The Chatham School Affair Short Guide

The Chatham School Affair by Thomas H. Cook

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Overview

The Chatham School Affair is a suspense novel detailing a crime of passion that takes place amid the rigid environment of an elite New England boys' school. Told from the perspective of Henry, who at the time of the crime was a young student at Chatham School, Cook uses death and intrigue to create a tale that combines the pain and yearning of coming of age with the pain and yearning of forbidden love. The dismal, disciplined setting of Chatham School and the proper Cape Cod community set the stage for conflict as Cook contrasts the drab with the vibrant, the indifferent with the passionate. Henry has a romantic imagination, and he longs for unknown worlds, complete with unrestrained passions and unknown dangers. Then Miss Charming, a lovely young teacher, enters Henry's life and gives him glimpses of the world he desires. Miss Charming begins an illicit affair with another new teacher, and their romance fuels Henry's dreams with passion he has never known. Henry, himself searching for intensity in life, immerses himself in their romance and finds himself playing out their passions in a deadly game.

Suspense builds as to the true nature of the crime, as Cook unravels his plot and Henry tells his story. The novel provides insight into the true nature of passion, as Henry, a man in his seventies when he narrates the story, looks back on the year that shaped his life, molded his thoughts, and changed his perceptions of life and love forever.

About the Author

Thomas H. Cook was born on September 19th, 1947, in Fort Payne, Alabama. He received a bachelor's degree from Georgia State College, a master's degree from Columbia University, and then enjoyed a career as an English teacher and book review editor before becoming a full-time writer in 1981.

Today Cook writes his highly acclaimed mystery novels from his apartment in New York City and his house on Cape Cod.

Cook has had a passion for writing since childhood and claims to have begun his first novel when he was just eight years old.

He came from a home with no readers and no books, yet his urge to write never waned, but only grew stronger as he grew older.

Impassioned by family ties and the emotions and conflicts they ignite, Cook unravels mysteries that dig deep into the nature of relationships and the human condition.

He sets his novels in small communities, and he uses his keen observations about people to create compelling characters and seductive plots. Cook has written fifteen novels to date, and two books on true crime, and he has become recognized as one of the mystery genre's most successful authors.

Three of his books received nominations for the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America, including The Chatham School Affair, which won the Edgar for best mystery novel in 1997.

Setting

The novel setting is Cape Cod in the 1920s, at the Chatham School, an academy for rebellious boys situated on the Atlantic seacoast and around the waters of Black Pond. The dismal New England community sets the stage for contrasting the cold with the passionate, as Henry himself contrasts his life with that of the exotic Miss Charming and the hot passions that arise when both she and Mr. Reed arrive at the school. Henry's life seems bleak, like gray New England, and Miss Channing seems clearly out of place there. Henry likens the landscape to the windswept moors of Wuthering Heights, shrouded in fog and grayness, and so in contrast to the hot passions of Catherine and Heathcliff that smolder on the moors, even after death. Black Pond, the cold, gray climate, and the rigid structure of Chatham School and the small community all define the image Cook creates to convey Henry's stifled longings.

Henry describes the Cape as tormented, "like a martyr," and Henry, Mr. Reed, and Miss Channing sail the Cape waters, as if riding the waves of discontent while sustaining unbridled passions in their hearts.

Social Sensitivity

Crimes of passion occur all too frequently in today's society, and they carry less severe punishments than premeditated crimes.

Cook hints early on that the crime that occurred on Black Pond was premeditated, yet we come to find out that the true crime was a crime of passion. Given Henry's feelings about his involvement in the Chatham School affair and the deaths of innocent people that occurred, Cook's plot fuels discussion for which, if either, crime is more devastating. Furthermore, what is the true punishment for any crime that involves the death of innocents? Could Henry's punishment be any greater than the guilt he inflicts on himself and the loss of passion for life he suffers as a result? We sympathize with Henry, and we understand his longing for passion. But does this justify what he did?

No one knows the true nature of the crime except Henry himself, and he considers himself a murderer. If the people of Chatham knew that Henry neglected to save Abigail Reed underneath the waters of Black Pond that day, would society forgive him?

Would he be exonerated legally? Probably not. Henry escapes legal incarceration, yet he lives in the private prison of his mind.

He will be forever tormented by his involvement in the Chatham School affair.

Moral punishment often weighs much heavier on the human mind than does legal punishment. Henry admires Miss Channing and Mr. Reed, even adores them for "living life on the edge of folly." Yet by engaging in adultery, they break an established moral code of society. Are Miss Channing and Mr. Reed good role models for Henry? This is clearly a question of ethics.

Should individuals be true to their own passions or should they abide by set moral codes of the times? Cook is a master at making time and place integral to his plot.

In 1920s New England, Miss Charnning is tried and convicted of adultery. Would this occur in society today? If the deaths had not occurred on Black Pond as a result, would Miss Charming still have been prosecuted for adultery?

Miss Charming was tried by those dedicated to maintaining order and discipline and to preserving the morals of their community. What would the ramifications of the crime have been had it occurred today in a large city? Would the conspiracy to commit murder charge have been justified, or simply dismissed as an accident and a suicide? True to Cook's style, he clearly relies on time and place to advance the plot of The Chatham School Affair. The 1920s view of morality and the close knit community and rigidity of the boys' school make the accusations against the lovers credible.

Literary Qualities

The Chatham School Affair is a suspense novel, and Cook is a master at building suspense. He reveals the true nature of the crime in the final chapter, and the punch is unexpected and poignant. The reader believes early on that it must have been a crime of passion committed by Miss Channing and Leland Reed, and that Abigail and Mary Reed, Leland's wife and daughter, were the likely victims. But this is not so, and Henry's role remains unclear until the end of the novel. It is significant that Henry is the narrator and that the story unravels only through Henry's eyes. This is a coming-of-age novel as well as a tale of suspense, and because Henry, in his seventies, has had the time to work through what happened, he is now able to relive it. The reader, therefore, only sees the characters as Henry sees them, and only understands their longings and their motives as Henry himself realizes them. The characters become alive as Henry gives them life. His mother, father, Abigail and Mary Reed seemed lifeless when Henry believed them to be so, but they gained substance as Henry gained understanding of them.

Cook unravels the plot through a clever use of contrast, using nature imagery to convey Henry's thoughts and to portray the dismal prison he makes of his life. He uses imagery from Chatham to describe Henry's passionless existence, and he uses imagery from Miss Channing's travels to describe the exploding emotions Henry hopes to experience. Using analogy to drive his theme, Cook has Miss Charming relate her memories of Mount Etna. The force of a volcanic eruption is awe-inspiring and frightening but what Miss Channing remembers are the flowers. "What I remember best about Mount Etna is that there were flowers everywhere," she tells Henry. "On the slope and in the valley. So many of them that even near the rim, where I could see smoke and steam rising from the crater itself, even at that point, where everything else was so desolate, I could still smell the flowers down below. Flowers ground from ash," she explains. The beauty of the phenomena is what captivated Miss Channing about Mount Etna, but what captivated her father was its violence and power, and "how indifferent [it was] to everything but itself."

Clearly Henry's captivation with Miss Channing's dangerous love closely parallels Miss Channing's captivation with the erupting volcano. Even during the trial, after the terrible tragedy, Henry continues to view the Chatham School affair as a love story. He remains captivated by the passion he sees in Miss Channing, and sees only the beauty of their romance, not the violence.

Like all powerful displays of nature, the volcano embodies both allure and danger.

It emits dazzling sparks and flames, can breed flowers from ash; but then it erupts, like the exploding passions Henry had no way to control. It is only later, when Henry is an old man and can see the events of the Chatham School affair clearly that he himself equates the tragedy to Mount Etna. It is then that he views the affair as "something that flowered briefly, gave off an exquisite sweetness, then, in a harrowing instant, turned everything to ash."

Nature can be a powerful metaphor for the duality of good and evil. The Cape waters too are both alluring and dangerous, as water itself has the ability to cleanse and purify yet can obliterate and drown everything in existence. Cook uses the waters surrounding Chatham much like he used the volcano. Allure and danger, good and evil, and passion and boredom exist side by side, even in Cape Cod. This, Cook appears to be saying, defines the human condition.

Henry comes to these realizations as a man, but as a young boy in the midst of adolescent turmoil, he lives a hopelessly romantic existence. He has little understanding of human nature, but reduces the people in his world to romantic characters he knows from books. Cook conveys this romanticism though Henry's literary analogies. Henry describes Miss Charnning and Mr. Reed as "modern day versions of Catherine and Heathcliff," the lovers of Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, whose passion was so strong it transcended death. He compares the snowy hilltops and the wintry waters of Chatham to the windswept moor of Bronte's novel, the place where Catherine and Heathcliff took refuge from the world and found solace in each other's embrace. Taking characters from literature and myth reveals Henry's naivete and clarifies his idealistic view of the world and of the relationship between Miss Charnning and Mr. Reed. Comparing them to Catherine and Heathcliff solidified his belief that by deciphering the nature of the affair, he could discover the key to legendary love.

Henry continues to compare Miss Channing to legendary heroines throughout the novel. He compares her to Madame Bovary and Eustacia Vye, who find passion in adultery. He also compares Miss Charming to the tragic Medea of Greek myth, and to "Proud Hypatia . . . determined . . . to hold back her cry." It is obvious that Henry views Miss Channing's love as both tragic and intoxicating, and that he invests her passion with power. When Miss Channing was accused of conspiracy to commit murder, Henry says that at the time, he wanted Miss Channing to "take the people of Chatham on like Hypatia had taken on the mobs of Alexandria." Later on, when he realizes how Abigail Reed must have suffered, he equates her with mythic figures; "Iseult beneath her billowing white sail, or Guenevere waiting heroically to be burned alive." These literary analogies not only expose Henry's romanticism, but they foreshadow the disaster to come. It is obvious that Henry finds danger attractive. But like the volcano, not until it erupts does the tragedy of such emotion become painfully clear.

"Life is best lived at the edge of folly."

Henry becomes exhilarated when he reads that sentence from Mr. Channing's book.

Yet years later, as Henry reflects on the Chatham School affair, Henry comes to think of that phrase as the deadliest lie he ever heard. When Miss Channing first arrived at Chatham, Henry says that she "stared out at the landscape of Cape Cod [and] pronounced it a world of stricken martyrs."

Henry considers himself a stricken martyr.

After he realizes the disastrous consequences that came from living at the edge of folly, he knows he could never trust himself, and that he will be forever imprisoned not by boredom, but by passion itself. "It finally seemed to me that we were not created in God's image at all," he says, "but in the image of Tantalus instead, the thing we desire most forever dancing before our eyes, and yet forever beyond our grasp." The murder of passion becomes the central irony of The Chatham School Affair. Henry's life during the year of the incident revolves around his search for passion, yet after the incident, his life becomes devoid of it. Speaking of Abigail Reed, Miss Charnning asks Henry, "Is she dead?" and Henry reveals to the reader that his answer "came already frozen in that passionlessness that would mark me from then on."

Themes and Characters

Each character in the book has some connection to Chatham School, and each of them plays a crucial role in the Chatham School affair. Because the story is told from Henry's point of view, we understand the characters' dreams and motives as Henry himself learns to understand them. From the time the crime occurred to the time Henry tells his tale, he had decades to dissect the events, comprehend the disaster, and evaluate his role in the murders. As Henry reveals the nature of the crime and how it molded his perspectives on human nature, we gradually understand the intricacies of the plot and everyone involved.

At the time of the Chatham School affair, Henry Griswald, the narrator, is a young student at the academy, the son of the headmaster Arthur Griswald. Henry is restless, bored, and struggling to break free of the bonds that tie him to a dull and rigid life.

Henry feels trapped in the staid conventions of his small town and of the academy, and he feels doomed to follow the path of his father, whom Henry believes to be cold and joyless. Arthur Griswald seems content with his life, but Henry has unquenchable desires. Cook takes us on Henry's journey as Henry himself recounts the events that happened so long ago. In recounting these events, Henry reveals the truths he discovered about passion and human nature as he struggled to find a place between ecstasy and despair.

Because Henry so longs for passion and excitement in his life, he tunes in to the passion and excitement he sees around him.

When a beautiful young woman comes to Chatham School and takes a position as art teacher, her worldliness captivates him. Miss Charming comes from a different world from the one Henry has always known. She has traveled extensively and has had what Henry considered to be exotic experiences.

In relating those experiences to Henry, she makes him painfully aware that he must transcend his provincial life or he will never have the life he desires.

Henry has an intense attraction to Miss Charming. It seems at first that he is in love with her and that he might become the object of her affections. Then Leland Reed enters the picture, an attractive 28-year-old war veteran with a wife and young daughter. Leland Reed also comes to Chatham School as a teacher, and it is he who becomes involved with Miss Channing. Henry becomes captivated by their romance. He devours their passion as proof that passion exists. Henry is not in love with Miss Channing as he believes Leland Reed is, but he is in love with what she represents. He is aware of the chemistry between Miss Channing and Mr. Reed from the beginning, and he finds it intoxicating.

Early on in the novel, Henry reads a travelogue written by Miss Channing's father, and he seizes upon several passages that move him to define his condition and perceive

what he wants out of life. The phrase that particularly moves Henry is that "life is best lived at the edge of folly."

This is exactly the type of living that attracts Henry to Miss Channing and to the relationship she shares with Mr. Reed. Henry eventually joins them in what he considers to be a "desperate and wildly romantic conspiracy," exhilarated by the notion of their illicit love affair. He sees this living "at the edge of folly" as proof that life itself can be exhilarating, and that passion can be achieved after all.

The relationship that ensues between Elizabeth Charming and Leland Reed is revealed to us only as Henry perceives it.

We first see their bond through the eyes of a hungry adolescent searching for meaning, and we therefore know their love to be tortured and tormented, full of longing and full of pain. In reality, the relationship between Miss Channing and Leland Reed could never be as all-consuming as it is in Henry's mind, because he injects it with all the fire and fury he so desires for himself.

Henry immerses himself in their affair. Not only does he cultivate a friendship with Miss Channing, but he cultivates one with Mr. Reed, who Henry comes to view as a surrogate father. This adult male, Henry believes, is so much more knowing and alive than his own father, and Henry identifies with his restlessness. Henry works for Mr. Reed, helping him build a boat, which in Henry's mind will be a means for Mr. Reed to escape with Miss Channing to a freer, unrestrained world. Henry longs to perpetuate the passion of the lovers, to free them from the stifling bonds that tie them to Chatham School and keep them from enjoying unbridled love.

During this one fateful year, Henry's thoughts revolve around Miss Charnning and the relationship she has with Mr. Reed.

The boy is searching for answers to life's toughest questions, and he longs to discover what hidden dynamics exist in relationships between men and women. Henry lives a sheltered existence at Chatham School, and he sees nothing dynamic about the relationship between his mother and father, nor about the relationship between Mr. Reed and his wife, Abigail. These women seem as passionless and apathetic as his father, who Henry sees only as a stern and pathetically dull headmaster of a lifeless institution. So what is passion? Henry wants to know. He wants to explore its depths, and he seizes the opportunity to do so when Miss Charnning and Leland Reed enter the picture. Henry's relationship with these characters develops during the course of the book because he finds kinship with both of them. Henry finds kinship with Miss Charnning because she represents the exotic world he so desires. He finds kinship with Mr. Reed because Henry recognizes in the schoolteacher the same discontent he knows in himself. Henry considers both himself and Mr. Reed "lost in separate but related fantasies, his focused on Miss Channing, [Henry's] upon a liberated life, both of [them] oblivious of what might happen should [their] romantic dreams converge."

Disaster is eventually what happens; Henry's passions and dreams are simply too intense. But however intense the love between Miss Channing and Mr. Reed, Henry injects it with the impossibly romantic dreams of an adolescent fantasizing of a world beyond reach. This knowledge gives the reader a sense early on that Henry plays a crucial role in the disaster. Both Mr. Reed and Henry long to be liberated, and Miss Channing dangles that possibility before them. She embodies the contradictory notions of allure and danger, both notions so foreign to Henry and so intoxicating, that disaster of some sort is inevitable.

Through Henry, Cook unravels the disaster that did occur little by little, teasing the reader until he finally delivers his surprise ending. Throughout the novel Cook refers to the murders and the death, but he only hints of their true nature. We know that multiple deaths occurred on Black Pond, and that Miss Channing had something to do with it. She could not help but have something to do with it, as Henry sees her as a tragic seductress, like Flaubert's Madame Bovary, "wild and passionately driven, capable of lethal wantonness." He even says that he finds Miss Channing "most alluring when poised at the edge of murder."

Throughout the novel Cook continues to build suspense as to the true nature of this murder, leaving Henry to decipher his role in the crime himself. The chapters roll on in suspense as Henry tries to understand the extent of Miss Channing and Mr. Reed's passions, to devour it, and to wonder how far the passions can go before they explode.

Cook builds the tension slowly, and Henry finally loses control. He projects his heartfelt desires on the couple who so captivate him, and in doing so he sets forth a series of disasters that destroys innocent lives and that changes his own life forever.

Henry overhears several intimate and disturbing conversations between Miss Channing and Mr. Reed, and believes them to be plotting murder against Abigail Reed and Mary, Leland's wife and daughter. He imagines the arsenic, the rope, and the knife he finds in Mr. Reed's boat as murder weapons, and he imagines the boat itself as an escape vehicle. Caught up in the emotion of forbidden love, Henry comes to believe that to be true to his own desires, he has a role to play in preserving this love. Miss Charming and Mr. Reed could never do what they needed to do without killing their passion.

So Henry sees no choice but to take it upon himself to deliver them from their prison.

This was a revelation for Henry, albeit a misguided one, because he never knew precisely what purpose he had in the relationship between Miss Charming and Mr. Reed before then. He knew only that his own desire to break free and to experience passion made it impossible for him to separate himself from these lovers. He knew that they too were imprisoned—imprisoned by Chatham School, imprisoned by Mr. Reed's wife and daughter, and imprisoned by their own tortured love; and that he believed at that time in his life and with all his being, that that kind of imprisonment was death.

Unable to disengage himself from Miss Channing and Mr. Reed's discontent, Henry takes a critical step. He goes to Mrs. Reed and tells her to release them, to set the

lovers free and allow her husband to live with his true love. Henry's bold act sets disaster in motion. A terrible accident occurs. Shortly after Henry speaks with Mrs. Reed, he and Sarah Doyle, the young servant girl and Henry's friend, visit Miss Channing outside her cottage at Black Pond.

As they stand by the waters, Mrs. Reed, agitated and out of control, comes barreling over to them in a car, presumably intending to hit Miss Channing, but hitting Sarah Doyle instead. The car careens into the waters with Abigail Reed inside it, and disappears. Henry dives into the water to save the woman, but emerges alone, seemingly unsuccessful. Abigail Reed dies in the water, and Sarah Doyle is transferred to a clinic where she dies as well.

It appears that two deaths occurred on Black Pond that day, two innocent victims of a twisted and tortured passion. But a few days after the illicit lovers are accused of murder, and Mr. Parsons, the commonwealth attorney, takes Leland's daughter, Mary, into custody for protection, yet another death occurs. Leland can withstand his torture no longer. Leland's boat is found floating in the water with a suicide note inside it. Leland Reed took his own life in the waters of Black Pond.

It seems after the initial description of the deaths, that no murder occurred at Black Pond at all. There was an accident and a suicide, but no murder. Yet Henry, as narrator, continues to call it murder, as he has throughout the book. Cook indicates throughout the novel that Miss Channing is responsible, certainly the townspeople believe she is. But it becomes clear that Henry considers himself the murderer. He talked to Mrs. Reed and caused to her to take that crucial step. He even helped build the boat that facilitated Mr. Reed's taking his own life.

The state and the community, however, hold Miss Channing responsible for the deaths. They hold her up as a Hester Prynne, a wanton seductress and an adulterer, as well as a murderer. Elizabeth Channing is indicted and tried on two counts; conspiracy to commit murder, and adultery.

During the trial that ensues, Henry begins to realize that his own passionate attachment to Miss Channing and Mr. Reed caused events to spin hopelessly out of control. Miss Channing reveals that Mr. Reed did not in fact want to be rid of his wife and daughter, as Henry surmised, but of her. She reveals that he told her one night in the boathouse that he wished she were dead, not his wife, and in fact, this was the very scene that Henry witnessed and that drove him to say what he did to Mrs. Reed.

Henry's romanticizing led him to make false assumptions, and in spite of the tragedy that occurred, Henry continues to view the ordeal as more of a love story than anything else. He tells his mother, after she testifies, that it is the love story that attracts everyone to the Chatham School affair, and this infuriates Henry's mother. Henry, still captivated by the passion he sees in Miss Channing, is unable to see beyond the beauty of her walking on the beach with her lover, or sailing in the boat with him. He continues to hold the life and love of Miss Channing and Mr. Reed on a pedestal of hope and desire, and for a while still, he continues to relegate his mother, father, and Mrs. Reed to dull,

lifeless existences, deeming them unfeeling and incapable of understanding true emotion.

Then something happens at the trial to shake Henry's reserve. Miss Channing denies her affair with Mr. Reed and lies on the witness stand. Henry is shaken, left, he said, to "swing from the gallows of his own conscience." In denying her passion, Miss Channing left Henry to bear the brunt of the crime, at least in his mind. It was he who had put himself on the line and told Mrs. Reed to set them free. It was he who remained true to passion. He, in essence, was the murderer. At this point, infuriated by Miss Channing's denials, Henry begins to identify with Mrs. Reed. She too had given her love and devotion, and she too received lies and deception in return. Henry begins to hate Miss Channing, and he begins to want to see her crucified. "That woman should be hanged," Henry's mother had said. Feeling abandoned by Miss Channing and left to wallow in his guilt, Henry begins to agree with his mother. But then Miss Channing clarifies her position. She says that though the relationship she shared with Leland Reed never went beyond "acceptable contact," she did love him deeply, and that she did not consider the feelings of his wife Abigail or his daughter Mary. This response "lifted [Henry] like a wild wind."

He has not been wrong about their passion after all, and this relieves him. Miss Channing is found not guilty of the conspiracy charge but guilty of adultery. She is sentenced to three years imprisonment and is shuffled off to Hardwick Women's Prison.

Except for one last visit years later, Miss Channing disappears from Henry's life at that point. She leaves him physically, but her presence remained, for clearly Miss Channing is the impetus for Henry's growth.

Through Henry's eyes and throughout the novel, Cook paints Miss Channing in sharp contrast to the other women in Henry's world. Mildred Griswald, Henry's mother, appears stiff and unaffected. So too does Mrs. Reed, Leland's wife and Mildred's own childhood friend and neighbor. Until the end of the novel, Henry sees both of them locked in loveless marriages, but both of them content to remain where they are, unaffected by the kind of passion that overwhelms and overrides reason.

After the trial, and after Henry and his father pay a visit to an ailing Miss Channing in prison several years later, an interesting twist occurs. Arthur Griswald reveals to Henry that Miss Channing had in fact been intimate with Leland Reed, and that she had shared her secret with him years before. Truly, it was Miss Channing who revealed to Henry the nature of passion. She exposed her own passionate nature, but ironically, she also exposed the passions of Henry's father. Miss Channing shared her most intimate longings with Arthur Griswald, and on several occasions, Henry witnessed his father sympathizing with Miss Channing, and exhibiting shows of feeling for her fate. In identifying with Arthur, Miss Channing enables Henry to finally identify with him, and to finally inject the man he once considered staid and passionless with life. After Henry learns of Miss Channing's connection with his father, she dies alone in prison. Henry, at this point, has learned to recognize the restlessness in everyone, and he has come to

realize, in Cook's words, that "our lives cannot accommodate the very passions they inspire."

Reminiscing about the year of the Chatham School affair as a man in his seventies, Henry takes us on the same journey he himself had to take to come to terms with the crime. It is not until after Miss Channing dies and after Henry grows up that we learn the true nature of the crime. That day on Black Pond, after Henry had spoken to Mrs. Reed and after she hit Sarah Doyle and went barreling into the waters, Henry continued to feel a fervent desire to protect the passion of Miss Channing and her lover.

Henry dove under the water, but then let Abigail Reed die in her car. With frantic, searching eyes, Abigail pleaded with him to open the car door. He witnessed her panic underneath the water. In unraveling this scene, Cook delivers his clincher. Henry, overcome with his own emotion, did not try to save Abigail Reed at all, but rather held the car door tightly shut and watched her drown. This, he believed, is what Miss Channing and Mr. Reed wanted. Henry was the murderer, in his heart and in his mind, and because of that, he doomed himself to the very imprisoned, passionless life he so desired to leave behind.

The "murder" that occurred on Black Pond that day was not simply the death of living beings, but the death of passion and the death of innocence. This is foreshadowed when Mr. Reed uses a phrase taken from William Blake. " Sooner murder an infant in its bed than nurse unacted desire."

Sarah Doyle, Abigail Reed, and young Mary Reed, Leland's daughter, all play the part of the sleeping infant—and Henry murders them all. Mary Reed does not die physically, but she dies emotionally. Innocence dies on Black Pond that day, and all for the sake of passions spun out of control.

Ironically, after all was said and done and Henry has come to terms with his feelings, the people who became enlivened in Henry's mind were the ones who once seemed to him so passionless and lifeless— particularly Henry's own father. For this reason Henry can finally identify with Alice Craddock, nee Mary Reed, Leland and Abigail's daughter, when he meets with her in the last chapter of the book. Mary Reed appears to play a peripheral role in The Chatham School Affair, yet like Sarah Doyle, her character gains importance after the deaths. Early on in the novel Cook mentions Alice Craddock, and he identifies her as a fat, friendless old woman who is generally considered weird. It is not until the last chapter that we learn her true identity.

Cook chooses Henry's meeting with Alice to allow Henry to reveal his understanding of the crime. That year at Chatham School, he could never have understood her, nor could he have understood how to balance dreams with realities. "Why don't they just run away together," Henry asked Sarah Doyle at the time. "Why are they such cowards?" Cook appears to be a master at opening windows to human nature. Henry, in old age, realizes that there could never be an answer to those questions. "For we have never discovered why," he reflects, "given the brevity of life and the depth of our need and the force of our passions, we do not pursue our own individual happiness with an annihilating zeal,

throwing all else to the wind. We know only that we don't, and that all our goodness, our only claim to glory, resides in this inexplicable devotion to things other than ourselves."

Topics for Discussion

1. What is it that attracts people to danger? Is danger simply an extreme form of passion? Think about this in relation to the dangers that developed from Henry's strong desires.

2. Discuss the differences between crimes of passion and premeditated crimes. Is Miss Charming guilty of either crime?

Is Henry? Why or why not?

3. What role did Sarah Doyle play in the novel? What role did Mary Reed (Alice Craddock) play?

4. How well do we know the characters' true natures? Do we understand them better at the end of the novel than we did at the beginning, and if so, why?

5. Discuss the opinions the people of Chatham had of Miss Charnning when she first arrived. Why do you suppose they felt as they did?

6. Why does Mildred Griswald want to see Miss Charnning hanged?

7. Discuss the ways Henry identifies with Leland Reed and how he identifies with Miss Charming.

8. Discuss Cook's uses of nature imagery to reveal how Henry feels about his life.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Some reviewers have said that Cook is a master at characterization, and other reviewers have said that the characters in Cook's novels are often underdeveloped. Write a character analysis of one character from the book and discuss how Cook develops that character.

2. Discuss how Cook uses characterization to reveal basic truths about the human condition. Consider whether you feel more sympathetic toward Henry and Miss Charming, or toward Abigail Reed and Sarah Doyle.

3. Rewrite the ending of the story, beginning with the deaths, as if the Chatham School affair occurred today. Would the outcome change based on whether it occurred in a small town or a large city?

4. Write a persuasive paper to answer the question of whether we should follow our hearts, even if our heart's desires go against established moral codes. What would be the ramifications if we did?

5. Cook uses the analogy of an erupting volcano to illustrate the duality of strength and passion. Choose some other natural phenomenon and use it to compare and contrast allure and danger. How does the dual nature of the phenomenon relate to the dual nature of passion?

6. Pick one of the literary characters Henry compares to Miss Charming and discuss the similarities and differences between them.

7. Compare and contrast Henry's relationship with his father with Henry's relationship with Mr. Reed.

8. Discuss the dangers of strong emotions and the ways people learn to balance such emotion with moral conscience.

For Further Reference

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