernard's perspective, because it would have confirmed her argument that he is unreflective and ignorant about his life. Jeremy realizes by talking to him they were trying to compare notes. Both June and Bernard tried to use Jeremy to send messages to one another. Jeremy never complied with their wishes. He kept their conversations private and refused to answer the questions they put to him about one another. Jeremy reasons that they could have spoken to each other any time, they were both simply too proud to make the first move.

June wakes up from her sudden nap, startled to find a man beside her bed holding a notebook. After a moment, her confused mind places the situation, and she quickly picks up where she left off in the conversation, pretending to Jeremy that she hadn't dozed off. Jeremy decides to get her talking by antagonizing her a bit in true journalistic style. He asks her if she's found spiritual peace, how come she is she still so bitter about Bernard? After a long silence she admits that everything she's ever done which had value she had to do alone, without Bernard, and that she had achieved inner peace, but not happiness. She admits to having failed to find a way to live with Bernard, although they loved and were obsessed with one another. For June, this is crucial, because to her way of thinking, the only way to fix the world is to fix the tiny corner of it

which you inhabit. She was unable to get through to Bernard, and shut him out in frustration.

Jeremy decides to pry and asks if their obsession was sexual; he finds it hard to imagine, knowing them only as aged antagonists. June gives him the context to help him understand. She grew up in an era when unwed mothers were sent to mental institutions by their ashamed families. Unmarried mothers were social outcasts, and treated vengefully even by the charities which were supposed to help them. She and her friends were raised to believe sex was immoral and bad, and the price a respectable lady had to pay to have a marriage, a home, and babies to raise. The men she dated she always presented to her parents first, for their judgment. It was her goal only to date suitable men who made good marriage material. Meeting Bernard changed everything she thought she believed about sex. Her hormones were on fire when she thought of him. Marriage and respectability were crowded out of her thoughts by the lurid fantasies she had about Bernard. She desperately wanted him, and could not admit such debased thoughts to her proper, lady-like girlfriends.

She and Bernard found themselves alone one rainy day in the house of a friend. She knew she could not and did not want to resist making love to him, but at the same time she felt she was dooming herself to the life of an outcast by losing her virginity before marriage. Her ignorance about sex was so total that she assumed pregnancy would definitely occur. She had to get close to this man, so with a mixture of terror and excitement, she undressed and climbed into bed with him. Bernard did not disappoint. He was tender, knowledgeable, strong - everything a woman could want. A week later she introduced him to her parents. On the surface they were a darling young couple, and everyone was thrilled at their engagement. No one suspected they were copulating wildly whenever they could get a moment alone. They were young, in love and created together a happiness which would forever after haunt them after they went their separate ways.

June tells him that communism was their one major topic of discussion whenever they talked of anything outside themselves. They agreed on everything, and happily planned to join the party as soon as the war was over June laments that once they later began to see the world differently, they both knew their disagreements prevented them from experiencing the happiness they knew they were capable of having together. June says the memory of those happy times still haunts them today, reminding them what they should have had together. June says, returning to the topic of the her change of heart, what she learned that day on their honeymoon in 1946 is that she was capable of standing alone. "That's a significant discovery for a woman, or it was in my day." (pg. 35) What she didn't realize back then, unfortunately, was that just because she was capable of standing alone, didn't mean she should have done so.

She broaches the subject of the black dogs, which Jeremy knows she has been leading up to all along. She wants him to make this the central theme and the turning point of his memoir. He has heard the story of her encounter with these dogs many times; it is family lore. Jeremy has resisted her desire to include it in his book because he, like Bernard, believes the story is a symbolic conceit of June's. June denies that she literally

believes the dogs were Satan's familiars, as Bernard thinks she does. She tells Jeremy he should ask Bernard what the *Maire* of St. Maurice said to them that day about the dogs. She does believe they were evil, and by meeting evil, she discovered God.

Jeremy shifts uncomfortably in his seat as she insists on telling the story. She begins to tell him, for the umpteenth time, about the halo of colored light she saw around her body that day. When Jeremy looks back upon this visit, he blames his years of orphaned loneliness for the defensive skepticism which made him wince with embarrassment at her beliefs. He stands up awkwardly, knocking over his chair. His apparent skepticism stole the strength from her words, and she tiredly asked him to leave. As he walked out of the room that day, he thought as he always did when he left her that it might be for the last time. It was. She died shortly afterwards. At the funeral he stumbled across Bernard, apart from the crowd, bent over and wracked with sobs, calling out to June.

Part 1 Analysis

In Part 1 the narrator sets the stage for the tragic estrangement of Bernard and June Tremaine. When we meet them, they are frozen in time in the photo June keeps by her bed as happy, young newlyweds. We discover that they have loved each other deeply their entire lives, but were destined to part shortly after that lovely photograph was taken. The seeds of their destruction were planted on their very honeymoon, and despite the passage of the years, both Bernard and June still regret their parting. They have taken to blaming each other, but their continual arguments are actually demonstrations of their continuing love. Each one still hopes to convince the other of the rightness of their own point of view, as if by winning the argument, they might still win their marriage back.

Unfortunately, the source of their conflict does not lend itself to compromise. Communism does not embrace either God or religion, and by believing in God, June betrays her husband's belief system and the plans they had to make the world a better place through politics and socialism. In her apocryphal experience with the two black dogs, June discovers firsthand the existence of God, and to her that made her newlywed happiness complete. She and her husband could still make the world a better place, but she no longer believes they can accomplish this through communism, because communism denies God, which June believes is the true source of happiness. June realizes quite suddenly and with clarity, that Bernard will never reach his goal of making the world a better place because his focus on politics, social responsibility, and helping strangers only distracts him from creating beauty in his own, personal life. June is insightful enough to realize how often human beings shy away from what's important in their lives by hiding behind ceaseless activity. This lesson is echoed by Jeremy when he recounts the vain energy expended by the family on helping June deal with leukemia. When his son is born, Jeremy realizes where his energy would be better spent. June waited a lifetime for her own husband to come to a similar realization; sadly, it never happened.

Part 2

Part 2 Summary

Jeremy resumes the narrative in 1989, two years after June's death. He wakes up to discover that his wife has returned home from a ten day trip, and is snuggled comfortably in bed with him. Their hands find each other under the covers, and they begin to take advantage of the hour they have left before the kids wake up. Jeremy's hand caresses the homely bump on Jenny's finger which is the remains of a sixth finger, amputated shortly after her birth. She was born with the same number of fingers as an insect has legs, June used to say. Their lovemaking is interrupted by an early morning phone call. Given the hour, they silently agree to suspend their activities to pick up what might be an emergency call.

It is Bernard. He gleefully informs his son-in-law that the Berlin Wall has come down. Jeremy hangs up and tells Jenny the news. Neither of them wished to discuss its importance until they had finished making love, but the moment has passed, and they both head downstairs to watch the news on tv. The news is affecting, as it shows shot after shot of warm reunions between loved ones long kept apart by the massive Wall. When the children discover Jenny's home and rush into her arms for their own reunion, she feels the news on a personal level and is moved to tears. When Bernard calls back an hour later, he invites Jeremy to go with him to Berlin to witness the excitement in person. Jenny mocks her father, telling Jeremy that he only wants to go to see his "Big Mistake" of communism being put right with the dissolution of the Wall, and he only needs Jeremy to carry his bags. Jeremy feels the pull of history, and Jenny finally gives him her blessing, after making him promise to first finish what he started with her that morning.

As Jeremy gets ready to depart, warm from his wife's arms, he congratulates himself on having an interesting life. He picks up Bernard in a cab and they head for the airport, discussing the political situation en route. Bernard enjoys debating politics, and so Jeremy obligingly presents a counter viewpoint for Bernard to argue. As they pull up to the airport, the cabbie, who has been listening with interest, interjects his opinion. Bernard rushes out of the cab without waiting for Jeremy to carry his bags, in order to avoid getting pulled into a debate with the cabby. Jeremy tells Bernard he's lost the common touch because he refused to debate with a cabby, but Bernard says he actually never had it and that ideas are more his thing. Bernard says that June had the common touch. As a young woman she could charm anyone. He says that the June he knew in 1946 would have missed her plane to debate the cabdriver, and would have even gotten his information to add him to the communist party mailing list. She, insists Bernard, was a better communist than he.

Jeremy says June wouldn't consider that much of a compliment. He twinges with guilt at her memory, because he has done nothing about the memoir since her death. So Jeremy now takes advantage of this time with Bernard in an airport bar to learn more

about June. Bernard tells him about a fight the newlyweds had at a train station in Italy, about a week before June's encounter with the black dogs in France. Bernard, whose hobby was collecting and studying insects, had the good luck to spot an unusual male dragonfly, called *Sympetrum sanguineum*. He caught it between his hands and rushed over to June, asking her to hold it while he brought out a killing bottle from his traveling kit. June, holding the life between her own hands, objects to Bernard killing the insect. Bernard defends his hobby, but she is angry that he wants to kill it because he finds it beautiful, and puts down the hobby of entomology. She gets extremely upset, and rails at him that he's unemotional and detached from life. She tells him that efficiency and organization are the only things which appeal to him, and that he has no right to be a communist because he doesn't even like working-class people. She accuses him of just wanting to organize their lives in tidy rows like his insect collection.

Bernard, who hates scenes, is horrified that his new bride seems to hate him. He declares if she sets the insect free and doesn't allow him to keep his prize, he will never forgive her. Resentfully, she gives him the insect and he stores it away in the killing bottle. Bernard defends his politics by saying he is an idea man, and loves communist ideas. So what if he doesn't like working class people? So what if he doesn't show June his emotions; that doesn't mean he doesn't have them. He announces that he loves her more than he'll ever be able to say, and if he hasn't said it often enough, he's sorry, and promises to tell her every day if necessary. As he says these words, the train pulls up and June throws herself into his arms, sobbing. She tells him she's pregnant, and was feeling responsible not only for the baby in her belly, but for the dragonfly in her hands. She was afraid that by letting Bernard kill the beautiful dragonfly, they had somehow jeopardized the life of their baby. Bernard, thrilled at the good news, comforts her with Darwin's theories of evolution, and reassures her rationally that nothing will happen to their child. They make up that night in their new hotel room.

The next day, alone at the bar, Bernard reflects on her odd superstitions and her accusations about his politics. He realizes that day that she will not stay with the communist party for long. Bernard says to Jeremy over a fresh drink that June's future "hocus-pocus" beliefs were already present that day at the train station, and they were not caused by some transformative event presented by the two dogs. Jeremy is taken aback to hear his own skeptical views about June's dog story thrown back at him by Bernard. He feels drawn to defend June, and asks Bernard, '"what about the insect's revenge?'

'What about it?'

'Jenny's sixth finger!'" (pg. 58)

Bernard shuts down that line of inquiry by changing the subject to lunch.

The two men try to take a cab to the Brandenburg Gate when they arrive in Berlin. Thousands of tourists line the streets, so they abandon their taxi and head the rest of the way on foot. On the way, they notice two young girls in tight jeans and leather jackets, with dyed black hair pulled back in ponytails. Bernard stares after them. Ever

since June died, he admits confidentially to Jeremy, he's found himself staring in the faces of young girls, looking for some trace of June. In his grief, he had been weakened by superstition, and the idea that if there is actually life after death, that June would attempt to contact him just to prove once and for that she was right. He also had the idea that she would contact him through a young girl who looked like her. He thought that one day such a girl would bring him a message from June. Jeremy asks what he thinks now. Bernard says he's put that silly superstition behind him, but he still looks out for the girl, out of habit. Bernard says one of the two girls with the black ponytails who just passed had looked something like June.

Bernard turns to Jeremy and asks if June ever told him personal things about their marriage. Guiltily, Jeremy confesses that she had, but carefully chooses how much to admit to Bernard. He admits she told him about their first time together. Bernard is incensed. Jeremy quickly assures him that what she told him was no more personal than Bernard's story about the fight at the train station. Jeremy tells Bernard that June's story focused on what a big step it was for a girl in those days to have sex out of wedlock, and that it proved just how much she had wanted to be with Bernard. He also quotes for Bernard the compliments June had given his performance; she had called Bernard a genius, and told him how Bernard had afterward leapt out of bed and made Tarzan noises out the window into the stormy night. Bernard is now incensed at June's poor recall, because the Tarzan incident happened two years after their first time. Bernard accuses June of rewriting history to airbrush the rough spots, and chastises Jeremy for writing a salacious memoir reducing their lives to nothing but sex. He insists that June constantly changed the facts to suit her version of the truth, and that her belief in God is proof of her ability to invent myths.

They wait with the crowd by the wall until Jeremy gets impatient, and asks Bernard to walk with him down to Checkpoint Charlie. Still in the role of journalist, Jeremy tries to stir up Bernard and get him talking by telling him that he must have done some fact-twisting himself in order to justify staying in the communist party for ten years. Bernard doesn't rise to the bait; he merely shrugs his agreement. After a moment, Bernard admits that he ignored the evidence against the viability of communism for too long. He ignored the mass purges, the labor camps, the censorship and even the genocide perpetrated by European communists, because he kept telling himself the *ideas* were good, only the wrong people were in charge. After all, you have to break eggs to make an omelet, and Bernard was accepting of all of these atrocities because he kept envisioning that omelet. Bernard says he finally admitted the reality and gave up on vision of a communist utopia. That, says Bernard, is the difference between him and June. June may have left the party ten years before he did, but she never gave up on her ridiculous fantasy of utopia. She had swapped spirituality for communism, but the underlying belief was the same. She was an absolutist; a hard-liner.

At that remark, Jeremy loses his temper with Bernard. In front of an amused crowd, he calls him a liar, and says Bernard never listened to June at all. She had not swapped one utopia for another; her life had been a journey to find utopia, if it existed. She never broke any eggs, and there was no cause for which she would have been willing to accept the sacrifice of other lives, as Bernard had for ten years. Jeremy criticizes

Bernard for wasting so much time when he and June had so obviously always loved each other. Hadn't he considered what that did to his children? Bernard says that calling June's life a quest doesn't change her absolutist streak. It was June who had not accepted Bernard's differing beliefs; it was June who insisted they live apart. Bernard and the children, he says, were the eggs she broke for her omelet.

As he speaks, Jeremy wonders what game he's playing in trying to reconcile Bernard with his now dead wife. He gives up his argument, but instead asks Bernard what he misses most about June. He says that although he hated the nonsense with which she filled her mind, he loved the serious way in which she went about her quest. "'She was one of the few people I know who saw her life as a project, an undertaking, something to take control of and direct toward-well, understanding, wisdom, on her own particular terms.'" (pg. 70)

As they finally reach Checkpoint Charlie through the crowd, they stumble across an old Gestapo headquarters, which is being unearthed from its underground location by archaeologists. Bernard comments on it bitterly, and for the first time Jeremy notices how weary and frail the older man looks. Jeremy urges him towards a café nearby, desperate to get some warm food into Bernard's chilled body. When they get to the café, a huge throng of people forms an impassable line. Before Jeremy can plead a medical emergency and force his way through, Bernard wanders off across the street.

Jeremy follows and sees that Bernard's attention was captured by a young man who holds a red communist flag up and marches in defiance of the larger crowd which has come to witness the fall of the great communist symbol, the Berlin Wall. The crowd starts to get ugly as the young man marches on. Bernard watches from close by - too close for comfort, as far as Jeremy's concerned, but Bernard will not be moved. A couple of drunks start heckling the young man, and as if that's a signal, a group of German neo-Nazi punks appear on the horizon and make a beeline for the troublemaker. To Jeremy's horror, Bernard steps between the young Nazis and the outnumbered young man. Some people in the crowd call vainly for peace as the Nazis now advance towards Bernard instead, allowing the young man to escape into the crowd.

His mission accomplished, Bernard tries to shoo off the young punks. They advance steadily, and the lead punk kicks Bernard with his steel-toed boots. Bernard crumples to the pavement, suddenly an old man again. Jeremy physically restrains one of the boys, but cannot prevent the rest of the gang from surrounding Bernard. Before they can attack the old man, out of nowhere a young woman streams out of the crowd and begins haranguing them. Jeremy notices that, as their peer, she has the street credibility to shame the boys. Powerfully attractive, she is able to shame them for their desire to injure a weak old man. "The force of her disgust was sexual. They thought they were men, and she was reducing them to naughty children. They could not afford to be seen shrinking from her, backing off. That was exactly what they were doing now, even though the outward signs were laughs, shrugs, and the unheard insults they called out to her. They pretended to themselves, to one another, that they were suddenly bored, that it would be more interesting elsewhere." (pg. 75)

The woman backs the boys all the way down the street as Jeremy helps Bernard up and into a cab. Only when the young woman returned with her ponytailed friend does Jeremy recognize her as the June look-alike who had passed them in the street earlier. The coincidence of seeing her again in this huge crowd is too big for Jeremy to ignore, especially when the first time he'd seen her was when Bernard had told him he was expecting a message from June from a young woman like this. Jeremy is anxious for Bernard to recognize her and acknowledge this coincidence, but Bernard refuses to look at the young woman, even as he thanks her for her help. When Jeremy pursues the point in the cab after they've left her behind, Bernard just tells Jeremy to take him home.

Part 2 Analysis

Bernard's weariness and physical frailty are the only outward signs of the turbulent emotions he must be feeling as the Wall comes down. It is not easy for a man to admit that he's wasted ten precious years of his youth on the wrong ideas. It is harder still to admit to wasting the entire span of his wife's life with his persistent lack of spiritual unbelief in the truths she valued so deeply. It was their disagreement over the existence of God which caused June to leave her beloved husband. Now that June's dead, his desire to hear from her again conflicts with his inability to admit that her soul could have survived death to contact him. If it turns out she's right, and she does contact him, he will have to admit that he wasted their entire marriage with his stubborn belief in the wrong ideas. If he was right, and there is no afterlife, then he will never, ever hear from his beloved wife again. Either realization is going to be tough for Bernard to swallow. When the event occurs which could be interpreted as a sign from his departed wife, Bernard chooses to disregard it. Ultimately, the thought that he'd wasted what could have been a lifetime of love with June by being wrong about God is too much for Bernard to accept. It is easier for him to continue to ignore all evidence of the divine.

Part 3

Part 3 Summary

The day following the incident at the wall, Bernard doesn't leave the apartment in Kreuzberg where he and Jeremy are staying as guests of Jeremy's friend, Gunter. Gunter calls a doctor to examine Bernard's leg, and it appears no bones have been broken. Bernard is despondent and uncommunicative, so Jeremy spends the day writing up their conversation from the previous afternoon, and heads out for a stroll and a beer by himself that evening. The Wall festivities continue, but he and Bernard have had enough. They're both in bed by ten thirty that night.

They leave by separate flights in the morning, but head for the airport together. Bernard is in better spirits, and is focused on his own comfort, which is more his natural attitude. He insists on a wheelchair at the airport, and as the two men head toward the departure gate, Jeremy is encouraged enough by his renewed spirits to ask him a question about June's dogs. Bernard reflexively denounces the dog story as religious nonsense, just the kind of story June liked to create to support her silly theories about God. In fact, Bernard admits, he himself had been the one to supply her fertile imagination with the story of Winston Churchill's depression, which the famous man referred to as a black dog.

As they arrive at Bernard's gate, Jeremy tells him that wasn't what his question was about. Jeremy had reviewed his notes the previous afternoon, and remembered June's admonition to ask Bernard what the *Maire* of St. Maurice de Navacelles said about the dogs. Bernard remembers it well; the conversation took place at the Hôtel des Tilleuls, and Bernard says it's a fine example of how June twisted facts to meet her theories. Jeremy asks what the *Maire* told them the dogs were trained to do, but Bernard waves the story off for another day. Dismissing Jeremy, he signals to his attendant to wheel him onto the plane. Jeremy is left standing in the airport, bemused. Something Bernard had said reminded him of one of his earliest memories of his own wife, Jenny.

In October of 1981, Jeremy was in Poland, having been invited as part of a cultural delegation by the Polish government because of Jeremy's position as administrator of a successful theater company. The cultural delegation also included a novelist, an arts reporter, a translator, a few bureaucrats, and Jenny, the only woman, who represented a Paris institution. Jenny was both beautiful and cool in her manner, a mixture which drew hostility from some of the men. The novelist was particularly disgruntled to find that such an attractive woman was not impressed by his literary reputation. The novelist had a running bet with the journalist and one of the bureaucrats as to which of them would bed Jenny first. Jeremy, however, quickly developed a heart-wrenching crush on her. The jokers who were betting on Jenny now considered Jeremy to be "in the race," much to his annoyance. To make matters worse, the group's daily schedule of lectures and meetings precluded any chance for private conversation with Jenny, although he saw her every day.

After two weeks, Jenny asked Jeremy to accompany her to Lublin, a hundred miles away, for the purpose of visiting a concentration camp called Majdanek. Jeremy had sworn, after visiting the concentration camp in Belsen some years before, that he would not repeat the experience. This was a chance to be with Jenny, who didn't want to go alone, and definitely didn't want the company of the other men in the group. Jeremy agreed to go, and impulsively kissed her. The next day they left in a taxi, before the novelist could catch on to their plans. On the ride, they began to get to know one another. Jenny told him about her estranged parents, Jeremy told her about being an orphan. When they arrived at Majdanek, which was disconcertingly close to the town of Lublin, Jenny made her first mention of the black dogs.

They stood at the main entrance to the camp, reading a sign which listed the numbers of Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, French, British, and Americans who had died there. Jenny was disgusted that no mention was made of the Jews on this official plaque, and that's when she said the words *black dogs*. This had no meaning to Jeremy at the time, so he had let the words pass without comment. They spent a silent hour together inside the camp; Jeremy found himself amazed by the sheer number of huts which had been built to house the prisoners. On their way out, she shook her head again at the plaque's omission, and mentioned the black dogs a second time. This time, Jeremy asked her what she meant. Jenny would only tell him that it was a family phrase from her mother. Once away from the morbidity of the camp, they were gladdened by the sunshine and life to be found in the regular world. Jeremy made an uncharacteristically bold move: He kissed Jenny and told her she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever met, and that he would love to spend the rest of the day making love to her. She raised her hand - to slap his face, he thought - but instead she pointed to a hotel across the street, where they wound up staying for three days. Ten months later, they were married.

Back in 1989, Jeremy arrives at the *bergerie*, which has been shuttered up since their last family holiday there. It's never a pleasant experience, thinks Jeremy, to reopen the property, and it's a harder job without the children, whose noisy exuberance gives the house immediate life. He's arrived early to prepare the house, and to be alone with the ghostly memories of June and Bernard's life. Tonight June's ghost feels like more than a memory. Her signature scent of lavender soap permeates the house, and Jeremy hurries towards the kitchen to the fuse box so that he can turn on the lights and drive out the eerie darkness. In the kitchen, he is gripped with a strong feeling of being watched. He can see the spot on the far wall where the fuse box is, but something about that darkened area looks wrong. It almost pulses with darkness.

Jeremy is literally frozen to the spot with fear. For more than five minutes, he stares at the darkened fuse box, unwilling to touch it for some unknown reason. He edges closer and his hand instinctively reaches for knob on the kitchen table's drawer. As he stands there, too afraid to touch the black fuse box, and too stubborn to let his uncharacteristic fear dissuade him, he realizes why his hand had sought the drawer in the table. He opens the drawer and rummages until he finds the candle and matches stored inside. In the light of the candle, Jeremy sees the scorpion curled around the handle of the fuse box. He dispatches it with a single blow from a wooden spoon, and stomps on its dead

body to be sure. Jeremy remembers as he turns on the lights that they had once found a whole nest of baby scorpions in the fuse box.

The next day he sets about preparing the house for the family's December holiday. He is plagued throughout the day by the competing voices of June and Bernard. June demands to know how Jeremy can pretend to doubt the obvious. June reminds him that he sensed her presence the moment he entered the house; she insists that she sent him the premonition of fear to keep him from touching the fuse box. It's all quite simple, says June to Jeremy. Bernard chimes in with his rationalistic viewpoint. Bernard says Jeremy sensing June's presence is just another way of saying that June's memory is strong at the *bergerie*, where she lived all her life. Bernard tells him the fear he felt in the kitchen was natural considering that the fuse box was the darkest, shadowiest part of the wall, and that Jeremy must have had a subconscious recollection of the time they'd found the nest of baby scorpions. Bernard finishes his argument by saying it wasn't the most deadly species of scorpion, so why would a spirit from beyond the grave go to such trouble to save Jeremy from a minor injury?

June says she saved Bernard at the Wall and Jeremy from the scorpion to prove how wondrous the universe truly is. She tells Bernard that he wouldn't believe it anyway, because there's no evidence a skeptic won't twist to fit his disbelief. Bernard replies that science is revealing the world to be a wondrous place, and there's no need to invent a god just because we don't understand it all. The arguments continued throughout the day. "Each proposition blocked the one before or was blocked by the one that followed. It was a self-canceling argument, a multiplication of zeros, and I could not make it stop." (pg. 97) Jeremy tries arguing back with the voices as he stares at the notes for his memoir. Finally he calls his wife to complain about her parents and tell her that he must be going mad. Jenny is gleeful because he's getting what he deserves for stirring up the ghosts of the past.

Another day, Jeremy decides to pursue the ghosts of Bernard and June by heading to the dolmen, where so much of their story took place. Feeling slightly like a truant, he left behind all household chores and memoir writing to enjoy the long hike to the Dolmen de la Prunarède. The fresh air and sunshine free him from his mental preoccupation with June and Bernard. He falls in love with the hillsides of France again, and feels his good spirits restored. He stops for a beer when he reaches the Hôtel des Tilleuls, the very hotel where June and Bernard Tremaine had eaten lunch with the mayor and heard his story about the black dogs. After the beer, Jeremy resumes his walk and covers the remaining mile to the dolmen.

When he arrives, he eats oranges on the flat slab of rock and tries to conjure the ghost of June and Bernard, on the day before she met the dogs, when they were still young and uncomplicatedly in love. The five hour hike has purged Jeremy of his mental haunting by the past; he thinks only of fond recent picnics at the dolmen with Bernard, Jenny, and the kids. He leaves by a different path than the Tremaines had taken as newlyweds, feeling free enough of his subjects to at last begin to write about them.

On his hike back, he stays the night at the Hôtel des Tilleuls. The hotel owner's name is Mme. Monique Auriac, and he remembers the name Auriac from his notes. He thinks she must be the daughter of the Mme. Auriac who sat at the table with June, Bernard, and the mayor all those years ago. Thinking the daughter might know the *Maire*'s story about the dogs, he resolves to speak with her before he leaves. Another event occurs which he believes June would call a "haunting" from his past. He feels June watching over him as he gets a chance to avenge his niece, Sally, for the beatings she suffered as a child.

At dinner that night, there are only three tables occupied, including Jeremy's. One table is occupied by a family, a husband, wife, and small boy who has the look of a child recently reprimanded. Jeremy watches as the pink-cheeked, doll-like mother slaps the boy hard for putting an elbow on the table. Later in the meal, after another minor etiquette violation, the father shoves the boy and his chair to the ground. Jeremy can tell this type of thing has happened before by the practiced way in which the mother hauls the boy up by his arm while the father surreptitiously picks up the chair. The performance is completed by the mom holding a menacing finger in front of the child to keep him from crying. Moments later the boy cannot hold it in any longer, and begins to cry. The father backhands the child with unrestrained force; the boy and his chair are propelled backward, nearly reaching Jeremy's table.

Now Jeremy's on his feet. He calls the man out for his monstrous behavior and invites him to step outside. The Frenchman stands up with a menacing smile; he is twice Jeremy's size. Jeremy is determined to teach him a lesson, and starts swinging before the dad is prepared. He knocks him down with a series of well-placed punches and continues to kick him until another one of the diners calls him back inside. Jeremy looks down at his vanquished opponent, horrified by his own violence. Back inside, the boy is given ice cream by the hotel staff, and Mme. Auriac agrees to tell Jeremy the *Maire*'s story.

Part 3 Analysis

Jeremy has a strong streak of skepticism cultivated during his years as an orphan. His fascination with the argument between June and Bernard is a reflection of his own personal journey towards faith. The Tremaine's arguments are his own inner voices, alternately ridiculing and embracing the notion of God. His persistence in pursuing the story betrays his deep longing to find spiritual truth. However, equally persistent is his skepticism, and although his hopes incline towards June's point of view, they are constantly undermined by Bernard's voice. Jeremy attempts to talk back to the voices, telling them that science and God are separate and neither should concern itself with the other. This is the only part of the argument uttered in Jeremy's own voice, and yet it is merely an attempt to deny the existence of the argument itself. He finds in the end that the only way to drive out the voices is to pursue the answers he seeks, and so he sets out on a quest, and in the process, exorcises the ghost of his guilt about Sally's childhood by standing up to the abusive man. Throughout all of this he continues to feel

June's presence. The narrator has not reached any conclusions, yet, but he feels he is on the right track.

Part 4

Part 4 Summary

In the spring of 1946, Bernard and June set off on their honeymoon tour of France and Italy. They had known each other since 1944, but had to wait until the war ended before they were given permission to leave their jobs. They both worked at the Senate House in Bloomsbury. Bernard, a Cambridge science graduate, worked with the intelligence services, while June, a linguist, worked as a liaison with the Free French and sometimes found herself in the same room with de Gaulle. The young couple planned to spend the summer of '46 traveling before returning to England to enjoy married life and civilian jobs during peace time.

Jeremy is always amazed when he thinks of the differences between the types of war work assigned to people of different social classes. His own parents had not come from such a privileged class as the Tremaine's, so his father spent the war slogging across foreign countries in the infantry, and his mother worked as a farm girl and later at a munitions factory. People like the Tremaines had it much easier; Bernard spent his days working out technical and scientific matters in support of the war effort, which still gave him time to court June with Sunday movies and hikes through the mountains. Jeremy knows which of the two war experiences he would have preferred.

Perhaps as penance for having got off so easily during the war, the newlywed Tremaines volunteered for six weeks work for the Red Cross when they first arrived in Italy. The damage to the countryside from the war was enlightening for the Tremaines, who had indeed had it pretty easy in England. They were idealistic and young and saw their volunteer work in terms of slogans like "winning the peace" and helping "build a new Europe." (pg. 113) Everyone in the Italian town of Lerici, where they stayed, was too sad to notice their bright, shining contribution, and when they left after six weeks, nobody noticed that either. Bernard did notice the grief and devastation left by the war; nearly every man and woman he saw was mourning a child, a spouse, a parent or a friend. It was in this frame of mind that the couple reached the dolmen for the first time., I Instead of enjoying its glory, they prattled on mindlessly, to June's growing annoyance, about communism and the enemies of Marxist-Leninist thought.

The next day they set out from the Hôtel de Tilleuls in St. Maurice, where they had spent the night after watching the sun set from the dolmen. With six weeks of toil at the Red Cross behind them, the couple had made plans as they sat on the dolmen to spend the next several days hiking and enjoying their freedom in the countryside. June feels discontent as they set off; she is unhappy to be hiking further away from her luggage, back at Lodève, and every step along the path feels like a pointless step away from the homelife awaiting her in England. She reminds herself the holiday is temporary, and to enjoy it while it lasts, but she cannot shake the feeling of dread which dogs her steps. When they reach a high cliff, she and Bernard look down and exclaim about the beauty of the view, as all hikers do. June realizes the appropriate response to such rugged

heights is fear, and remembers stories of eighteenth-century travelers plummeting to their deaths from such heights in the Swiss Alps. She stands there taking in the view and hating it.

With determination, June forces herself to move ahead. She walks off ahead of Bernard, half-hoping by plunging onward he might be the one to suggest they turn back. Leaving him behind on the trail, she passes a bend in the trail. Around the other side, she can see two donkeys on the path ahead, about a hundred yards down. When they are seventy yards ahead, she realizes the two donkeys are actually enormous black dogs. Her steps falter and stop as a cold feeling spreads through her body. She is not afraid, not yet; she believes Bernard is moments behind her on the path, and she has no particular fear of dogs in general. These hardly qualify as dogs. "In size they resembled mythical beasts. The suddenness of them, the anomaly, prompted the thought of a message in dumb show, an allegory for her decipherment alone." (pg. 120) The dogs seem to carry some powerful meaning, and June feels sick with fear. They are collarless, and seem to be working together to some purpose as they graze along the path.

One of the dogs looks up and spots her. The dog alerts its partner, and they begin to walk toward her. She looks back for Bernard, but he is some three hundred yards away, attention captivated by a very unusual caterpillar procession. She knows enough not to provoke the dogs by running, and begins to walk backwards along the trail. She picks up three rocks as she backs up. Stumbling momentarily, she leaps back to her feet immediately, trying not to show weakness or fear, as the mutinous dogs continue to advance on her. At fifteen feet the dogs stop, but her hope dissolves when the larger one begins to growl. The smaller of the two crouches, ready to spring. She backs up against a tree and fumbles in her backpack, still clutching the rocks.

June calls out to God, and realizes God might be her only chance. She tries to find space within herself for the presence of God. In that instant she feels an energy streaming through her, which she would later describe as a "colored invisible light" (pg. 125) and she knows that if this wondrous presence is God, it is also her own soul. With this amazing new discovery, June feels determined to survive so that she can further explore it.

She finds some leftover sausage and tosses it to the dogs. While they devour it, she finds a pen knife in her bag. The dogs finish the sausage and resume stalking her. Something in their movements suggest they have worked out a plan. June tosses the rocks at the dogs. They poise to spring, and June rushes forward to attack the dogs. The smaller dog, the bitch, backs away, but the big male dog lunges for June and buries its fangs in the backpack she holds before her. June thrusts upward with her pen knife and stabs the huge dog several times in the belly. The dogs ran off down the path away from her, the big one trailing blood. Fifteen minutes later, Bernard finds her sitting in the path.

Tersely, she tells him she was frightened by two dogs. Bernard doesn't get the magnitude of the encounter, doesn't see the bloody knife lying on the trail. He insists he

can handle the dogs, and wants to continue their hike. She insists on returning to St. Maurice. Bernard, flabbergasted, goes back with her to the hotel, where they get a table and order some stiff drinks. While they wait, Bernard tells her the story of the caterpillar parade, oblivious to June's lingering feeling of trauma. Mme. Auriac brings them their drinks and notices the blood on June's hand. June finally breaks down and cries, telling them both the story. Angry at Bernard for not being there when she needed him, June finally forgives him when she sees the proud, surprised look on his face as she tells the full story. In the telling, June finds relief, and the three of them toast to her bravery.

Mme. Auriac sends for the *Maire*, who arrives irritated at being summoned from a nap. When he sees the large bite the dog had taken out of June's backpack, he promises June that he will round up a posse to track down the dogs for public safety. He remarks casually to Mme. Auriac that there had been a similar incident the year before, the dogs had attacked another woman for the same reason. What reason? asks June. The *Maire* tells her a story about how resistance movements in the town of St. Maurice had brought the Gestapo to town during the war to investigate. The Gestapo's investigation turned up nothing, but in the process, they had rounded up a local woman named Danielle Bertrand for questioning. Mme. Auriac interrupts him to say that Danielle was raped by the Gestapo. That, said the *Maire*, is what everyone thought, until two eyewitnesses reported that Danielle had been raped by the Gestapo's dogs. Those are the same dogs June met on the path, the *Maire* tells her.

Mme. Auriac is infuriated with the *Maire* for telling this story, which she says is a defamation of poor Danielle, and that the two eyewitnesses were a couple of drunks. From her deep indignation, it was obvious that Mme. Auriac was telling the truth, and yet June, having met the dogs, was inclined to believe him. Despite his promise, the *Maire* did not dispatch any men out to shoot the dogs by the next day when the Tremaines were leaving. Bernard wished to continue their hike anyway, but June was immovable. Mme. Auriac understood completely, and gave them directions for the quickest route back to their luggage in Lodève. Despite his disappointment, Bernard understood too, and they set off back the way they came. Later that afternoon they made up by making love on a quiet, country lane.

June wanted to talk about the colored lights and the *Maire*'s story, but didn't feel comfortable broaching either subject with Bernard. Instead she grew resentful in the silence. That afternoon Bernard remembers a poignant scene, which June later told Jeremy she didn't recall at all, other than through Bernard's story. Bernard saw a woman, dressed in mourning black, watching in grief as a mason carved names of the war dead into an iron cross along the road. Bernard is again struck by the damage done by the war. The true damage, he realizes, is in the private sorrows of a family member or friend lost to the war. He sees the landscape of Europe as being dotted by these private sorrows; in each home, an empty bed, and yet all of the sorrow is borne individually, by people like the woman in black along the road. He thinks how vast the countryside is to have absorbed all this sorrow. He conceives of the analogy of mold spores, covering the land. "What possible good could come of a Europe covered in this dust, these spores, when forgetting would be inhuman and dangerous, and remembering a constant torture?" (pg. 140) Years later, when Jeremy retraces their

path, he will find the iron cross which Bernard referred to, but the words inscribed in it are harmless, they are not the names of the war dead.

That evening Bernard and June get lost on the path, retracing the same circle several times, until fortune brings a shepherd and his flock across their path. The shepherd, or *berger* in French, leads them along the correct route, stopping at his home, the *bergerie*. June can think of nothing but getting home, and as the *berger* tells them the story of his brother's recent death, and how he must now sell the *bergerie*, June is touched by a joyous vision of the future. Without even telling Bernard, she purchases the *bergerie*, which comes with twenty acres of land.

The next afternoon, Jeremy tells us, June finally worked up the courage to tell Bernard; to her surprise, he did not oppose her at all. After the honeymoon, Jenny was born and June did not return to the *bergerie* for two years, until 1948. On that visit, and on succeeding visits over the years, June renovated it and made a number of small improvements. In 1951, after their third child was born, June took the children and moved to France permanently. The Tremaine kids went to French schools, and spent much of their childhood being mailed back and forth from England to France, from father to mother. June could not accept Bernard's atheistic communism, and Bernard could not accept her lack of political involvement and her spiritual mumbo jumbo. Even after Bernard left the communist party, June felt his continued involvement in social politics kept him separated from a truer connection with the meaning of life. The couple found themselves unable to live together, but too much in love to leave each other definitively.

June went on to publish three spiritually themed books in the course of her life. As time passed, her visits to London became less frequent, and she closeted herself in the *bergerie* to contemplate the mystical. In later years, June wrote a letter to Jeremy, explaining her theory that the only way to overcome evil - the kind of evil Bernard saw in the spores of grief dotting the European landscape, the kind of evil June had come face to face with in the dogs - was to forget about grand socio-politic designs and concentrate instead on healing one's own life, one's own family, one's own heart. '"Without a revolution of the inner life, however slow, all our big designs are worthless. The work we have to do is with ourselves if we're ever going to be at peace with each other. I'm not saying it'll happen. There's a good chance it won't. I'm saying it's our only chance. If it does, and it could take generations, the good that flows from it will shape our societies in an unprogrammed, unforeseen way, under the control of no single group of people or set of ideas...'

As soon as I had finished reading, Bernard's ghost was before me. He crossed his long legs and made a steeple of his fingers. 'Face to face with evil? I'll tell you what she was up against that day-a good lunch and a spot of malicious village gossip! As for the inner life, my dear boy, try having one of those on an empty stomach. Or without clean water. Or when you're sharing a room with seven others. Now of course, when we *all* have second homes in France... You see, the way things are going on this overcrowded little planet, we *do* need a set of ideas, and bloody good ones too!'" (pp. 147-148) And so, despite June's death, the fight continues between the ideas of faith and skepticism, and

meanwhile, Jeremy senses, the black dogs of evil continue to roam the land, from where they will return to haunt us another day.

Part 4 Analysis

The couple's return walk after the dog incident is symbolic of their parting ways. Although they tread the same ground, it seems as if they are on different paths. June has found spirituality, and is overcome with its import. She cannot communicate her feelings to Bernard, assuming he would not understand. Bernard meanwhile succumbs to sorrow and grief as he surveys the human wreckage left by the war. Without spiritual feeling, he gives in to despair. One wonders if June's enlightenment might have helped Bernard through that difficult day. Had June told him about her spiritual experience, he might even have been receptive. She went on the assumption that a communist skeptic like Bernard would never believe her, conveniently forgetting that she herself had been a communist skeptic up until that moment on the path with the dogs.

June makes a lot of limiting assumptions about Bernard that day, assumptions which help shape their future so tragically. She assumes he would oppose her about the house, and yet learns nothing about him when he surprises her by agreeing to the purchase. She claims the cynical, skeptical comments typical of Bernard prevent her from sharing with him, but in the narrative his cynical comments only become typical of his later life, after she left him. Perhaps by assuming he was close-minded and narrow, June helped make him so. She loved to oppose him as much as he loved to oppose her; argument is one way human beings keep a relationship alive which they are afraid of losing. Had June had more faith in Bernard, their marriage might have survived the honeymoon and thrived. Shortly before her death, June told Jeremy that the day with dogs taught her that she, as a woman, could stand alone. In her old age June regrets not realizing then that it didn't mean she *had* to stand alone in life. She could've gone a different route, and all of their lives might have been the richer for it. June's theory on creating a better life by healing our own families is a beautiful one, but she lacked the courage to put it into practice in her own life by healing her marriage. The narrator, Jeremy, who wants to share June's faith in God, might have been more strongly convinced by her arguments had she been a better example of them in her life.

Characters

Jeremy

While June's turning point in life was her encounter with the black dogs, Jeremy defines his life story as being an orphan. His teen years were spent chasing substitute parents instead of girls, and he began courting Jenny's parents shortly after they were married. When he finally regained parents in the form of his in-laws, Jeremy began to suffer the same pangs as Jenny and her siblings over the estrangement of June and Bernard. Having come from a background devoid of any kind of belief system, Jeremy feels compelled to resolve, at least in his own mind, their argument about rationalism versus spiritualism. Jeremy wonders about the existence of God, too, but his new parents present him with opposing views instead of clear cut guidance.

He diligently refuses to get involved in their squabbles while June is alive, but after her death, in the pivotal scene when the Wall falls, Jeremy's passion overtakes him and he absurdly attempts to act as marriage counselor to the widowed Bernard. The falling Wall also symbolizes Jeremy's personal walls falling, as he allows God consciousness to permeate him for the first time; he senses June's presence and believes she is there, and Jeremy finally allows his emotions some release when he chastises Bernard over the break up. As Jeremy's literal and figurative journey progresses to St. Maurice, in France, his emotional catharsis continues when he is given the opportunity to stand up for an abused child. Jeremy feels he vindicated his niece Sally in that moment, and is able to release his guilt and anger over the situation; he is certain that June's spirit helped arrange that chance encounter. Although as a narrator, Jeremy never states outright his growing confidence in the viewpoint represented by June, his actions in the last half of the book demonstrate his newly acquired faith.

June Tremaine

We are only allowed one visit with June before her early departure from life by way of leukemia. This is ironic because her marriage to Bernard was equally brief; she allowed him only a little time with her before she decamped from the marital home and went off by herself to meditate in the wilderness. Jeremy, who found his long-awaited mother at last in June, was only given a little time with her before she passed away. June's greatest, and probably only, crime in life was her absence from her own life. She may indeed have been the hard-liner Bernard made her out to be, because her search for spirituality was not something she felt she could accomplish in her free time at home; she gave up everything to pursue her spiritual quest with a single-mindedness of purpose that only hard-liners can muster. As challengingly stubborn as Bernard was, she was every bit his match; yin to his yang. A marriage of two extremists, both on opposite ends of the spectrum, was doomed to fail, she thought. Or was it? In her later years she began to realize that had she applied her theory of spiritual self-improvement to her own life, she and Bernard might have forged a healthy, happy medium in their

lives and the lives of their children. So ironically, although June represents spiritual enlightenment in the argument which forms the central core of the book, she is actually a poor example of her own theories. Towards the end, it seems she was realizing this, and for that reason pressed Jeremy to write her life's story, so that others might profit more directly from the theories she developed, but did not put into practice.

Bernard Tremaine

Bernard's skepticism is so ingrained and stubborn that one quickly grows tired of his constant efforts to spread cynicism through his clever but overworked sense of humor. He's the kind of guy that always one ups you; determined to have the last word, he allows no positive remark to pass unchallenged. The reader certainly understands how June could have grown weary of this never ceasing negativity. Bernard masks his emotions and stifles his personal growth by keeping his mind and body in a constant state of busyness. His motives are good; Bernard became a communist because he loved the ideal of creating a utopian society where all men and women were truly equal. He stubbornly ignored the horrifying news coming out of communist countries for ten years, until he finally had to concede that the grand experiment of social and economic revolution had failed. What irritated June is that Bernard never stepped back from his life of looking at the big picture to notice what was going on immediately around him. Bernard's inability to open up to life drove his wife away. His thoughts were always on a grand vision of the future, which prevented him from living in the present with his wife and children. Although June was the one to leave Bernard, she probably felt his absence long before she had physically left.

Bernard was also a caring, loving, passionate man, and June gave up on him way too quickly. Fundamentally, they both wanted the same thing: a better world for themselves, their children, and for every nation on earth. They simply believed in different ways of achieving the goal. June failed to understand that Bernard was capable of changing his mind, even if it took him a long time. He eventually gave up on communism, which due to his loyal nature more than anything, he stayed with for much longer than June. She had little sympathy with how hard it must have been for him to admit that ten years of his life had been wasted. By leaving him over his refusal to believe in God, June helped entrench him in that belief. If it was hard for Bernard to admit to being wrong about his politics, imagine how hard it would have been for him to admit that he had lost his wife over an argument in which she turned out to be right. Bernard refused to accept the message that June's spirit sent him at the Wall. He clung to his lack of faith, perhaps realizing that he was too frail to accept that he had been wrong about the most important decision of his life.

Jenny Tremaine

Jeremy's wife; June and Bernard's daughter. We do not learn a great deal about Jenny as the narrative focuses on her parents, but the narrator makes us aware of his deep

love for his wife, and she seems to be the cultured, interesting off-spring of cultured, interesting parents.

Mme. Auriac

The proprietress of the Hôtel de Tilleuls, in St. Maurice where June and Bernard stayed during their honeymoon. Years later, when Jeremy visits the hotel, her daughter, the second Mme. Auriac, is running the place and is able to recount for Jeremy the *Maire*'s story about the dogs.

The Maire of St. Maurice de Navacelles

The mayor of the French town of St. Maurice de Navacelles. In the Hôtel de Tilleuls, in St. Maurice, the honeymooning Tremaine's had sat at a table with the mayor and listened to his story about the black dogs.

Danielle Bertrand

The subject of the *Maire*'s story about the black dogs. It was Danielle who was raped by the Gestapo, and some say, by their dogs as well. Mme. Auriac defended Danielle's honor from these vicious rumors, but June, having encountered the dogs personally, was inclined to believe them.

The Berger

The French shepherd June and Bernard meet when they're lost on the path. Occurring on the day of her spiritual conversion, June allowed the shepherd to show them the way, both literally and symbolically. She purchased the property he offered her and turned it into her family home.

Objects/Places

The Dolmen de la Prunarède

An ancient burial ground in France which today sits in a lush, gorgeous landscape. A dolmen is a large slab of rock propped on two others to make a low table; they were once part of ancient tombs. This particular dolmen overlooks the site of June's spiritual conversion, and the land she subsequently purchased while on her honeymoon. Bernard would often visit June and the children's full time residence near the dolmen, and Jeremy has fine memories of them all picnicking there together.

The Bergerie

The property and home in France which June purchased on her honeymoon. Although Bernard didn't live there regularly, she made a beautiful home for their children on the property. Jenny and Jeremy inherit the *bergerie* after June's death and spend all of their holidays there as a family.

Sympetrum sanguineum

The species of dragonfly which prompted a fight between June and Bernard during their honeymoon. Having recently learned she was pregnant, June superstitiously believed that by killing the insect, Bernard would bring bad luck down upon their baby. When baby Jenny was born with six fingers on one hand, June used to say that she had as many fingers as an insect had legs.

The Hôtel des Tilleuls

The hotel where June and Bernard stopped for lunch after June's harrowing incident with the dogs. It was here they heard the story of the dog's Gestapo origins, and the rumor that they had been trained to sexually violate human women.

Themes

Good and Evil

The nature of good and evil has been the subject of literary exploration since the emergence of civilization on this planet. Prophets, poets, artists, and singers have explored every facet of this theme. Is mankind basically good? Are we basically evil? Or a third possibility, that we are a tabula rosa - a blank slate - waiting to be marked with our good or our evil deeds. Then the greater question arises: Do we cause good and evil, or are they independent forces which compete for our attention?

Many religious philosophers conclude that if evil exists, then good - in the form of God - must also exist. You can't have God without the Devil. Of course not all religions believe this, but it's a common belief, because throughout the sordid history of mankind, it has been far easier to cast our eyes upon the earth and find a concrete example of evil than it has been to find examples of miraculous good.

June subscribes to this theory, that if evil exists, so must God. The crux of her argument with Bernard comes down to whether the dogs represented some greater evil, or whether they were just plain dogs, cruelly used by their former masters and starving in the wilderness. June felt the presence of both good and evil that day, and although she believes the evidence of her senses, she cannot prove to Bernard that anything out of the range of normal human observation occurred on the path that day.

Rationalism vs. Spiritualism

This argument which June and Bernard have throughout their lives has surfaced periodically in the course of human events. For as long as humans have existed, we have demonstrated a deep curiosity about our environment. The search for meaning and fundamental truth in our world has led some to science and others to religion. In some, perhaps more enlightened, eras, science and religion were not believed to be mutually exclusive. Deep faith in God would seem to preclude the fear that science could actually disprove the existence of the divine. Many religious people, like June's character, do feel threatened by science, instead of having faith that science will ultimately lead to a better understanding of God.

Science itself is responsible for that religious fear, because many scientists hold sacred the atheistic principles represented by Bernard, and Bernard's disdain for all things spiritual is not an uncommon view for a scientific man of his generation. Modern science is a tradition of independent investigation into the inner workings of the world, with the intention of disproving religious superstitions with the truth — the truth being defined, in terms of science, as a rational, mechanical explanation for the workings of the Universe. In Bernard's World War II generation, the prevailing scientific theories centered on a

machine-like Universe. The rules of this theory did not allow for foolishness such as June's mystical experiences.

Ironically for June and Bernard, with the birth of modern physics, the scientific, "mechanical" nature of the world has proven to be just the tip of the iceberg. Physics and religion have merged to form the hybrid spirituality of metaphysics, which June Tremaine subscribes to. Many of her deeply held spiritual beliefs are today being supported by scientific breakthroughs. Had she and Bernard lived in a different era, they might not have seen their views on rationalism and spiritualism as being inherently conflicting.

Admitting Mistakes

Realizing a mistake can be both a blessing and a curse, as June realizes on her honeymoon when her joyous future with Bernard is threatened by her realization that their shared communist ideals are a mistake. What is a young bride to do? She still loves Bernard, but a moment of transcendent clarity shows her that she's headed down the wrong path. June opted to admit her mistake instantly, on the spot, and pay penance for it by sacrificing her marriage to pursue her new truth.

June threw the baby out with the bath water. She might just as easily have reacted to her insight with gratitude for having realized at such a young age, with her whole marriage stretching in front of her, the kind of life she hoped to create for her family. It never occurred to her to try to infuse her marriage with her new ideals. Had she more confidence in her new spiritual beliefs, or in Bernard's love, she might have realized her truth could be an important part of their future.

Bernard took the opposite tack, by stubbornly refusing to leave the communist party for quite a few years after he became convinced of its failure. Bernard may have had too much pride to admit his error. On the positive side, he may simply have been demonstrating persistence, which is a key quality in success. Where do we draw the line between persistence in our heartfelt endeavors, and cutting our losses on an apparent wrong turn? June's character is probably an exception to the rule; she cut and ran almost immediately. Human beings may be more apt to resemble Bernard in this respect, and therefore the reader can deeply empathize with his pain at realizing, too late, the error of his ways.

Style

Point of View

Ian McEwan employs several clever plot strategies to advance his story. The point of view is ostensibly through the eyes of Jeremy, both a main character and the narrator. Jeremy is writing a memoir about his fascinating in-laws, and the author uses this artifice to good effect, as Jeremy is able to reveal much of the story through his personal interviews and notes about the life of the Tremaines. McEwan is able to submerge us directly into the thoughts of June and Bernard Tremaine, not by switching to their point of view, but by having his narrator, Jeremy, plagued by their ghostly voices, which argue incessantly in his head just as the couple so often bickered in 'real life.'

The story is really a debate as to whose point of view - June's or Bernard's - is the correct one. Bernard is the rationalist, convinced that only social engineering can save the world. June renounced her once similar views to embrace spiritual enlightenment, which Bernard sneers at. In an artfully written Preface, McEwan, through Jeremy, offers us Jeremy's personal history, which has led him to be as skeptical as Bernard when the story begins. However Jeremy gradually adopts June's point of view, and in the end her spiritual beliefs become the overriding message of the novel.

Setting

Black Dogs ranges in setting from England, to France, and to Berlin. The distance between England and France symbolizes the distance in Bernard and June's marriage. The legendary fall of the Berlin Wall symbolizes the fall of communism, a setting which illuminates Bernard's atheistic way of life. In addition to spanning a continent, the novel also spans forty-three years of time and three generations of Tremaines, from Bernard and June's honeymoon in 1946 to the fall of the Wall in 1989.

Much of the action takes place in a pastoral setting, and all of the characters express a love for nature. It was the carefree bike rides along the Thames with her Socialist Cycling Club that convinced June to join the communist party. She cared nothing for politics; in her mind communism was inextricably linked with those sunny carefree days when she rode with her friends underneath the dappled shadows cast by leafy trees. Hiking across France is the romantic setting for her honeymoon in 1946, but here nature showed her its dark side in the form of the huge beasts for which the story is titled. Bernard saw the dark side as well, and he compared the grief spread over the country by the war to evil spores of creeping darkness. Light and dark permeate every nature scene the author creates, as best evidenced by the bright family picnics held on the dolmen — a stone table-like structure which was once an ancient tomb.

Language and Meaning

Ian McEwan's use of language is simultaneously gentle and powerful. He paints detailed pictures with spare prose that somehow reveals the very essence of human emotion. McEwan's novel is not dialogue driven or full of poetic description; instead, the meaning is conveyed through the stories told by its main characters. This hodge-podge collection of tales, told seemingly at random by the characters in the book, is converted skillfully by the author into one coherent narrative which ties together all the unrelated stories and memories.

The clarity of McEwan's prose marks him as a truly talented author. His words lull the reader along a gentle path of self-discovery as we recognize ourselves in his all too human protagonists. McEwan has the rare ability to capture the heart of a moment without resorting to excessive description or flowery prose. He gets right to the bottom line, but his prose is not so spare as to sacrifice the beauty of the written word. The power of his writing creeps up gradually on the reader. Lulled and lured in by McEwan's equanimical prose, only gradually does the reader realize that he's captivated us with his poignant drama about the struggles of human emotion.

Structure

Black Dogs is divided into four Parts, and preceded by a Preface which introduces the fictional narrator, Jeremy, and establishes the premise that the novel is a memoir about the narrator's in-laws. Although the book's structure meanders a bit as the narrator reminisces, each of the four Parts is centered on a particular event which dominates that section. The apocryphal story of the black dogs is mentioned in each section, but is not revealed until the end, and it serves as both the culmination to, and the resolution of, the four Parts of the narrative.

Part 1 details Jeremy's death bed visit with his mother-in-law. This visit concludes a series of informal interviews which our narrator has conducted with June Tremaine, his wife's mother. From their discussions, Jeremy has decided to write a memoir about June's life. She focuses her efforts on convincing him to use the story of the black dogs, which for June represents a pivotal turning point in her life, the day she became aware of God's existence, forever estranging her from her skeptical husband. Jeremy, a stubborn-minded skeptic just like his father-in-law, Bernard, resists her wish to include the story of the dogs in the memoir at first.

Part 2 advances two years, to present day 1989 and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The public destruction of this symbol of communism serves as an ideal launching point for Bernard to add to Jeremy's story by reminiscing about his past, when he and June were young communists and newlyweds. Part 3 picks up in present day (1989) St. Maurice de Navacelles with Jeremy revisiting, in the present, the site of Bernard's previous reminiscence. Part 4 transports the reader into the past, to 1946 St. Maurice de Navacelles, where the narrator finally reveals the story of the black dogs which changed the fate of the Tremaine family. By choosing to conclude the narrative with the black dog

story, the fictional narrator resolves the long-standing argument between June and Bernard by signifying his acceptance of June's version of events.

Quotes

"Jenny, my wife, June's daughter, suspects my predatory nature and is irritated by my fascination with her parents. She has spent long enough getting free of them and she is right to feel that my interest might be dragging her back." (Part 1, pg. 4)

"As I trod the bilious, swirling carpet, which continued out of the hall, under the wire mesh glass fire door, along the corridor to cover every available inch of public space, it came to me again how deeply I resented the fact that she was dying. I was *against* it, I could not accept it." (Part 1, pg. 9)

"'And then, everything changed. Within days of meeting Bernard my feelings were ...well, I thought I was going to explode. I wanted him, Jeremy. It was like a pain. I didn't want a wedding or a kitchen, I wanted this man. I had lurid fantasies about him. I couldn't talk to my girlfriends honestly. They would have been shocked.'" (Part 1, pg. 32)

"'In the twenties and thirties respectable families were locking their pregnant daughters away in mental institutions. Unmarried mothers were marched through the streets, humiliated by the organizations that were supposed to be looking after them. Girls killed themselves trying to abort. It looks like madness now, but it those days a pregnant girl was likely to feel that everyone was right and that *she* was mad and deserved everything she got.'" (Part 1, pg. 33)

"'One thing I learned that morning after the dolmen was that I had courage, physical courage, and that I could stand alone. That's a significant discovery for a woman, or it was in my day. Perhaps it was a fateful discovery too, a disastrous one. I'm not so sure now I *should* have stood alone.'" (Part 1, pg. 35)

"But for a while I couldn't stop thinking that if the world by some impossible chance really was as she made it out to be, then she was bound to try and get in touch to tell me that I was wrong and she was right-that there was a God, eternal life, a place where consciousness went. All that guff." (Part 2, pg. 61)

"'Listen, Bernard, what she told me was not more intimate than your story of your row at the station. If you want to know, its main feature was what a bold step it was for a young girl in those days, proving just how attracted to you she was. And in fact, you came out of it rather well. It seemed you were, well, extremely good at that sort of thing-*genius* was the word she used.'" (Part 2, pp. 62-63)

"'For God's sake, forget about sex. Here's your subject-how people like June bend the facts to fit their ideas instead of the other way round. Why do people do that? Why do they go on doing it?'" (Part 2, pg. 64

"'But you stayed in the party ten years. You must have bent an awful lot of facts yourself to manage that.'

I wanted to stir him out of his self-satisfied calm. But he shrugged his high shoulders and hunched deeper into his coat and said, 'Of Course.'" (Part 2, pg. 65)

"'But you know, I was the one who told her about Churchill's black dog. You remember? The name he gave to the depressions he used to get from time to time.'" (Part 3, pg. 82)

"'The Germans did their work for them. Even when there are no Jews left, they still hate them,' Jenny said.

Suddenly I remembered. 'What was it you said about dogs?'

'Black dogs. It's a family phrase, from my mother.'" (Part 3, pg. 89)

"'Monsieur, to hit a child in this way is disgusting. You are an animal, an animal, monsieur. Are you frightened of fighting someone your own size, because I would love to smash my jaw.'

This ridiculous slip of the tongue caused the man to relax. He smiled up at me as he pushed his chair back from the table." (Part 3, pg. 107)

"In size they resembled mythical beasts. The suddenness of them, the anomaly, prompted the thought of a message in dumb show, an allegory for her decipherment alone. She had a confusing thought of something medieval, of a tableau both formal and terrifying. At this distance the animals appeared to be grazing quietly. They emanated meaning. She felt weak and sick in her fear." (Part 4, pg. 120)

"She dared not run. She shouted Bernard's name once, twice, three times. Her voice sounded thin in the sunny air. It caused the dogs to come faster, almost at a trot. She must not show her fear. But they would smell it on her. She must not feel her fear, then." (Part 4, pg. 123)

"'And when this terrible thing happened to her, did you help her against the Gestapo? No, you took their side. You added to her shame with this story, this evil story. All of you, so willing to believe a couple of drunks. It gave you so much pleasure. More humiliation for Danielle. You couldn't stop talking about it. You drove that poor woman out of the village. But she was worth more than the lot of you, and the shame is on you, all of you, but especially you, Hector, with your position. And this is why I am telling you now, I never want to hear this disgusting story spoken of again. Do you understand? Never again!'" (Part 4, pg. 137)

"'This is what I know. Human nature, the human heart, the spirit, the soul, consciousness itself-call it what you like-in the end, it's all we've got to work with. It has to develop and expand, or the sum of our misery will never diminish. My own small discovery has been that this change is possible, it is within our power.'" (Part 4, pg. 147)

Topics for Discussion

Given what the narrator tells you about himself, why do you suppose he was interested in writing the story of June and Bernard Tremaine?

Discuss the similarities between June and Bernard's seemingly disparate methods of achieving utopia.

Cite two examples of symbolism in the novel, and discuss what you think the author intended to convey with these symbols.

Do you believe Jeremy helped or hurt the Tremaine family by writing such a personal memoir? Why?

Do you believe science and spirituality are incompatible? Why or why not?

Describe June's experience with the black dogs from Bernard's point of view. When you have completed the assignment, review Bernard's arguments and indicate whether they ring true.

Do you think the story would have turned out the same if June had made more of an effort to include Bernard in her experience initially, instead of assuming he would not understand? Why or why not?