

The Cement Garden Study Guide

The Cement Garden by Ian McEwan

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Plot Summary

The Cement Garden is the story of a mother and father's death and the children's dysfunctional attempts to cope with their loss. The story begins with Father, Mother, and their four children, Julie, Jack, Sue and little Tom living together. Things are well, for the most part, although Jack, the narrator, is somewhat isolated from the rest of his family, feeling distant from his father and fighting with his mother and Julie, along with harassing Tom for attention from the others.

When Father dies, Mother and the children are left alone. The family is already isolated from the rest of the community; they have few friends and no one visits the house. Mother grows sick and only the children know. She tells Julie she is going to die but the two of them hide it from Jack, Sue and Tom until it is too late for her to tell them. Jack and Julie must now take care of the family and prevent the authorities from splitting them up.

Jack and Julie decide that they cannot have a public funeral or bury Mother outside, as either would invite suspicion so Jack gets the idea to bury Mother in a trunk and fill it with cement so that no one will ever know. Julie agrees and they follow through with the plan. These events comprise the first five chapters, Part I of the book.

Part II is the story of the dysfunctional relationships and coping mechanisms the children use to deal with their problems. Tom reverts to acting like a baby after a brief stint wanting to be a girl. He acts this way to become as dependent as possible on Julie and attract all of the attention he can from her. Sue journals and reads obsessively while developing the same close emotional friendship with Julie that Julie had with Mother. Jack acts out, takes poor care of himself hygienically and becomes increasingly emotionally isolated. His attraction to Julie increases and he finds himself jealous of the other emotional bonds in the family.

Julie, however, appears the most dysfunctional. She develops a strange romantic relationship with a man much older than she is, Derek. She will not let Derek touch her but loves spending time with him and she will not connect with him emotionally or tell him about Mother. Jack is intimidated by Derek and dislikes him and Julie and Jack have conflicts about it.

However, it later becomes clear as Derek starts to poke around the house and ask probing questions about the cellar and the trunk that Julie is not as interested in him as she appears. Instead, she reciprocates Jack's attraction to her. The book climaxes as she becomes sexually intimate with Jack. When Derek walks in he is horrified and runs down to the basement to break open the concrete hiding Mother. Then he reports the family to the authorities. As the authorities arrive, Jack, Julie, Sue and Tom are all sitting on the bed, talking, for the first time, about their fond memories of Mother. Only on the last page does the dysfunction begin to end and the real grieving process begins.



Chapter One

Chapter One Summary

The narrator, Jack, opens by claiming that while he did not kill his father, he fears that he helped him to die. Yet his death was insignificant in comparison to what lay ahead.

When Jack is fourteen two men visit Jack's family's home to deliver cement. His father has them bring the cement packs into the cellar and Jack's father records information on his clipboard. Jack does not know what the cement is for. His parents argue about the cement that night; his mother, typically quiet, is angry. She wants his father to return the cement. He refuses to engage her.

Jack and his two sisters, Sue and Julie, go to Julie's bedroom; Julie and Jack strip Sue of her clothes and begin to examine her naked body like doctors. Then Julie suggests it is Jack's turn, but he refuses and locks himself in the bathroom, masturbating to the thought of his sisters touching him.

The next day, Jack and Tom (his younger brother) go into the cellar. They explore the area, which is full of old things. Their father starts to come down the stairs, wanting Jack to help him with the sacks. Julie tells Jack that as their father's health declines, he and Tom will compete for their mother's attention; she believes Tom will easily win, and Jack finds this thought odd. Father would often provoke Tom, probably for this reason. The boys move the cement packs and ask what the packs are for. They are for the garden.

Jack's father constructs his garden according to his own plans, which are focused mostly on constructing paths and placing flower beds. He demands that his children walk the garden properly and insists that the garden remain in perfect order at all times. Prior to his first heart attack he wanted to build a wall to protect his "special world." Jack recounts how the family made jokes about one another but jokes against Father were usually prohibited.

After Father's heart attack, he stops working on the garden and it becomes overrun with weeds, the pond dries up, and so on. Jack is both horrified and delighted that he and Julie are behind the disintegration.

The next day, men bring sand that Jack's father wants to help keep the garden tidier. One day they mix cement; it is tedious. While outside, Jack becomes distracted by a semen stain; he does not initially notice when his father has a heart attack. An ambulance eventually shows up. Jack copes by smoothing out the area of concrete that Father's body has disturbed.



Chapter One Analysis

Chapter One introduces the main story. The main characters are Jack and his family—his father, mother, his sisters Sue and Julie and his younger brother Tom. It is quite clear initially that Jack's family has some serious emotional issues. He believes that he helped to cause his father's heart attack. His father is a quiet man obsessed with his garden and keeping it pristine. His younger brother is afraid of his father and his father is in poor health. Jack, Sue and Julie play exploratory sexual games with one another and the reader finds Jack masturbating about his sisters in the bathroom. Jack, however, is a teenager, and some regard such experiences as normal. It is clear that Jack does not regard it as particularly strange.

An important event occurs in Chapter One and an important symbol is introduced. The symbol is the cement garden, the object of Jack's father's obsession and clearly important to the book and Jack's father's heart attack.



Chapter Two

Chapter Two Summary

In the next year, Julie trains for school athletics and holds some records; she runs fast but her father does not respect her accomplishments. Before he dies he refuses to attend her sporting events. The whole family attacks him, even his wife but he laughs at them. He misses his daughter's greatest triumph on the field.

Julie has various boyfriends, but she never gets close to them. No one is allowed to bring friends home to the house and her friends are "bad" girls anyway. At school, Julie never acknowledges Jack. He notes that his acne increases and his hygiene habits diminishes; he thinks people who really like him will tolerate him no matter what. Jack has no close friends at school.

One day Tom is walking around the house and expects Julie to walk to school with him but today Julie is refusing. Sue will not walk with him either, so he leaves on his own. While describing his walk, Jack tells the reader that his house is old and large and that they have no real friends or visitors. Sometimes Tom has friends over but for the most part the family is isolated. Julie exits the house and Jack comments on how quiet, beautiful and stuck in thought she is. They walk together. After a brief conversation, Jack leaves Julie behind to meet up with Sue and Tom. Sue is two years younger than Jack.

Jack returns to the house and sees his mother in a window; he notices that his mother always seems depressed. He recalls faking sickness to come home from school when he is eight. He really just wants his mother's undivided attention. She obliges him. She has her own life, surprising as it is to him. When his mother notices him staring at her, she calls to him and he pops out of his flashback. He runs off.

Chapter Two Analysis

Chapter Two gives the reader a bit more insight into the relationship between family members in Jack's household. Julie is growing up, hanging out with bad girls, developing her own life. She also becomes a track star. Jack is in the throes of his teenage years. His acne is becoming unmanageable and in frustration he has given up any pretense of hygiene, ceasing even to brush his teeth. He points out that he has no close friends at school and that this is standard for the family. They are usually isolated; no one brings friends home except Tom, and he is younger. Jack's family's house and life is cut off from the outside world.



Chapter Three

Chapter Three Summary

Jack struggles to wake up, trying to escape a nightmare. He finds his mother sitting on the bed next to him and tells him that she wants to have a talk with him. She tries to subtly imply that she knows that Jack has a problem masturbating and that it is affecting his behavior. She encourages him to stop and tells him that it will help him; otherwise he will damage his body.

The game Jack plays with his sister stops when their father dies, but Father's death does not cause this—it is Sue who resists. She becomes ashamed and they do not know why; further, Julie is further away and has many secrets; she has conversations with just her and her mother. Julie also criticizes Jack frequently; one day he tries to retaliate by harassing her with gardening gloves in her room. He starts to press against her rib cage and she initially laughs but she cannot breathe. Jack continues and Julie is so frightened she urinates on herself. She begins to cry and demands that he leave. Tom and Sue see it all.

Jack's mother grows more and more tired; she begins to sleep before dinner, leaving dinner to Julie and putting Sue and Tom to bed. Jack is uncooperative to a degree but his shame causes him to obey. Tom dislikes evenings without his mother and will sometimes try to sneak into her room.

Jack dislikes being alone with Mother because he wants to avoid further awkward conversations; he knows she is wrong about masturbation but he cannot get the image of hurting himself out of his head. He starts spending more time with Sue while she reads various novels that Jack finds uninteresting. They sometimes discuss how sick their mother is and they think Julie claims too much authority for herself.

One day Jack is telling Sue that he thinks Mother is relieved when Father dies because she does not really like him. Julie sits down next to them and presses Jack on the matter; she says little except that they do not know what they are talking about because they do not talk to their mother. The next day, out of guilt, Jack offers to accompany his mother to the shops. Initially, they walk quietly but she starts up small talk. Jack's fifteenth birthday is coming and he wants to have friends over but Mother resists. He wishes aloud that his father could be there and Mother tells Jack that he would have been proud.

On the morning of his birthday, Jack receives some cleaning utensils from Julie, a sci-fi novel from Sue and he goes to see his mother upstairs; she is too tired to get up. She gives him a card with two pound notes. They spend a few awkward moments together. That morning, Jack reads the book and enjoys it. Julie interrupts Jack about cake; Mother will not be able to get out of bed. Julie wants him to clean himself up and he



obliges. The family gathers in Mother's bedroom and sings Happy Birthday to Jack; they eat cake and perform some tricks for their mother.

Chapter Three Analysis

Chapter 3 occurs after Jack's father has died. It primarily concerns Jack's mother and the children's relationship to her. In the beginning of the chapter, she wakes Jack up to subtly tell him to stop masturbating, which makes things awkward between the two of them. This becomes a reason he dislikes spending time with her.

She is growing increasingly fatigued, spending a great deal of time in bed. Julie becomes the family's primary caretaker, helping Sue, Tom and her mother while fighting with Jack. Julie and her mother grow close and Sue and Jack begin spending more time together. Julie's relationship with Mother seems to make Jack jealous. She seems to him to be claiming too much authority for herself. However, when she chastises Sue and Jack for wondering whether Mother loved Father, Jack feels that he should spend more time with mother. He takes a trip with her to the pharmacy and they have an awkward time.

The chapter ends with Jack's Birthday celebrated at their house. Mother is too tired to get out of bed so they take the party to her room and bond as a family. It is clear that Mother is growing increasingly sick and that the children may eventually be alone.



Chapter Four

Chapter Four Summary

Jack is in the garden, looking at a gutted and abandoned "prefab." It is decaying and Jack imagines that one day his house will be in the same state. Jack picks up the sledgehammer and is happy to have found it. He begins to smash a concrete path he considers useless and opens up a crack, much to his satisfaction. However, Julie catches him and tells him to stop because his mother tells him to; the noise is giving her a headache. Out of anger he slams the hammer against the wall.

His mother rarely leaves bed these days. Julie, Sue and Jack maintain the house and do the chores. Since Jack's birthday, two weeks ago, she has not left the bed. Mother has many magazines and books but apparently never reads. She is also tired of doctors. As time progresses, Mother's bedroom becomes the central place of activity in the house.

While outside, Julie is sunbathing in a green bikini. She and Jack talk and she asks him to put lotion on her back; it is an erotic experience for him.

Jack walks Tom to school once every three school days; Tom resists and says he has an "enemy" at school that hurts him. He is a sickly, small kid and can be difficult, making him perfect to make fun of. Jack asks Tom to point the kid out to him and Tom does so. Jack threatens the kid and that afternoon Sue brings Tom home beaten up rather badly. Julie, Sue and Tom immediately tend to his wounds. The ginger kid's bully friend had hurt him.

At supper that night, Tom and Mother are asleep. Julie tells Sue and Jack that Tom has told her that he is tired of being a boy. He says that you do not get beat up if you are a girl. Sue and Julie laughs but Jack is "horrified and fascinated." Sue and Julie decide to dress him up and Jack thinks it is a dumb idea.

The next day, Tom's teacher writes Mother a letter that she has trouble attending to. They discuss redecorating when Mother gets up. She then falls asleep, her throat full of mucus. Jack leaves to do homework. His mother calls him to the bed, asks how he is, and suggests he find a job so he has some money to play around with. She tells him that she "might have to go away soon." Jack and Julie must cooperate in taking care of Tom and the house, otherwise the state will take Tom away and maybe Sue was well. If Mother is in the hospital, she cannot do much.

Three days later Mother dies; Julie finds her and Jack come home minutes later. Julie is trembling; she tells Jack that Mother is dead and that she has been sick for awhile but had not wanted the other kids to know. Jack resents this and will not believe Julie; he wants to see Mother's body but Julie will not let him, asking him to talk before Sue and Tom come home.



Chapter Four Analysis

Chapter Four is the story of Mother's decline and eventual death. As time progresses, Julie takes up more and more of the house's chores. Jack begins to oblige Julie's requests for help and Sue chips in as well. They basically tend to the house themselves. All the children are suffering quietly, Julie bearing the burden of being the head of the house and Jack acting out and resenting the special relationship Julie has with Mother. Tom is having trouble at school, although primarily due to some bullies that have gotten a hold of him.

Chapter Four, then, is a story of decline. Mother has not left bed since before Jack's birthday and she continues to deteriorate. She tells Jack that he will have to work with Julie to take care of Tom when she is gone so that the state will not take him (or even Sue) away. Mother does not tell Sue, Jack and Tom that she is dying; she requests that Julie keep it to herself. When Jack discovers this after Mother dies, he resents Julie.

The children are now alone; Mother is gone and they will never have the attention of their parents again. The general aimlessness and sadness of the book seems to have come to a head.



Chapter Five

Chapter Five Summary

Julie is in the kitchen when Jack catches up with her; he wants to see his mother. Julie tells him no but Jack insists that he has the authority to do so because of what his mother said to him. Jack cries but Julie does not as they wait for Tom and Sue; they are silent for half an hour.

Sue comes in; Julie gives her the news and the girls burst into tears. Tom comes in and they cannot tell him immediately. Sue, Julie and Jack enter Mother's bedroom and Julie covers Mother with a sheet but it will not reach and pops over her feet. Sue and Jack giggle and when Julie cannot cover both her feet and her head, they burst out into laughter as does Julie.

Tom comes in the room and says that he wants to see Mother but they tell him she is asleep. Tom yells, "Mum!" and there is no response. He runs to uncover the sheet when Julie stops him by pulling on the sleeve of Mother's nightgown; Mother falls off the bed and her head hits the table. Tom starts in silence and Jack runs out of the room.

That night Tom cries the entire time he is falling asleep. Sue cries occasionally and the older siblings exclaim that she did not suffer. They eat together and Julie tells Sue and Jack that she knew on Jack's birthday. They carry Tom to bed while he is asleep; Jack falls asleep holding Tom.

At the end of the following day, they have not told anyone and Sue thinks they should. The four of them spend the day in the garden; they are all in denial. Sue says there should be a funeral but Julie does not want authorities to split up the family and place them in foster care or an orphanage. They cannot decide what to do and Jack suggests a private funeral. Jack walks up to Tom who has just told a friend that his mother is dead. The friend denies it but when Jack backs Tom up, Tom laughs in his friend's face. Then he starts to claim that his friend's mother is dead too, to provoke him. The boy runs off.

At night, the four go inside and Tom starts crying again. The older three think to place their mother in the garden under the rocks. However, Jack rejects the plan as it would be conspicuous. Jack is enjoying himself as he plots.

Sue stays in the kitchen with Tom. Julie and Jack get a wheelbarrow and a shovel, load sand and take it into the cellar; they are making cement and work for hours. Sue and Tom fall asleep and Jack and Julie are finished at 5 a.m. Jack and Julie go get mother and can smell her rotting. They spread a sheet on the floor and wrap Mother in it; then they carry her downstairs, place her in a trunk and then fill the trunk with cement.



Chapter Five Analysis

Chapter Five ends Part One of the book. Now that Mother is dead and Jack and Julie know, they must tell Sue and Tom. They tell Sue quickly but have trouble telling Tom. When he finally discovers Mother's body, he is distraught. The four children fade in and out of denial, all sometimes kidding around and laughing sometimes and crying at others. They are concerned, however, that if they tell anyone Mother has died that they will be split up, or at least Tom will be taken away, so they decide to keep Mother's death a secret.

Jack hatches a plan to place Mother's body in a trunk and cover it with wet cement made from materials his father has left lying around. They complete the plan. The chapter brings the death of both parents to a close. They have "buried" Mother and are now on their own, living by themselves and keeping a secret. It is completely unclear now what they will do, but Julie and Jack must share power and raise Tom, all the while getting along.

The symbolism of cement has changed somewhat. For Father, the cement garden is about having his own private place, but for the kids, cement is about hiding a dangerous secret. The symbol of cement becomes a symbol not for hiding oneself but for hiding something about oneself.



Chapter Six

Chapter Six Summary

Jack reminisces about how the four siblings handle running the house when Mother and Father are gone to a funeral two years before the present day. Mother and Father prepare them. The kids go wild, playing with each other until Tom defecates on himself. They tie him to his brass cot as he screams; when they shut him in the bedroom, they cannot hear him anymore and resume their games.

Thirty minutes before Mother and Father are due home, Julie, Jack and Sue start cleaning Tom and the house. That night, the three older siblings discuss how they are eager to have their parents away again.

Following Mother's death, Jack recognizes a sense of freedom but a lack of excitement. Life is quiet and the weather is hot. Tom, however, seems content; he takes Julie to be his mother. When he follows Julie around too much, she loses it, tearing off his clothes and forcibly bathing him. She subdues him eventually.

Later Jack starts a conversation with Sue, who is writing, apparently to her mother. When Jack sees in the book, Sue becomes embarrassed. Jack leaves and Sue locks him out of the room.

They do not eat a cooked meal for even a week following their mother's death. Julie gets money and shops but the food she buys rots. They live on bread, cheese, peanut butter, fruit and other food that do not need to be cooked. Tom eats chocolate constantly. Flies fill the house.

Jack spends each morning and afternoon masturbating; he drifts through the house and wonders what is wrong with him. He thinks of his mother downstairs only as a fact. Spontaneously, Jack remembers the two pound notes he got for his birthday and runs to the shops; he does not know what he wants. When he reaches the shops, he runs into a woman he thinks is his mother and then thinks is Julie but the woman is neither of them and thinks he is homeless. Jack goes home and then to his bedroom.

Jack falls asleep and wakes up to Sue and Julie's laughter. Julie and Sue are dressing Tom like a girl, as he had wanted. Jack wonders why but the girls said they do it for fun. Julie says he looks pretty. The girls then comment on how gross Jack's appearance is. It turns out that the dress they have altered for Tom had cost thirty-eight pounds, but Julie did not pay for it. A boyfriend had given it to her.

Chapter Six Analysis

Mother is dead and the children are alone; they must now decide how to manage themselves. Jack opens with a story about how much fun they had had the last time



Mother and Father had left them alone. They had instructed the children how to manage the house, but Jack, Sue and Julie played and made a general ruckus, cleaning up before their parents get home.

However this time, things are different. Being alone is not exciting even if it is somewhat liberating. Jack, Sue and Julie have to decide how to take care of Tom and Tom attaches himself to Julie, apparently using her as a replacement Mother. Julie does not take to this role immediately, initially frustrated by it. However, later it turns out that she gets a boyfriend to give her (or buy her—it is not clear yet) a dress for Tom. Tom has wanted to dress like a girl and Julie thinks it will make him happy.

The familial relations between the four children are becoming more complex. Tom now sees Julie as his mother and Julie is adapting to her role as mother, but clearly not in a functional way. Sue spends her time writing and Jack is aimless but they seem to be fighting less and growing closer. All four still seem to live mostly in denial. Julie takes care of the finances and buys food; Jack, Julie and Sue keep the house clean and life goes on.



Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven Summary

Three weeks have passed since Mother's death; Jack decides to reread the sci-fi he received from Sue. He notices more on the second read. In the story, a ship speeds across the galaxy at a fast speed; the commander of the vessel is concerned to keep the messroom clean but Jack wonders if he would care if the ship was motionless in the middle of space.

Jack wants someone else to read the book—Julie and Sue. Julie is uninterested but takes the book to taunt Jack. Jack grabs her and is hurting her to get the book. She lets it go and openly wonders what is wrong with him. She says he should be locked up. Jack feels stupid. He is bored. Sue stays in her room, reading and writing. She takes baths and tends to her hair. Jake passes the time listening to the radio and considers returning to school or getting a job, despite not wanting to. His acne is spreading to his neck.

Julie, Sue and Jack decide to clean the kitchen and cook. Jack feels happy to be working with them. They prepare a full dinner. Tom plays in Sue's skirt and the other children, oddly, do not tease him or notice. Jack cannot understand it but when he inquires, he discovers that he and his friend are pretending to be Julie and Jack. Jack then brings Tom in for dinner.

Jack decides to go downstairs. The trunk is still open, as they left it. When he peers into the trunk, he realizes he cannot remember his mother's face. Jack wonders if hiding Mother is a good idea, whether it would not be better to split up. His thoughts are dissolving though. He feels nothing which gives him the urge to masturbate; as he begins, he notices a red stool by the trunk. Apparently one of the girls has been downstairs. Jack comments that he did not know this because they try to ignore Mother by not talking about her.

Sue finds Jack and tells him that Julie's boyfriend Derek is coming to tea. Derek is already upstairs and has a sports car. Sue and Jack admire it. Tom now has a wig and a dress on; Jack asks him whether he likes being a girl. Tom says he does not know.

Derek and Julie come downstairs and Julie introduces him to the family, including Tom who is still dressed like a girl. Sue tells Derek that she and Jack like his car but he says he does not like it much, thinking it too flashy. Jack notices that Julie is wearing all new clothes and he becomes irritated. During dinner, Sue and Julie do most of the talking. After dinner, Julie and Derek go outside and Sue raves about him to Jack. It turns out Derek is a snooker player, rich and twenty-three years old. Jack is upset.



Chapter Seven Analysis

Chapter Seven begins with some symbolism gleaned from Jack's novel. He wonders whether Commander Hunt would be as keen to keep the messroom clean if his ship was not traveling to a particular destination but was instead at a standstill. This clearly represents Jack's approach to life—everything is still, nothing significant is happening. He seems to care about nothing. Hiding Mother's death is keeping them from moving on in life.

Another significant event is Jack going downstairs to visit his mother. He finds his thoughts cloudy; he cannot maintain a train of thought and feels nothing, is wholly without emotion. This seems to be the clear result of repressing the grieving process.

It turns out that Julie has a boyfriend over, Derek. Derek is handsome, rich and owns a car. Jack seems incredibly jealous of him. Throughout the book, it is clear that Jack is attracted to Julie and appears to feel threatened by Derek's superior masculinity and its attraction to Julie.

The only positive event in the chapter is when Jack, Julie and Sue clean the kitchen and cook; Jack feels as if he is on a family team and is as happy as he has been in some time. This indicates that the children are handling their grief by isolating themselves and that the path to healing is to grow close and handle their grief together.



Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight Summary

Jack is having more nightmares, mostly about a large wooden box in the house that will not stay closed. He sees his mother in an armchair and she is speaking to him and asks him to stop "drubbing" his fingers while she speaks, obscuring her voice. He then notices he is naked and masturbating in front of her. When he tries to tell Sue about the dream, she changes the subject.

Jack asks Sue if she still wishes if she, Julie and Jack could play the sexual game they played long ago. He asks if she gets tired of reading, but she does not want to do anything else. Derek is still downstairs and Jack wishes that she disliked him like he does. He asks Sue if he can read the parts of her diary about Mother, but Sue tells him that he would not understand. She says that he cannot because he was horrible to her. Jack tries to deny this but Sue insists that he fought Mother on everything. He claims that his dreams of her are evidence that he cared but Sue says that his dreams are about him; he only wants to look in her diary, she says, to read the stuff about him.

Sue then starts reading aloud from her diary, noting that no one mentions her. She writes at length about how violent and dirty Jack is; Jack pretends not to notice. When he leaves, he finds Tom crying; Tom says that Julie hit him. The radio is up because Julie and Derek are arguing; Jack goes downstairs to see what is going on but they act like nothing is happening.

Julie is staying out all night with Derek; she only tells Sue where she goes. They talk for hours in the morning.

Derek asks how Jack is doing and Julie tells him not to; Jack asks him back, but Derek does not say much. He invites Jack to come down with him and play a game, but does not say what the game is. Jack gets in the car with Derek, who does not talk to him. They enter Oswald's Hall; pool tables are inside. The owners of the bar, the Oswald's, call Derek "son." He tells them that Jack is Julie's brother.

Apparently Derek plays pool there and he has since he was twelve. The Oswald's do not make him pay to play because he brings people in. Derek then introduces the valet parking guy, Chas, to Jack. Greg, a man waiting to play Derek in pool, has been there about an hour. They start to play a game and Derek comments to Jack that his house has a strange "set-up." He tells his friends that their parents are dead and that the four children take care of themselves in a big house. They start to discuss converting the house into flats. Jack feels sick and wants to leave.

Derek tells him to calm down and laugh and Chas, Derek and Greg gather around him to make him laugh, but when Jack reacts negatively, they back off. Jack is furious and walks to the door. As Derek and Jack leave, Derek tells him that he is like his sister. He



asks Jack if his sister always acts weird in the cellar, but Jack says he does not know. Derek says that Julie is always getting randomly upset.

When Jack and Derek get home, he wonders what has happened. Julie is holding Tom, who wants to act like a baby. Tom has been bad that afternoon and he and Julie have had a talk. When Tom falls asleep, Jack wants to talk to Julie about Derek but Julie is too busy putting Tom to bed.

Chapter Eight Analysis

Chapter Eight displays many outward signs of the children's psychological decay. Sue is constantly visiting her mother downstairs and is writing journal entries as letters to her mother every day. When she reads one to Jack, the reader discovers that she is tracking when her mother is mentioned by the other children.

When Jack wants to read the parts of Sue's diary about Mother, Sue tells him that he only cares about himself and that his behavior has been violent. He was always difficult with Mother and did not understand her, Sue also said. Jack thinks he ignores this but the reader gets a picture of a boy acting out from a lack of attention and decaying into bad behavior due to unacknowledged grief and a lack of emotional connection to others.

Jack is also having nightmares about his mother. The dreams display an obvious symbolism. In the dreams, Jack is vulnerable to his mother as represented by his nakedness and masturbating in front of her. The presence of a wooden box in his way is a kind of "elephant-in-the-room" symbol, representing the fact that Jack is refusing to deal with his Mother's death.

Derek takes Jack to play a game at a tavern, and he tells his friends that Jack's parents are dead and they are living in the house alone. When they start talking about how much the house is worth and converting it into flats, Jack gets upset and wants to leave. It is clear that Jack finds this idea denigrating to his entire family.

As they leave, Derek asks Jack if Julie always gets randomly upset; he tells Jack "man to man" that Julie is emotionally out of control and notes that Jack has a touch of the same instability. Julie and Jack have a similarity—they oscillate between isolation and overflowing with emotions they do not know how to handle.

At the end of the chapter, Julie has taken to her role as Tom's mother and Tom is behaving like a baby. He is handling the trauma of losing his mother by bonding to Julie and pretending to be something he is not, first a girl, then a baby.

The entire family is in a state of psychological dysfunction and decay.



Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine Summary

Jack's hands begin to smell like rotten meat. He stops masturbating and starts washing his hands but the smell will not go away. Then Jack cleans himself up more, taking baths, cutting his nails and wearing clean clothes but the smell is still there, still distant. Jack's newfound cleanliness causes Julie to warm up to him. He worries that he has cancer and bathes in the rain.

At supper, Jack argues that it has rained for the first time since Mother passed, but Sue and Julie deny this. Yet they cannot remember when. This makes them angry and annoyed; the conflict escalates, and Jack nearly hits Sue in the back of the head and Jack smells the smell again.

Tom is still acting like a baby, wearing a bib and sometimes crawling around under the table. When Julie treats him like a baby, Tom seems to turn further inward on himself. Tom wants Julie to himself as well. One night, Julie undresses Tom and Tom tells Jack to go away. When Tom is put to bed, Julie comes to Jack's room and they sit on his bed and discuss Tom. When Jack says Tom should come out of it, Julie puts her hand on Jack's leg and say "I think someone is jealous." They laugh.

Julie asks if Jack thinks about Mother often; it turns out they both do. Jack asks Julie if putting their mother in the cement was right. Julie is no longer sure. Jack complains that Julie let Derek in the cellar and Julie becomes upset. They argue and Jack tells her that Derek asked about her. Julie simply responds by saying that she has not slept with him yet.

At dinner one night, Jack tries to pull off Tom's bib. The other siblings protest and Jack responds by wandering outside into the garden. He slams a rock on a frog and buries it but Derek is behind him, digs up the frog and shows him that it is not dead. Derek comments that Tom is odd for wearing girl's dresses but Jack defends him; Derek says it could have consequences for him later in his life. He then asks Jack when his parents died and Jack says that it was a long time ago. Julie had told Derek it was not long ago. When Derek goes inside, he notices the same smell that Jack had, noting that it is weak but odd. He thinks it is the drain but Julie comes downstairs.

It is clear that Julie is slowly acting more and more like her mother, putting Tom to bed early and speaking to Jack as if he were her son. Derek appears to be aware of all of this. Julie acknowledges the smell and says it is coming from the cellar; Jack and Sue go downstairs and have to cover their noses. Sue says it is rats. When the light is turned on, Jack sees that someone has kicked the trunk and the concrete is broken. Part of Mother is visible and the two are excited, as if Mother is still alive.



The two go upstairs, say they should get more cement and claim that they can get used to the smell but Derek will not let them out of the stairs. Derek insists on knowing what is down there, and when he goes downstairs he surmises that something is rotting. Julie says it is a dead dog. Derek comments that they mixed the cement poorly and suggests a reburial next to Jack's frog but Jack does not want the trunk moved. Derek then insists on sealing the trunk and the rest of the night is awkward.

Chapter Nine Analysis

Chapter nine starts to ascend to the climax of the book. It introduces two symbols—the frog and the smell. The smell is the smell of Mother's rotting corpse. The trunk cannot hold the concrete and the concrete has broken out of it, along with part of Mother's body. The smell has filled the house. However, Jack initially thinks it is him and he decides to start cleaning himself up to get rid of the smell. The habit continues when he realizes it isn't him. The smell is probably representative of Jack's guilt, which is evidenced by the fact that he asks Julie if they did the right thing.

The second symbol is the frog. Jack tries to kill a frog outside and then buries it quickly, but Derek picks it up and shows that it is not dead. Jack killing the frog may represent his constantly fighting his mother, draining her of energy. Burying the frog quickly is analogous to burying Mother and Derek discovering the frog is directly analogous to his curiosity about what is in the trunk. It foreshadows the rest of the chapter—Derek is on to them and knows that they are hiding something.

Julie and Tom are becoming increasingly disturbed. Julie is acting like her Mother, babying Tom and speaking to Jack as if he were her son. Tom is acting like a baby and the more Julie treats him like one the more he "sinks into himself" adapting to his grief by drifting further into his trauma-induced delusion.

It is clear in the chapter that Derek is going to figure out what is going on.



Chapter Ten

Chapter Ten Summary

Julie goes back to sunbathing days later; Tom is wearing his own clothes and playing with a friend; he wants Julie to watch. She ignores him. The kitchen trash is overflowing and wasps and flies are in the kitchen. It is incredibly hot and Sue wants Julie to be careful sunbathing.

Jack, Julie and Tom go to buy a packet of cement. At a bus stop, Jack hides from the heat but Julie encourages him to get out in the sun. They take the cement home and Jack notices that his street is now an empty junkyard. Most of the neighboring houses have been torn down. Jack lies down in the sun and falls asleep; he is horribly sunburned.

Derek is at the house and as Jack walks in he finds the cellar open and hears voices. Derek is applying the wet cement. The smell is dimming and Derek asks if something is wrong. Derek suggests that Jack should apply the cement because it is his dog, but then suggests it might not be one.

They make tea and Derek seems to fade out of the mood he was in. He starts asking Jack about his dog; Jack does the best he can to convincingly lie. Julie helps. When Tom comes in, he lies as well. Derek says that he wished they would trust him more. Jack worries that they have not been careful enough to quiet Derek's suspicions. However, they have ignored the trunk for so long it does not seem like a threat.

Derek leaves to play his game; Jack goes to bed and feels stifled. He falls asleep and it is dark and cold when he awakens. He hears someone crying in the next room and imagines a day at the beach with his mother and father. Jack is dreaming but then is totally awake. He realizes that it is Tom crying; Tom is fake crying, trying to get Julie's attention. However, Julie and Sue are downstairs talking. Jack simply listens.

Eventually he talks to Tom and Tom says that he wants Julie to come up and be with him. Jack asks him why and Tom says that it is because he "wants" her. When Jack asks if Tom wants Mother too, Tom says that she is dead. He tells Jack that he and his friend Michael dress up in Mother and Father's things, pretending to be their parents or Jack and Julie.

Jack asks Tom where Mother is and he says that she is in the cellar. He says that Derek told him. Jack feels indifferent. He asks Tom why he acts like a baby, but before Tom can answer, Julie comes in the room and punches Jack for being naked. However then Julie calms down and strokes his head. Jack looks at her tan breasts and Jack is grinning. He wants to put his thumb in his mouth and Julie encourages him but then Jack wants to run. Julie points out his erection.



Julie tells Jack not to go away; she wants to talk to him. She tells him he looks wonderful without his clothes. He asks about her clothes and she takes them off. She asks if Tom is happy and Jack says yes. She tells him that Derek has known all along; he is only upset that they did not include him. He wants to be "big, strong daddy," she says. He is getting on her nerves. As she talks, she puts her arms around Jack and Julie locks her fingers into his. She complains that Derek wants to be in charge of everything; he wants to move in with them. She says that she wants to take care of them. Derek is also a bit of a Moma's boy.

They continue to make small talk and hug. They fall on the bed and have their arms around each other's necks. Julie says she cannot remember what it was like when Mother was alive. She says that life seems still and that this prevents her from being afraid. However, when she goes in the cellar, she gets afraid and feels sleepy. Julie then slowly brings her breasts up to Jack's face; he touches her nipple and it is hard. Julie pushes it towards his lips and encourages him to do it. When he put his lips around it, Derek walks in on them. Julie will not let Jack go. Derek asks how long they have been doing this and Julie tells him that it has gone on forever. Derek is surprised and angry. He complains that she never did that with him. He wants her to tell him and Julie says it was none of his business. He yells that Jack is her brother and that it is sick. Derek runs out and Julie locks the door. Julie smiles at him and they begin to investigate each other's bodies.

Julie takes Jack's penis and puts it inside of her and sinks down on him. They are both feeling pleasure and Julie puts her breast in his mouth. They continue to have sex and Tom is apparently watching. Sue starts to call for Julie and Julie lets her in. Sue hugs her and tells her that Derek is breaking up the concrete. They see Derek getting in the car and speed off. The three of them sit together and no one says anything. They start to talk about Mother, about her illness and everything. They have forgotten what happened.

As they talked, cars pulled up to the house and footsteps are heard climbing up the stairs. Tom wakes up and Julie kisses him. There the story ends.

Chapter Ten Analysis

Chapter Ten ends the book and contains the climax. It begins innocently enough, with Jack, Julie and Tom getting cement and Derek patching up the trunk. Derek apparently knows that Mother is buried in the trunk but he wants the siblings to tell him. He is upset that they will not share with him.

Jack falls asleep and wakes up to Tom crying. He speaks to Tom about how Tom wants Julie to give him attention, Mother, and he and his friend Michael wearing Mother and Father's things, role-playing.

Tom tells him that Derek knows about Mother. when Julie comes in, and Tom falls asleep, Julie responds to Jack's nudity by taking off her own clothes. As they are



physically intimate, Julie tells Jack that Derek has known all along and complains that he wants to move in, be a daddy, about how she wants to take care of everyone, rather than Derek.

Derek walks in, finding Jack and Julie naked. He is shocked and furious. He is disgusted by the incest and verbally attacks Julie for not being physically intimate with him instead of Jack. When Derek storms off, Jack and Julie have sex. Then Sue runs upstairs and tell them that Derek is breaking up the cement in the chest with the sledgehammer. They then congregate together as a family and start to talk about Mother. In the meanwhile, Derek has apparently called the authorities who arrive at the house.

The climax builds from the cement-covering. When Jack wakes up, he discovers that Derek knows, making it clear that something has to happen. When Julie enters the room, she starts acting like Mother again but when she and Jack have sex she is clearly trying to recreate a family structure that Mother and Father left them without. Jack gives in to his incestuous lust for Julie and she exposes her desire for him. This not only brings the incest theme to a head, but fits it in the context of the story about role-playing as a dysfunctional method of grieving. Jack is even tempted to act like a baby, just as Tom did.

Before they have sex, Julie complains about Derek, about how he wants to be a father. Julie wants to be sole caretaker, to keep Derek away. Either she wants Jack to play the father or she wants to play Mother as she was without Father. It is not clear why.

Derek walking in on them is the climax of the book. The jig is up. The incest is exposed and Derek runs downstairs to crack open the trunk with the sledgehammer. When Mother's body is exposed, he speeds off and apparently calls the authorities out of his jealousy and disgust with Julie. At the very time that the authorities are descending on the house, the siblings discuss Mother fondly for the first time since before she died. The denial of Mother's death is over and now that their delusion is forever smashed, they can heal.



Characters

Jack

Jack is a teenage boy, a second child between Julie and Sue. He is the narrator and is attracted to his sister. He takes poor care of himself hygienically and fights with Mother though out his teenage years until she dies and he has a distant, awkward relationship with his father. As any teenage boy, Jack is a serial masturbator and thinks about sex often. He is also plagued by vivid nightmares of his mother, who catches him masturbating.

Most of the time, Jack is extremely emotionally isolated and jealous of the other family members who have emotional connections that he lacks. He is jealous of Tom's relationship with Mother and Julie's close relationship with Mother. He is jealous of Julie's relationship with Derek, wanting to be in Derek's place. He is jealous that Sue and Julie form a close bond after Mother's death and he is jealous of Tom's relationship with Julie.

He acts out through violence and taking poor care of himself. He is needlessly combative which appears to be desperate attempts for attention. He appears selfish but is in fact struggling to cope with grief. One method of getting attention from Julie is by acting on his attraction to her by having sex with her, something she initiates. In general, Jack has little insight into his own motives and actions, as any ordinary teenage boy would who was suffering through the grief of losing his parents.

Julie

Julie is perhaps the second main character of the book, despite the fact that it is narrated from Jack's perspective. She is the eldest child and older sister to Jack. Early in the book, she takes up track at school and is quite good, despite the fact that her father discourages her from engaging in a traditionally masculine activity. After Father dies, Julie becomes Mother's primary caretaker and Mother places on her the emotional burden of being the only child to know of her impending death.

Julie is very attractive and is in great shape. She sun-bathes often and develops a special relationship with Mother before she dies. After Mother dies, she and Jack bury mother in the trunk in cement. Julie begins to act like Mother and forms a dysfunctional relationship with Tom. She also develops a relationship with a man named Derek whom she brings to the house and acts erratic around. Julie also develops a sexual relationship with her brother Jack.

Julie is so significant because she is probably the least functional of the children, other than Tom. She has carried emotional burdens for the family since after Father's death and the beginning of Mother's sickness. She has been forced into the role of Mother,



whether she wanted to be or not, and copes by adopting the role that she is forced to play in order to recreate the family structure that she lost.

Sue

The youngest sister, between Jack and Tom, she copes with Mother and Father's death by journaling and reading constantly. Early in the book, Jack and Julie play "doctor" with her.

Tom

The youngest of the four siblings, Tom is the "baby" of the family and begins to act like it as a coping mechanism.

Mother

In the first half of the book, Mother grows increasingly sick and fatigued. When she dies, the kids hide her away in a trunk in the cellar.

Father

Jack's father is distant and dies from a heart attack early in the book.

Derek

Julie's older boyfriend, who is rich and has his own car. He is suspicious about the children's cellar and discovers Mother's body there.

Greg and Chas

Greg and Chas are Derek's billiard friends.

The Oswald's

The Oswald's own a tavern and let Derek play billiards there for free.

Michael

Tom's friend who plays make-believe with him as Mother and Father or Jack and Julie.

The Authorities

Mother worries that the authorities will break up the family after she dies, and when Derek reports the kids to the police, the book ends with the authorities coming after them.



Objects/Places

Cement

The substance that Jack learns to mix and Jack and Julie encase their Mother's corpse in.

The Cement Garden

The cement garden is Father's garden full of plants and cement paths he built. Before his heart attack, it is an obsession of his, a place where he can hide himself from the world.

The Trunk

The trunk is where Jack and Julie cement Mother's corpse.

Mother's Corpse

When Mother dies, Jack and Julie place her corpse in a trunk and cover it with cement; later, the trunk cannot hold the cement and it cracks, releasing the faint odor of Mother's rotting corpse.

Masturbation

Jack is a serial masturbator.

Julie's Bikini

Julie wears a green bikini when she sunbathes. Jack watches her lustfully when she does so.

Tom's Bib

When Tom starts acting like a baby, he starts wearing a bib.

Sue's Diary

Sue constantly journals as her method of coping. Many if not all of her entries are letters to her mother.



Jack's Novel

Jack's sci-fi novel fascinates him and is the first book he reads all the way through. He analogizes events in the book to his own life.

Tom's Dress

Tom has a dress that he likes to wear.

Derek's Car

Derek's car is an older, red sports car that he is not too impressed with but Jack and Sue admire it.

Billiards

Derek is an extremely talent billiards player.

The Sledgehammer

Jack uses the sledgehammer to break open concrete in the yard; Derek uses it to break open concrete encasing Mother's body.

Incest

Jack and Julie engage in incestuous sex.

The Cellar

The cellar is where Father keeps his supplies for the cement garden and where the children later cement their mother in an old trunk.

The House

The large, mostly empty house is the primary setting of the book.

The Shops

The shops are the shops where the family goes for food and drugs.

The Yard

The yard outside of Jack's family's house is filled with junk and adjacent to run-down homes being demolished.



Themes

Dysfunctional Mourning

The primary theme of *The Cement Garden* is the dysfunctional mourning that Julie, Jack, Sue and Tom engage in following the death of their father and later their mother. The children grew up emotionally isolated from one another, their parents and the outside world. They have little hope of coping with Mother's death when she places the burden of caring for the family on Jack and Julie, and they decide to keep authorities from discovering her death to keep the family together. Dysfunction is inevitable.

Jack is the main character and expresses his emotional dysfunction as a teenage boy would. He is defiant, not only to his mother but to Julie—at least initially. He mourns through violent outbursts and his inability to control his temper, sometimes getting violent with Julie and later harassing Sue and Tom. He takes very poor care of himself hygienically until he begins to faintly smell his mother's rotting corpse. As time progresses, he develops an intense attraction to Julie and jealousy of Derek for the time he gets to spend with her and the attention he receives from her. The most dysfunctional feature of his behavior is his having sex with Julie.

Julie initially deals with the burden of Mother's sickness through her track participation, hanging out with a rough crowd and taking too much authority over her siblings, but once Mother dies, she appears to crack somewhat. She develops a relationship with Derek, a man much older than she is. She acts out emotionally with him and refuses to let him touch her or connect with her emotionally. She starts to act like Mother, babying Tom to keep him dependent on her, developing an emotional attachment with Sue like Mother developed with her and playing a subtle game of sexual seduction with her brother Jack.

Tom mourns by retreating into roles that garner the attention he has lost, particularly acting like a baby, and Sue mourns through her obsessive journaling, reading and admiration of Julie and Derek.

The dysfunction only begins to end after Jack and Julie have sex and Derek exposes Mother's body. When he speeds off, the four siblings sit on the bed and remember Mother fondly for the first time, this as the authorities arrive.

Emotional Isolation

One of the most important prerequisites for the dysfunctional behavior in *The Cement Garden* is the extreme emotional isolation of the children. Father and Mother never seem to get along well; Father keeps to himself except when he erupts in anger and the children often feel distant from him. Julie and Mother have a special relationship as Mother grows sick and nears death, but Jack, Sue and Tom are kept away from being close with her because she wants to avoid burdening them with her illness.



Jack is often jealous of Julie but he does not deal with it effectively and after Mother dies, Julie and Sue develop a close relationship like the one Julie had with Mother which again excludes Jack. Julie and Tom also grow dysfunctionally close, again excluding Jack. When Julie grows close to Derek, Jack again is left out of her life. Other examples of emotional isolation abound. For instance, the family has almost no friends and those friends they have they never bring over. Derek is the only person to visit them in the book. Their house is isolated and no one in town is suspicious when they hear nothing from Mother. The family is emotionally isolated as well.

As a result of their emotional isolation, the children are even less able to cope with their grief. They do not even know how to rely on each other, pretending that Mother is not dead and not talking to each other about her until the very end of the book. Since they cannot communicate their feelings effectively and have not even learned how to observe them, their grief is bound to erupt inappropriately.

Role-Playing

Dysfunctional Mourning and Emotional Isolation are both important themes in *The Cement Garden* but the way these themes are expressed is by means of the extensive role-playing that occurs in the book. The children often step into the roles of others in order to sub-consciously recreate the family structure that they lose when their parents die; they feel alone, isolated and full of grief without realizing it and react by trying to reproduce a secure time, however much they may fail to do so.

Tom is probably the most extreme role-player, in large part because he is by far the youngest sibling and the least psychologically capable of handling his emotions without help. After Father dies and Mother grows sick, Tom wants to start dressing like a girl and being a girl. His sisters oblige him by dressing him in women's clothes and a wig after Mother dies. However, he grows tired of this role and decides, again sub-consciously, to revert back to being a baby. He probably does this to garner Julie's attention as completely as he can, since a baby receives endless attention from her mother.

Julie oscillates between leading the family as a big sister and coping with her grief by acting like Mother. Burdens have been placed on her since Father died and Mother became ill. She has been bearing the emotional burden of leading the household for some time and appears to cope with it by actually pretending that she is Mother, treating Jack and Tom like little children, Tom in particular.

Derek seems to play a role as father, but Julie resists this and appears to prefer to sexually bond with Jack.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *The Cement Garden* is that of Jack, the narrator and a fifteen and sixteen year old boy whose Mother and Father die while he is still that age. He lives in a large, quiet and isolated home in the country, surrounding by old, worn down prefabricated houses. He has no friends at school and his family keep to themselves, having practically no visitors besides friends of Tom's.

Jack is an ordinary teenage boy in many ways. He fights with his mother and sister, feels distant from his father, takes poor care of his hygiene and fights against acne. He masturbates frequently—twice a day—and thinks about sex often. However, as Mother nears death and dies, it is quite clear that the events are too much for Jack to handle. He reacts to her death in odd ways, as do the other children. When Julie, Jack and Sue are trying to cover Mother's body with a sheet and cannot, they laugh uncontrollably and they decide not to tell anyone about Mother's death and bury her in cement in the basement, all described by Jack as normal, ordinary decisions with only a dim awareness of their oddity.

Jack describes his nightmares which seem to be his most lucid moments as their symbolism deals directly and simply with the secret he and his siblings are keeping from the world. His mind becomes faded whenever he goes into the cellar to visit Mother. He is also embarrassed when he recalls that his mother subtly encouraged him to stop masturbating but this does not bring about an expression of his deep feelings of grief. Finally, when the book nears its climax, he has sex with his sister, not finding it disgusting, bizarre or inappropriate.

Setting

It is not clear what time period *The Cement Garden* takes place in. It seems to be located in the English Countryside between 1950 and 1980, but since relatively few appliances are mentioned and no TV is around, it is probably in an earlier period. Jack never says what city they live in or where they are located, as these matters are not important to the book.

The setting of *The Cement Garden* is the family's house, the yard, the children's rooms, Mother's room and the cellar. Practically everything of significance occurs in these places.

The yard is where Father's cement garden is located, along with the close-by houses that are dilapidated and being demolished. The cement garden has plants and cement pathways but in Father's absence it decays. The outside of the house represents dreary stillness and decay.



The house itself is large and very empty after Mother dies. The children seem to experience a kind of timelessness there, not interacting with the world, but instead living within their old home, acting as if nothing has happened. The house has a cellar and two stories. The kids spend much of their time in their rooms, particularly Jack in his room, being bored. The kids sporadically clean the house but most of the time grow increasingly dysfunctional stuck in the same place.

Another setting of significance is Mother's room. It is in Mother's room where Mother spends her last days, increasingly fatigued and it is in Mother's room that she dies and the kids confront her death. After they remove Mother, Tom spends time in there and the book ends with Julie and Jack having sex there and talking with Sue and Tom about Mother for the first time as the authorities approach.

The cellar, however, is the most important setting. Before Mother's death, it stores Father's old materials for his cement garden, but after Mother dies, they place her body in the cellar in a trunk and cover it with cement. They ignore the cellar for the most part but Sue visits Mother occasionally. As time progresses, they start to smell her corpse faintly because the trunk has busted due to the weight of the cement and part of Mother's corpse is exposed. The cellar contains their dark secret and it is Derek's probing into what lies in the cellar that eventually produces the climactic events in the book and leads to their resolution.

Language and Meaning

The language and meaning of *The Cement Garden* is that of a teenage boy who does not grasp the significance of what is happening to him. The book is written from the perspective of Jack at some period after the book's events, but it is not clear when. Nonetheless, there is little or no commentary on the strange events that transpire in the book.

Instead, various events are described in mundane terms. For instance, when Mother dies, Jack discusses his sibling's grief, but it is not a substantial discussion and the terms used are not those typically applied to the death of a family member, much less a mother. When Jack describes burying Mother in a trunk in the cellar with cement, the idea just seems like an ordinary one, from what one could glean from the prose.

The language also contains subtle sexual references. It is clear that Jack is attracted to Julie but in the beginning of the book, this is conveyed to the reader not by any explicit statement of Jack's but instead by the amount of detail he puts into describing his sister's body. Instead of stating openly that he is attracted to her, he observes her dark skin, her green bikini, his erect penis, and so on.

The book rarely uses excited language for anything, not death, not incest, not the futile attempt to hide Mother's body from Derek, nor the siblings being tracked down by the authorities.



Structure

The Cement Garden contains ten chapters divided into two major parts. Part I contains the first five chapters and Part II contains the second five chapters. The first five chapters are grouped together because they introduce the main conflict of the book—the children's attempts to cope with their grief without understanding the gravity of their loss.

In Chapter 1, Mother, Father and the children are introduced and Jack recounts the story of his father's death due to a heart attack he had in the cement garden. The following four chapters concern Jack's mother. In Chapters 2 and 3, Jack continues to deepen the character descriptions of Mother, himself and his siblings Julie, Sue and Tom. This occurs against the backdrop of Mother becoming increasingly sick and lethargic, spending more and more time in her room.

Chapter 4 brings Mother's death. The day of Jack's birthday party is the last day that Mother gets out of bed. For the next two weeks, death approaches quickly until Chapter 4 when she dies and Julie and Jack have to take on the responsibility of telling Sue and Tom and then caring for the house. Chapter 5 winds up the main conflict of the book by discussing how the kids decide what to do about Mother's death. They consider telling people but decided against it to keep the family together. It is also the chapter where they bury Mother in cement.

Part II unfolds the conflict within each of the children. Throughout Chapters 5 through 10 each child is drawn further and further into their defense mechanisms as the remaining family spirals out of control. Derek is introduced and eventually exposes their secret. Chapter 10 brings the book to climax as Jack and Julie face up to their sexual tension, Derek exposes Mother's body and the authorities come to take the children away.



Quotes

"I did not kill my father, but I sometimes felt I had helped him on the way." (13)

"For ... the garden." (18)

"On the day, because we did not ask him to come, he forgot and never saw, in the last month of his life, his oldest daughter star of all the field." (25)

"Only because you two won't have anything to do with her." (40)

"I had accepted without curiosity the fact that Mother was rarely out of bed now. She became bedridden so gradually we hardly commented on it. Since my birthday, two weeks before, she had not been up at all." (49)

"And he said he was tired of being a boy and he wanted to be a girl now." (54)

"I might have to go away soon." (58)

"Don't you think we ought to tell someone?" (65)

"When Mother died, beneath my strongest feelings was a sense of adventure and freedom which I hardly dared admit to myself and which was derived from the memory of that day years ago. But there was no excitement now." (79)

"Isn't he pretty?" (87)

"You ought to be locked up." (93)

"I felt safe, as if I belonged to a powerful, secret army." (95)

"We hardly spoke at all to each other about Mother. She was everyone's secret." (98)

"Can't you stop drubbing even while I'm talking to you?" (106)

"The parents are both dead and the four of them looking after themselves." (116)

"Do you think what we did was right?" (124)

"What have you got down there that smells so good?" (133)

"It's your dog if it is a dog." (138)

"Derek said. He said you put her in there." (145)

"Everything seems still and fixed and it makes me feel that I'm not frightened of anything." (149)



"Now I've seen it all." (149)

"There!" "Wasn't that a lovely sleep?" (153)



Topics for Discussion

What is the significance of incest in the book?

Give three examples of dysfunctional role-playing in the book.

Describe how Tom, Julie and Jack each mourn Mother's death without realizing it.

Why does Julie tolerate Tom's baby-like behavior?

How does Sue cope with Mother's death?

What is the climax of the book?

What is the significance of Derek in the book? What really motivates Derek?

Why does Julie have sex with Jack?