

# **Daughters of the House Study Guide**

**Daughters of the House by Michele (B.) Roberts**

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## Plot Summary

Now middle-aged, two cousins reunite at their ancestral country house in the small town of Blémont in Normandy, France. The house itself contains brutal secrets from the time of the Second World War, when Thérèse's and Léonie's mothers were young women. Thérèse, who has been living a sheltered life as a nun, returns to the Martin estate, where Léonie waits for her. Léonie, having chosen a life with Baptiste, the son of a local farming family, has been living in the Martin house and raising a family. Léonie is full of intense anticipation and anger as she waits for Thérèse to arrive. As young girls, the two women shared the role of "daughter of the house" when Léonie and her mother came to spend summers in France. The two cousins have a relationship full of shared secrets, jealousies, and competition within the household, colored by Baptiste's presence, secrets from the past, sexual exploration, and Antoinette's progressively deteriorating health.

The novel is a retelling, from two mixed viewpoints, of the girls' childhood and particularly the "odd summer" when the two reach adolescence and Antoinette dies of cancer. The girls watch as Antoinette becomes weaker and then dies, and they deal with the pain of her loss in their own ways. Léonie builds up a fierce anger against the other girl as Thérèse tries at all costs to win the attentions of her father, Louis. Thérèse becomes more and more convinced that her own pain and sacrifices will aid her mother's journey through purgatory and into the afterlife. When Antoinette dies, Louis suffers a stroke, and Antoinette's widowed sister Madeleine care for him. When it becomes clear that Madeleine will take Antoinette's place as Louis' partner, meaning that Léonie will now be his daughter also, Thérèse decides to join the convent and retreat to a life in the service of God.

When Thérèse returns to Blémont as an adult, it becomes clear that many secrets and tensions have never been resolved between the two women, including personal secrets and the larger mystery of the horrors and transgressions that took place in and near the Martin estate during the war years just before the two girls were born.

Earlier in Thérèse and Léonie's childhoods, the girls' maid and guardian Victorine, a local woman who proudly abides by many of the old traditions, shows them a place in the woods behind the house where an ancient shrine has stood. The place is shrouded in mystery because ancient pagan traditions are still celebrated here at harvest time. These celebrations are melded with the Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary at the shrine. During the war the original shrine was dismantled. The woods also harbor a darker secret, one that the entire village prefers to forget.

Three mysteries are central to the novel. The first is the mystery of the transgression that took place in the cellar and involves Antoinette. The second involves the back stairs of the Martin house and the back bedroom where Léonie sleeps. This mystery is tied to the images Léonie sees in her nightmares. The third mystery is that of the mystic vision that both girls claim to have seen. It is only at the very end of the novel that Léonie, after persistently questioning of the adult characters, finally learns the village secret from



Rose. During the Nazi occupation of the village a Jewish family was found hiding in the Taillés' barn. The family was then transferred to the back bedroom of the Martin house, along with Henri Taillé. The next morning the local man, along with the young family, was taken to the nearby woods and shot.

Throughout the novel the author builds on the secrets that Léonie and Thérèse share. These secrets lurk within the house, surfacing in Léonie's intense nightmares. The girls are told only that Antoinette suffered horribly during the war and that the cellar and the back room where Léonie sleeps harbor the house's secrets. By the end of the novel it is clear that one secret being kept from the girls is that Antoinette was sexually assaulted during the war, though the name of her aggressor continues to be a mystery. Whether the perpetrator was a German soldier billeted at the house or Louis himself, Antoinette's ensuing pregnancy necessitated her marriage to Louis and forced her to give up her dream of becoming a nun.

During her childhood, Léonie is prone to nightmares brought about by voices crying out and chanting around her in the back bedroom where she sleeps. At the end of the novel, Rose finally tells Léonie that this back room is where the young Jewish family and Rose's husband Henri spent their last night. The Nazis killed Henri, who harbored the fleeing family, as a lesson for others in the village. Rose also tells Léonie that she had been pregnant at the time and that the death of her husband brought about early labor and a stillbirth. This partially explains why Thérèse spent the first few years of her life with Rose and not with her mother Antoinette. Rose was paid to be Thérèse's caregiver until a husband could be found.

Thérèse and Léonie have reached early adolescence in the summer that Antoinette dies. The two girls have outgrown the sexual and religiously tinted games they shared previously, and their relationship deteriorates to one filled with competition and jealousy. The girls compete for the affection of the adults in the household. Léonie struggles with being excluded and snubbed because of her Englishness, although she is only half English, and Thérèse takes every available opportunity to comment on any idiosyncrasy that Léonie exhibits.

Like their mothers, who as sisters both inherited the Martin estate, Thérèse and Léonie compete for the position of daughter of the house. The girls compete for the affections of Louis, Antoinette's husband, soon to be a widower, and of Baptiste, a local farmboy whose eventual marriage to Léonie is a transgression of the social differences that were so important at the time. Like Louis, who married into the family to cover up Antoinette's shameful pregnancy, Baptiste crosses a social barrier by marrying Léonie and becoming part of the Martin family.

The summer that Antoinette dies, Léonie goes to the woods and sees a vision of an olive-skinned woman dressed in red and gold. Not to be outdone, Thérèse claims that she also sees a vision of the Virgin Mary. Thérèse's version conforms to people's expectations because she describes a white woman dressed in blue and carrying a veil. Though Madeleine believes that Thérèse's vision is suspiciously similar to the statue in her niece's room, the villagers believe in the vision and worship at the shrine. The



village priest *le Curé* attempts to put Thérèse in her place and dispute the vision, but the bishop comes to visit and a chapel is eventually constructed at the site.

Later that summer, after Antoinette's death, Thérèse receives a box of letters that Antoinette had written to her sister, Soeur Dosithée. The letters imply that Antoinette was sexually assaulted in the cellar. The letters do not say that Antoinette likely was attempting to hide the statue of the Virgin Mary before it was destroyed when the shrine in the woods was dismantled. Thérèse, her identity being thrown into question and suffering from the loss of her mother, claims that she and Léonie are sisters. She permits Léonie to read only one carefully chosen letter, then tells Léonie about Antoinette's rape by a German soldier. Thérèse throws the letters into the range, where they go up in flames along with any truths they contain.

Léonie kisses Baptiste in the woods after a pagan celebration in the clearing to get back at Thérèse for taking away her sense of security and identity, as she is now unsure whether her father was a German or Louis. At the celebration, there is dancing and the innuendo of further sexual activities that will begin when the young people leave. After Thérèse has stolen Léonie's vision and made Léonie question her own identity, Léonie makes love to Baptiste, knowing that Thérèse is watching and that Thérèse also fancies Baptiste.

Thérèse, meanwhile, feels that Madeleine and Louis will likely become partners now that Antoinette has died. Thérèse feels rejected, as she has been very close to her father, doting on him and relishing his attention. Louis, who has suffered a stroke, is unable to respond when Thérèse announces at a luncheon for the bishop that she will pursue a life of religious contemplation and become a nun when she turns sixteen.

At the conclusion of the novel, Thérèse and Léonie reunite after decades of silence and separation. Louis did remarry, but he and Madeleine have been dead for several years. Léonie married Baptiste, and the two have brought up their family at the Martin estate. Thérèse has returned from the convent with a journal about the years surrounding her mother's death. Thérèse and Léonie stay up talking well into the night about that time in their lives. Thérèse wants to put things straight about her vision and perhaps recant it.

Thérèse also is interested in the Jewish history of the area, and it is possible that she has come back to tell the truth about the bones that were found under the shrine. An enquiry is opening, and racist graffiti recently has been found on Henri's grave. These bones, belonging to Henri Taillé and the family he was murdered with, were hidden by the Nazis under the stones at the shrine and then given a quick and private burial in the graveyard by *le Curé* when they were found years later as the shrine was being reconstructed.

In the morning, Thérèse visits the church, which has been decked out in preparation for the harvest festival. Every year the villagers celebrate the harvest festival and their devotion to the Virgin Mary by taking her statue on parade. Thérèse must realize that much of this celebration is based on pretence, as she made up the story of seeing the Virgin Mary. Her retreat to the convent was a way of hiding the pain of her mother's



death and Louis' remarriage to her aunt Madeleine. This series of events robbed Thérèse of her role as favorite and gave Léonie equal rights as daughter of the house. Impulsively, Thérèse takes Léonie's cigarette lighter and sets fire to the church.

In one of the final scenes in the novel, Thérèse calls out for her mother and runs toward the door of the church, rushing to outrun the flames that surround her. Léonie decides to finally go public with the secret that she has been carrying for many years. In the nightmares of Léonie's childhood, the names of the murdered family members were revealed to her. In these dreams she also heard the name of the informer who led Henri and the young family to their deaths.





# Chapter 1, The Wall

## Chapter 1, The Wall Summary

The novel begins with a description of a nightmare. The dream sequence takes place in the ancestral house on the Martin estate, and in the dream Thérèse's mother Antoinette is buried in the cellar under a heap of sand. Antoinette's mouth is full of torn-up letters and broken glass, and she clutches her red handbag, which is full of flesh, as she tries to get out of the house. The farmhouse has strict rules by which Léonie must abide. An evil presence in the back bedroom, for example, repels her. Léonie prefers to stay at the front of the house. The house is "changeable." Sometimes it is safe, and other times it is torn apart by the evil forces that Léonie senses. Léonie dreams that she rushes up the cellar stairs, the death and evilness she has been dreaming still inside her. She runs to the bathroom to be sick, and she imagines that she is vomiting up her cousin Thérèse. She feels relief that Thérèse is no longer inside her.

## Chapter 1, The Wall Analysis

There are two sides to the Martin house. One side is proper and presentable, and the other is full of darkness and threatening secrets. This scene is the conclusion of the novel, when Léonie rids herself of Thérèse after her cousin's visit. Léonie dreams that her aunt, Antoinette, is buried under the sand in the cellar, attempting to escape from the house and hang her petticoats on the line in the orchard. Antoinette had buried the statue of the Virgin Mary in the cellar, which Thérèse discovers shortly before she sets fire to the church. The sexual assault that Antoinette suffered in the cellar would lead to Antoinette's pregnancy with Thérèse and Antoinette's marriage to Louis.

Also important in this opening scene is the imagery related to the house. The back bedroom and the cellar symbolize the hidden side of the household. Rooms such as the sitting room and the front entrance way are public areas where guests are greeted and formal daily life goes on. Léonie's physical sickness is a final way of ridding herself of the lies, jealousy, and competition attached to her cousin Thérèse. Léonie's vomiting is a way of ridding herself of pretence and fakery that was forged when Thérèse fabricated a false vision and stole her cousin's story. The sickness is also a sign of her repugnance at the secrets that the house harbors and a way of cleansing herself of the sins committed during the Second World War.



## Chapter 2, The Writing Table

### Chapter 2, The Writing Table Summary

Léonie and Thérèse meet after years of separation. Léonie waits for her cousin's arrival. While Thérèse has been in the convent, Léonie married Baptiste and has been raising a family. Léonie paces the house. As Léonie walks through the house, the objects around her take on a heightened significance. These objects have not been moved in decades, and Léonie feels a strong sense of ownership over them. Unsure of her cousin's motives for returning, Léonie has started a list of all the objects in the house on the advice of her lawyer. Léonie notices the writing table that Antoinette once used. She looks at herself in the mirror and wonders what she will see when Thérèse arrives. She asks, "Which of us is which?" (14).

Léonie expects the comparisons and jealousies from her and Thérèse's adolescent years will resurface. She thinks about the nightmares she has about the house where she walks through a labyrinth of corridors. Léonie imagines Thérèse returning and claiming everything here as her birthright. In the kitchen, Léonie finds herself testing the tip of a knife against her finger. She is shocked and lets the object clatter to the floor. Feeling dizzy, Léonie imagines she and Thérèse are again playing a game where they spin on the spot until one of them falls.

### Chapter 2, The Writing Table Analysis

Because Léonie has tended to the house for so long, she feels that she owns the objects in it. Léonie feels a sense of superiority over Thérèse because Léonie has been burdened with the upkeep of the estate. Because some areas in the house are safe and others are not, Léonie tries to keep all of the objects in their proper places to keep the evil forces under control. Léonie's uncertainty about the reason and duration of Thérèse's visit makes her angry and insecure.

The objects from Léonie's inventory find their way into the chapter titles. Léonie does not want Thérèse to take everything Léonie owns. The central conflict of the novel-which girl has the legitimate rights as daughter of the house-will be rehashed when Thérèse returns to the family estate. The dizziness Léonie feels is linked to her feelings about her cousin. Léonie's anger at Thérèse has been brewing for decades. The act of absentmindedly picking up a knife indicates the depth and intensity of Léonie's anger. The author builds suspense by beginning the novel with nightmare imagery and the intimation of violence, making readers want to know more about the relationship between the two characters.



# Chapter 3, The Doorbell

## Chapter 3, The Doorbell Summary

Thérèse arrives by bus. She has not left the monastery for twenty years, and she feels vulnerable and uncomfortable in public. Thérèse is aware that the other passengers are staring at her. In town, Thérèse notices the graveyard where her father, mother, and aunt are buried. In a corner is Henri Taillé's grave, which recently has been opened. Vandals have drawn swastikas on the tombs. Thérèse has read about this in the news, and she decides to look at it later. When she reaches the house, the lights are off. As Thérèse approaches the door, it opens and she is greeted by Léonie, who stares angrily.

## Chapter 3, The Doorbell Analysis

Thérèse feels vulnerable being out in public. This feeling of physical vulnerability is tied to the competition the girls had about their bodies. Thérèse also is a public figure in the village. Thérèse's glance at the graveyard is important because it reveals that her father Louis lies buried there with his first and second wives. Readers only will recognize the significance of this small glance near the end of the novel when Thérèse's desire for her father and her intense jealousy of Madeleine is made clear. The secrets of the Martin house are linked to the graveyard. Though the gravesite is only mentioned in passing in this chapter, the secrets in it are the true center, or "secret," revealed at the climax of the novel. It is also significant that Léonie has not left the lights on to welcome Thérèse.



# Chapter 4, The Chandelier

## Chapter 4, The Chandelier Summary

Thérèse and Léonie walk into the conservatory. The room is decorated with corn dolls and sheaves of grain for the harvest festival. Thérèse notices that Léonie is heavier than she was as a teenager. Thérèse feels inadequate in her frumpy, borrowed, synthetic clothes. Thérèse comments that her father, Papa, brought the chandelier from Italy for her mother. Léonie counters tartly, saying that she has kept all of the important objects that belonged to their family. The two women prepare for supper and have a drink.

## Chapter 4, The Chandelier Analysis

The tension between Thérèse and Léonie is apparent as they meet after a twenty-year absence. Thérèse feels awkward, as she is not used to social interaction. Thérèse attempts to bring up something she and Léonie have in common by commenting on an object in the room. By first mentioning that the chandelier was gift from her father to her mother, Thérèse is trying to claim her primacy as daughter of the house. The two women do not discuss Louis' remarriage and the additional rift it caused in their relationship. Léonie's defense is to emphasize how she has taken proper care of all the objects in the house, keeping things as they have traditionally been. Léonie makes a sarcastic comment about the buffet, implying that Thérèse has been negligent by her absence. They have a drink to change the course of the awkward conversation with its undercurrents of pain and hostility.



# Chapter 5, The Buffet

## Chapter 5, The Buffet Summary

Thérèse walks through the rooms of the house, entering rooms and turning the lights on and off as she passes through. In the kitchen, Thérèse notices that the only things that have changed are the appliances. She takes out tonic to mix into her first alcoholic drink in twenty years. Thérèse thinks of the house and how everything in it belongs to her.

## Chapter 5, The Buffet Analysis

Thérèse is a visitor, a stranger entering the old rooms of her childhood. The brevity of her visit to each of the rooms represents the short time she spent here and foreshadows Thérèse's final moments as she runs toward the doors of the burning church. The clock and its ticking are the symbolic heartbeat of the house. The house, despite its secrets, has a life force and a heavy heartbeat that serves as a measure of stability and protection. Both women feel that they own the house and the objects in it. This competition gives the novel its title and extends to other things that both girls wanted to own, namely the knowledge of their father's identity, the adults' attention, Baptiste's attention and the vision of the woman near the shrine.



# Chapter 6, The Bed

## Chapter 6, The Bed Summary

Léonie and Thérèse eat a meal together in the kitchen. Thérèse notes that Léonie has taken care in setting the table. Léonie says she still uses all of Victorine's recipes. Thérèse finds the meat heavy and rejects the meal. Later, the women kiss each other goodnight. Thérèse will sleep in the master bedroom, where her parents slept before Antoinette became sick. Louis' toiletry objects have been carefully preserved. Thérèse thinks about how she was born in this bed. She imagines making room for her mother in the bed and preparing for a new birth.

## Chapter 6, The Bed Analysis

The sharing of food is important in the novel. In this chapter, Thérèse is rejecting Léonie's control over her by refusing to eat the meal. By following Victorine's old recipes, Léonie is asserting that she belongs in the house and that she is fully French. The two women have always competed over weight and body image. Léonie had been jealous of Thérèse's voluptuous figure, while Thérèse had been jealous of Léonie's slenderness. At this reunion, Thérèse is proud that she is no longer overweight.

The careful way that Thérèse and Léonie kiss each other goodnight is also indicative of the formalities they are holding on to and the discomfort they feel in the relationship. This careful propriety also hints at the hidden passion they once shared when they were preteens. Thérèse, a guest in the master bedroom, is in some ways revisiting the years before Antoinette's illness and death, when Antoinette and Louis were stable parents and Thérèse's sense of identity was intact. She makes room for her mother in her thoughts, physically moving over in the bed as she opens her mind to her memories.



# Chapter 7, The Holdall

## Chapter 7, The Holdall Summary

Léonie waits half an hour and then treads softly upstairs with her cousin's suitcase and goes through Thérèse's things. The bag is full of books, mainly history and Jewish history, and a journal about Thérèse's childhood titled, "The Story of a Soul." Thérèse has used words such as soul, God, miracle, and prayer. Léonie thinks about how, in contrast, her own world is made up of the objects in the house. She ruminates that she does not have a soul, adding that it was Thérèse who stole it.

## Chapter 7, The Holdall Analysis

The reader's interest in the relationship between the two characters is heightened by the way Léonie rifles through Thérèse's bag. The reading of Thérèse's journal parallels the secrets that were revealed in Antoinette's letters. At the end of the novel, when Léonie steps forwards "into the darkness, to find words" (224) readers realize that Léonie has retold Thérèse's account of the past. The retelling of their childhood stories is repeated several times: in Thérèse's journal, in Antoinette's burned letters, in the discussion the two women have throughout the night, and finally in the novel itself. In Thérèse's journal, Léonie finds the handwriting to be "well-behaved" and neat, which sums up how Thérèse narrated the events of their childhoods.



# Chapter 8, The Gray Silk Nightshirt

## Chapter 8, The Gray Silk Nightshirt Summary

Thérèse has heard Léonie wait outside her door and then descend the stairs. Later she hears Baptiste arrive home. Thérèse thinks about how Baptiste supposedly despised her after she spied on the couple making love. Thérèse believes that Léonie made sure that Thérèse was a witness. Léonie comes into Thérèse's room, and she smokes as she asks Thérèse why she has come back. Thérèse tells Léonie that she is thinking of leaving the monastery and that there is some unfinished business she must attend to. Léonie says she will kill Thérèse if she brings up anything else about the past. Léonie tells Thérèse that for twenty years she has pretended that Thérèse was dead.

## Chapter 8, The Gray Silk Nightshirt Analysis

As Thérèse sits talking to Léonie, it brings back memories of when they would sit up like this and share secrets as children. Léonie clearly distrusts Thérèse, implying that the other woman has been harboring major secrets and distorting the truth. Léonie accuses her cousin of making up a sanitized and biased version of the events in their past, casting Léonie as the sinner and Thérèse as the saint. Like the adults who surrounded the girls when they were children, Léonie would rather not bring up difficult questions from the past. Like the rest of the villagers, Léonie has tried to forget the murders that occurred near the house.





# Chapter 9, The Photographs

## Chapter 9, The Photographs Summary

Léonie is fascinated by the family photographs in the main salon. Antoinette had placed herself at the center of the group. A photograph of Thérèse dressed for her first communion is next to a photograph of Léonie, who is in a school gym uniform and is scowling at the camera. Beside Antoinette's photograph is a formal photograph of Louis. Madeleine looks young and eager, a defiant expression on her face. Marie-Joséphine is also featured in a photograph. The eldest of the three sisters, Marie-Joséphine renamed herself Soeur Dosithée when she joined the convent. Victorine took the photograph of Léonie and Thérèse, arms around each other, in the kitchen doorway. The image is blurry, and it is difficult to tell the girls apart.

## Chapter 9, The Photographs Analysis

The formal arrangement of photographs on the mantle shows the official arrangement of the household. Antoinette has put herself in the center, emphasizing her power and importance in the family. She has represented herself as she was before the war. Louis' photograph is formal, which is an attempt to prove his status despite his poor upbringing. Soeur Dosithée has prophesied that either Thérèse or Léonie will become a nun, and the reader wants to know whether this will become true. We can also understand some of Léonie's frustration with always being painted as the sinner of the household. Even in these photographs, Antoinette has chosen formal pictures of herself and her husband, Soeur Dosithée, and Thérèse, while she has chosen a photograph of Madeleine looking defiant and one of Léonie in her school gym uniform, the latter particularly ungratifying. Victorine and Rose are excluded from the photographs, though they are important in the household. This formal arrangement of images is in many ways like Thérèse's neatly written journal. It puts forth a version of reality that does not fully represent family life.



# Chapter 10, The Biscuit Tin

## Chapter 10, The Biscuit Tin Summary

Soeur Dosithée has kept the letters Antoinette sent to her during Thérèse's infancy and childhood. After Antoinette's death, Thérèse receives the letters but does not open the tin immediately. In the letters Antoinette describes how Rose Taillé took the baby in because she lost her own baby the week before. Antoinette writes that she wishes the girls were not so fair-haired because they had enough "fair-haired people" to "last a lifetime" (45).

## Chapter 10, The Biscuit Tin Analysis

Thérèse reads these letters after she realizes that Madeleine will likely marry Louis. Thérèse was angry and upset when she read these letters. In the correspondence, Thérèse discovers unexpected information about her parentage. At this point in the novel, the reader is only told that Antoinette does not feel capable of bringing up the baby and has given her to Rose to care for. Intimations of what may have happened to Antoinette are planted in the line, "These filthy Germans take everything" (45), and in the description of both girls as being *too* fair-haired.



# Chapter 11, The Ivory Ring

## Chapter 11, The Ivory Ring Summary

Thérèse remembers details about her first months as an infant, such as Rose Taillé caring for her in the farmhouse. Thérèse plays in the mud and on the linoleum floors, curling up next to Rose at night. The baby's first word is "Rose," and she stays with the wet nurse until she is just older than one and a half. When Antoinette comes to get Thérèse, the infant rejects her biological mother because she is a stranger. Louis has followed Antoinette into Rose's kitchen, and Thérèse lets Louis pick her up. Antoinette drops money onto the table and walks with Louis and the infant back toward the Martin house, where Thérèse screams for the entire evening. Within a week Antoinette reports that the baby has settled in well, though Thérèse is clingy and cries if her mother leaves the room, even for a moment.

## Chapter 11, The Ivory Ring Analysis

In this chapter we begin to understand Thérèse's character through the events in her infancy and gain an understanding of her personality and the decisions she will make during her troubled adolescence. We understand why Thérèse later has such a collapse when her mother dies and it appears that Louis will marry Madeleine. Thérèse's first years were spent in the secure and intimate world of Rose's farmhouse. Thérèse's dependency on her parents is set early in childhood, when her entire world and all of her security is taken from her as Rose is removed from her life and substituted by her biological mother, who is a stranger to her. Even at this young age, Thérèse is close to Louis, as she accepts him even before she accepts Antoinette. Thérèse's despondency at the loss of her mother and the eventual betrayal of her father, whose affections for Thérèse will be displaced by his involvement with Thérèse's aunt Madeleine, is set up in this early chapter.



# Chapter 12, The Baby Book

## Chapter 12, The Baby Book Summary

Léonie's birthday is one week after Thérèse's, just before the summer holiday when Léonie and Madeleine travel from England to France. A baby book records Léonie's first words, and Madeleine will not let her daughter take the book with her. In the voyage across the channel, Léonie briefly leaves one identity behind and takes on another. Antoinette, Louis, and Thérèse greet Léonie and Madeleine as they disembark from the boat. Antoinette's demeanour is stiff and rather bossy, and she comments on Léonie's hair not being properly brushed. Madeleine greets Louis warmly, taking his arm and complimenting him on his beret. Antoinette interrupts, commenting that the two travelers look starved. Léonie enjoys being a foreigner for a change.

## Chapter 12, The Baby Book Analysis

More dualities are brought up in this chapter, this time the difference between two languages and two cultural identities. Léonie feels that she is physically traveling between English and French as she and her mother cross the channel. Léonie lies awake trying to sense the moment she crosses the boundary between the two languages. This is repeated later in the novel when Léonie counts the birds in the fields, attempting to identify the line that separates one version of the truth from another. This scene also plants the idea of an attraction between Louis and Madeleine, which is intimated by the close physical contact they have and Madeleine's obvious happiness at seeing Louis. Antoinette, in contrast, is depicted as strict and controlling. Antoinette guides the group toward the car while her fashionable younger sister flirts with Louis. This triangle of two female relatives and one local man is also played out in the tension between Thérèse, Léonie, and Baptiste.

This chapter gives some weight to the possibility that Léonie is really the daughter of Madeleine and Maurice because Madeleine has kept a baby book charting the girl's first years. Madeleine does not want Léonie to bring this book to France because Thérèse does not have a baby book of her own. This would only bring up difficult questions about the past. However, we do learn that the girls' birthdays are just several weeks apart, leaving the possibility open that the two are sisters and not cousins.



# Chapter 13, The Nightlight

## Chapter 13, The Nightlight Summary

In the evening, the visitors and their hosts sit in the salon arguing about religion. Antoinette tells Madeleine that she must bring Léonie up as a good Catholic. Louis embraces both girls before they go up to bed. Léonie is afraid of going to her room alone. In her room, Léonie says her prayers, and Antoinette approves. Léonie notices a halo around her aunt's head, cast by the nightlight. Downstairs her mother's hair also seems to glow from the light cast from the lamp. Léonie tells Antoinette that she is afraid in this room because at night she hears people chanting and crying. Antoinette is shocked, but she tries to brush aside her niece's fears. When Antoinette leaves the room, Léonie's nightmares begin.

## Chapter 13, The Nightlight Analysis

The house, like the lives of its inhabitants during the war, is divided. A large, formal front room is full of respectable social interaction, adult talk, and family traditions, and in the back are rooms such as the bedroom where Léonie sleeps during her summer visits. Léonie's nightmares are linked to the village's wartime secrets. The crying, pacing, and chanting that Léonie hears come from the ghosts of the family who spent the last night of their lives in this back room with Henri Taillé. Antoinette must be shocked by Léonie's uncanny and frighteningly accurate visions and nightmares.



# Chapter 14, The Silver Cake Tray

## Chapter 14, The Silver Cake Tray Summary

Victorine takes Léonie and Thérèse into the woods behind the house to collect berries. They come across the place where a shrine used to stand. The shrine was dedicated to a saint, perhaps the Virgin Mary. It is situated in a clearing near a steep outcropping of rock and a small stream. Victorine tells the girls that there used to be a tradition among the villagers to bring gifts here and to pray for help. When the new priest arrived he put an end to the worship at the shrine, as well as to the dancing and festivities.

Victorine tells the girls that during the war the original shrine was pulled down and the statue of the saint vanished. Victorine spits on the ground, adding that the Germans also used these woods for "their filthy business," although she will not elaborate. She tells the girls that she still hates the Germans for what they did to Rose Taillé but then refuses to say more.

## Chapter 14, The Silver Cake Tray Analysis

The clearing with the shrine is an important location in the novel because several major threads of the plot come together here. This is the place where the folk traditions of the people who live in the Normandy area are celebrated. The *curé's* abolition of the shrine represents a symbolic attempt at rooting out the folk culture of the area and replacing it with the organized and formal religion of the Catholic Church. This site is also the place where Léonie has her vision of the lady in red and gold and where Thérèse claims she saw the Virgin Mary. Here the girls witness the harvest festivities that take place at night, and later Léonie and Baptiste will observe the fertility rites associated with the place when they become lovers here.



# Chapter 15, The Carpets

## Chapter 15, The Carpets Summary

Thérèse and Léonie help Victorine dust the main salon. Victorine tells them how the Germans were billeted all over the village, with officers staying at the Martin estate. The floors are marked by their boots, and the original red tiles are permanently ruined. Antoinette has had carpet put down to cover these marks. One of the village girls who came to help with chores at the house was billeted in the back bedroom. Victorine describes how the girl used to go to one of the officer's rooms at night. The Martin family still does not buy goods from the bakery that the woman now runs. Thérèse realizes that the girl must be a collaborator, and Victorine replies: "Vive la France! Vive de Gaulle!"

## Chapter 15, The Carpets Analysis

The marks of the officers' boots on the floors are symbolic scars that the family has covered over. The carpets show that the family is not constantly reminded of the Nazi occupation. The attitude toward individuals who collaborated with the Germans is one of haughty intolerance. Victorine states that their family would rather starve than buy food from the woman who had been "friendly" with one of the German officers. Léonie's room, in addition to hiding the secrets of the captured victims, also hides the story of the local woman who took one of the officers as a lover. Léonie's bedroom is associated not only with violence but also with desires of the body. The duality between chaste and unchaste, innocence and sin, is developed by associating sexuality with the room where Léonie sleeps.



# Chapter 16, The Recipe Book

## Chapter 16, The Recipe Book Summary

Victorine juggles potatoes and tells Léonie and Thérèse about a famous gypsy circus. The girls peel potatoes and argue about French and English food. Léonie holds back the urge to cry. Victorine tells the girls about the stories that used to circulate about the Gypsies and Jews, such as they stole little blond children and killed them. Thérèse adds that the Catholic Church asks its supporters to pray for the conversion of Jews, explaining how the Jews put Jesus to death and comparing them to the evil of communists. Léonie forces herself to deny her positive memories of Jewish friends at school. She leaves to see her mother in the conservatory.

Madeleine works on a dress pattern, and Léonie asks about her father. Madeleine describes how Louis and Maurice were friends and how Maurice helped hide the villagers' wine in the cellar. Madeleine makes a reference to the Germans almost finding the wine but stops short. Léonie returns to the kitchen, where she hunts for the forbidden key to the cellar door.

## Chapter 16, The Recipe Book Analysis

Léonie continues her barrage of questions, asking the adults around her for answers. The subject of sexual assault is taboo, and Madeleine will only talk of Maurice and how the villagers accepted him. This defense of Maurice is important to Léonie because she has difficulty integrating into French culture during her summer visits. Victorine and Thérèse are condescending about Léonie's attitudes and tastes, and Léonie feels what it is like to be discriminated against. Some of the first conflicts between the two girls come about in this chapter, where Thérèse makes derogatory remarks about the English. This attitude is also present in the folk culture in which Victorine has been raised. Thérèse has picked up racist views about Jews and communists, showing her ignorance by lumping both groups together. Thérèse's attempt to get Victorine to agree that the English are heathens is an attempt to prove her own superiority over Léonie and gain favor in the eyes of an adult.





# Chapter 17, The Cellar Key

## Chapter 17, The Cellar Key Summary

Léonie goes down to the cellar. As she reaches the cellar floor, the light goes out. Léonie feels trapped in the darkness, unable to call for help. Antoinette calls out from the top of the stairs, panic in her voice. She disciplines Léonie when the girl returns to the kitchen. Madeleine tries to intervene, explaining that she has told Léonie a story about the wine in the cellar and that Léonie had only wanted to find out for herself. Antoinette, however, is clearly still upset. She abruptly ends the conversation, saying, "Why don't you all just leave me alone" (72).

## Chapter 17, The Cellar Key Analysis

Léonie attempts to explore the cellar herself, demonstrating curiosity, courage, and the first hints of rebellion. However, once she descends the stairs the light goes out, and she feels claustrophobic, trapped in the darkness and unable even to call out for help. Symbolically, Léonie has descended into the underbelly of the house to the place where the central transgression in the novel, Antoinette's assault, took place. Antoinette is harsh with Léonie because the older woman is afraid. Antoinette does not want the door to the memories locked deep inside the house, and within her own memory, to be opened. Léonie's bold disregard for the unspoken laws of the house is a serious transgression.



# Chapter 18, The Red Suitcase

## Chapter 18, The Red Suitcase Summary

Léonie suffers another nightmare. She dreams that Antoinette's red suitcase is tied up in scarlet cloth. The bag is filled with a bomb. In Léonie's dream, Antoinette drags the suitcase across the Customs Hall. All of the officers refuse to touch the suitcase because they know what is in it. Antoinette drags the bag back and forth, more and more urgently, beginning to run as the Nazi soldiers watch her through plate-glass doors. Léonie wakes and realizes that she has wet the bed. She is too frightened to get up and find Victorine. Léonie feels that the room is filled with the image of her aunt's "mad red grin" (75).

## Chapter 18, The Red Suitcase Analysis

The nightmare sequence in this chapter is similar to dreams Léonie has in the first chapter. She dreams that Antoinette is at the border, running with a red suitcase filled with a bomb. The bomb symbolically contains the information that Léonie has been seeking. The deadly knowledge concerns violence, both sexual assault and murder, that occurred here. The Nazis watch Antoinette in her distress, safe behind the plate-glass doors that represent the Nazis' emotional detachment from their atrocious acts. Léonie is left with the image of Antoinette's grin. Antoinette's desire to keep things under control despite her panic fills the room with urgency and the implication of madness.



# Chapter 19, The Sofa

## Chapter 19, The Sofa Summary

Company is arriving. Thérèse and Léonie enter the white salon where Antoinette sits, surrounded by the wives of professionals from the village. The ladies are discussing the diagnosis of breast cancer that Antoinette has just received. The two girls leave the salon and go outside to play. Léonie suggests they go to the cellar. Once there, Thérèse pretends to sleepwalk. She disappears behind a barrel, and then both girls fall into a lit area at the bottom of the stairs. Thérèse has found a faded red velvet shoe, the same one that Antoinette is wearing in her photograph. The girls return upstairs, but the guests have gone. Madeleine, Antoinette, and Louis are sitting quietly in the salon and do not notice the girls' dishevelment. Thérèse brings the shoe up to Antoinette, happy that she can return it to her mother. Her mother's face flushes, and she throws the shoe into the fireplace. Antoinette tells the girls not to "bring rubbish into the house" (79).

## Chapter 19, The Sofa Analysis

All members of the family strongly feel social pressure here. Thérèse and Léonie, like Antoinette before them, have reputations to uphold as daughters of a respectable upper-class family. Léonie winks at Thérèse and suggests playing in the cellar, her way of trying to sully the family's perception that Thérèse is as a good girl who abides by the rules. Thérèse's pretence at sleepwalking foreshadows the way she will hide her pain through religion, which she will imagine as a great white veil bringing her peace and comfort. Likening Thérèse to a ghost foreshadows her absence from the house and her implied death at the end of the novel. The red shoe found abandoned behind the barrel is from the day Antoinette was assaulted. Antoinette refuses to take ownership of the object, dissociating herself from what happened to her during the war. She tells the girls not to bring "rubbish" or evidence into the house, much as Léonie will later hate Thérèse for coming back into her life with her notebook, digging into painful memories.



# Chapter 20, The Sack

## Chapter 20, The Sack Summary

Thérèse and Léonie accompany Louis into the field, where the bull has gotten loose. Louis catches the bull's rope, and the girls go to the barn to see a litter of newborn kittens. In the barn, Baptiste Taillé treats the kittens cruelly, and the girls pretend to ignore him. Baptiste becomes increasingly cruel to get the girls' attention. The girls return to the kitchen. Victorine tells Louis that the specialist has seen Antoinette and that it does not look good. The girls now go to Louis' workshop. Louis confirms that the litter of kittens will need to be drowned. After Baptiste helps Louis with this task, the men walk off together. Thérèse and Léonie discuss Rose Taillé's glass eye. Thérèse says that everyone around them has blue eyes, even Léonie, who is half-English. Léonie decides to check the color of Baptiste's eyes.

## Chapter 20, The Sack Analysis

Thérèse and Léonie still do not understand the seriousness of Antoinette's illness. When they return from the dangerous task of helping capture the bull, they are confronted with the news that Antoinette's illness is very serious, another danger that they ignore. The differences in social class between several of the male and female characters in the novel are worth noting. Louis is associated with physical spaces outside the house such as the field, barn, and workshop. Baptiste also is part of Louis' world. Later, when Baptiste marries into the family, he makes a jump of social status like Louis has done before him. The similarity of their positions in life is emphasized by the way they walk off together toward the kitchen garden after their unsavory work is done.

The fact that many of the people around them have blue eyes points to the possibility that Thérèse and Léonie could be sisters because blue eyes and fair hair are a common Germanic trait. This gives some weight to the possibility that the girls share a German father. Also important in the chapter is the first hints of Léonie's interest in Baptiste, evident when she thinks of looking more closely at his eyes to check their color. Léonie thinks of Rose's glass eye as the eye that sees in the dark and colors things in. Léonie is searching for the answer to many questions she has about what happened during the war, and she wants to have the truth illuminated.



## Chapter 21, The Altar

### Chapter 21, The Altar Summary

Thérèse does not like the dressing room because Victorine and Antoinette discuss her mother's illness here. Thérèse asks to be given the bedroom upstairs instead. Léonie comments that the room feels like a chapel. Thérèse has added a crucifix to the wall and a statue of Our Lady on her table. Thérèse has left her "dead" baby doll near the base of the makeshift altar. Léonie suggests that they might save the baby if they operate. They pretend to practice surgery on each other. The girls play the game again, where the patient is tied to the bed and they both take their clothes off. Victorine calls upstairs, and the girls quickly abandon their game. They dump the "expired" doll in the range of the stove, count out one Hail Mary, and then join Victorine in the garden.

### Chapter 21, The Altar Analysis

Thérèse wants to be far away from the sickroom. She prominently displays religious objects, including an altar featuring Bernadette and a statue of Our Lady. Léonie thinks that this saintly appearance is the same image that Thérèse is trying to create for herself. Later in the novel, this statue will influence Thérèse's vision of the Virgin Mary.

The childhood games, with their sexual experiments, are a way for Thérèse and Léonie to work out feelings about Antoinette's illness. Burning the sick baby who has died is symbolically a way of rejecting Antoinette's illness, and it also is an act that does away with the evidence of their sexual explorations. The sexual games add an element of complexity to the girls' relationship. The burning of objects recurs several times throughout the novel, and it is always a way of destroying evidence. Antoinette's shoe, her letters from the war, Léonie's first used sanitary pad, and the baby doll all are thrust into the range of the stove. These objects are linked to unwelcome truths or to sins, and the burning of these objects foreshadows Thérèse setting fire to the church.



# Chapter 22, The Dark Glasses

## Chapter 22, The Dark Glasses Summary

Soeur Dosithée has died. Thérèse rubs her face against her father's sleeve, hoping to convince Louis to let her go to her godmother's funeral. Louis refuses. Upstairs, the girls play Carmelites in a game called "All for Love." Léonie, as the devil's handmaid, has no success at distracting Thérèse, so the two decide to play martyrs instead. The girls pretend to torture each other. Thérèse plays a Christian, and Léonie pretends to be a lion, attacking Thérèse. The latter pretends to do a miracle, producing a caramel that turns the lion into a docile pet. However, Léonie leaps and tackles Thérèse, and it seems that the lion has won. Thérèse, however, retorts that she will win by never speaking to Léonie again. The two fight until they are exhausted, and then they begin to touch each other, exploring each other's bodies. Thérèse calls the sexual climax of the game "dying" and imagines it is like this for Soeur Dosithée all the time, in heaven.

## Chapter 22, The Dark Glasses Analysis

In this chapter we gain insight into several aspects of Thérèse's character and her relationships with Louis and Léonie. Thérèse fawns over Louis, rubbing her face against his sleeve in an attempt at convincing him to let her go to the funeral. The complexity of the women's relationship that is hinted at during the first chapters of the novel is expanded in this chapter. Between them is a mixture of childish friendship and a more mature passion, as the religious overtones of their games are mixed with sexual exploration. Also, for Thérèse, sexual climax is associated with death. This link between physical desire and religious activity also is found in the rituals associated with the harvest festival in the clearing near the shrine. Finally, it is significant that Thérèse plays the Christian martyr in their games, while Léonie plays the role of temptress and lion. Upon losing the game, Thérèse threatens to win by giving Léonie the silent treatment and never talking to her again. Later in the novel, this is in fact Thérèse's way of dealing with loss.



## Chapter 23, The Soap Dish

### Chapter 23, The Soap Dish Summary

Louis finds Léonie examining the old lavatory in the yard. He has the shed door nailed shut. Léonie admits to herself that she enjoys the act of defecating. She helps Victorine and Baptiste scoop up horse manure from the road to fertilize the garden. Léonie uses the bathroom after Louis has vacated it. She stares at the soap and toiletries arranged in the room around her. Léonie flushes the toilet, washes her hands, and goes downstairs.

### Chapter 23, The Soap Dish Analysis

Léonie's fascination with defecation is another way that she celebrates the body, even though this act normally is considered base. Again in this chapter Thérèse sidles up to her father and tries to look sweet and well-mannered in comparison to her cousin. The themes of sin and death/afterlife are also associated with the baser functions of the human body. Watching the toilet bowl empty, Léonie considers death and the physical nature of the body and its decomposition. She wonders if the soul lives on after death. Questioning religious truths in this way is in direct contrast to Thérèse, who takes the church's teachings to heart without any critical inquiry.



# Chapter 24, The Frying Pan

## Chapter 24, The Frying Pan Summary

Antoinette lives for three more years, while Léonie and Madeleine continue to visit the family in Blémont during the summer holidays. As Antoinette becomes weaker, Rose comes to stay at the house and relieves Madeleine of some of the household chores. Antoinette craves company, and Madeleine and Thérèse spend time with her as her illness continues. The girls are asked to take on additional household responsibilities. They often prepare meals and listen as Victorine and Rose gossip about people in the village. The two women discuss the Germans and recount how one day Antoinette lost her shoes and was too ashamed to come back inside the house. The women wonder if they could have done anything differently and then become quiet, realizing that the girls have been listening.

Thérèse, meanwhile, spends her time in the kitchen praying for lost souls and attempting not to let the others know what she is doing. She chooses to make herself suffer in small ways so that her mother will suffer less in purgatory. Thérèse's does not know what the limit should be for these small discomforts she inflicts on herself. During lunch, Léonie sulks, playing with her food and knowing that she will be reprimanded. She imagines how she will make up her own rules when she is an adult, rejecting all decorum and etiquette expected at mealtimes.

## Chapter 24, The Frying Pan Analysis

Victorine and Rose attempt to make sense of the wartime events by discussing the events over and over again. Their gossip and banter is a healthy way of dealing with the events imposed on the community. In contrast, Thérèse and Léonie lack this kind of easy communication, and their relationship is troubled. The girls are only partly privy to the information about Antoinette's trauma during the war. This is what they overhear:

"Very clean, the bastards."

"Very polite and correct, that officer, that day."

"Those scum of *sales Boches*."

"Poor Mademoiselle Antoinette." (97)

It is within this passage that Antoinette's secret tragedy is explained. The German officer who acted so politely the rest of the day had assaulted Antoinette in the cellar. Rose and Victorine would have met Antoinette as she came around from the back of the house because she ran up from the back stairs of the cellar, into the garden, then to the kitchen. In this chapter we also see Thérèse turning more and more to religion as her mother's death approaches. Her prayers and self-sacrifices are an escape from pain



and uncertainty. She hopes to ease her mother's journey through purgatory by taking on some physical suffering herself.



# Chapter 25, The Pillows

## Chapter 25, The Pillows Summary

Antoinette lies dying. Léonie spends as little time as possible with her aunt. Antoinette talks and cries out in her sleep. Her limbs fly out as she experiences a half-dreaming state under the influence of morphine. Thérèse catches her mother's hands, and her mother tells her that she is a good girl. Antoinette says something about not letting the officer see her. Thérèse stays with her mother, holding the bowl when her mother vomits. At dinner Thérèse refuses to eat because she feels ugly and overweight. Tonight Thérèse limits her intake of food, although at other times she eats compulsively, unable to stop the feeling that she is starving. Louis asks his daughter to eat for his sake. Thérèse eats heartily, even taking a second helping.

## Chapter 25, The Pillows Analysis

Now far along in her illness, Antoinette is incredibly thin and suffers a great deal. She cannot hold down food. This probably influences Thérèse's already troubled self-image. Thérèse becomes a binge eater, developing a self-consciousness about her maturing body. She even imagines cutting off her newly grown hips and breasts with a knife. Thérèse also turns to food as a way of quieting the pain associated with her mother's impending death. She admits that she sometimes imagines food as a gag that stops her from crying out.

The encouragement to eat, passed from one character to another, is important. In this scene, Louis encourages Thérèse to eat. Thérèse wants to gain her father's approval, which she does by taking second helpings.



# Chapter 26, The Statue of the Virgin

## Chapter 26, The Statue of the Virgin Summary

Antoinette has less than a week to live. Thérèse lies face down on her bedroom floor, her body in the shape of a cross. She prays and concentrates on the last four things listed in the catechism: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. Every day, Thérèse makes small tasks more painful and difficult. As Thérèse performs these acts of self-sacrifice, she sometimes looks up at the statue of Our Lady with the figure of Little Bernadette praying at her feet. Thérèse knows that the girl's visions led others to Our Lady. Thérèse feels that her thoughts are off-track, and she bangs her head against the floor. Madeleine appears at the door and looks in. She orders Thérèse to get up off the floor immediately.

## Chapter 26, The Statue of the Virgin Analysis

Thérèse's concerns about her mother's soul and her journey through death cause Thérèse to become more extreme in her religious activities. Thérèse adheres to the views of the Church, and she believes that her mother's soul will have to travel through purgatory, where fire will cleanse her of sins committed on earth. Thérèse's small daily sacrifices foreshadow her escape to the convent. Her obsession with self-sacrifice and the question of her mother's suffering in purgatory are linked, later in the novel, to her setting fire to the church. The reader understands that Thérèse is troubled by the assault against her mother that led to the sin of unchastity. Thérèse believes that her mother will suffer horribly in purgatory.



# Chapter 27, The Camp Bed

## Chapter 27, The Camp Bed Summary

After finding Thérèse on the floor praying, Madeleine decides that Léonie should be moved into Thérèse's room. Thérèse resents the other girl's presence and threatens to never speak to Léonie again. Madeleine had previously sewn nightdresses for the girls, which turn out to be see-through near a light. The girls had laughed because they could see each other's bodies, so Madeleine then made more conservative nightdresses. The girls, in these new nightgowns, stand by Antoinette's bed and wish her good night. Antoinette slips back into semi-consciousness, and the girls return to the bedroom upstairs. To coax Thérèse out of her silence, Léonie suggests a midnight picnic on the roof. When they return to the bedroom, Thérèse has cramps. Léonie gets into bed with her, massaging her cousin's stomach. The girls go downstairs to find an adult because Thérèse has her first period. They find the light on in Antoinette's room. She seems to be asleep. Louis dozes against Madeleine's shoulder. Madeleine sits very still, staring straight ahead.

## Chapter 27, The Camp Bed Analysis

Thérèse's use of the silent treatment control Léonie again foreshadows their years of silence. It is significant that Léonie wishes to soothe her cousin's pain and that she tries to break the silence between them. Later, however, Léonie will be so hurt by Thérèse's actions that she will make no move to stop her cousin's retreat into silence. At the moment when Thérèse physically and symbolically reaches womanhood with the onset of menstruation, she is confronted with her mother's death. The new dynamics in the household are intimated in the scene that the girls find when they come downstairs. Louis rests his head on Madeleine's shoulder, showing his developing reliance on her and a physical affection that has previously not been expressed. Madeleine stares ahead blankly, likely thinking about her sister's death and what this means for her future.



# Chapter 28, The Coffee Bowls

## Chapter 28, The Coffee Bowls Summary

Antoinette has died, and Louis suffers a period of intense grief. Louis and Thérèse refuse to eat their breakfasts, while Léonie relishes her meal. Thérèse and Léonie watch from the window of the salon as cars depart for the funeral. They recite the *De Profundis* and return to the dining room. On the table sit the remains of breakfast. Léonie retreats upstairs. In English, she tells the house that she is glad Antoinette is dead and that it took her aunt too long to die. She waits for the house to answer.

## Chapter 28, The Coffee Bowls Analysis

Louis attempts to protect Léonie and Thérèse by not allowing them to attend the funeral. He does not know that this decision will make it more difficult for the two young women to grieve. While Thérèse seeks refuge in prayer, Léonie becomes angry, retreating to her room and venting her feelings. She vents her anger in English. Yet again, the author uses personification, implying that Léonie can communicate with the house. Léonie's anger will stay with her as an adult. Like the house itself, she will keep her memories bottled up.



# Chapter 29, The Bread Basket

## Chapter 29, The Bread Basket Summary

Thérèse is in mourning and often stays in bed, feverish. Léonie takes on her cousin's share of their morning chores. Léonie goes to the village to buy bread for breakfast. In the square there are two bakeries side by side. Léonie buys two baguettes from the shop she is not supposed to visit. As she leaves, she meets Baptiste and a group of four boys who block her path and call her names. Léonie runs down the lane by the edge of the woods, and she flicks off a sandal because a strap has become loose. The boys reappear and continue their pursuit. Léonie throws the loaves of bread on the ground and runs through the forest, losing her pursuers. She is in the clearing near the stream. The fine rain in the air forms into a woman. Time seems suspended, and a deep sense of peace descends on Léonie.

Léonie returns home. Baptiste and his mother Rose arrive with Léonie's sandal and the discarded loaves of bread. Baptiste claims that the boys were trying to be friendly and that Léonie ran away without explanation. Victorine asks why Léonie was so late returning and, to save Baptiste from his mother's anger, Léonie explains her vision. She describes a beautiful woman with olive skin dressed in red. Victorine laughs, but Rose wonders if it was the Virgin Mary. Thérèse also discredits the story. Baptiste and Léonie are both in trouble with the adults, who think they are lying. Léonie watches Baptiste glance at Thérèse, and then she carries a several knives to the other room.

## Chapter 29, The Bread Basket Analysis

Léonie's experience is both physical and visual, although the others focus only on the physical aspects of the vision. Her vision does not fit with traditional accounts, and it is rejected immediately. Adding to Victorine's quick rejection is her prejudice against the English. It would be hard for Victorine to believe that a bourgeois, half-English girl could recognize the Virgin Mary. Prejudice is also present here against people of color because Victorine laughs at the thought of the saint having dark or olive-toned skin.

The relationship between Baptiste and Léonie changes in this chapter. In the village square, Baptiste and his friends threaten Léonie. Their pursuit implies a threat of physical and perhaps sexual violence because Léonie is loosening her sandal at the moment the boys reappear. This parallels Antoinette's loss of her shoe during her ordeal in the cellar. The turning point in their relationship happens when the two are accused of lying. Léonie and Baptiste share a glance that binds them as allies against the others.

The two bakeries parallel the two stories the girls will claim. One bakery is "good" and accepted, and the other bakery is ignored in the official histories. Thérèse plays up Léonie's Englishness and dismisses Léonie's vision because it does not fit with traditional accounts. Léonie's anger at Thérèse is compounded when she sees Baptiste



looking at Thérèse. Léonie adds feelings of envy to that of her anger. Thérèse has taken away the credibility of Léonie's experience, and Thérèse has possibly stolen Baptiste's attention as well. Léonie's anger is represented symbolically by the handful of knives she carries with her from the kitchen.



# Chapter 30, The Quimper Dish

## Chapter 30, The Quimper Dish Summary

Thérèse is feverish, and she stays in bed demanding companionship because she claims that she sees the Devil hiding behind the curtains. Léonie sits by her cousin's side, still unable to cry about her aunt's death. Léonie makes a big deal about how much work it will be for her to prepare lunch all on her own, and she goes downstairs and gets out the antique Quimper bowl. Léonie then leaves, climbs over the wall at the back of the property, and enters the forest. The vision of the woman appears again. Thérèse, meanwhile, feels compelled to help Léonie. Thérèse rushes out of the house without giving Victorine a chance to question her. While Thérèse knows she should first go to the grenier to get fruit for breakfast, she decides instead to go to the orchard. She intuits that Léonie has gone to the clearing. Thérèse sees Léonie kneeling reverentially by the rock. Thérèse gets on her knees and mimics her cousin.

## Chapter 30, The Quimper Dish Analysis

It is surprising that Thérèse suddenly has the energy to get out of bed and run after Léonie because she supposedly has been so ill. Léonie guesses that the girl's illness is an act to exert control over the adults. Thérèse probably senses how her cousin will gain superior standing in the household by doing more than her share of chores. The Quimper dish, associated with Antoinette and her approval, is a symbol that first appears in this chapter. The girls have a history of competing over its use, and later in the novel Louis will turn a piece of the broken dish in his hands, mourning the loss of his wife. Léonie's eventual feeling of being burdened by the daily upkeep of the house and the estate is foreshadowed by her comments in this chapter. She exaggerates how difficult it will be to do extra chores and to manage on her own. She is probably getting back at Thérèse for deflating her story about her vision in the woods. Léonie again has a profound religious experience in the woods, but this time Thérèse joins her. On first reading, it is unclear whether Thérèse shares Léonie's vision or if she is merely copying Léonie's reverent pose.





# Chapter 31, The Dustpan

## Chapter 31, The Dustpan Summary

Léonie and Thérèse arrive home from their experience in the clearing. They are met by reproaches from Victorine and Madeleine. Thérèse admits that she broke the Quimper dish as she ran out the door, following the voice of Our Lady, who compelled her. Madeleine is furious, but this subsides and she turns her anger on Victorine. She calls Victorine an imbecile and orders her to pick up the pieces with her hands instead of with the dustpan. Madeleine confronts Thérèse on the similarity between her "vision" in the clearing and the statue in her room. Thérèse breaks down in tears. Her aunt softens towards Thérèse and comforts her. Léonie wipes her nose on her sleeve and then steals the central piece of the Quimper dish. She then bangs the gong for lunch and hides the piece of dish upstairs. At bath time, Thérèse again tells her cousin about how Our Lady spoke to her and that she will announce her next appearance. Condescendingly, Thérèse asks Léonie to pass her a towel.

## Chapter 31, The Dustpan Analysis

Madeleine diverts her anger at the broken Quimper dish from Thérèse and Léonie to Victorine. Though Madeleine knows that Thérèse's vision seems suspiciously similar to the statue of the Virgin Mary in her niece's room, Madeleine softens towards her niece when the girl breaks down in tears, mourning her mother's death. In Thérèse's version of events, her calling toward the Virgin Mary was so strong that she broke the bowl in passing. At this point it is up to the reader to decide whether Thérèse is a reliable character. Later we will realize that she broke the Quimper dish on purpose, symbolically shattering Léonie's recent claim of being the one to take on the domestic chores and responsibilities on her own. Both girls now claim to have had visions of the Virgin Mary. We also see how easily Thérèse's demeanour crumbles when others question her manufactured version of events.

Léonie reacts negatively to all of the attention being paid to Thérèse. Léonie tests the limits of what she can get away with while the adults' attention is distracted. Wiping her nose on her sleeve is a minor misbehavior. Stealing the piece of Quimper dish is in retaliation against Thérèse for having replaced Léonie's story with an easily accepted story of her own. Symbolically, the rift in the family relations cannot be put back together because the joined hands on the dish fragment will always be missing from the repaired plate. The plate comes to represent Antoinette's loss and also how relations within the household deteriorate after her death. The plate is the object in the middle of the cousins' struggle for power over the household in Antoinette's absence, one that Léonie "steals" and keeps for herself.



# Chapter 32, The Oranges

## Chapter 32, The Oranges Summary

Léonie tries to resolve the problem of when two objects are distinct from each other yet the same, such as the addition of one plus one, and when the objects are two separate entities. She thinks of walking in a field and spotting magpies, wondering how much time should elapse before the next magpie she sees can be counted as a second magpie. Léonie sits on the doorstep behind the kitchen juggling oranges. She watches the individual fruit become one orange as the fruits blur with motion. She then lets the oranges slow down so that they become two distinct objects. As she juggles, Léonie thinks about how she dislikes objects without names, such as magpies, which are not solid and safe like the fields, for instance, or the cows, which are named and thus not threatening.

## Chapter 32, The Oranges Analysis

As Léonie finishes juggling the oranges she thinks to herself: "One red lady. One blue. One? Or two?" (131). The rhythmic quality of Roberts' writing follows the rhythmic movement of the fruit in Léonie's hands. In these final clipped lines of the chapter, we realize that Léonie has not really been concerned with magpies but with reasoning through the problem of the two separate visions of the woman in the clearing. Léonie is hesitant to disbelieve her cousin. Physical objects are easily counted and differentiated, but in the case of the visions, it is simply Léonie's word against her cousin's. Léonie prefers to think of two objects as "one plus one" instead of "two" because this keeps the distinction in place between the two events or objects.

Juggling oranges emphasizes the blurring of two things into one. The blurring of fact and fiction and the problems in differentiating between two similar things is repeated several times in the novel, most noticeably in the blurred photograph of Léonie and Thérèse. Like the twin visions of Our Lady, the two girls' identities are intertwined and difficult to separate. Thérèse claims that the two girls are not cousins but twin sisters. Now, regardless of what Léonie wants, the story of her experience in the woods will always be paired with Thérèse's story.



# Chapter 33, The Green Scarf

## Chapter 33, The Green Scarf Summary

Léonie and Thérèse have given Victorine a green scarf as a birthday present. Victorine visits Rose Taillé for the evening. Supper is gloomy. Louis has insisted that Antoinette's place still be set even though she has passed away, and Madeleine gossips and then becomes silent. The girls sneak out of the house after saying good night to the adults. The two girls move toward the front of the crowd, and they join the villagers at the clearing near where Rose is tending a bonfire. Victorine spreads the green scarf on the boulders, completing her makeshift altar with bouquets of grain. The townspeople pray as Thérèse puts on a show of having a vision. The gathered worshippers sing hymns, and an accordion adds accompaniment. The singing changes to patois, the local dialect. The villagers then start to dance. Rose dances with Léonie, and they take turns leading in the man's role in the dance. Baptiste then asks Léonie to dance, and he leads her confidently across the clearing. On the way home, Baptiste and Léonie lean against a tree and kiss, and this leads to sexual touching. As they near the house, they notice the lights in one of the windows switch off. Madeleine greets Léonie at the door, furious and full of questions. Léonie answers that she has simply gone for a walk in the forest and that Rose, Victorine, and Baptiste had been there.

## Chapter 33, The Green Scarf Analysis

The celebration in the woods is an extension of the ancient pagan traditions associated with fertility worship and the celebration of the seasons. This contrasts with organized religion, which is associated with hierarchy, the doctrines of the church, and patriarchal figures of bishops and priests. In the novel there is also a tenuous relationship between sexuality and religious experience. In traditional Catholic teachings, abstinence before marriage is expected. Léonie can feel the tension in the air as the adults dance. Once she and Baptiste have left, she intuits that the adults will continue the celebrations by engaging in further sexual activities. She feels she has to silence the "nun in her head" who tells her to stop kissing Baptiste. Léonie also dissociates herself from the sin and guilt of the experience by imagining that Baptiste is pretending he is with Thérèse. This also points to Léonie's worries about an attraction between Baptiste and her cousin. This love triangle is complicated further when, not long after the evening described in this chapter, Léonie takes Baptiste as a lover while Thérèse looks on. It is also puzzling that Léonie thinks of the kittens that Baptiste helped drown many years ago while she kisses the young man.



# Chapter 34, The Water Bottle

## Chapter 34, The Water Bottle Summary

Léonie accompanies Victorine to pick tomatoes in the garden, sorting them into baskets of red or green. They see Louis, who is sitting in his workshop, turning a Quimper dish piece in his hands. Thérèse arrives, and the two girls make their way to the cemetery. Thérèse fills a water bottle from a tap at the side of the graveyard and returns with it to lay flowers at the grave. The girls leave the cemetery, arguing about Baptiste and about the previous evening. As they near the clearing, Rose appears and tells them to stay away from the woods. *Monsieur le Curé* is performing an exorcism by having holy water flung at the stones. Thérèse drops to her knees and tries to kiss the priest's hand, and he tells her that he would like a word with Thérèse and her father the next day. Léonie tugs down Victorine's scarf, which is hanging, torn, in the branches of a nearby tree.

## Chapter 34, The Water Bottle Analysis

Again, this chapter emphasizes the differences between the people's celebrations and those accepted by the Church. The priest denounces the festivities as pagan rites and puts on a show of exorcising the place from the Devil. The *Curé* is a "swirl of lace and black skirts" (149) as he leaves the clearing. He represents the wealthy, privileged traditions of the Catholic Church, and he wants to preserve his own power in the village by quieting the rumors of mystic sightings. Also important in this scene is Thérèse's supplication and sycophancy. She debases herself in front of the priest and kisses his hand to gain his approval.

This chapter is dense with imagery. The carefully tended graves are symbolic of the control that the local women exert over their houses, their families, and the past. The author tells us that Thérèse knows why the location of a person's burial is important, but that "she did not say why" (145). It is unclear how much Thérèse knows at this time about the secrets that occurred during the war. It is possible that she already knows from her mother's letters about the deaths in the woods and the unknown burial site. If this is the case, then she keeps it a secret. The neatly tended graves come to represent the version of events that gets passed down in the official histories. Later, when the truth about the murdered family's hasty burial comes to light, the demeaning way in which their bones were hidden, jumbled together in a makeshift grave, contrasts with these neatly tended sites.



# Chapter 35, The Rosary

## Chapter 35, The Rosary Summary

Léonie helps Thérèse prepare for her meeting with the priest. The priest lives in a large, ostentatious house made of stone. The interior of the residence is dark and bleak (151). Thérèse imagines the housekeeper washing the entire room, including the statue of Christ and the priest himself. She tries to ignore these thoughts while the priest lectures her. He tells Thérèse that she is lying and that she is an impressionable young girl.

Thérèse objects at first, but then she begins to cry. The priest tells her that a true visionary would not break down under a little opposition. He gives Thérèse a cheap rosary, telling her that prayer will do her good. Thérèse follows Louis out to the car, her bladder bursting and her feet pinching in her uncomfortable shoes. The next Sunday, the priest lectures about the importance of obedience to the church and warns against "individualism and mysticism, undesirable attempts at originality" (155).

The priest also emphasizes the importance of going to confession. Thérèse has not been to confession since she made her claims. Thérèse feels intense shame as the priest continues his sermon. Her anger gives way as she feels a veil of white descend around her. Thérèse faints, and Louis carries her out of the church. After the service, the villagers gather to gossip. Some think that Thérèse's fainting was a sign of the Virgin rescuing Thérèse from evil, and others think Thérèse has been putting on a show. Victorine arrives with important news. The men sent to dismantle the heap of stones in the clearing have found a shallow grave containing a jumble of human skulls and bones.

## Chapter 35, The Rosary Analysis

The truce that Thérèse and her cousin share at the opening of this chapter is possible only because they have a common enemy, the priest. Thérèse's preparations show that she cares how she will be perceived. She puts on high-heeled shoes to prove that she is mature. These shoes are uncomfortable and add to her suffering during her visit with the priest. Thérèse breaks down under the priest's criticisms. Thérèse feels an invisible bond break between herself and her father, as Louis stays silent and does not defend her.

During the sermon the next Sunday, Thérèse's deals with her fury and this very public humiliation by retreating into prayer. Her anger at the priest is encapsulated in the lava she imagines flowing into his mouth to stop his voice, which incriminating her and bringing her intense shame. She decides to retreat from regular life, and as she faints she imagines herself flying to meet her future self, removed from grief, shame, and anger. The priest gives her a cheap rosary as a quick way to fix the situation, a token gesture. The priest has also mentions the discrepancy between reports of the visions, stating with some repressed humor that some reports claim the vision to have been "as



dusky a beauty as you'd find among the pieds-noirs" (154), emphasizing the prejudice that discredits Léonie's vision.

The bones that lie in a mess jumbled together in a shallow grave are central to the plot and to the themes of the novel. By ordering the men to destroy the shrine, the priest has accidentally uncovered the village's most horrific wartime secret.



# Chapter 36, The Cake Tin

## Chapter 36, The Cake Tin Summary

Madeleine checks a receipt from the funeral services. Léonie asks whose bones were found in the woods, but Madeleine will not give a clear answer. Léonie thinks of the war memorial in town, which she confuses with the statue of Our Lady. Adding to this confusion is the fact that the villagers honor their war dead with processions on Our Lady's feast day. Madeleine forbids Léonie from venturing into the woods. She discourages Léonie from associating with people of different social standing than herself, claiming that no good can come of mixed marriages.

Léonie then helps Victorine make a cake. Victorine hesitates before telling Léonie that the bones may have been the bones of French Jews persecuted during the war. Victorine asks why Léonie has not learned this information at school in England. Victorine describes how many people hated the Jews at that time, denying that she was one of these people. Victorine gives Léonie the bowl to lick. She tells Léonie how the Germans murdered Henri and the family he was hiding. They then buried the bodies themselves, keeping the gravesite secret. Léonie asks Victorine how she knows this, and the older woman shouts at Léonie to be quiet, telling the girl that she has to get back to work.

## Chapter 36, The Cake Tin Analysis

Léonie is persistent in her quest to find answers about the village's secrets from the war. Dissatisfied with vague answers from Madeleine, Léonie goes to the kitchen, a less public space where she might get answers from Victorine. When Léonie brings up questions of racism in French culture, however, Victorine gets defensive. In her comments we can see that Victorine harbors prejudice against the Jews. Her words imply that she accepted them within the French culture as long as they kept to themselves and did not participate in public life. She gives Léonie the bowl to lick to shut her up and to keep her in her place as a child. Victorine's defensiveness turns into anger, and she lashes out verbally when the questions lead to uncomfortable self-analysis.



# Chapter 37, The Package

## Chapter 37, The Package Summary

Madeleine and Léonie stay on past the beginning of the school term. After Antoinette's death, the postman often comes to the house to drop off letters of condolence. From the postman's gossip, Léonie learns that the priest has had the bones buried in the corner of the cemetery as quickly and quietly as possible. Léonie and Thérèse walk to the white mailbox at the end of the lane, and Thérèse insists that, as daughter of the house, she should have the right to open the mailbox with the small key.

The girls collect the letters, but the postman cycles back, throwing a small package over the gate. The package, addressed to Thérèse, contains letters that Antoinette sent to her sister at the convent during the war. Back at the house, Thérèse hides the letters. The girls descend the stairs, dressed for lunch. Léonie has started her period, and Thérèse notices that the back of Léonie's shorts are stained. Thérèse helps her cousin change clothes and "smuggle" the used towel downstairs, where they destroy it in the range. They then enter the dining room, where their fingernails are inspected. They enter the room for lunch.

## Chapter 37, The Package Analysis

Léonie and Thérèse conspire with each other and hold secrets, and the package is kept a secret for the moment. Léonie's secret is that she has begun to menstruate. Symbolically, the two girls have reached the edge of adulthood. With the bloodstain removed and their secrets disposed of or hidden, the two girls are presentable. Their bodies are inspected for neatness and cleanliness before they can enter the dining room, while their secrets are guarded by the back rooms of the house. At this point neither girl knows the importance of the information in Antoinette's letters.





# Chapter 38, The Ironing Board

## Chapter 38, The Ironing Board Summary

Rose arrives from her husband's reburial and funeral. Léonie accompanies Rose to the attic to help with the ironing. Rose tells Léonie what happened in France during the war, how the Germans rounded up the Jews, with one particularly "grande rafle" in Paris (169). She tells Léonie how the Jews were kept in a stadium near Paris under horrible conditions and how prisoners were sent on to the concentrations camp at Drancy and then to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Rose describes the railway freight cars that were used to transport the prisoners and how the journey lasted for three days with most people standing up without food or water. Rose explains how people sometimes escaped, and how she and her husband Henri had sheltered a young couple and their daughter from Rouen.

However, someone in the village betrayed Rose and Henri. It was difficult to keep a secret in a small town with such a strong Nazi presence in the village. Henri and the family were taken away in the night. In the early morning the captives were taken to the woods and shot. Their graves were hidden so that a proper burial would not be possible. A month prior to this, the priest had ordered the shrine be removed, and the villagers did not think to look under the rocks at the shrine itself. The identity of the informer was never discovered. Some think that it was someone in the Martin family, while others blame the girl who had the affair with a German officer. Rose finishes pressing the shirt, telling Léonie that she had been expecting a baby at the time. The shock of Henri's death sent her into early labor, and the baby was stillborn.

## Chapter 38, The Ironing Board Analysis

In this chapter we discover yet another mystery that goes unsolved, the identity of the informer who precipitated the death of the Jewish family and Henri Taillé. Léonie finally discovers the village secret. It is only in this attic, cloaked from the rest of the world because it is both physically distant from the main rooms and filled with hanging sheets and other clothing, that the secret can be revealed. This scene develops the relationship between Léonie and Rose because Léonie finally hears the truth from an adult. By being privy to this knowledge, Léonie is entering the adult world where there are carefully guarded secrets. In addition to the murder, the German soldiers are guilty of sacrilege in that the bodies were unceremoniously buried, heaped together under the rocks at the site of the ancient shrine.



# Chapter 39, The Onyx Ashtray

## Chapter 39, The Onyx Ashtray Summary

Louis suffers a minor stroke, and Léonie and Thérèse visit him in hospital. Thérèse breaks down in tears, and the two girls are asked to leave because they are causing a disturbance. Later, the priest pays the family a visit to offer his sympathy. The priest hesitates and then accepts a cigarette from Madeleine. Thérèse judges the priest harshly, thinking to herself that he is worldly. She watches, full of criticism, as Madeleine leans forward and asks what will happen to the shrine. The priest emphasizes that he will do what the bishop and the church deem correct. When the priest leaves, Madeleine downs two quick shots of whisky. Madeleine thinks that the priest would rather have the entire situation hushed up. This would explain the hasty and unpublicized burial of the bones in the graveyard and the headstone inscribed with only Henri Taillé's name.

## Chapter 39, The Onyx Ashtray Analysis

Madeleine deals with the upsetting events of the previous days by drinking two shots of whisky as soon as the priest leaves. The alcohol allows her to express herself more freely, and she criticizes the priest for his hypocrisy in being forced to erect a memorial at the shrine site, yet trying to cover up the scandal by arranging a small and hasty burial of the bones in a corner of the graveyard. The memorial in the woods will be purposefully vague. It will commemorate France's war heroes instead of commemorating the true victims. Similarly, only Henri's name is inscribed on the tombstone in the graveyard. This means that the priest can avoid the media attention and the public outcry that would occur if the truth were known about the murder of the Jewish family that happened literally in the village's backyard. Another important element in this chapter is Thérèse's animosity toward the priest and her aunt Madeleine. From Thérèse's perspective, her aunt is flirting with the priest, and the priest is falling prey to earthly vices by allowing this behavior and by accepting a cigarette. Thérèse is developing a sense of moral superiority to those around her.



# Chapter 40, The Fish Kettle

## Chapter 40, The Fish Kettle Summary

Thérèse excitedly plans the preparations for Louis' return from the hospital. When Thérèse finds her aunt Madeleine already making up the bed downstairs, she is upset because Madeleine has stolen the role she imagined for herself. Thérèse notices that her aunt has painted her toenails red and that she has on a beautiful new dress and high-heeled sandals. Upon Thérèse's insistence, Madeleine agrees to let her niece make lunch. Thérèse feels like crying as she prepares lunch. She imagines that her fish sauce will be much better than anything that Madeleine could make.

Thérèse has a sudden urge to read the letters that she has hidden, unread, in the buffet. Thérèse already knows that Rose cared for her for several years. Now she learns from the letters that Antoinette's pregnancy was likely unwanted. The letters imply that Antoinette was raped in the cellar and that Antoinette's hope of a religious life was shattered when she became pregnant. One letter implies that the perpetrator was one of the German officers: "Those filthy Germans. Destroying everything. Taking everything they've a mind to" (178). Thérèse wonders whether she and Léonie are sisters and if Louis could have been the aggressor rather than a German officer. Thérèse also imagines Madeleine's fancy new dress crumpled on the white sheets in Louis' room. Antoinette also describes the tantrums Thérèse used to have. Thérèse rejects this information because she believes she had a very happy childhood. She thinks about how God's presence is a comfort. She leaves the kitchen and goes to the shrine.

## Chapter 40, The Fish Kettle Analysis

Thérèse's discovery of the secrets disclosed in the letters coincides with her feelings of jealousy and the threat that Madeleine poses to her status as Louis' favourite within the household. It also means that Antoinette sinned by having sexual relations outside of marriage, and Thérèse's existence is based on this act of violence and sin. Thérèse rejects this information. Instead, Thérèse imagines that Louis is to blame for Antoinette's unwanted pregnancy. At least she could claim him as her biological father. With Louis likely to marry Madeleine, Thérèse would no longer be a valid household member. She worries that Léonie will take her place as Louis' favorite and as his daughter. Symbolically, Thérèse takes off her apron and renounces the world of physical tasks and human love. She feels betrayed by everyone around her, and being thrust into a crisis of identity, she decides to devote herself to God. By leaving the kitchen and feeling called to go to the woods, Thérèse is symbolically renouncing the Martin family and foreshadowing the day she will become a nun.



# Chapter 41, The Dust

## Chapter 41, The Dust Summary

Thérèse runs across the backyard. She does not notice Léonie, who is trying to avoid Louis' return. Baptiste arrives. He and Léonie have a strained conversation, and then Baptiste tells Léonie that he has something to show her. Léonie insists on going ahead of Baptiste up the back stairs. Downstairs, the adults help Louis settle into his new bedroom. Baptiste leads Léonie to her old bedroom. This is the room where the Jewish family was kept the night before the murders. Léonie feels dizzy and nauseous. She feels that she is too young for this information, and she is sick of the adults' secrets. Baptiste expresses his anger at the Germans for killing his father. He tells Léonie that the *curé* does not want the Jewish community to know about the murders and the mixed burial of the bones. Léonie goes downstairs to the kitchen, intending to get some potatoes to show Baptiste how to juggle. Instead, Victorine assumes that Léonie will help prepare the meal. Victorine notices the biscuit box on the counter, and Léonie tells her that it contains Thérèse's letters. Victorine assumes that Thérèse has gone to spend time with Louis on his first day home from hospital.

## Chapter 41, The Dust Analysis

In this chapter Léonie finally discovers the secret hidden in the back bedroom where she slept as a child. Symbolically, this passage marks the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. She finally has answers to her questions, but she finds the information too much to handle. Léonie wants to show Baptiste how to juggle, her way of blurring fact and reality and giving herself time to think about what she has learned. By closing the door to her old bedroom, Léonie is closing herself off to the enormity of the information she has just been told.

Léonie retreats downstairs and immerses herself in the domestic task of preparing a meal. This is a foreshadowing of the choice she will later make to stay and "root" herself in the Martin property and the domestic tasks associated with family life. In this chapter the relationship between Léonie and Baptiste is developed. The two characters grow closer by sharing information, noticeably excluding Thérèse from their secrets. The attraction between the two characters is hinted at earlier in the scene, as they pretend not to notice each other and then engage in a strained conversation before relaxing in each other's company. The final lines of the chapter are full of irony, as Thérèse discovers that Louis is not her paternal father and the closeness between the two characters has been destroyed forever.



# Chapter 42, The Blue Skirt

## Chapter 42, The Blue Skirt Summary

In the clearing, Thérèse experiences a vision while the priest, the bishop, and some villagers stand by. Thérèse feels that the bishop and the others want something that she has, namely her proximity to the divine through her vision of the Virgin Mary. The *curé* comments dryly on the coincidence of Thérèse having a vision at this moment, but the bishop believes Thérèse's docile show of devotion. Thérèse kneels before the bishop, but she feels superior to him. The bishop asks if Our Lady has sent a message for him, and Thérèse tells him that a chapel should be built at the site of the old shrine. She adds that a festival should be celebrated during the harvest festival time. Thérèse mentions primly that she must get home for lunch to see her father, who has just returned from hospital. The bishop tells Thérèse to run along home, and he invites himself over for a meal.

## Chapter 42, The Blue Skirt Analysis

Only a handful of villagers are present at the blessing ceremony. The local people distrust the authority and rigidity of the church even though they attend regularly. The bishop, clearly taken with Thérèse, trusts her claims that she has yet again had a vision of the Virgin Mary. Thérèse is manipulating the bishop, and she gains a sense of power and worth from the experience. Thérèse needs comfort and a sense of identity, and she boosts her sense of self by manipulating the religious figure and the townspeople into believing that she can communicate with the Virgin Mary.



# Chapter 43, The Slotted Spoon

## Chapter 43, The Slotted Spoon Summary

Thérèse is nonchalant when she returns to the kitchen. She announces that the bishop and the priest will be coming for lunch. Rose and Victorine hurriedly prepare the meal. Léonie pulls the cookie jar toward her and begins reading a letter. Thérèse becomes upset, and Léonie offers to trade secrets with her cousin. Thérèse assumes that Léonie's secret is about Baptiste's crush on Thérèse, but this is not Léonie's secret. Thérèse agrees that her cousin can read one carefully chosen letter. Léonie and Thérèse trade criticisms about the fish sauce. Thérèse criticizes Madeleine's cooking, and Léonie corrects her, telling Thérèse that what Thérèse has taken for sauce is leftover water from the cooking. Thérèse drinks up the rest of the liquid from the broth and watches Léonie read the letter from the top of the pile.

## Chapter 43, The Slotted Spoon Analysis

The tension between Thérèse and Léonie builds toward a climax in this scene. The secrets they keep from each other are discussed for the first time, and Léonie suggests a trade of information. Thérèse's new confidence is soundly tested and deflated. She is wrong in her assumption that Léonie's secret is about Baptiste. When she is wrong about the fish broth, Thérèse reacts by drinking it up. Symbolically, Thérèse "drinks" or internalizes her mistakes, her anger, and her pain. At the end of the scene, Léonie is allowed to read one carefully chosen letter. While this may appear to be a trade, Thérèse is actually keeping the secret of her identity, and the assault that led to her birth, secret.



# Chapter 44, The Washing-Up Bowl

## Chapter 44, The Washing-Up Bowl Summary

The bishop arrives for lunch. The company politely continues in conversation, ignoring Louis' tears of frustration and rage because he cannot eat on his own. The bishop compliments Thérèse on her cooking, and instead of admitting that she did not cook the fish, Thérèse tells him that she believes God has called her to "be a contemplative" (194). Thérèse asks Louis' permission to enter the convent at age sixteen. Unable to speak, Louis weeps and is comforted by Madeleine. Madeleine scolds Thérèse for upsetting her father on his first day home. The bishop encourages Thérèse to continue on the religious path. The priest interjects, suggesting a boarding school instead. The bishop's attention shifts to Léonie. He mentions that he has heard a conflicting story about a different sort of vision of Our Lady. While Madeleine is busy attending to Louis, the *curé* quickly explains that this story came about as a fault of translation.

After lunch Léonie and Thérèse wash up. Léonie asks Thérèse if she truly intends to become a nun. Thérèse plays up the fact that she can communicate with God. The two girls criticize each other. Thérèse tells her cousin that she will marry young and criticizes her for becoming involved with Baptiste. She taunts Léonie about secrets in Antoinette's letters and blames Madeleine for having sinned, yet Thérèse will not explain what she means. Thérèse grabs the cookie tin and dumps the letters into the range, where they go up in flames. Thérèse cries out: "They've betrayed me. I don't want you as my sister. I want Papa" (199). Léonie cries out as well, asking her cousin to explain what she means.

## Chapter 44, The Washing-Up Bowl Analysis

For Louis, the dinner with the high-ranking guests heightens his frustration and humiliation. Louis' dependency on Madeleine is obvious by the physical care she heaps on him. Both girls dislike how Madeleine dotes on Louis. Thérèse, having just learned that Louis is not her biological father, turns her pain into criticism of Madeleine and Léonie. Feeling jealous and threatened, Thérèse again plays up her religious devotion to save herself from her pain. She hurts Louis by threatening to leave the family for a life of religious seclusion. Though she does not admit it to herself, Thérèse wants to hurt Louis for choosing Madeleine over her.

Léonie feels angry because her experience in the woods is ignored in favor of Thérèse's version. The priest uses Léonie's biculturalism to discredit her vision. The tension between the two characters comes to a climax in this scene in the kitchen, resulting in a heated exchange of insults and criticism. One of the most important actions in this chapter is the way Thérèse dumps the cookie tin full of letters into the range of the stove. The letters go up in flames, destroying the truths written there.



## Chapter 45, The Vase

### Chapter 45, The Vase Summary

Thérèse has left for the village. In the dining room, Léonie looks at a porcelain vase on the mantel and wishes it would break. Léonie finds the piece of Quimper dish in her pocket, then walks to the woods. She lies down on a strip of carpet that has been used as a pew. The makeshift shrine has been restored, and various religious trinkets are lying about. Baptiste arrives, and Léonie tells him Thérèse's story that she and Thérèse are not cousins but sisters, fathered by a German officer. Baptiste does not believe Thérèse's stories, but he listens to Léonie's theory that it may have been Louis who impregnated Antoinette. As Léonie kisses Baptiste, she imagines Thérèse as her twin, sharing in the experience. Léonie hopes that Thérèse will see them and run to get the priest.

### Chapter 45, The Vase Analysis

Léonie is furious at Thérèse for telling her this information. To deal with her pain, Léonie becomes intimate with Baptiste. Thérèse, now excluded, had been Léonie's partner in the sexual games engaged in earlier in childhood. Léonie's decision to make love to Baptiste is also an act of defiance against the church and a way of entering womanhood and shedding her Englishness. As she undresses, Léonie is symbolically letting go of her childhood. She now adds sexual knowledge to her list of adult secrets. Léonie's anger and defiance are so powerful that she hopes to be found.





# Chapter 46, The Cigarette

## Chapter 46, The Cigarette Summary

Léonie and Thérèse have reunited. Léonie hurls criticisms at her cousin, jabbing a cigarette in the air as she speaks. Thérèse remembers how it had snowed on the day of her clothing. She is hurt that Léonie did not attend this ceremony. Léonie is wary of Thérèse's motives and feels that Thérèse is here to stir up painful secrets from the past. Léonie accuses Thérèse of having returned so that the villagers will give her attention again. Léonie finally confronts Thérèse, accusing her of having lied about her visions. Thérèse admits that she was mistaken and that she would like to set the record straight. Léonie instead forces her to confront the fact that she lied and fabricated her visions. Both women criticize each other for being self-interested and for not caring about the Jewish family whose fate was sealed at the Martin estate. Both women call out "hypocrite" at the same time as Léonie leaves the room.

## Chapter 46, The Cigarette Analysis

Two sets of imagery recur in this scene. First is the lit cigarette, tied to fire imagery, which is aggressive and complements the intense criticism that Léonie hurls at her cousin. The next morning, Thérèse will use the lighter to set fire to the church and finally deal with the truths Léonie has laid bare. Secondly, the symbol of the knife, which was introduced at the beginning of the novel, is finally used to its full capacity in this scene. Instead of the physical knife that Léonie tested against her fingers in the earlier chapter, it is a figurative knife that cuts into the lies and excuses that Thérèse has carried with her for many years. Léonie cuts deep into layers of self-protection. Thérèse, on the other hand, criticizes Léonie for focusing only on her family and caring only about the public opinion in the small village. She says that Léonie is being confrontational because she is afraid of the truths from the past that will have to be dealt with. This is precisely the case, because at the end of the novel Léonie will face the secret she has been hiding, that she knows the name of the informer. The last thing that the characters do in this scene is to call each other a hypocrite. For the reader, it is at last a chance to see the women deal with the tension between them. These are their parting words.



# Chapter 47, The Statue

## Chapter 47, The Statue Summary

Thérèse dreams of Antoinette. Thérèse watches as her mother's body is mended and prepared for burial by women from the convent. Léonie comes out of the corner and moves her fist over the body, letting a stream of sand spell a word. Thérèse wakes and kneels on the floor by her bed to pray. She imagines the edges of a photograph and that Léonie is smiling. She goes downstairs to look at the photographs. Léonie has added photographs that Thérèse has not seen. There is a photo of Léonie and Baptiste on their wedding day and a photo of the couple's three girls. There is no photograph of Thérèse at her clothing ceremony, though Louis took several photographs that day.

Thérèse is reminded of the shoe she found in the cellar. Acting on intuition, Thérèse opens the unlocked cellar door and goes down the stairs. She digs in the pile of sand and finds the original statue of the Virgin Mary that was torn from the shrine. Thérèse lets her mind wander, thinking of the vision that Léonie saw of the olive-skinned woman above what was later discovered to be the victims' shallow grave. Thérèse believes that Léonie has known about the statue being here, having heard it from Baptiste. Thérèse feels triumphant that she has finally discovered the secret Léonie has been keeping from her for all these years.

## Chapter 47, The Statue Analysis

Thérèse's dream is linked to the nightmare sequence that Léonie has in the opening of the book. In both dreams, Antoinette is fighting to get out of the basement. In Thérèse's dream, the dead woman's body is being mended, which represents the healing process that Thérèse is going through by finally dealing with her mother's death. Thérèse feels triumphant that she has finally discovered Léonie's secret, although she is wrong. We must not necessarily trust the discoveries of characters because they are fallible, like the narrator. The photographs are also important in this chapter. Léonie has continued Antoinette's tradition of taking control over the household by arranging formal portraits. Léonie has focused on her own family and has deliberately left Thérèse out of the photographs to get back at her cousin for threatening her sense of identity and belonging.



# Chapter 48, The Cigarette Lighter

## Chapter 48, The Cigarette Lighter Summary

Thérèse walks toward the village just before sunrise. She goes to the church, which is decorated for the day's harvest festival Mass. The old altar has been replaced with a simple altar and a white cloth. There are many wreaths and bouquets of grains and grasses throughout the church. Thérèse looks at the Statue of Our Lady of Blémont-la-Fontaine. The statue has been repainted, and it is attached to a platform decorated with grain. The whole thing will be hoisted up by the local people and taken in procession after Mass, then returned to the chapel that has been built in the woods. Thérèse sees that the statue is child-sized.

Thérèse thinks about how she substituted the Virgin Mary as her mother figure when Antoinette died. She takes the cigarette lighter that Léonie left in her room and sets fire to the wreaths that lie underneath the statue. Thérèse watches as the statue goes up in flames, seeing a red and gold lady as the flames envelope the figure. Thérèse runs down the aisle of the church toward the doors, the fire burning behind her. Her clothes catch fire and she jumps clear of them, flinging herself at the door of the church and calling out, "Mother!"

## Chapter 48, The Cigarette Lighter Analysis

Thérèse has blurred the line between two women figures, yet another example of the "blurring" and doubling imagery that recurs throughout the novel. Thérèse's religious beliefs have led her to believe in the importance of chastity. She has projected this onto her mother, and she has looked to the Virgin Mary as a model because Our Lady is asexual and safe. We finally learn that Thérèse has exhibited feelings typical of the Elektra complex, similar to the Oedipal complex but involving a female child and her father. Thérèse's anger at her mother used to take shape by Thérèse "punishing" her and imagining that she had married her father instead. This lets the reader see the roots of Thérèse's incredible jealousy at the prospect of Madeleine and Léonie taking Thérèse's place in the household. Once she has admitted these things to herself, Thérèse wants a funeral and a fire to finally part with the grief over her mother's death and to rid herself of the consequences of her lies.

The festival and procession planned for that day are based on pretence. When Thérèse jumps free of her burning clothes, she is symbolically burning away her past self. She is going through a self-made purgatory, and she must pass through this and suffer to atone for her sins. We see Thérèse jump free of her burning clothes but we do not know whether she will make it out alive. She is either calling out to her mother, who she will greet in the afterlife, or else she is calling out to the Virgin Mary to save her.



# Chapter 49, The Alarm Clock

## Chapter 49, The Alarm Clock Summary

Léonie wakes as the sun comes in the window. She looks at her mother's old alarm clock and wonders if the clock has stopped, because it reads six a.m. Léonie is not sure of the time. Baptiste wakes sleepily beside her and pulls the duvet over their heads. Léonie tells him that she had a violent dream about Thérèse but that she cannot remember the details. Léonie feels anxiety, though she cannot identify the cause. She does what she usually does to reduce her anxiety, which is to take an inventory of the objects in the house.

Léonie feels wind blowing into the room, though she has shut the window. Léonie intuits a memory and senses it taking shape in the air. She sees Rose feeding both her and Thérèse when they are babies. Rose takes both girls and dips them in the stream in the clearing. Then Rose winks her green glass eye and is gone. Léonie gets out of bed and reaches out, but there is only emptiness in the air around her.

## Chapter 49, The Alarm Clock Analysis

In this chapter, Léonie has an intuition that something has happened to Thérèse. This is coupled with a sense of anxiety that she cannot place. There is reason to believe that Thérèse has died at the church because Léonie looks at the alarm clock and believes that the clock has stopped. Traditionally, a clock's arms stop when someone in the room has died. There are two ways to interpret the final image in this chapter. Léonie senses a memory that she has not had before. It might be a lost memory proving that the two girls are twins and that Rose has acted as a mother figure to both of them. A more likely explanation is that Léonie has invented this memory as a way of coming to terms with her relationship with Thérèse. If this is a false memory, then the author is again emphasizing the fallibility of memory and her characters. Finally, Rose's glass eye is an important symbol because it sees everything. Rose's wink with this eye is a playful gesture from an omniscient narrator. Léonie stands in the middle of the room without the support of this all-seeing figure. Symbolically, Léonie represents the writer about to embark on the difficult task of writing. She is surrounded by emptiness and must find her own way to tell the story of her childhood and the house's secrets.



# Chapter 50, The Words

## Chapter 50, The Words Summary

Léonie stands outside her old room. She wants a cigarette and breakfast, but she has left her lighter in Thérèse's room. Recently Léonie has used this back bedroom as an attic space. It is filled with Maurice's old things, and she has tried to discourage her daughters from spending any time here. Léonie feels cowardly as she thinks about the recent vandalism at the gravesite in the cemetery. She realizes that she must face the racism that is showing itself in her village, and she admits that she has heard the names of the family members and the name of the informer during her dreams. Léonie decides she will give the names during the enquiry that will soon be held. Léonie feels she needs to open the door to her old bedroom and join the departed characters there. Léonie opens the door, and she hears shadowy voices ahead of her in the room. She follows them, moving forward and attempting to find the words for her story.

## Chapter 50, The Words Analysis

The wind that Léonie feels in her room is a wind that heralds change. She puts aside her physical desires and finally deals with the secret that she has been harboring, that she knows the names of the Jewish family members and the informer who brought about their capture. Symbolically opening the door to these events from the past, Léonie steps over the threshold of the room and vows to tell the story of the people who suffered here. It is likely that Thérèse's return to the village is what has allowed Léonie to take this brave step. The previous evening, Léonie used her words to cut into Thérèse's layers of self-protection. In the previous chapter, Thérèse sets fire to the church and releases the pain she has kept inside her since her mother's death. In this final chapter, Léonie faces the secret that *she* has protected all these years. Léonie must now take moral action and tell others about the secret the village has been harboring. She will create a narrative of her childhood, melding Thérèse's writings with her own and integrating the stories of the many characters who were affected by these events.



# Characters

## Thérèse

Thérèse is the primary daughter of the house before her mother, Antoinette, passes away. Thérèse believes that she has the rights to the Martin estate and to everything in the house. Antoinette and Madeleine, Léonie's mother, are sisters. When Léonie and Madeleine come to stay for the summer, Thérèse and Léonie are close friends.

However, when Antoinette passes away it appears that Madeleine and Léonie will stay on at the Martin estate, and Thérèse feels threatened by the changes. Letters from her recently deceased aunt Soeur Dosithée arrive after Antoinette's death. Antoinette wrote these letters to her sister during the war. They imply that Thérèse was conceived in an act of sexual assault in the cellar, which means that Louis likely is not Thérèse's biological father. Thérèse finds this out when she is on the verge of adolescence, and this knowledge precipitates her story of seeing a vision of the Virgin Mary in the woods.

Throughout her childhood, Thérèse is constantly searching for attention from the adults around her. The roots of this may be in the first years of her life, when she was given to Rose, a local village woman, who acted as her wet nurse and cared for her at a cottage near the bottom of the Martin estate. At one and a half years old, Thérèse was returned to Antoinette. She took to Louis at first more than to her mother because Louis smelled of the farm, something familiar to her. Thérèse's mother leaves money for Rose when she comes to collect the infant. Thérèse cries but soon settles down in her new home. As an infant, Thérèse cries if Antoinette leaves the room, even for a moment.

Thérèse desires to be the main love in her father's life. She plays up Léonie's faults in front of the other adults, focusing particularly on Léonie being half-English and thus ignorant of various customs. Thérèse does whatever she can to get Louis' attention and win his affection. In turn, Louis dotes on Thérèse, calling her fanciful nicknames and showing her affection.

The insecurities that Thérèse develops in her early years are amplified in the period leading up to and following her mother's death. When Antoinette dies, Thérèse steals Léonie's story of having seen a vision of a woman in the woods. Thérèse turns increasingly to religion to give her solace and to bury her grief. Thérèse makes small sacrifices during the day, purposefully making herself uncomfortable to help her mother's passage through purgatory.

The close relationship that Thérèse shared with Léonie during the summers of their childhoods is now threatened. Thérèse sees Léonie as a threat and takes her cousin on as a competitor instead of as a friend who shared intimacies. The previous summers the girls shared secrets and created games that involved sexual experimentation. Thérèse tries to show up Léonie's Englishness in front of Victorine, proving that she is more French and more acceptable as the principal daughter in the family. This reliance on bloodlines and culture is used to enforce Thérèse's sense of belonging. This is



dangerous because Thérèse finds out that she was likely fathered by a German officer who had been billeted at the house. The superiority Thérèse feels over Léonie now appears misguided.

As an adolescent, Thérèse weighs more than Léonie. Thérèse thinks of herself as overweight, although Léonie is jealous of Thérèse's voluptuousness. Thérèse's eating is tied to her low self-confidence and her unspoken concern for her mother's deteriorating health. In addition to her growing religious fervor, Thérèse moves upstairs to be away from her mother's sickroom. She feels jealous of Léonie for being slender, although when Louis encourages Thérèse to take second helpings, she always does. Thérèse is incredibly eager to please Louis.

After Antoinette dies, it is obvious that Madeleine will marry Louis, making Léonie and Thérèse sisters. Thérèse keeps secret the fact that she is not Louis' biological daughter. Acting out of grief and denial, Thérèse steals Léonie's story of having seen a vision in the woods. Thérèse's lies inspire the bishop's visit and the construction of a chapel in the clearing in the woods. The statue of the Virgin Mary erected there is a copy of Thérèse's ideal image of herself: sexless, innocent, and adored by those around her. Thérèse tries to hurt Louis by escaping to the convent and a life of religious seclusion. She succeeds, replacing her feelings of jealousy, betrayal, and abandonment with solace from the church. Thérèse cannot accept that Louis will marry her aunt Madeleine and that Léonie will have as much right to the Martin estate as she will.

Twenty years of separation pass before Thérèse returns home with the intention of setting things straight about the past. She wants to tell the villagers that she was mistaken about her vision of the Virgin Mary. Léonie, however, wants her to admit that she purposefully lied. The summer Antoinette died, Thérèse tried to bolster her own sense of identity by implying that she and Léonie were twins, fathered by an unknown German officer. By the time she reunites with Léonie, Thérèse has been excluded from Léonie's life for more than two decades. Thérèse has escaped to the gentle white seclusion of the convent, while Léonie has immersed herself in her family life with Baptiste. The girls' competition also focused on Baptiste when they were adolescents. As tension developed between Thérèse and Léonie, Léonie used Baptiste to hurt her cousin. Léonie became involved with Baptiste despite believing he had a crush on Thérèse. Eventually Léonie married the local youth, and Thérèse, after seeing the two make love in the clearing, turned even more to the chaste and comforting arms of the church.

Thérèse and Léonie stay up late talking, and Thérèse faces the pain and denial she has been hiding since the summer her mother died. Feeling Léonie's criticisms cut her to the core, Thérèse must take responsibility for her actions and the way she has misled people. She admits that her desire for Louis ran deep and that she has replaced her own mother with the safe and accepting image of the Virgin Mary. Thérèse's final act in the novel is to set the church on fire and to watch the statue, brought into being by her lies, go up in flames. She runs through the church, the flames catching her clothing. At the end of the novel she leaps toward the door, being cleansed of her sins and calling out for her mother.



## Léonie

Léonie is the other main character in the novel. At the heart of the book is Léonie's conflict with her cousin Thérèse, a girl who is fiercely competitive with Léonie once they reach adolescence. The tension between the two characters is in part what drives the plot of this work.

Léonie is half-English, having a French mother and an English father. Léonie's father Maurice was killed in the war, and Léonie only knows him from photographs and her mother's stories. Madeleine met Maurice, a journalist, when she left Blémont-la-Fontaine to study languages in Paris. During the school year, Léonie lives with her mother in England. They try to integrate themselves into British society as much as possible, and Léonie enjoys the multi-ethnic environment at her school. Though she is bilingual, Léonie finds it a shock coming to France for the summers because she is seen as a foreigner and sometimes looked down upon because she is not fully French. Throughout her childhood and early adolescence, Léonie develops an intense anger toward her cousin because Thérèse often faults Léonie for being a "heathen" and an outsider. Thérèse takes every opportunity to point out Léonie's shortcomings in front of the adults, and it is doubtful that Léonie ever fully forgives her for this. Léonie will tell Thérèse that her cousin has always painted Léonie as the sinner and herself as the angel, which becomes true when Léonie makes love to Baptiste in the clearing, hoping that Thérèse is watching and will run and bring the priest.

During the summers, Léonie and Madeleine return to the Martin estate, where Madeleine lived as a young woman during the Nazi occupation. Throughout her childhood, Léonie has heard murmurings about the chaotic and disturbing events that occurred during the war. She is a curious child and is constantly questioning the adults around her. She often overhears Rose and Victorine gossiping in the kitchen, and she pieces together that something traumatic happened to her aunt Antoinette during the war.

After Antoinette dies, Thérèse convinces Léonie that they are not cousins but twin sisters, but Léonie has no way of verifying this claim because Thérèse burns Antoinette's letters. Thérèse has also told her cousin that they both were fathered by a German officer and that Antoinette gave Léonie to Madeleine to raise. Though Léonie learns to be skeptical of this as an adult, during her teen years she believes Thérèse and feels that her entire identity has been taken from her.

No longer knowing who she is and feeling betrayed by Thérèse for stealing the vision of the lady in the woods, Léonie vents her anger by making love to Baptiste and excluding Thérèse. As children, the two girls were very close. They shared secrets and played games involving religious themes and sexual intimacy. The summer that Antoinette dies, however, Léonie's story of her experience in the woods is superseded by the safe version that Thérèse puts forward. The comfort and peace that Léonie felt in the presence of the red and gold lady is overshadowed by Thérèse's safe and traditional description of the woman in the woods. In addition to this act of betrayal, Thérèse has





eroded Léonie's sense of identity and has made Léonie feel unwanted by both her aunt and her mother. Thérèse had made her cousin unsure of who her mother really was. An intense rivalry develops between the two girls, with Léonie kissing Baptiste in the woods and eventually making love to him, aware that Baptiste likely has a crush on her more voluptuous cousin. At the end of the novel, Léonie feels sick and imagines that she vomits out her cousin, removing Thérèse from her body. Just before Thérèse arrived at the Martin estate, Léonie absentmindedly tests the edge of a knife against her fingers. Using words, she cuts to the quick of Thérèse's lies and makes Thérèse admit to her misdeeds so many decades ago.

Léonie deals with the pain she felt that summer by escaping into family life and taking firm control of the physical world around her. Léonie does not continue with school, instead settling down with Baptiste and having a family as Thérèse predicted. The couple have three girls, and Léonie has spent considerable time raising them. She has also spent considerable effort on preserving the Martin house. To remove anxiety, Léonie does a mental inventory of the objects in the house. She does this at the very end of the novel, when she can feel the wind of change blowing in her life and when she is on the cusp of revealing the wartime secret she has been hiding. The inventory that she takes may be what gives each chapter its heading.

During her childhood, Léonie was plagued by the feeling that there were evil forces in the house. She sensed that the house was trying to communicate with her, and she often experienced dreams where people were chanting and crying out. Later, Rose reveals to her the wartime secret that everyone in the village avoids, the fact that a Jewish family was murdered along with Henri Taillé, the local man who had been hiding them. The secret that Léonie keeps until the very end of the novel is that she knows the identity of the informer, which she learns when the names of the victims and the informer are chanted to her during her disturbing dreams. At the end of the novel, Léonie decides to finally deal with the past. She takes moral action by opening the door to her old bedroom and deciding to tell the story of her relationship with Thérèse and go public with the information that she has been harboring for decades.

## Antoinette

Antoinette is Louis' first wife and Madeleine's sister. She and her sister inherited the Martin estate because their older sister left to join the convent. Antoinette is the head of the household, and her careful attention to detail can be seen in the way she has arranged the family photographs over the mantelpiece. Antoinette is strict, and she presents the family to the world in the way she wants them to be seen.

Antoinette has represented herself in the photographs as she was when she was younger, in the years before the Second World War. Everyone in the house knows that something traumatic happened to Antoinette during the war and that this sapped her of all her energy. Though she used to be quite attractive, her experiences during the Nazi occupation of their small French village left her sharp-tongued and less attentive to her appearance. We also find out that Antoinette once had dreams of entering the convent.



These dreams were dashed when she became pregnant, likely from a sexual assault in the cellar. Thérèse and Léonie, however, both privately prefer to think that the sexual encounter in the cellar was a consenting event between Antoinette and Louis.

Antoinette married below her social station by wedding the local farmhand Louis. Antoinette's realm is in the house, where she oversees household chores and organizes the hired help. Antoinette's role as head of the household is compromised when she learns during the girls' early adolescence that she has breast cancer. Antoinette becomes progressively thinner and more ill as the cancer progresses. At the end of her life she retreats into a morphine-induced state of semi-consciousness. Thérèse feels extremely lost and rejected after Antoinette's death, and Madeleine turns to Louis for comfort. The two eventually marry.

The secret of what happened to Antoinette in the cellar is a central mystery in the novel. Another secret revealed at the end of the novel is that Antoinette hid the original shrine statue in the sand pile in the cellar. This is most likely linked to the sexual assault that occurred there.

## Madeleine

Madeleine is Antoinette's younger sister. She is rightfully co-owner of the Martin estate that has been in the family for generations. The Martin family is a well-off family in the area, and the local people are very interested in keeping up traditions. Madeleine is rebellious because she leaves home to study languages in Paris. Her defiance of convention can be seen the photograph that hangs in the family grouping. She seems cocky and defiant in front of the camera. Thérèse and Léonie notice Madeleine acting flirtatious with the priest and with Louis, something neither of the girls likes.

In Paris, Madeleine meets Maurice, a young English journalist who she later marries. Maurice returns to France to visit Madeleine when he is on leave because Madeleine returned to the Martin estate during the war to help her sister Antoinette. When Maurice is killed in the war, Madeleine takes Léonie to live with her in England for most of the year. They return every summer to spend several months with the family in Blémont-la-Fontaine.

While Léonie is growing up, Madeleine attempts to integrate herself and her daughter into English society. In some ways, living in England gives Madeleine freedom because expectations about her daughter's religious education and other things are not questioned there.

After Antoinette dies, Madeleine is hit by grief, as are the other members of the household. Louis suffers a stroke not long afterward, and Madeleine turns her attentions to him. She eventually marries Louis, her sister's widow. When the two eventually die, they are buried next to each other in the graveyard beside Antoinette's grave.

Like her daughter Léonie, Madeleine is fashionable. Madeleine's appearance and her attention to clothing make Thérèse extremely jealous. This is particularly obvious the



day that Louis comes home from hospital and Madeleine prepares the bed for him. She is wearing a new dress and has painted her toenails red, signs of her growing interest in Louis. Madeleine also tries to dissuade Léonie from seeing Baptiste, telling her daughter about the problems that result from matches made across social barriers. Madeleine is hypocritical, however, because she eventually marries Louis and continues on as mistress of the house, marrying below her social station.

## Louis

Louis is Thérèse's father and Antoinette's husband. He comes from a farming background, and Victorine tells the girls that Louis was lucky to marry into the well-off Martin family. Louis is a simple man who loves his family and cherishes his daughter and his wife. Though his character is not particularly developed in the novel, we do see that he is deeply affected by Antoinette's death and that Thérèse's decision to escape to the convent causes him great pain. Several months after Antoinette's death, for example, Louis absentmindedly turns pieces of the broken Quimper dish that Antoinette had loved. Louis is also very involved in the outdoor life of the farm. It is he and Baptiste who perform the necessary task of drowning the kittens. He also brings in the bull when it escapes into a neighboring field.

Thérèse tries to capitalize on Louis' attentions by fawning over him and doing anything to please him. While Louis is kind to both Thérèse and her cousin, he favors Thérèse slightly, calling her endearing nicknames to do with white flowers and other objects while evoking darker objects in his nicknames for Léonie.

After Antoinette's death, Louis suffers a stroke and relies on Madeleine for support. The potential for attraction between the two characters is seen earlier in the novel when Madeleine takes Louis' arm and compliments him as she and Léonie disembark from the boat. In contrast, Antoinette is a severe character, guiding the group to the car and implying that more care needs to be taken with Léonie's appearance. Madeleine and Louis eventually marry, and after they have passed away Louis is buried with both sisters, his first and second wives, in the church graveyard in town.

## Rose Taillé

Rose is the local woman who lives near the Martin farmhouse. She and Victorine are close to the family and are indispensable because they help with the daily running of the Martin household. The women's tasks include meal preparation, laundry, and other chores. Rose is also Baptiste's mother and widow to Henri Taillé, who was murdered with the Jewish family he harbored during the Nazi occupation. Rose was pregnant when she heard the news that her husband had been murdered. The shock sent her into premature labor, and the baby was stillborn. Rose is also important because she acted as wet-nurse and surrogate mother to Thérèse when the girl was an infant. She is a traditional local woman, proud to continue the old traditions such as taking part in the rituals in the clearing. It is Rose who finally reveals to Léonie the village secret. Léonie



has picked up quite a bit of information already listening to Rose and Victorine gossip, and Rose finally lets Léonie in on the harrowing and brutal secret.

## Victorine

Like Rose, Victorine is hired help and is integral to the lives of the Martin family. She is particularly important to Thérèse and Léonie because she helped raise the girls and involved them in many of the daily tasks. Being a servant, Victorine is not represented in the formal and public family photo display at the front of the house. Physically, she is linked to the back of the house, a place of gossip, secrets, and labor. Victorine is also fiercely French, proud of the local traditions and condescending to Léonie when the girl speaks out about the superiority of some English foods or traditions. Thérèse plays to this proud, nationalistic side of Victorine, hoping to be favored over Léonie. Victorine, representing the attitudes of the local people, is also racist although she does not admit it. For example, she tells Thérèse and Léonie about how some people, but not her, hated the Jews and easily could ignore the atrocities that were being carried out. She defends herself, however, saying that she is not against the Jews, as long as they do not try to run anything or take on superior attitudes. This kind of subtle racism, and Victorine's inability to identify it in herself, represents the deep-seated roots of the racism that Léonie identifies in the culture. Like Rose, Victorine takes a leading role in the ceremony at the site of the original shrine.

## The village priest (le curé)

The priest is characterized as a well-off and not completely likeable individual. His presence is announced with the ruffling of his long gowns, and his residence is an imposing stone structure filled with minimal decoration and poor air circulation. The priest is a powerful figure in the community, and he attempts to oust the folk traditions of the area. The villagers still follow local traditions celebrating the seasons that date to pagan times. The priest is uncompromising and sees this kind of religious expression as going against church doctrine.

When the priest first arrived during the wartime years, for instance, the original shrine in the woods was destroyed. When Thérèse claims to have had a vision in the woods, the priest is condescending and authoritarian, forcing Thérèse to submit to a grueling private interview and then humiliating her during a sermon in church. He wants to do all in his power to stop the rumors of visions of the Virgin Mary. He prefers to have control of the congregation and enforce the religious teachings that come from church doctrine. When the bishop arrives and believes Thérèse's story, the priest must agree to what the bishop desires. However, *le curé* does try to have Thérèse sent away to a boarding school instead of taking up the religious vocation. At the end of the novel, we learn that Léonie has known the name of the informer who sent Henri Taillé and the Jewish family to their deaths. Though she cannot prove it, she has learned from her nightmarish visions that it was the priest who informed the Nazis of the family in hiding.



## Baptiste

Baptiste Taillé is the son of Rose and Henri, who was killed by the Nazis during the years of the war. Baptiste, like Louis, is a local man, and his involvement with Léonie is a step up the social ladder. During their adolescent years, the Léonie and Thérèse compete over Baptiste's attention, though neither admits it to each other. Léonie believes that Baptiste is interested in Thérèse and feels jealous of her cousin's voluptuous figure. However, it is Léonie who stays at the celebration in the clearing and dances with Baptiste. The two kiss in the woods later that night and eventually make love in the clearing while Thérèse watches. Baptiste is a straightforward character, angry about his father's death and affectionate with Léonie once they are married. Baptiste does not believe Thérèse's stories and assures Léonie that Thérèse has fabricated the story of the two girls being twins, just like she has fabricated the story of her vision in the woods. It is Baptiste who tells Léonie that his father and the other victims were kept in the back bedroom the night before they were murdered.

## Soeur Dosithée

Soeur Dosithée is the eldest of the three sisters, the other two being Antoinette and Madeleine. When she left the Martin household to become a nun at the Visitation Centre in Caen, she changed her name from Marie-Josephine. Soeur Dosithée prophesied that one of her nieces would become a nun. The letters that Antoinette wrote to her sister during the war are important because they contain information about Thérèse's early years and hint at the assault that led to Thérèse's conception.

## Henri Taillé

Henri was Rose's husband and Baptiste's father. During the war, he harbored a family of Jews who were running from persecution under the Nazi regime. Someone in the community informed the occupying forces about Henri's secret, and he was executed along with the family he was attempting to save. Henri's last night alive was spent in the back bedroom of the Martin house. Some villagers believe the victims were kept there to create the impression that the informer was someone in the Martin household. When the original rocks under the old shrine are being removed on the priest's orders, the construction workers find a jumble of bones buried in a shallow grave under the rocks. Henri's bones have been mixed with the bones of the family with whom he was murdered and hidden in this spot. No one would think to check this place due to the disrespect and sacrilege assumed by the use of this location. When the bones are discovered, the priest arranges for a quick and private reburial of all the bones in a corner of the village graveyard. The gravestone is marked only with Henri Taillé's name.



## The Jewish family

The family that Henri Taillé was hiding are captured alongside him, and all of the victims are kept at the Martin house the night before they are taken to the woods and killed. The names of the family members are not known, though Léonie has known their names and the names of the informer since she was a child. The family was originally harbored in the Taillé's apple loft. Henri was killed with them as an example to the other villagers. As noted above, the bones of the victims were buried together in a shallow grave in the clearing. When this is finally discovered, the priest arranges for a private burial. He decides to only mark the gravestone with Henri's name. Officially, this is to keep the matter private so the press and the Jewish community do not become involved. In reality, the priest does not want investigations into the matter because he was the informer who led to these murders. He arranges for all of the bones to be buried together under a marker only bearing Henri Taillé's name, which is a continuation of the offenses carried out against the remains of the murdered people.

At the end of the novel, an enquiry has been started. Thérèse has come back to Blémont-la-Fontaine in the hopes of clearing up issues about the past. Her presence helps Léonie let go of her fears and finally resolve to share the secret she has been keeping for all these years, that she knows the names of the family members and the names of the informer.

## The bishop

The bishop pays a visit to Blémont and to the Martin house because he has heard of Thérèse's reported visions of the Virgin Mary. He fully believes Thérèse's story and agrees to have a chapel built at the site of the original shrine. He also agrees to Thérèse's request, which she passes on from her communication with Our Lady, to begin yearly celebrations of the Saint with a procession and other ceremonies during the harvest festival. The bishop decides to lunch with the Martin family, and during this meal Thérèse tries to hurt Louis by vowing she will take up the religious calling and become a nun. The bishop supports this decision, though the priest puts on a show of protecting this young member of his parish by saying that a boarding school would be more appropriate. The bishop also compliments Thérèse on her cooking, and she does not correct him, though the sauce she made is not used in the meal.

## Maurice

Maurice was Madeleine's husband. He was an English journalist who she met while studying in Paris. Maurice enlisted during the war and came to France on leave because Madeleine had returned to her hometown to help Antoinette during the years of the war and the Nazi occupation. Maurice is killed during the war, and the family remembers him through Madeleine's stories. She describes how he loved France and helped hide the villagers' wine in the cellar of the house under a heap of sand. When Léonie is an adult, she keeps all of Maurice's old things out of sight in the back



bedroom. In this way she has shut out her Englishness and denied that she is part of either culture.

There is some doubt raised as to whether Maurice is really Léonie's father. In Thérèse's version of events, she and Léonie were conceived by a German officer and Antoinette is their mother. However, Maurice's trunks and other possessions do exist, and Léonie stores these in the back room that used to be her bedroom.

## **The baker (the village girl)**

During the war years, a young woman from the village boards at the Martin estate and helps with the housework. She has the back bedroom, the same room that Léonie will eventually use during her summer visits. The girl takes one of the German officers as a lover, and Victorine never forgives her for this. She is thought of as a collaborator even decades after the end of the war. In adulthood, the girl operates a bakery in the village, but Victorine never buys anything there.

## **The German officer**

There is evidence in Antoinette's letters that she was the victim of a sexual assault in the cellar. From overheard conversations between Rose and Victorine, it seems likely that a German officer committed this crime. Thérèse comments that she and Léonie both have blue eyes. This could potentially link both girls to a German father.



## Objects/Places

### The Martin Manor

The ancestral farmhouse and estate belonging to Antoinette and Madeleine. Léonie and her mother spend their summers here, near the village of Blémont-la-Fontaine. The house harbors secrets from the time of the Nazi occupation during the Second World War.

### The shrine

The original shrine to a Saint, possibly the Virgin Mary, was taken down during the years of the war. The shrine is in a clearing in the woods behind the Martin estate. The shrine stood on an outcropping of rocks near a small stream.

### The clearing

The shrine is located in a clearing in the woods behind the Martin estate. This is the site of the villagers' harvest festival rituals with dancing and music. This is also where Léonie and Baptiste make love.

### The green scarf

This scarf is a birthday present from Léonie and Thérèse to Victorine. She wears it often, and it is used as a makeshift altar covering during the ceremony in the woods.

### The red shoe

In the photograph on the mantelpiece, Antoinette wears these shoes when she is a young woman, before the war. Thérèse finds the shoe behind a barrel in the basement when she and Léonie venture into the cellar.

### The back bedroom

Léonie's bedroom is the back bedroom, accessible by the back stairs of the house. This is where Henri Taillé and the captured Jewish family spent their last night alive.

### The statue of Our Lady

The original statue from the shrine in the woods went missing during the war. One secret that Thérèse discovers at the end of the novel is that her mother hid the original





statue under the pile of sand in the cellar. There is also a small statue of St. Bernadette in Thérèse's room. After Thérèse's vision, she asks the bishop to build a chapel in the woods. A new statue of the Virgin Mary is constructed, and at harvest festival time it is brought from the clearing to the church and taken in procession around the village.

## **Rose's glass eye**

Rose Taillé has one green glass eye.

## **The white salon**

This room is associated with Antoinette's illness.

## **The convent**

Thérèse leaves the Martin household to take up a religious calling. She lives at the convent for several decades.

## **The church**

The village church in Blémont-la-Fontaine is where Thérèse sets fire to the statue that was created after she told the story of her visions to the bishop. The church goes up in flames while Thérèse runs for the church doors.

## **The cigarette lighter**

Léonie smokes a cigarette the night that Thérèse returns to Blémont. She forgets her lighter in Thérèse's room, and Thérèse uses it to light the fire at the church.

## **The Quimper dish**

This had been one of Antoinette's favorite dishes. Thérèse and Léonie used to fight over who could bring it to the table. This dish breaks on the day the girls report their visions in the woods. Léonie steals one piece of it so the dish cannot be mended.

## **The graveyard**

This is a walled area, neatly tended by the village women. Henri Taillé's grave is set in a corner of the graveyard.



## Henri Taillé's grave

Henri Taillé's bones are mixed with those of the Jewish family that was murdered with him. The bones are removed from under the rocks at the shrine, where they are discovered, and are reburied in the village graveyard. The gravestone only features Henri's name.

## The cookie tin

A cookie tin contains the letters that Antoinette sent to Soeur Dosithée during the war. This is sent to Thérèse after Antoinette's death.

## The kitchen

Meals are prepared in the kitchen, where the girls overhear a lot of village gossip from Rose and Victorine. The range on the stove is used to destroy secrets such as Léonie's first sanitary pad and Antoinette's letters.

## The cellar

The cellar at the Martin house was used during the war to hide the villagers' wine. Antoinette also hid the original statue from the shrine in the woods under the sand pile in the cellar. This is the location of Antoinette's sexual encounter that led to Thérèse's conception. The encounter was likely a sexual assault by a German officer.

## The rosary

The priest gives a cheap rosary to Thérèse after he has his private conference with her. He does not believe she is a visionary and humiliates her during this meeting and in church.

## The knife

Léonie absentmindedly tests a kitchen knife against her fingers before Thérèse arrives.

## The kittens

Louis drowns a litter of kittens, with Baptiste's help. Earlier, Baptiste has shown off to the girls by swinging the kittens around.



## **The bull**

The animal escapes into a neighboring field, and Louis must bring it back to the farm.

## **The war memorial**

The war memorial lists the names of the soldiers killed in the Second World War.

## **The attic**

Léonie helps Rose with the ironing and, in the attic, learns the truth about Henri Taillé's death and the family that Henri tried to save.

## **The lane**

A lane runs by the edge of the woods between town and the Martin estate.

## **Léonie's sandal**

Returning from the bakery, Léonie slips off her sandal as she runs from Baptiste and his friends.

## **The bakery**

There are two bakeries in town. Victorine tells Léonie only to patronize one of the bakeries. The other is run by the woman who had taken a German officer as a lover during the war. Léonie goes into this bakery when she goes alone to buy bread.

## **The living room floor**

Antoinette has put down carpet to hide the broken tile floors, ruined by the German officers' boots.

## **The photographs**

The photographs on the mantelpiece are Antoinette's way of displaying the Martin family to the world. Léonie later adds her photographs to this assortment, deliberately leaving out a picture of Thérèse's clothing ceremony.



# Themes

## Siblinghood and Rivalry

As the title suggests, one of the main themes in the novel examines sibling relationships between two female characters, particularly Thérèse and Léonie. The novel charts how tensions develop and refuse to be resolved in the relationship.

At the core of the rivalry is the girls' need for attention and acceptance from the adults around them. For Thérèse, this means being Louis' favorite and being seen as a "good girl," innocent and chaste. Thérèse plays up her own strengths and begins to play up Léonie's faults as her sense of confidence diminishes. Thérèse paints Léonie as her opposite, criticizing both Léonie and her mother Madeleine for being unchaste. Thérèse also emphasizes her own cultural identity, finding fault with Léonie for being half-English. This is particularly apparent in the kitchen scenes with Victorine because Thérèse capitalizes on Victorine's pride, nationalism, and intolerance of other traditions.

When Thérèse returns to the estate after over twenty years of absence, she and Léonie continue to compete over who has the rights to the house. Thérèse, having been brought up in the house, feels that she has the right to the building and to all the objects in it. This is first apparent when the girls are younger and Thérèse claims she has the right to open the mailbox because she is the daughter of the house. When she finally returns from the convent, Thérèse walks through the rooms of the house, thinking that all of this should belong to her, not to Léonie. Léonie, however, becomes "daughter of the house" when Thérèse escapes to the convent. Léonie brings up her family on the estate, having married Baptiste and had three daughters. Thus she feels she has rights to the house because she has felt burdened by the responsibility for the upkeep of the estate for several decades. Léonie has also been very careful to preserve all of the objects and pieces of furniture in their original places and to use all of Victorine's old recipes. She has gained a sense of control over her surroundings and feels like she belongs.

Another primary way that the rivalry between the female characters comes about is in their competition over men. For Antoinette and Madeleine, this rivalry is subtle. Readers catch a glimpse of Madeleine flirting with her sister's husband when Madeleine and Léonie arrive off the boat from England. Later, we see how Madeleine cares for Louis after his stroke, and, like Thérèse, we can sense the caring relationship growing between the two characters. Madeleine becomes Louis' second wife.

This competition over a local village man is paralleled in the next generation. As Léonie and Thérèse reach adolescence, they compete for Baptiste's attention. The two girls develop confidence problems based on their weight. Thérèse feels fat, while Léonie is jealous of her cousin's voluptuousness. Léonie feels ugly although Thérèse sees her as fashionably thin. Léonie is convinced that Baptiste has a crush on Thérèse, although it is Léonie who eventually kisses Baptiste in the woods and then consummates the



relationship there, an act performed purposefully to exclude Thérèse and make her jealous.

## Sin and Purgatory

As Antoinette becomes more and more ill, Thérèse turns increasingly to religion to deal with her grief and loss. Thérèse believes firmly in the teachings of the church, though her beliefs are sometimes skewed because she is just out of childhood. One example of this is her admission of praying for the conversion of Jewish souls and the way she blames the Jews for Jesus' persecution, saying that they were "just as bad as the communists" (66). As Antoinette becomes more ill, Thérèse begins to deprive herself of comforts. She secretly says prayers at many times in the day, never knowing when she will have said enough to provide a safe passage for her mother through purgatory.

Thérèse also begins small acts of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Later these will be extended into the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, her decision to leave her family and live a simple and isolated life in the convent. Near the end of Antoinette's illness, Madeleine finds Thérèse lying in the shape of a cross on the floor of her room. Soon after this Léonie is sent to live in Thérèse's room with her. Though Thérèse finds escape in these acts of self-sacrifice and prayer, she and Léonie also create games based on religious themes. These games often lead to sexual activities, and on one occasion the two girls play at doing surgery. The baby doll that they pretend needs the surgery has witnessed their games, and they dispose of it in the range of the kitchen. The image of fire destroying material that witnesses or describes a sin is repeated several times in the novel. Antoinette's letters, for example, are disposed of in the range, since they imply that a sexual assault led to Antoinette's pregnancy.

At the end of the novel, Léonie has forced Thérèse to confront the major sin she has committed in lying about her vision in the woods. Thérèse admits to herself that she has committed a mistake, and to atone for this she wants fire and a funeral so that she can finally let go of her grief at the loss of her mother. This loss drove Thérèse to seek attention and admiration by fabricating the story of her vision in the woods, and she sets fire to the statue that represents her ideals of being the "good" child. As Thérèse runs toward the doors of the church, her clothing catches fire and she jumps free of it. This represents Thérèse's success in letting go of her past and passing through judgment.

Finally, the novel contains an even larger examination of sin and its aftermath. This is contained in the secrets the villagers keep about the murders carried out during the Nazi occupation. This larger theme asks how individuals can go on with their regular lives knowing that something evil has happened in their own houses and neighborhoods. The novel asks us to examine how a small community could bury, literally and figuratively, the evidence of a crime that most people knew about. Like the expensive carpet that Antoinette puts down over the floors, the villagers settle a cloak of silence around the knowledge of the murders and say nothing when the Jewish family's bones are buried, unmarked, with Henri Taillé's bones in the village graveyard. In the very last chapters of the novel, Léonie resolves to reveal the informer's name. The novel



closes with the hope that the informer's name will be announced publicly and that the sins of the past will not go unpunished.

## Secrets

The entire novel is built around the suspense of several secrets held by villagers and by members of the household. At the opening of the novel, we hear that the house harbors secrets, and as readers we want to read on to find out what they are. Léonie is constantly questioning the adults around her, wanting to know about the secrets that are part of the adult world. First, there is the question of what happened to Antoinette during the war. The girls know from gossip they have overheard that something happened to Antoinette that drained her of energy and forced her to give up hopes of becoming a nun. After Antoinette's death, Soeur Dosithée's letters hint at an answer. Later, when Rose and Victorine gossip in the kitchen, other pieces of the puzzle fall into place. The women describe how Antoinette had been too ashamed to come in the front door of the house and how she had arrived, shoeless, at the kitchen door. The women also describe how a German officer was very polite that day. All of these hints imply that Thérèse was conceived during a sexual assault in the cellar of the house.

Secondly, Thérèse and Léonie begin to keep secrets from each other as they reach adolescence. The secret that Léonie does not reveal until the very end of the novel is that she has learned the names of the murdered Jewish family members through her recurring nightmares. Also, the name of the informer was chanted out during these nightmare sessions in the back bedroom, and she has known the informer's name for all these years. Thérèse's secret, on the other hand, is that she has read Antoinette's letters and has discovered that Louis is not her biological father. Devastated by this information, she tries to imply that she and Léonie are twins, both fathered by an unknown German officer. The revelation of this "secret" destroys Léonie's sense of confidence in her family and in herself. She believes that it was perhaps Louis and not an officer who seduced Antoinette. The truth of this matter is never clearly revealed, as Léonie has a memory, perhaps false or created by the power of suggestion, that she and Thérèse were both fed from Rose's breasts and taken together to be dipped in the stream near the shrine.

Finally, there are other secrets that Thérèse and Léonie keep from each other. Thérèse's claim to have had visions of the Virgin Mary in the woods is fictional. Thérèse keeps this secret from Léonie for many years, instead using her ability to communicate with this religious figure as an advantage over her cousin. Thérèse's secret is that she has created an idealized image of herself and projected this for the townspeople to see. Once entwined in her lie, Thérèse felt compelled to continue with it, garnering attention from the bishop and demanding that a chapel be built and a yearly festival held in the Virgin Mary's honor. Thérèse returns to Blémont with the intention of revealing this secret to the people of the town. While Léonie first criticizes her cousin for returning to stir up trouble, she realizes by the last chapter that she must go public with her own secret and tell the enquiry the informer's name.



One final mystery is also cleared up at the end of the novel. Thérèse finds the original statue from the shrine hidden under the pile of sand in the cellar. She believes she has discovered Léonie's secret, although Léonie's secret actually is much more important than this discovery. The author lets readers draw their own conclusions, and it is safe to assume that the assault Antoinette suffered occurred *not* while she was attempting to divert the Nazi's attention from the wine stored in the cellar but instead while she was trying to save the statue of the Virgin Mary.

# Style

## Points of View

The novel is told in third-person point of view, mainly from Léonie's perspective. However, in the last chapter, "The Words," Léonie describes how she wants to construct a narrative incorporating Thérèse's writings and the stories of many different characters. Thus in scenes that are important to Thérèse, or where Thérèse feels intense emotion, the author has continued with third-person narration but gives Thérèse's perspective instead of Léonie's.

By varying the storytelling in this way, the reader gets a better understanding of the motivations and emotional reactions of the two main characters. This also balances our reactions to the characters as we progress through the novel. For example, Léonie's anger at her cousin colors much of the novel, and as readers we sympathize with her when Thérèse tries to make Léonie look inferior in the eyes of the adults. However, when we come to the scene at the priest's house, it is crucial that we gain insight into the humiliation that Thérèse feels during this visit. Similarly, we gain some sympathy for Thérèse and a much better understanding of her character when we see, from her perspective, how Madeleine has dolled herself up and prepares the house for Louis' return from hospital. If we had not been allowed access into Thérèse's character in these moments, we might not be able to sympathize at all with her. Seeing the conflict between the two cousins and experiencing parts of the narrative from both sides, while continuing in third person point of view, is very effective in the novel. The use of two perspectives means that readers can feel the tension increasing between the characters without taking sides. It also deepens our understanding of the conflicts in the novel because we can experience both characters' desires, fears, and jealousies.

Even in her choice of points of view, the author plays with the idea of dualities and the twinning of Thérèse's and Léonie's identities. Like the blurred photograph where the line between the two girls' identities is indistinct, the shifting third-person point of view means that there is frequent switching between the two characters' perspectives.

## Setting

The novel is set in the French town of Blémont-la-Fontaine, a small village in Normandy. Two main time periods are used as the setting for the action in the novel. First, the contemporary narrative is set in recent years, when the two main characters reunite after an absence of more than twenty years. The setting for this section of the narrative is in the rooms of the Martin house. The family house is large, with many salons and a division between the public front areas of the house and the more secretive back areas of the building. Tension is strong between the two characters, and this can be felt more intensely because the two women talk in the same rooms that housed their childhood memories and their adolescent conflicts. Also, with the exception of Thérèse's journey





by bus to Blémont and the church setting for the final chapter she appears in, all of the scenes between the two women occur in the domestic space of the house or in the nearby clearing.

The novel travels back twenty years to the post-war era when Léonie and Thérèse were growing up. The settings in the novel are restrained. The author keeps the narrative action within several small areas: the rooms of the family house, the grounds, the woods behind the house, the interior of the church, and the interior of the priest's stone house. This emphasizes the intimate relationships between the characters because scenes often occur within a particular room in the house. The setting is also crucial to the novel because the house harbors many secrets and many things are physically hidden, including the bones buried at the shrine site and their eventual reburial at Henri Taillé's grave, the statue in the cellar, and the broken tiles under the carpet in the main room of the house.

On several occasions Léonie feels that the house is hiding something and that it communicates with her. Thus the setting is drawn into the novel as a complex and active force. The clearing in the woods acts in this way as well. The setting itself is magical, and the vision of the red and gold lady appears to Léonie out of the mist. Though the author keeps the variety of settings to a minimum, she relies heavily on the setting to help build tension and atmosphere.

## Language and Meaning

The language employed is not difficult to understand, but the novel does sometimes use unexpected combinations of words or short and poignant sentences for literary effect. The author writes in short, dense chapters, so every word and phrase must carry meaning and add to the impact of the chapter. Because each chapter is fairly short, often only two to three pages, word choice is important and the vocabulary used is evocative and effective. The author also regularly makes use of fresh and surprising imagery to keep the reader focused. For example, in describing Léonie waiting for Thérèse's arrival, Roberts describes how Léonie's mind "bristled with knives. She imaged the edge of the blade, silvery and saw-toothed. Its tip vanishing into Thérèse's soft flesh" (13). The use of clipped sentences and sentence fragments adds to the perceived speed of the narrative.

The chapter titles describe objects within the house, emphasizing these domestic items. The titles visually focus the reader on an object that will appear in the chapter. The novel examines the complexities of the relationship that develops between Thérèse and Léonie, who may be either cousins or sisters. Naming a domestic object at the beginning of each chapter is tied to the competition between the two characters as to who rightfully owns these objects.

Roberts uses a mix of dialogue and expository passages to build scenes and develop characters. The dialogue sections are typically very short, with each line bringing significant new information to the reader. Because the novel is set in France and



explores Léonie's biculturalism, the author occasionally uses French words. This mixing of languages is natural for Léonie, especially if the novel is in some way her effort to retell the story from Thérèse's perspective as well as from her own. Also, Léonie has spent most of her adult life pretending she is fully French, casting off her Englishness. It makes sense that French expressions should come naturally to her in telling her story.

The author also pays particular attention to the senses, describing things in terms of touch, smell, and texture. This helps the reader stay focused on the events of the narrative despite the fairly narrow range of physical settings.

## Structure

The novel is comprised of fifty short chapters, each titled with the name of a household object. These objects appear somewhere in the chapter, often subtly placed though always significant. These titles, in addition to structuring the novel, emphasize the domestic nature of the work and the importance of the conflicts that go on inside the house. They also serve as hooks at the beginning of chapters to pique the reader's interest before the chapter begins.

The main storyline follows the reunion between the Léonie and Thérèse when Thérèse returns to the family estate after decades of absence. The middle section of the novel returns to the post-war decades when the small community of Blémond was recovering from the effects of the Nazi occupation during the Second World War. This section, which comprises the main part of the novel, charts the relationship between Léonie and Thérèse when they are on the edge of puberty. The novel follows the events of the summer that Antoinette dies and both girls claim to have visions of a woman in the woods. The final chapters of the novel return to the present, as Thérèse and Léonie face each other after a pained silence of many years. Both women are middle-aged, and the two stay up in the night talking of their experiences that "odd" summer and criticizing each other for their hypocrisy. The narrative follows Thérèse the next morning as she walks to the church and sets fire to the statue there. The novel ends with a chapter called "The Words," in which Léonie symbolically opens the door to her old bedroom and resolves to go public with the information she knows. In some ways the entire novel can be thought of as Léonie's attempt at meshing her version of events with that of her cousin.

The novel's pace is fairly quick due to the author's use of short chapters and the suspense built on the many secrets and mysteries that the characters and the physical settings contain. Though the narrative has two main timelines, the reader has no trouble with the transition between the two because the prior narrative is contained to the middle section of the novel, with the "present" storyline coming in at the beginning and end.



## Quotes

"It was a changeable house. Sometimes it felt safe as a church, and sometimes it shivered, then cracked apart." Chapter 1, p. 11

"Léonie was waiting for Thérèse to arrive. She longed for her, like a lover. Her mind bristled with knives. She imagined the edge of the blade, silvery and saw-toothed. Its tip vanishing into Thérèse's soft flesh." Chapter 2, p. 13

"She felt dizzy. As though Thérèse were already here and they were children again, playing the game of spinning on one spot with arms outstretched, seeing who could twirl longest and not fall." Chapter 2, p. 15

"Too much attachment to objects, she scolded herself. She had spent twenty years trying to practice detachment and she had failed. She'd discovered that as soon as she had re-entered the house.

*My house*, Thérèse corrected herself softly: *my house*. All of it. She opened the fridge and took out the bottle of tonic." Chapter 5, p. 26

"She'd been born in this bed. She rolled over, she felt she must, to make space for her mother beside her, newly delivered after a day and a night of labor." Chapter 6, p. 31

"Thérèse had listed words like *soul, God, sin, miracle, prayer*. Léonie's inventory sang a litany of beds and tables and chairs. I haven't got a soul, have I? she thought: Thérèse stole it." Chapter 7, p. 33

"'You always were good at making things up,' Léonie said: 'In your version I was the sinner and you were the saint. Darling little Thérèse, everybody's pet. That's not going to change, is it? Yours will be the Authorized Version of what happened, won't it.'" Chapter 8, p. 39

"In life, when Antoinette moved, you saw she was a tall woman, long-legged, with broad shoulders and hips. As a girl she'd had red hair, down to her waist, Victorine said. Her terrible experiences during the war had sapped her physically, had faded her hair prematurely to pepper and salt. She didn't bother with it after that, just scraped it into a sagging bun at the nape of her neck.

What terrible experiences? Léonie always wanted to know. But Victorine would never say. Or she'd snap: 'Don't be stupid. The war was terrible for everybody. Except the collaborators. And we all know who *they* are.'" Chapter 9, pp. 40-41

"It was Victorine who took the picture of Thérèse and Léonie that Antoinette declared she disliked yet never got around to removing from the frame. There they stood, merry pair, arms about each other's necks, heads close, grinning at the camera, teetering on the kitchen doorstep. They wore skimpy bunched frocks, little aprons tied on over them. They looked more like sisters than cousins. Antoinette complained that Victorine had got



the focus wrong. The children's faces were a smiling blur. You couldn't properly tell which was which." Chapter 9, p. 43

"Then,' Victorine went on: 'when the new priest came, our *curé* that is, he had the shrine destroyed. Rubbish, he called it. He said we had to pray in church, not out in the woods. People used to come here at night at harvest festival time and pray and dance. He stopped all that.'" Chapter 14, p. 59

"Thérèse put on a joyous smile, skipped up to the sofa to kiss her mother. Antoinette looked at the object clutched in her daughter's hand. Patches of red appeared on her cheeks like bits of worn red velvet. She seized the shoe and threw it into the fireplace.

'Really. At your age you should know better than to bring rubbish into the house.'" Chapter 19, p. 79

"One thing you have to give the Germans, they were very clean.'

'Very clean, the bastards.'

'Very polite and correct, that officer, that day.'

'Those scum of *sales Boches*.'

'Poor Mademoiselle Antoinette.'" Chapter 24, p. 97

"Thérèse lay flat on the floor, facedown, hands outstretched. She lay in the shape of a cross. As still as possible. Eyelashes tickling the floor, mouth kissing its varnished whorls. She shut her eyes and concentrated on the four last things listed by the catechism: death, judgment, heaven, and hell.

Don't let her burn in purgatory, dear God. Let her go straight to heaven. Don't let her burn." Chapter 26, p. 102

"When she got to the little clearing, she halted, seeing Léonie there on her knees, looking up at the outcrop of rock. Then she, too, knelt down." Chapter 30, p. 125

"The Quimper dish lay in pieces on the floor. Violence measured the distance of one fragment from another. Painted jigsaw bits. The Breton lady had been dismembered. Her head lay near a table leg. Her flower-clasping hands rested at the foot of the stove." Chapter 41, p. 126

"Beside her Thérèse gasped. Became rigid. Her face tipped up, radiant. She opened her arms and smiled. The glow of the bonfire outlined her in gold.

That was the sign. Everyone, even the men, sank to their knees. All heads turned toward Thérèse, while the *Ave Maria* shot from their lips. Léonie closed her eyes and felt nothing." Chapter 33, p. 137



"Thérèse insisted it was her right, as daughter of the house, to fit the little black iron key into the lock and turn it." Chapter 37, p. 165

"Someone from the village must have betrayed us, because the Germans came in the night and took the Jewish family away. They took Henri as well. In the morning, just before it was light, they took them into the woods and shot them. They hid the grave so that we couldn't give the bodies a proper burial. They must have guessed we wouldn't look under the shrine. We'd all kept away from it ever since the priest had had it pulled down the month before. We never thought they'd dare put the bodies there." Chapter 38, p. 171

"Unchastity is a mortal sin. It means you go to hell. My poor mother. It's even worse than what happened to Saint Maria Goretti. At least *she* died defending her honor. It was the only thing she could do. It's worse when you don't die. Everybody whispers about you. It's disgusting."

Thérèse's eyes glared in her pale face. Sweat from the washing up misted her forehead and nose.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Léonie lied: 'I don't know what's the matter with you.'

Thérèse clasped the biscuit tin in the crook of her arm." Chapter 44, p. 199

"They've betrayed me. I don't want you as my sister. I want Papa.'

She didn't care what Léonie felt. She didn't care who was watching. She wrenched the lid off the biscuit tin and tipped her mother's letters into the range, stuffing them well down with a poker until there was nothing left of them but black ash." Chapter 44, p. 199

"Ripping off her Englishness and casting it aside was as easy as unfastening the collar of her dress. Her fingers glided over the frilled edges of daisy-shaped buttons. Shaking off the very idea of a German father was a wriggle of the shoulders, the thin cotton sleeves pushed down." Chapter 45, p. 205

"Little solid rainbows on the plaits and wreaths, on the statue of Our Lady of Blémont-la-Fontaine. Thérèse's statue. Fashioned according to Thérèse. Our Lady of would-be-saint Thérèse. Our Thérèse's Lady." Chapter 48, p. 215

"Thérèse ran down the aisle of the church toward the door. After her ran the fire on red, crackling feet. But Thérèse was too quick. Can't catch me. She flew with her one red wing. Her spine flared, one great red fin.

She jumped clear of those rags and tatters of flame. She cried *Maman* and flung herself at the church door." Chapter 48, p. 217

"Something was going to happen, to be upset. Léonie lay back, tried to reassert control over her world. She applied her usual formula for overcoming anxiety. She wandered in



imagination through her house. She listed her numerous possessions one by one."  
Chapter 49, p. 219

"She had the idea that Thérèse was waiting for her on the other side of the door, along with the Jewish family and Henri Taillé. Her father, Maurice, was with them too. All she had to do was go in and join them, listen to what they had to say, unravel the different languages that they used.

She twisted the handle of the door. She opened it. She paused in the doorway, then went in.

The voices came from somewhere just ahead, the shadowy bit she couldn't see. She stepped forward, into the darkness, to find words." Chapter 50, p. 223



## Topics for Discussion

Chart the development of fire imagery throughout the novel. Describe how this helps to develop at least one theme in the novel. For example, examine the use of fire-related imagery and how it is linked to the theme of sin. Secondary sources will be useful in backing up your discussion if you choose to discuss religious imagery.

Support one of the following statements:

*Using evidence from the novel, it seems clear that Thérèse and Léonie are actually..... (sisters/cousins).*

*Thérèse and Léonie's relationship to each other remains unclear even at the end of the novel. The effects of this uncertainty are.....*

You may discuss evidence found within the novel as well as discuss the importance of what information is left out. In either case, you will want to discuss the relationship between the two characters and do a close reading of several passages in the novel.

Compare and contrast the emotional and moral growth of Thérèse and Léonie. In what ways are their emotional responses to their conflict similar? To what extent are their decisions at the end of the novel similar? Dissimilar? How have the characters changed by the final chapters of the novel?

Discuss Rose's green glass eye that "sees everything." How does the author challenge assumptions about omniscient narration? Discuss the falsehoods in the novel and the places where characters' perceptions and/or assumptions are wrong. You may want to examine how evidence is used, such as the burned letters, Thérèse's journal, or Léonie's memory of being fed by Rose.

Discuss the importance of mother figures in the novel. How is this linked to religious imagery and ideas of dependence/independence and "growing up"?

Research the tradition of shrines and the rituals associated with saints in medieval and modern times. Using this as a base, discuss the conflict between the folk culture/worship in the novel and religion as imposed by the church. Please cite specific passages from the novel in your discussion.

Discuss what reasons the villagers had for covering up the murders that occurred during the Nazi occupation. Discuss the implications this kind of "cover up" might have on various individuals, organizations, and institutions both in the community itself and in the larger context of the world, post-Second World War.