

Daughter of the Forest Study Guide

Daughter of the Forest by Juliet Marillier

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Plot Summary

Daughter of the Forest is the first book in the Sevenwaters Trilogy by Juliet Marillier. In this novel, Sorcha is the seventh child of Lord Colum, an Irish warlord. Sorcha's mother died shortly after her birth, leaving her in the hands of capable servants and her older brothers. As she and her brothers grow, they become very close. When their father marries a new woman who Sorcha and her brothers come to realize is an evil witch, they ban together to rid their lives of this threat, only to cause this powerful witch to lay a curse on the brothers that Sorcha alone can reverse. Daughter of the Forest is a novel about love of family and the strength of character that allows Sorcha to break the curse that holds the lives of her beloved brothers.

Sorcha is something of a wild child, having been raised by her six brothers and a handful of well-meaning servants. Sorcha's father, an Irish warlord, is constantly on the move, running campaigns against foreign threats and caring for his people. In the care of her brothers, Sorcha learns the secrets of the forest, using them to heal her people. Sorcha also learns at the feet of Father Brien, a kind Christian priest who lives a hermit's life near her home.

When Sorcha is still young, she finds herself pulled into a plot by her brother, Finbar, to help a Briton taken prisoner by her father's men escape. Sorcha wants to help, but Finbar limits her involvement to making a sleeping draft for the prisoner's guards, afraid that any more involvement on her part will cause her irreparable harm. However, weeks after the prisoner's escape, Sorcha is called by Father Brien to help heal the prisoner, whose physical wounds are healing but whose mental wounds continue to fester.

Sorcha stays with Father Brien for weeks, caring for the Briton, whose name she learns is Simon. Simon is terribly wounded, but his deepest fears are that he might have broken under torture and given information to Sorcha's father. Sorcha does the best she can to help Simon, but soon her brothers return for her and force her to go home, causing her to leave Simon alone. At home, Sorcha discovers that her father has met a woman he plans to marry.

As Sorcha and her family prepare for the wedding, Sorcha learns that Simon has disappeared. However, Sorcha is now focused on her new stepmother, a woman who appears to have nothing but malice in her heart. Shortly after the wedding, Sorcha and her brothers gather to perform a Druid ceremony they hope will rid their family of this malicious force, but their stepmother arrives during the ceremony and curses the boys, turning them all into swans.

Sorcha goes to Father Brien, but instead runs into the Lady of the Forest who tells her that only she can reverse the curse, but she must remain silent and she must make a shirt for each brother made out of a plant she knows as starwort. Sorcha gathers a few necessities and finds a place where she can hide in the forest until she can finish the shirts.



Sorcha is all alone in the forest for nearly two years, visited only twice a year by her brothers. Shortly before one of these visits, Sorcha's hiding place is discovered by three men from a nearby village. Sorcha is brutally attacked. A short time later, the Lady of the Forest comes to Sorcha and tells her she must move on. Sorcha takes a boat down the river and finds herself caught in a storm. A Briton sees Sorcha and saves her from near drowning. When the Briton searches Sorcha's bag and finds a carving Simon left for her, he becomes convinced that she knows something of his brother and he decides to take her back to Britain with him.

Sorcha spends a year in the home of Lord Hugh of Harrowfield, allowed to continue working on the shirts without question. However, many in the household are suspicious of Sorcha because of her nationality. Sorcha finds herself in constant danger, the source of which is often Lord Hugh's uncle, Richard of Northwoods. To protect Sorcha, Lord Hugh marries her, but then he leaves to return to Ireland in search of his brother, Simon. In his absence, Sorcha is accused by Lord Richard of infidelity, treason, and witchcraft. After her trial, Richard attempts to burn Sorcha at the stake. Sorcha reverses the curse on her brothers and is rescued by her beloved, whom she must leave but is later reunited with.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Sevenwaters is the name of the home of Colum, a warlord in Ireland. The house sits at the junction of seven streams. Sorcha is Colum's seventh child. Sorcha should have been the seventh son of a seventh son, but she is Colum's only daughter. This is the first novel in a trilogy and is set in the early to mid-800s, a time period in which there was a great deal of foreign threat to the small luaths throughout Ireland.

Chapter 1. Sorcha and her six brothers are playing near the lake when Sorcha touches a plant called starwort. This plant has many tiny barbs that immediately imbed themselves in her hand, causing it to swell. Finbar, the fifth son, carefully removes the barbs with two sticks. Sorcha's brothers have always taken care of her because their mother died on the day she was born and their father is rarely there. He is the lord of Sevenwaters, a position that causes him to often be gone with both administrative tasks as leader of his luath and in campaigns against their many enemies, including Norsemen, Picts, and Britons.

When Sorcha is twelve, a neighboring lord comes for a visit with his young daughter, Eilis. Sorcha thinks Eilis is boring, but her brothers are quite interested in her, especially Liam. There is soon a celebration to announce Liam and Eilis's engagement. During the celebration, a Briton prisoner is brought into the hall. Finbar asks Sorcha to make a sleeping draft so that he might help the Briton escape before their father and his guards kill him. Sorcha agrees.

Chapter 2. Sometime later Sorcha runs into Father Brien, a priest who lives a hermit's life not far from Sevenwaters, who tells her he needs help with a patient he has been caring for. When Sorcha goes to his home with him, she discovers that Father Brien has been caring for the Briton prisoner.

Sorcha is visited by one of the Fair Folk, the Lady of the Forest, who tells her that she is about to set out on a long, painful journey. The Lady tells Sorcha how to care for Simon and warns her to remain steadfast on her path.

The Briton, Simon, refuses to allow anyone but Sorcha to care for his terrible wounds. Simon is healing, but he has been broken mentally and is filled with anger for the torture he suffered at Colum's hands. Sorcha must fight to get him to trust her.

When Sorcha finally reveals to Father Brien that she has seen the Lady of the Forest, he tells her that her Conor has been chosen to become a druid, and for this reason Conor has great knowledge that continues to grow.



Chapters 1-2 Analysis

These first two chapters introduce the main character of the novel and her family. Sorcha is the first person narrator of the novel, the seventh child of an Irish chieftan. Sorcha has been raised by her brothers and well-meaning servants while her father runs his luath and keeps their lands protected. Colum is a disinterested father, a man who was deeply wounded by the death of his wife and has buried his emotions in his work rather than the care of his children. For this reason, Sorcha has grown up somewhat wild in the forest of her homeland and has developed a very close relationship both to her homeland and her equally wild brothers.

Sorcha's brothers are strong, opinionated men who care very deeply for their only sister. Three of Sorcha's brothers, Liam, Diarmid, and Cormack, are like their father, warriors with a strong sense of patriotism for their homeland. Each of these boys will follow in their father's footsteps and become defenders of Ireland. However, Finbar, Padriac, and Cormack's twin, Conor, are very different. Finbar is a sensitive boy who has the gift of sight, an ability to see the future. Finbar is the closest to Sorcha and for this reason they share an ability to speak without words, a sort of mind reading ability. However, Finbar is a highly secretive young man who often shields his thoughts from Sorcha in an attempt to protect her from things he believes might hurt her. Padriac is creative, a healer of animals and one who often builds new contraptions for whatever he can see a need for. Conor is a scholar, a very mature young man who takes over the running of the household when he is still an adolescent. Sorcha soon learns that Conor has been chosen to become a druid, to become part of an ancient tradition of Ireland that includes the use of magic and knowledge of nature that includes an understanding of fairies and spirits.

Sorcha's world has revolved around her brothers for a long time; therefore, when she learns that the eldest, Liam, is to be married, she becomes very upset. This is the beginning of change for Sorcha and she is very unhappy with it. Sorcha wants things to remain the same forever and the idea that it will not be is very frightening for her. Although this marriage never takes place, it begins a series of events that will change things forever for Sorcha.

A Briton is captured by Lord Colum's men and is tortured in unspeakable ways for information. Finbar, who believes in peace and that all men are basically the same, decides to help the Briton escape from his father's men. This is a dangerous situation that reveals to the reader Finbar's deep understanding of human nature and his own sense of right and wrong. The fact that Finbar tries to protect Sorcha at the same time he asks for her help also reveals the depth of his concern for Sorcha. The fact that Sorcha soon becomes the Briton's nursemaid seems to place Sorcha on a path that will bring her both great pain and great happiness, if the words of the Lady of the Forest are to be believed. Whatever the reader believes, it seems that this Briton, Simon, will play an important role in Sorcha's future, though what that role will be is unclear at this time.



Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary

Chapter 3. Sorcha continues to treat Simon for several weeks, treating his physical wounds and telling him tales to help him through the nightmares that are a result of his mental wounds. A short time later, Father Brien leaves Sorcha and Simon alone to go get supplies in the village. On that day, Sorcha's brothers come for her. Simon begs Sorcha not to go.

Sorcha returns home to discover that her father has brought home a woman he intends to wed. Lady Oonagh is a beautiful woman, much younger than Colum, who appears on the surface to be quite devoted to Colum. Sorcha and her brothers are uneasy around the lady Oonagh. Strange things happen in her presence.

Soon before the wedding, Father Brien comes and agrees that there is something evil about lady Oonagh, but Colum will not listen even to him. At the same time, Sorcha learns that Simon has disappeared.

On the day of the wedding, Eilis is poisoned and Sorcha suspects lady Oonagh has done it just as she suspects Lady Oonagh caused Cormack to hurt his dog.

Chapter 4. Sorcha is forbidden by lady Oonagh to practice the healing arts and must focus on more lady-like pursuits. When Socha fails to heed this warning, her garden and her herbs are destroyed. Sorcha's brothers rally around her, and Conor comes up with a plan.

At their mother's tree, Sorcha and her six brothers form a circle and Conor begins to conduct a ceremony, calling to the Fair Folk. Soon it appears that the prayers have worked, but then Sorcha realizes that the woman walking toward them is not the Lady of the Forest, but lady Oonagh. Lady Oonagh laughs at them and tells them she is much more powerful than they gave her credit for. As Sorcha runs away into the forest, lady Oonagh weaves a spell over the brothers that turns them into swans.

Sorcha runs deep into the forest and makes her way to Father Brien's place. The Lady of the Forest is waiting for her. The Lady of the Forest tells Sorcha that she can reverse the spell on her brothers if she makes six shirts of starwort. Sorcha must make these shirts herself. As Sorcha does this, she must not speak or tell any part of her story to anyone, even her brothers. Sorcha is told that her brothers will be able to return to their human forms twice a year, at midsummer and midwinter. After the Lady of the Forest is gone, Sorcha finds Father Brien dead in his cave.



Chapters 3-4 Analysis

Sorcha makes great progress with Simon, and he begins to come out of the depression that seems to have impeded his healing progress. However, just as Simon begins to trust Sorcha by telling her some of his life story, she learns that her father has returned from his campaign and that she must return home. Simon begs Sorcha not to leave, as she once promised she would not, but she is still a child and must do as her family requests. For this reason, Sorcha leaves Simon alone. She soon learns that he left Father Brien's on his own. Sorcha believes Simon could not survive on his own and must surely be dead. This is an important fact in the overall plot of the novel as Simon's well-being will prove to be imperative later.

At home, Sorcha discovers that her father plans to remarry despite his deep love of their mother and his long grief over her death. Sorcha is put off by this, as would be any child of her age. However, it turns out that Sorcha's concerns are rooted more in reality than in the perception of a jealous child. Lady Oonagh turns out to be some kind of evil witch, someone who takes pleasure from creating chaos and pain for others. Lady Oonagh seduces Diarmid, the second oldest son, and causes the illness of Eilis, Liam's betroth and the deaths of the animals Padriac cares for. Finally, lady Oonagh destroys Sorcha's garden and healing herbs, the only possessions Sorcha has.

Conor is something of a druid priest and he tries to organize his siblings in order to stop lady Oonagh. However, this plan backfires, and he ends up calling lady Oonagh's attention on them. It seems they have played right into lady Oonagh's hands. However, lady Oonagh did not plan on Sorcha escaping her clutches. Now Sorcha is the only hope that her brothers have, the only one who can reverse the curse that has turned them into swans. Sorcha must pay a dreadful price for this, however. Sorcha must not speak and she must make shirts out of the most painful of plants in nature. It will be a difficult task that Sorcha must do alone. Only just thirteen, Sorcha is now all alone and faced with an impossible situation. The reader will truly learn Sorcha's character now.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

Chapter 5. Sorcha settles down in the area the Lady in the Forest told her about, using the cave for shelter, the dog, Linn, her only companion. Sorcha finds a supply of starwort nearby and quickly begins her task.

Winter turns to summer, and Sorcha soon realizes it is nearing midsummer, Mean Sumhraidh. Sorcha takes a day off and walks close to the village that is not far from her cave. Sorcha is spotted by a simple-minded boy who thinks she is a fairy.

That night, Sorcha is waiting near the river when her brothers suddenly appear. The boys are upset when Sorcha will not speak to them, but Conor figures out the reason for this and explains it to the boys. Conor is also able to figure out Sorcha's task and the reasons for it, reassuring the others that Sorcha is not hurting herself without good reason. The boys feel bad for Sorcha and decide to make her situation as easy as they can in the short time they have. Diarmid and Liam cut wood for Sorcha's fire while Padriac and Cormack go into the village to steal supplies.

Chapter 6. One day, Sorcha comes upon an old altar to a Fair Folk on which someone has recently left an offering. Sorcha, still struggling to get enough to eat, steals the bread and cheese. Another six months pass and Sorcha has completed two shirts. Sorcha's brother's return and she learns from Conor of the birth of another brother to her father. Conor then reluctantly tells Liam that his betrothed, Eilis, has been promised to another man. As the boys prepare to leave again, Finbar tells Sorcha that he has seen a terrible future for her, a future so dark that he refuses to show it to her.

Months pass and Sorcha nears the completion of the third shirt. Then, at midsummer, Sorcha is relaxing by the river with her work as Linn catches fish further upstream. Linn first hears the approaching men and begins to bark, warning Sorcha before she is silenced. Then Sorcha finds herself surrounded by three men, one of them the mentally impaired young man from the village. Sorcha is raped and beaten before the men leave, promising to return soon. Sorcha is frightened when she hears her brothers approach, fearful even of these trusted companions. Conor immediately realizes what has happened and tells the others. While Finbar, Liam, and Diarmid go to seek revenge for their sister, Cormack buries his dog and Conor and Padriac coax Sorcha out of her hiding place to treat her injuries. When Finbar returns, he uses his mental connection to Sorcha to help heal her mental trauma by infusing her with good memories of their childhood.

In the weeks after her trauma, Sorcha finds it difficult to focus on anything, let alone work on the shirts. She becomes ill from lack of food and self-care. One day the Lady of the Forest appears and tells Sorcha it is time to move on. The Lady tells Sorcha where there is a boat for her use.



Chapters 5-6 Analysis

Sorcha settles in the forest, where she has always felt at home. The making of shirts from starwort is terribly painful because of the barbs in the plant that never really soften or go away. For this reason, Sorcha's hands are painfully swollen and often become infected where the barbs become embedded in her hands. However, despite her isolation and fear for her brothers, Sorcha finds a sort of happiness in her isolation in her beloved forest.

Sorcha's first visit with her brothers is painful, especially when they realize what she must do to herself in order to reverse the curse. Sorcha sees in her brothers a pain much worse than her own as they find themselves disconnected completely from humanity and missing things at home that should have been their right, such as Liam's relationship with Eilis. There is a certain urgency to Sorcha's work that she feels more intently after seeing her brothers again. However, despite the urgency, Sorcha finds it difficult to finish a shirt any quicker—in part because of her lack of knowledge of clothing making and in part due to the pain and difficulty of working with starwort.

As Sorcha becomes comfortable with her isolation, she begins to forget how important it is to conceal her whereabouts. Sorcha's only fear is that news of her whereabouts will get back to lady Oonagh. However, on midsummer day, Sorcha realizes she should have been fearful of others as well. Sorcha is attacked and left with the promise of more to come. It is a dark and difficult moment for Sorcha, but still she refuses to use her voice to cry out for herself. Still she remains strong. Sorcha's character shines through in this, her worst moment.

Sorcha's brothers return and see the sacrifice their sister has made for them. Although they seek revenge for Sorcha, it is clear that the brothers can no longer protect their sister as they once did. This leaves Sorcha hurt and angry, the anger giving her more strength as she struggles to deal with what has been done to her. However, even her emotional strength is not enough to heal her physically. Sorcha needs help, and it seems the Fair Folk recognize this. The Lady of the Forest comes and tells Sorcha she must move on. This causes Sorcha to embark on yet another journey, taking her somewhere she never could have imagined she would go.



Chapters 7-8

Chapters 7-8 Summary

Chapter 7. Sorcha sits in the boat and allows it to take her where it will. When she is caught in a storm, Sorcha remains in the boat, unable to steer because of the loss of her paddles. As Sorcha's boat passes a bend in the land a couple of men spot her. One man jumps into the water to rescue her. Sorcha thinks he wants to hurt her, so she falls into the river, content to drown. The man manages to save her despite herself.

Back at their camp, the man manages to convince her to change into dry clothes. However, Sorcha remains frightened of the man and his two companions, especially when she realizes they are Britons. It is an uneasy night, but Sorcha sleeps some before waking from a nightmare. The man who saved her, a man called Red by his companions, is awake. Red begins to speak to Sorcha, unsure if she can understand him. Then he shows her the wooden carving Simon had left for her and tells her that it is the first evidence of his brother he has found in his search.

Shortly before dawn, Red's companions wake and they decide they must move on before their enemies find them. Sorcha learns from their discussion that Redbeard, Eilis's father, has his men searching for these Britons. One of the men, Ben, does not like that Red has insisted on taking Sorcha with them. Red tells Ben that he and the other man, John, should go down the path they had planned to take the day before and meet up with a boat they expect to be waiting for them when they reach the sea. Red and Sorcha will take another path with the hope that this will divide Redbeard's forces.

Red and Sorcha make their way painfully slow through the forest with Redbeard's men close behind. They are finally overtaken and Red fights well, but is outnumbered. Sorcha, afraid of being taken back to lady Oonagh, prays for help from the Fair Folk and is rewarded with a sudden storm. Sorcha and Red run away, finding themselves deposited in a cave when the ground beneath them gives way.

After repairing an injury to Red's leg, they rest. Sorcha hears voices and follows the sound to find a chamber filled with Fair Folk. As she speaks to them, Red shows up. The Lady of the Forest warns Red to not hurt Sorcha again. The following morning, Sorcha and Red are rescued by Ben and John.

Chapter 8. During their trip home, Red and his companions stop at a convent, where Sorcha is cleaned and given new clothes. A nun tells Red of Sorcha's injuries and suggests their cause. The nun wants Sorcha to remain there, but Red refuses. Later, the nuns give Sorcha a new name, Jenny.

Sorcha accompanies Red and his friends to Harrowfield, where Red is known as Lord Hugh of Harrowfield. Red makes it clear to all that Sorcha is his guest and should be treated as such, going so far as to provide guards for her.



The people of Harrowfield are not happy to have an Irish woman living in their midst. Rumors quickly begin to spread. Red appears aware of these rumors and asks Sorcha not to wander far from the house without him or Ben or John. Margery, John's wife, befriends Sorcha.

Lord Richard of Northwood, Red's uncle, comes for a visit and is not happy to find an Irish woman living in the home of his daughter's future husband. Richard makes many comments against the Irish, making it clear that he represents an enemy to Sorcha.

Chapters 7-8 Analysis

Sorcha wanders aimlessly down the river, no longer concerned for her own safety. Sorcha is rescued by Red, a Briton who has come to Ireland in search of his brother. It turns out that Red is Simon's brother and that Sorcha has a story to tell him. However, Sorcha cannot tell the story yet; she must remain quiet until the curse is lifted from her brothers. For this reason, Red feels he has no choice but to take Sorcha back to Briton with him.

Sorcha finds herself placed in a position where she must help Red escape from Redbeard's men, afraid that if Red is killed and she is taken captive by Redbeard's men that they will return her to her father's home and to the clutches of lady Oonagh. This will end Sorcha's quest to free her brothers, a quest she has already sacrificed so much for, forcing her to choose her father's enemy over her own. This creates a unique bond between Sorcha and Red that is further complicated by her inability to speak to him or to tell him anything as simple as her name.

Sorcha is taken to Briton, where Red gives her a place in his household despite the reactions of his mother and his household. Sorcha is placed under constant guard, suggesting to the reader that she might be in danger from the Britons simply because of her nationality. It is a difficult situation that leaves Sorcha uneasy, but Red handles it with grace and compassion. Red seems to understand without really understanding Sorcha's need to be silent and to finish the shirts she is making from starwort. Red is a compassionate man who recognizes more in Sorcha than she perhaps recognizes in herself.

Lord Richard, Red's uncle and nearest neighbor, arrives at Harrowfield after a few weeks and makes it clear to everyone that he thinks Red is crazy for giving sanctuary to an Irish woman. Richard has lived his life fighting against the Irish for a cause that Red aptly points out no one can remember. Richard is much like the men who attacked Sorcha so brutally, and he brings back to her memories of that horrible day. It is clear that Red recognizes the danger in his uncle as he reveals to Sorcha that he suspects his uncle has not been completely honest about Richard's role in Simon's disappearance. It is clear that Richard is not a good man and that he poses a dark threat for Sorcha as the novel's plot continues to develop.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

Chapter 9. At midwinter, Sorcha makes plans to escape to the river alone to see her brothers, but is sidetracked when Margery goes into labor. Sorcha is reluctantly allowed into the room to help. Even though Sorcha successfully delivers the child, many still distrust her.

Sorcha arrives at the river shortly before dawn, but there is no sign of her brothers. Sorcha collapses in tears. Red arrives and sits quietly beside Sorcha as she cries. Red makes Sorcha a promise that the moment she is able to tell him of his brother, he will return her to her home.

Sorcha goes in search of more starwort and is surprised when Lord Richard comes upon her. Word is sent to Red and he quickly comes to her rescue. However, Red is angry and forces Sorcha to promise she will never place herself in such a position again.

Richard remains at Harrowfield for a long visit. During this visit, Richard seems to be fishing for information on Sorcha even as he continues to suggest that Simon is dead and that he brought his death on himself. Finally, Richard uses lady Anne to try to convince Red to send Sorcha to Northwoods, but Red refuses.

Chapter 10. Elaine comes for a visit and to begin planning her May Day wedding to Red. When she leaves, several of her household remain behind. Soon after, bad things begin happening to Sorcha.

As the wedding approaches, Margery gives Sorcha a dress she has made for her. While Sorcha is trying the dress on, John, Ben, and Red come into the room. When Sorcha sees desire in Red's eyes, she becomes frightened and runs away. Sorcha has come to believe that Red has been placed under a spell by the Fair Folk to make him love her so that he will protect her.

There is a fire at Harrowfield in the room where the women do their sewing. It is discovered that the fire has been set to intentionally ruin the shirt Sorcha has been working on and the threads she has made. Sorcha goes with John and two guards to the place where the spindlewood grows and harvests enough of the plant to finish the last two shirts. As she is reaching the end of her work, a landside hits the side of the hill where they sit. Sorcha is injured, but John is buried by heavy rocks. John dies in Sorcha's company. Grief causes a darkness to settle over Harrowfield.



Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Sorcha uses her healing knowledge to help Margery deliver her child despite its breech position. This does not win Sorcha any points in the household, however, because people continue to believe that Sorcha is some sort of witch who has cast a spell on Red, and possibly others as well. The darkness of prejudice continues to cloud Sorcha, leaving her fearful for her own safety and concerned about the burden she is creating for Red. It is for this reason that Sorcha chooses to disobey Red and go on her own in search of the plant she needs for the shirts. This leads to trouble when Lord Richard finds Sorcha alone. It is clear to the reader the kind of man Richard is and that he means to harm Sorcha, given a chance. It is for this reason that Red has made the rules he has and tried to keep Sorcha under constant guard.

Red seems to reveal more of himself than he intended when he learns that Richard has been alone with Sorcha. Red is angry, but more than that, he is concerned for Sorcha's safety. It is becoming clearer and clearer to the reader that Red has fallen in love with Sorcha, despite his commitment to marry his cousin, Elaine. This creates some difficulty for Red, who has many responsibilities and expectations as the Lord of Harrowfield.

Richard clearly wants to know who Sorcha is. It seems that his interest is based in an attempt to gain financially from ransoming her to her father. However, the reader suspects this interest goes deeper as Richard continues to tell stories about Simon's disappearance that Red feels are somehow wrong. It seems that Richard had more to do with Simon's capture than he has admitted to Red and his family, something Richard is clearly attempting to hide from his family.

The wedding is quickly approaching and Sorcha finds herself conflicted over it. Sorcha is happy for Red and she likes Elaine, but seeing them together leaves her feeling uneasy and unhappy. However, Sorcha's only concern is freeing her brothers from the curse, and she continues to focus on her task. Odd things begin to happen around the house, and it soon becomes clear that someone is deeply unhappy with Sorcha's presence and is trying to scare her off. This unfortunate circumstance comes to a head when John is killed in what appears to have been an attempt on Sorcha's life. Sorcha is more devastated by this loss than she was by her own brutal attack, weeping for the innocence of a man who had nothing to do with lady Oonagh and her family. A darkness seems to settle over Harrowfield and Sorcha begins to despair for those around her and how her own situation is damaging their lives. Once again, Sorcha's strength of character shines through here even as she faces some of the darkest days of her life.



Chapters 11-13

Chapters 11-13 Summary

Chapter 11. On the day of Red's wedding, he takes Sorcha to a small cove where some seals have come to lay in the sunlight. For most of the morning Sorcha plays on the beach, running and laughing. Sorcha sees a bird in the sky that calls to her. Sorcha realizes it is Conor. Sorcha tells him where he can find her come midsummer.

Red talks to Sorcha about his brother, asking her questions he has never asked before. Red then tells Sorcha that he has learned of a man who fits his brother's description who has shown up at a monastery in the west of Ireland. Red has also been told by his uncle that Simon is dead. Red says he must go to Ireland to find out the truth, but it means leaving Sorcha behind. To protect Sorcha, Red suggests that they be married. Sorcha rejects this idea immediately, but as she thinks about it and realizes this is the question John made her promise to say yes to, Sorcha realizes she must agree. Red and Sorcha are married in a quick ceremony, with Ben as witness. Ben and Sorcha return to Harrowfield while Red goes back to Ireland to search for his brother.

Back at Harrowfield, although now the lady of the house, Sorcha returns to her silent existence and her work on the shirts. Lady Anne takes control of Harrowfield, but she fails to mediate several tenant disputes. In the end, lady Anne is forced to rely on her brother, Lord Richard, to help mediate disputes at Harrowfield.

Chapter 12. It is midsummer, and Sorcha knows that Conor will be coming. She has made plans to sneak out of the house after supper to meet him by the river, but lady Anne has decided that they will throw a supper for all of Harrowfield in the gardens that day. Sorcha finds herself stuck in the company of Lord Richard. As dusk settles over the area, Sorcha knows she must get away. Sorcha tells Ben that she is sick to her stomach, and she manages to convince him to allow her to go next to the river alone. There Sorcha finds Conor waiting for her. They hug and speak quickly, but Sorcha knows there is danger for Conor here and she warns him to be ready to flee. Before Conor can leave, however, Lord Richard and Ben find Sorcha in his arms.

Lord Richard immediately orders Sorcha's arrest, claiming she has been unfaithful to her husband, that she has given defensive secrets to the enemy, and that she is a witch. Sorcha is placed in a small cell in Harrowfield. At first, it seems that Sorcha is destined to fail at her task of creating the shirts, but then Lady Anne brings the shirts and her fibers to her. For the next three months, Sorcha works non-stop on the sixth and final shirt in an attempt to get it finished before her trial and punishment.

Richard begins coming to see Sorcha. At first, Sorcha is afraid that he has less than honorable intentions, but soon learns that he is no longer interested in forcing himself on her. Instead, Richard has decided that Sorcha truly will never speak again, making her a safe confidant. Richard begins telling Sorcha things he cannot tell anyone else,



such as of an alliance between him and Redbeard's son-in-law, or the pact he has made with lady Oonagh in order to be sure Sorcha burns along with the shirts. Richard also confesses that Simon overheard information about Richard's dealings in Ireland that he should not have heard and that Richard intended to have Simon killed before he disappeared and was later captured. Finally, Richard informs Sorcha that the priest he has been waiting for to help conduct her trial has arrived and it is time for her to face her punishment.

Chapter 13. Sorcha's trial has come. Sorcha is taken to a large room where many of Harrowfield's tenants watch as she is questioned by Lord Richard and a representative of the bishop, Father Dominic. This is not the priest Lord Richard had hoped would come, but he cannot wait any longer to rid himself of Sorcha. Lord Richard and his men testify to Sorcha's infidelity and her powers as a witch, reporting lies and rumors instead of concrete evidence. The one person who might have testified on Sorcha's behalf, Ben, is nowhere to be found. Toward the end of Lord Richard's testimony, Sorcha passes out from malnutrition. Lady Anne, Margery and the maid, Megan, clean Sorcha and feed her a little food. Later, Sorcha is given the chance to offer a defense, but Sorcha cannot imagine what she could silently tell the court that would help her. Sorcha is taken back to her cell.

Sorcha spends the night quickly working on the last shirt, completing one sleeve and partially sewing it to the shirt. The other sleeve has not even been started, however. Sorcha is taken to a room downstairs where Richard tells her that the verdict is guilty and that she will burn at dusk. Sorcha is to stay in this room where she can watch the preparations for her burning, but will not be allowed to work on the last shirt. Sorcha does not cry for herself when she is alone, but cries for her brothers. Even though she has seen a vision of the future, of her own three children playing by the lake in Sevenwaters, Sorcha believes she will die this day. For this reason, Sorcha calls to her brothers and tells them to come, telling them this is the only chance.

When Sorcha is placed on the pyre, her hands are left free. A kind guard places the basket of shirts near enough that Sorcha can reach them. As the sun begins to go down and Richard lights the pyre, Sorcha can see five swans flying toward her. Sorcha quickly places a shirt around the neck of each swan. Finbar is late and Sorcha cries to him in her mind as the fire begins to lick the underside of the platform where she stands. Red arrives with Ben and Simon. Red moves through the crowd to where Sorcha is, but the crowd is thick and does not recognize him. Sorcha sees an archer in an upstairs window, his arrow pointed toward Red. As the last shirt is pulled from Sorcha's hands by a sudden gust of wind, Sorcha calls out to Red, warning him just in time to avoid a fatal hit. Although injured, Red continues to Sorcha, pulling her from the pyre at the last possible moment. Sorcha cries in Red's arms, convinced her brothers will forever be swans because of her failure to remain silent.



Chapters 11-13 Analysis

Red is to marry Elaine, consolidating Harrowfield and Northwoods for future generations. However, Red is in love with Sorcha, something only the reader seems to understand at this point in the novel. Red takes Sorcha to the sea, where she plays on the beach for several hours before he tells her that he is returning to Ireland. To protect her, Red says, he wants her to become his wife. The reader can tell from the way in which Red asks and his response to Sorcha's initial reluctance that he really wants to marry her in the hopes that she will one day willingly stand beside him as his wife.

By marrying Sorcha, Red has indeed protected her from the sexual advances of his uncle and from the outright scorn of those in his household. However, Red has not protected her from his mother's disapproval or from the evil maneuverings of his uncle. When Sorcha is spotted in the arms of Conor, who is barely clothed because of the curse, she is immediately accused of infidelity. In the 800s, a wife's infidelity is considered a terrible crime, but it is complicated when Richard also accuses her of giving information to the enemy and of being a witch. Sorcha is placed in a jail cell and treated with disregard, left to starve and to lie in her own filth. At the same time, Sorcha must listen to Richard's confessions of all he has done to hurt his family and to win power both in Briton and in Ireland. Richard's true evil nature comes to light in these confessions, making it clear that lady Oonagh continues to wreak havoc in Sorcha's life even from such a distance.

Sorcha is unable to defend herself against the charges Richard has leveled against her and accepts her death. Sorcha is strong until the final moments, remaining silent even though she could clear her name if she only spoke up in her own defense at her trial or told someone the truth about Richard. Instead, Sorcha hopes to reverse the curse on her brothers in the final minutes of her life, sacrificing all for those she loves. However, instead of sacrificing her life for her brothers, Sorcha sacrifices her brothers for Red. In the end, Sorcha breaks her silence out of love for the man who has become her husband.



Chapters 14-16

Chapters 14-16 Summary

Chapter 14. As Sorcha lies in tears in Red's arms, he becomes aware of strange men attempting to pull her away. Red warns them away, but they tell Red they are her brothers. Sorcha turns and discovers that each of her six brothers is standing around her in tattered clothing. Sorcha goes to them and Red is taken into the house by Ben. Sorcha and her brothers are immediately surrounded by angry Britons, who cannot believe what they have seen with their own eyes. It is not until Father Dominic returns with lady Anne that they realize that not only was Sorcha falsely accused and placed on the pyre by Richard, but that she has performed a miracle by lifting the curse on her brothers.

Sorcha and her brothers are taken into the house by lady Anne, where they are given clean clothes and food. Sorcha's brothers begin to plan their return to Ireland, which they plan to do first thing in the morning. Sorcha's brothers insist that Sorcha must go with them and Sorcha reluctantly agrees, aware that life would be ultimately easier for Red if she were no longer around. In fact, Sorcha believes that Red continues to be under the Fair Folk's spell and that he will quickly forget her when she leaves. However, when Red returns to the house after arresting Richard, he is deeply grieved by the news that Sorcha will be leaving. Red insists that he be the one to escort Sorcha and her brothers safely to the sea.

On the trip to the sea, Simon rides with Sorcha. Sorcha tells him all that Richard told her. Simon then tells Sorcha how he left Father Brien's home and was taken by the Fair Folk. He said it was like more than twenty years where he went, a place where his wounds ceased to exist and his mind was tormented. Simon swore that it was his memories of Sorcha that kept him sane during this time and what helped him survive. Simon asks Sorcha why she did not wait for him and Sorcha explains that she was only a child and did not know he loved her.

At the sea, Sorcha tries to find a way to say goodbye to Red, but she cannot. Finally Sorcha signals to Red how much she loves him before jumping into the boat and beginning her journey back to Sevenwaters.

Chapter 15. Sorcha and her brothers make the long journey back to Sevenwaters, walking many days upon reaching Ireland's shores. When they reach the outer boundary of their home, they are surprised to see there are no watchmen. Trees have been cut down and the villagers are suffering from illness, the cold, and starvation. When they reach their home, they find Donal has returned and has taken charge of the house. Donal tells them that lady Oonagh left over a week ago and took her son with her. Donal also says that their father, Colum, has gone insane from grief. Sorcha finds her father in her old garden, but he does not recognize her.



Sorcha and her brothers quickly set to repairing the damage done by lady Oonagh. Sorcha spends her time rebuilding her stores of herbs and ministering to the people of the village. Liam takes charge of their defense, Conor their stores. Finbar begins to spend a great deal of time with their father, using his mental powers to help heal Colum's mind. Soon neighbors begin visiting and Liam works with Redbeard to find a way to rid them of the traitor Eamonn.

Chapter 16. As time passes, Sorcha finds it harder and harder to forget Red. One day Sorcha realizes her hands have healed enough so that she can finally wear the wooden wedding ring he carved for her. Sorcha begins to cry, wondering why she must suffer so. The Lady of the Forest comes and tells Sorcha that her journey is almost complete and she will soon find happiness. After dinner that night, a guard brings a prisoner into the house and Sorcha immediately recognizes Red. Finbar stops Sorcha from speaking as Conor and her father force Red to tell them a story. In his story, Red reveals his deep love for Sorcha and how he has given up his life in Harrowfield in order to be with her in Ireland. Colum leaves the choice of what to do with Red up to Sorcha.

As Sorcha and Red come happily together, Sorcha's brothers begin to search for their own futures. Diarmid, consumed with hatred for lady Oonagh, decides to go in search of her. Cormack follows. Conor is called into the forest by the druids to finish his training. One morning, Finbar disappears at the lake's edge. Padriac begins to build a boat and will soon leave to explore the world. Colum decides to go in search of Diarmid and his seventh son. Sorcha and Red prepare for the birth of their first child, fated to be the next generation of Sevenwaters.

Chapters 14-16 Analysis

Sorcha has been incredibly strong throughout the novel, putting up with terrible things in order to make sure her brothers recover from the curse lady Oonagh has placed on them. However, when her brothers return to their human forms, Sorcha becomes silent once more, allowing her brothers to make her choices for her. Among these choices is the idea that she must return to Ireland with them despite her marriage to Red. Sorcha is saddened by this because she has finally come to the realization that she loves Red, but she continues to believe Red has been under a spell by the Fair Folk and that he will be happier without her. This proves to be false, as Sorcha finally learns months later that there was no spell, that Red's love had always been his own choice.

It is something of a surprising turn when Sorcha and her brothers all return to Ireland, but not surprising. Sorcha is a child of the forest and she loves her land as much as her brothers. Despite Sorcha's grief over Red, she is happy back at Sevenwaters with her brothers. However, fate pulls this family apart once again, leaving Sorcha to continue on the family legacy at Sevenwaters. It is a happy day for Sorcha when Red comes to her there and confesses his love in such a way that even her brothers cannot help but accept him as their sister's husband, despite his nationality. It seems Sorcha has finally found happiness in her life despite all that has happened.



Characters

Sorcha/Jenny

Sorcha is the seventh child of Lord Colum of Sevenwaters, an Irish warlord. Sorcha's mother died at her birth; therefore, Sorcha has been raised by her six older brothers and well-meaning servants. Sorcha's father is rarely present in the family home because of his duties as warlord and his constant campaigns against foreign powers, such as the Norsemen, Picts, and Britons. For this reason, Sorcha is something of a wild child who has grown up in the forest, learning firsthand about nature and the power of herbs.

When Sorcha is only twelve, her brother helps a Briton prisoner escape his father's clutches. Sorcha finds herself becoming nursemaid to this man when he struggles mentally with what has been done to him. Sorcha tells him stories and cares for his wounds, slowly gaining ground with him both physically and emotionally. However, news from home forces Sorcha to leave this prisoner earlier than she would have liked. The prisoner disappears, leaving Sorcha convinced that he has died wandering alone in the forest.

Sorcha's father then marries a woman who is evil, a witch who curses Sorcha's six brothers and turns them into swans. Only Sorcha can reverse the curse, but she must sacrifice greatly in this effort. However, Sorcha loves her brothers so much that she sacrifices everything, including her sense of safety, her virtue, and nearly her life. The only thing that could stop Sorcha from saving her brothers is her love for Red, a Briton lord who has made himself her protector and husband. Sorcha is known as Jenny while living with Red in Harrowfield, due to the fact that she cannot speak and give him her true name.

Sorcha realizes her love for Red much too late and realizes that the love is more than likely one-sided, because she believes Red has been placed under a spell by the Fair Folk in order to compel him to protect Sorcha. However, Sorcha learns that this is untrue just hours before Red shows up at her father's house and declares his love for her. Finally, after much sacrifice, Sorcha is rewarded with love.

Lord Hugh of Harrowfield/Red

Lord Hugh of Harrowfield, or Red as his friends call him, is a Briton lord who has inherited his father's lands in Northumbria. Red is a kind, non-violent man who believes in the goodness of the earth, the future of agriculture, and respect of all things. Red is considered a coward by his uncle, who is constantly waging war against the Irish, even though Red proves himself against a band of Irish warriors to be a capable warrior in his own right.

Red's brother, Simon, has always seen himself as a mistake waiting to happen, someone who can never do anything right, while Simon sees Red as someone who has



never made a wrong choice. For this reason, Simon goes on campaign in Ireland with his uncle. Simon wants to prove himself a strong man, a good warrior. Instead, Simon overhears something he should not and is targeted for death by his uncle. Fortunately—or unfortunately—Simon is captured by Lord Colum's men before his uncle can kill him. Simon is tortured and then cannot be found.

Red goes to Ireland in search of his brother when his uncle's responses to questioning about Simon's fate ring false. Red finds little evidence of his brother until he rescues a young woman from drowning and discovers a wood carving among her belongings, a carving that has the crest of Harrowfield on it. Since the girl cannot speak, Red takes her home with him and makes her his guest at Harrowfield until she can tell him what she knows about Simon. In the process of protecting the girl he has dubbed Jenny from his uncle, Red falls in love with her.

Red marries Jenny with the intention of protecting her from his uncle when he returns to Ireland to find Simon. However, this marriage does little to protect Jenny, but instead gives Lord Richard reason to arrest Jenny after catching her in the arms of an Irish man. Red learns of Jenny's situation and rushes home, arriving just in time to save her life. However, in the process, Red discovers that Jenny has reversed the curse on her brothers and is to return home with them. Red feels as though he has lost the only woman he could love, but when she leaves, she leaves him with a declaration of love that is unmistakable. Red gives up everything to be with Jenny in her native homeland.

John

John is one of Red's friends and a member of his personal guard. John travels with Red to Ireland in search of Simon, despite the fact that John's wife is expecting their second child. John is a kind man who offers unconditional understanding to Jenny from the moment he meets her. John's wife, Margery, will become Jenny's only friend while she is living at Harrowfield. Unfortunately, John is killed while guarding Jenny as she collects more of the spiny plant from which she must make her brother's shirts. Jenny feels great guilt for this death. Later, when Red proposes to Jenny, she feels she must agree because she unwittingly promised John as he lay dying that she would.

Ben

Ben is another of Red's close friends and a member of his guard. Ben is also with Red on his trip to Ireland to search for Simon. Ben expresses doubt about the girl Red rescued from the river, worried that taking her with them will cause them to move too slowly, allowing their enemies to catch up to them. However, over time Ben comes to like Jenny, as he knows Sorcha, and puts a great deal of energy into protecting her at Red's request. When Red decides to marry Jenny instead of his betrothed, Elaine, Ben is the one he trusts to help with the arrangements and to have as witness at the wedding.



Lord Richard of Northwoods

Lord Richard of Northwoods is Red's uncle, the brother of Red's mother. Lord Richard is a man who has become obsessed with battling the Irish, even though Red claims that no one can quite remember what began the conflict. Lord Richard makes many trips to Ireland in order to fight and gain more land on the island. However, Lord Colum and Redbeard have thus far been successful in keeping Lord Richard from success in Ireland. As a result, Lord Richard has become somewhat power-hungry, hoping to use his daughter's marriage to Red to force Red to add his own forces to those Richard has already gathered in order to give him an army big enough to destroy Lord Colum.

When Sorcha, known as Jenny, comes to Harrowfield, Richard at first sees her as a possible ransom against one of the warlords in Ireland. However, the more Richard learns about Jenny and her relationship with Red, he begins to think that perhaps Jenny knows something about Richard's involvement in the disappearance of Red's brother, Simon. Then, when Richard returns to Ireland and tells lady Oonagh about Jenny, he is told that she is the daughter of Lord Colum and should be burned, along with her shirts that she is making. The lady Oonagh promises Lord Richard if he burns Jenny, she will make sure he is well rewarded.

Lord Richard hopes that by killing Jenny, not only will he get what he wants in Ireland, but he will be able to convince Red to marry Elaine after all, giving him the power in Britain that he desperately seeks. To this end, Richard overestimates his power and nearly puts Jenny to death when it is not sanctioned by the court. For this reason, Richard is arrested and punished after Jenny has returned to Ireland.

Conor

Conor is Sorcha's brother. Conor is a gentle young man who is clearly not fit to be a warrior. Conor is very intelligent, even learning how to read and write at the hands of the hermit priest, Father Brien. Sorcha will learn while caring for Simon that Conor has been chosen by the Fair Folk to become a druid, explaining a great deal about the knowledge Conor seems to possess and powers he has that begin to manifest soon after. Conor can read Sorcha's thoughts and project his own thoughts into her mind. Conor can also conduct ceremonies that call the Fair Folk forward. In fact, Conor attempts to do this to rid his family of the evil of lady Oonagh, but fails. Conor, along with his five brothers, is turned into a swan by lady Oonagh. Unlike his brothers, however, Conor holds on to some of his human knowledge, allowing him to keep tabs on his father and sister while a swan.

Finbar

Finbar is Sorcha's brother. Finbar is a gentle, caring child who goes out of his way to rescue a Briton prisoner from his father's home despite the danger this places him in with his father and the lack of gratitude from the prisoner. Finbar and Sorcha have a



close connection and can use their minds to talk to one another. This special connections causes Finbar and Sorcha to be very close. However, as events unfold in the novel, Sorcha finds that Finbar is blocking more and more of his mind from her. The reason seems to be that Finbar has the gift of sight—he can see the future—and the future he sees is a dark one. Finbar is worried for Sorcha and the future that he sees coming for her. In the end, Finbar is unable to protect Sorcha, and this causes him great pain. At the same time, Finbar has fallen in love in his swan state with another swan and has been forced to leave his lover. This causes Finbar even more pain, eventually leading to him disappearing to places unknown to Sorcha.

Colum

Colum is the lord of Sevenwaters, a seventh son of a seventh son. Colum should not have inherited his family home, but each of his six brothers was killed in combat protecting their homeland. Colum should have become a druid, but he fell deeply in love and was passed over. Colum's love for his wife was absolute. Therefore, when she died Colum was devastated, surviving only by throwing himself into the running of his land. Colum is rarely home, and when he is he is a strict, dispassionate father. Colum wants his sons to be warriors and is deeply unhappy when Finbar suggests Britons are human and should not be treated as enemies.

Colum falls under the spell of an evil witch, lady Oonagh, and brings her home to become his wife. Colum is so deeply under the spell of this woman that he will not heed the warnings of his sons or his priest. When Colum marries lady Oonagh, bad things begin to happen at Sevenwaters, culminating in the disappearance of all seven of Colum's children. Colum is so devastated by this that he goes insane. However, when the children return, Finbar helps him to restore his sanity.

Lady Oonagh

Lady Oonagh is an evil woman who places Lord Colum under a spell that convinces him to marry her. Lady Oonagh uses the weaknesses of those around her to bring evil and unhappiness to Sevenwaters. When Conor and his siblings try to ask the Fair Folk to stop her, lady Oonagh places a curse on the brothers that turns them into swans. Only Sorcha can reverse the curse, therefore lady Oonagh does all she can to find Sorcha. Fortunately, despite many sacrifices, Sorcha manages to reverse the curse and return order to Sevenwaters.

Lady of the Forest

Lady of the Forest is one of the Fair Folk, known in an ancient story as Deirdre. The Lady of the Forest is something of an advisor to Sorcha during the course of the novel, warning her of the path she is about to set out on, telling her how to reverse the curse on her brothers, and urging her to move on when her hiding place in the forest becomes too dangerous. The Lady of the Forest, along with other members of the Fair Folks,

seems to be playing a game with Sorcha and her family. However, they also give her a great reward in helping her find true love with Red.



Objects/Places

Amulet

Sorcha's mother gives Finbar an amulet she has worn around her neck the day she dies. Finbar gives this same amulet to Sorcha after being cursed to live as a swan. Sorcha returns it to Finbar with the curse is lifted, but later finds it by the lake after Finbar unexpectedly disappears.

Wooden Wedding Ring

Red gives Sorcha a wooden wedding ring he has carved by hand on their wedding day, suggesting that he planned to marry her long before he revealed his decision.

Wood Carving

When Simon disappears, he leaves a wooden carving where it will be found, with the suggestion that he has left it for Sorcha. Sorcha later learns the picture carved on the piece of wood is the crest of Harrowfield. Red recognizes this carving as belonging to his brother when he finds it among Sorcha's things.

Starwort Shirts

Sorcha must make six shirts out of the starwort plant in order to reverse the curse lady Oonagh has placed on her brothers. However, this plant contains many tiny barbs that cause those who touch it terrible pain.

Swans

Sorcha's six brothers are transformed into swans through an evil spell by their stepmother, lady Oonagh.

Herbs

Sorcha uses all kinds of herbs to heal her patients. Lady Oonagh uses herbs to poison and curse those around her.

Wood Pyre

Sorcha is to burn on a wooden pyre for the crimes of infidelity, treason, and witch craft. However, Red returns just in time to save her from death.



Sevenwaters

Sevenwaters is the name of Sorcha's home in Ireland, named for seven streams that meet in a lake near her home.

Harrowfield

Harrowfield is the name of Red's lands in Britain.

Northwoods

Northwoods is the name of the lands Lord Richard owns and governs.

Northumbria

Northumbria is a section of Britain where Harrowfield and Northwoods is located.

Ireland

Ireland is the island country where Sorcha lives with her six brothers.



Themes

Family

One of the major themes of this novel is family. In the beginning of the novel, this theme is clear in the dynamics of Sorcha's family. Although Sorcha's mother has died and her father appears to be largely disinterested in his offspring, it is clear that Sorcha and her brothers are especially close. In fact, Sorcha's brothers have raised her despite their own young age, and they behave with one another as though they are seven pieces of one whole.

Sorcha grows up believing that her brothers will always be a part of her life and she can rely on them no matter what might happen. However, when lady Oonagh comes into their lives, Sorcha discovers that it is she her brothers must rely on. Sorcha dedicates her life to working to reverse the curse that lady Oonagh has put on her brothers, giving up the power of speech and ruining her hands to work the spiny plant, starwort. It seems such a small sacrifice to Sorcha when the alternative is to never see her brothers again. However, Sorcha will soon have to give up much more, testing her love for her brothers almost beyond her limits.

At the same time Sorcha is struggling to do as she has been asked to save her beloved brothers, Red is searching in Ireland for his brother. Red and his brother were never very close, as Red was older and had different interests than Simon. However, Red is loyal to his family, and for this reason is driven to find the answers to his brother's sudden disappearance while on campaign in Ireland. The only answers Red can find are connected to a young Irish girl who refuses to speak and insists on making shirts out of a painful plant. In the end, Red gets the answers he seeks without the girl saying a word. Red then realizes that the only way he can have what he truly wants, the woman he loves, he must give up his biological family and embrace a world he only marginally understands. For this reasons, and those mentioned above, family is a major theme in this novel.

Love

Love is a powerful motivator and therefore is often a theme in novels. In this novel, love takes several forms. In the beginning, there was the love between Colum and his wife, Niamh. Colum loved Niamh so much that he gave up the chance to be a druid in order to be with her. However, Niamh's death after the birth of Sorcha was so devastating to Colum that he practically gave up his children in his decision to throw all of his energies into running his small kingdom.

Love continues as a theme in the relationships between Sorcha and her brothers. Not only does Sorcha love her brothers, but she feels as though they are all one, made of



the same cloth. This deep love motivates Sorcha to sacrifice everything, nearly giving her life, to give her brothers' back their humanity.

Love is corrupted and used for evil when lady Oonagh comes to Sevenwaters. Lady Oonagh convinces both Colum and his son, Diarmid, that she loves them and will do anything for them. However, lady Oonagh is only using this excuse to control these men and use them to bring devastation to Sevenwaters.

Finally, romantic love comes into the novel as Sorcha is rescued by Red. Even though Red is a Briton, he falls in love with Sorcha the moment he sees her, nearly drowning in the river. Sorcha does not see it immediately, but she slowly begins to fall in love with Red as well. In the end, Sorcha nearly chooses Red over her brothers when she finally uses her voice again, to warn Red against sure death. Sorcha thinks that Red does not love her, however, and has only been placed under a spell. However, it soon becomes apparent that Red is Sorcha's reward for all the sacrifices she has made to reverse the curse on her brothers.

Strength

Character is a major driving force of the plot in this novel. As part of this, one character must show her strength, her ability to keep silent and to preserve no matter what is done to her physically or emotionally. After her brothers are turned into swans with a curse from an evil witch, Sorcha is told that she must remain silent, telling her story to no one, until she has completed six shirts made of starwort and placed them around the necks of each brother. At first, Sorcha thinks this will only take a few months, but it takes nearly three years.

Sorcha is happy in her task at first, despite missing her brothers and feeling quite alone. However, when Sorcha is brutally attacked by two men, she nearly breaks her vow of silence, but holds on to her desire to restore her brothers' humanity to them. Sorcha is deeply wounded by this experience, both physically and mentally, leaving her deeply angry and afraid of all men, including her brothers. For a short time Sorcha considers giving up her task, but she never breaks her vow of silence and never truly gives up.

Later, Sorcha is rescued by a Briton and is taken to his home. This presents Sorcha with a quandary. While living with the Briton provides her with a safe home and food to help her complete her task, it places her in a situation where she is dependent on her father's enemy and is bringing trouble onto her protector by causing his friends and family to question his judgment and his authority. Then, when a friend dies in an attempt on Sorcha's life, she is nearly ready to give up, consumed by the unfairness of the situation. However, Sorcha continues to fight on.

Even when faced with the loss of her own life, Sorcha continues to fight. Sorcha sits in a cell and continues work on the shirts, determined to finish them even though she knows that her trial will end in a guilty verdict and she will be sentenced to death. On the day her sentence is announced, Sorcha's only regret is that she has not completely finished

all the shirts and her hope that what she has done is enough. Standing on a pyre, fire burning around her, Sorcha completes her task, the last task she anticipates she will ever complete. This shows the depth of Sorcha's strength, her character one of amazing maturity and determination. For this reason, strength is a theme of the novel.



Style

Point of View

This novel is written in the first person point of view. The narrating character is Sorcha, seventh child of Lord Colum of Sevenwaters. Sorcha tells the story from some point in the future, often stopping her narration to clarify a moment for the reader or to comment on a significant element to the story. These comments add a little of the authorial voice to the story, giving the reader advanced knowledge of Sorcha's story, such as the fact that she must survive her ordeal and her near burning due to the fact that she is telling the story from some point in the future.

The point of view of this story works well with the plot of the novel because it creates an intimate relationship between the reader and Sorcha, giving the reader a reason to care what might happen to Sorcha. This point of view also allows the author to develop the character of Sorcha in such a way that the reader alone is witness to the terrible struggle Sorcha must endure in order to save her brothers and win the heart of the man she loves. For this reason, the point of view of this novel works well with the plot.

Setting

The novel begins in Ireland in approximately the year 837. This time period is one of great strife in Ireland where there are multiple warlords who must fight to preserve their land against their enemies who include the Norsemen, Picts, and Britons. As the novel progresses, three years pass and the main character is transported from her home at Sevenwaters to the forest and finally to Britain.

The novel is filled with rich nuggets of history that include both Ireland and Britain. The setting allows the author to explore the history of these two nations early in their development, including the strife that caused peoples of each nation to misunderstand the purpose of the other. This creates conflict in the novel; therefore, the author is able to use her setting to create themes that propel the plot of the novel. At the same time, the author carefully creates two fictional estates that represent the reality of the time period, giving the reader a feel for what it might have been to really live in this time period. For this reason, the setting of the novel is essential to the plot of the novel.

Language and Meaning

Although the novel is set in the early to mid-800s and uses two different languages, the majority of the language in this novel is simple English. The author never attempts to use foreign words or phrases in her novel except for those terms that are generally understood. The language of the novel is educated, perhaps a little out of the realm of the characters who populate the novel, but is simple enough that the intended audience of the novel can easily understand and follow the action and dialogue of the novel.



While the language of the novel is not truly authentic to the characters, the language is clear and precise, a language that is of intelligence and a clarity that makes the novel simple to read even for the youngest readers. The language allows the author to tell a story without complications of foreign languages or colorful metaphors that might make it difficult for unsophisticated readers to comprehend. Therefore, the language of the novel works well with the plot of the novel.

Structure

The novel is divided into sixteen chapters. Each chapter is quite long, some as long as fifty pages. Each chapter is divided into multiple scenes, some covering large amounts of time. The novel is written in simple narration and dialogue, showing the story as much as the narrator tells parts of the story.

The novel contains several plots. The main plot follows Sorcha as she fights to remain silent and create the shirts of starwort that will save her brothers from the curse that makes them swans. This plot takes Sorcha through years of silence and dark, tragic episodes that leave her almost desperate to end the curse. Another plot involves Sorcha's relationship with Simon, a Briton her father took hostage and tortured before her brother managed to free him. This plot leads Sorcha to Red, Simon's brother who is searching for news of his brother. Another plot follows Lord Richard's attempts to learn Sorcha's true identity and to burn her under orders from Sorcha's stepmother, lady Oonagh. All the plots of this novel come to a satisfying conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

"If you are lucky enough to grow up the way I did, you have plenty of good things to remember."

Chap. 1, p. 7

"Some broken things you can't mend. Some you have to put together very slowly, piece by fragile piece, waiting until the last bit of work is strong before you try the next. It takes a lot of patience."

Chap. 3, p. 74

"For me, there was worse to come. I should have been prepared, but I was not."

Chap. 3, p. 112

"These trees held in their hearts the tale of our growing years, and now they were to witness a mystery greater than any in our experience."

Chap. 4, p. 127

"'Until we return,' said Cormack, or maybe it was someone else, and then it was really dawn, and there was a sound of rushing wind, and swirling waters, and beating wings, and I ran blinded by tears back to my cave and lay there facedown weeping, for losing them now was no easier than last time and I did not want to see, or even to imagine, the slipping away of their minds and the transformation of their selves into creatures of the wild."

Chap. 5, p. 161

"Hindsight is a fine thing. At the time, safe back by our little fire, sharing this wonderful, unexpected feast as dusk fell, I basked in the forest's protection, and I never thought such a small act could herald such terrible consequences."

Chap. 6, p. 164

"My body tensed with fear, and suddenly the thought of slipping over the side, of sinking down below the water and out of this world seemed altogether good, the only sensible thing to do."

Chap. 7, p. 189

"I wondered, later, why it did not break my heart to go away across the sea, far from the forest, leaving no sign my brothers could read, no map or chart by which they might find me."

Chap. 8, p. 216

"On the worst days, when snow fell soft outside and lanterns lit the room where we worked even at midday, I had to fight hard to keep back tears as I forced myself to go on."

Chap. 9, p. 253



"He hates me, I thought. They all hate me. And with good reason, for in this household I am nothing but a destroyer."

Chap. 10, p. 316

"But still I felt alone, so alone; the path was indeed a hard one, and full of dangers."

Chap. 12, p. 344

"Real life is not quite as it is in stories. In the old tales, bad things happen, and when the tale has unfolded and come to its triumphant conclusion, it is as if the bad things had never been. Life is not as simple as that, not quite."

Chap. 16, p. 447



Topics for Discussion

Who is Sorcha? Why does she grow up wild in the forests of Ireland? What happened to Sorcha's mother? Who raised Sorcha? Who is Finbar? What is unusual about Sorcha's relationship with Finbar? What can Finbar see in Sorcha's future? How does Finbar attempt to protect Sorcha from this future? Is he successful? Why or why not?

Who is Simon? How does Sorcha come to be Simon's nursemaid? Why will Simon only accept the help of Sorcha in his time of convalescence? How does this compare to Sorcha's later reluctance to allow a man to touch her? What story does Simon tell Sorcha about himself? What does this story foreshadow for Sorcha's future? What is Simon's fear in regards to returning home? Why is Simon so reluctant to go home? Did Simon betray his people under torture? How does the reader know this?

Who is lady Oonagh? How does lady Oonagh come to live at Sevenwaters? What is her intention at Sevenwaters? How does Sorcha become aware of lady Oonagh's ability with herbs and spells? Who does Conor think will be lady Oonagh's first targets among the people of Sevenwaters? Why? What does lady Oonagh cause Cormack to do to Linn? What happens to Padriac's animals? What does lady Oonagh do to Sorcha that proves to be the last straw for the sons of Colum?

What curse does lady Oonagh place on the sons of Colum? How does she do this? How does Sorcha escape this curse? Why does Sorcha think the curse is irreversible? Is it? What does the Lady of the Forest tell Sorcha about the curse? What must Sorcha do to help her brothers? How long does Sorcha believe this will take? How long does it take? Why must Sorcha be silent while she works to reverse the curse? Is she?

Who is Red? Where does Sorcha meet him? Why does Red take Sorcha home with him? What does Red learn about Sorcha that causes him to be more cautious about her safety? Why does Red set guards outside Sorcha's room while she lives with him? How do the people of Red's household react to Sorcha's presence? What do they think of her work with the starwort plant? What things begin to happen around Sorcha that convince her she is nothing but a burden to Red?

Why does Red marry Sorcha? Is the marriage legal? Why does Sorcha agree to the wedding? Does Sorcha believe Red to be in love with her? Is Sorcha in love with Red? Why is Sorcha accused of infidelity? With whom has she committed this crime? Why does Sorcha fail to defend herself at her trial? How might Sorcha have defended herself? What is to be Sorcha's punishment?

Why does Sorcha agree to go home with her brothers? Why does Sorcha refuse to stay with Red? Why does Red not ask Sorcha to stay? How does this compare to the story Red told Sorcha in the beach cove? What does Sorcha and her brothers find when they return home? What has caused this situation? Why does Sorcha remain in Ireland?



Who finds Sorcha in Ireland? Who finally gives Sorcha the right to choose whether or not to remain with Red? For what reason? What lies in Sorcha's future as the book reaches its conclusion?