

# **Eileen Study Guide**

**Eileen by Ottessa Moshfegh**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Moshfegh, Ottessa. *Eileen*. New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

Set in 1964, the story is told by Eileen, the eponymous character, 50 years after the events of the novel. She is an older, mature woman who reflects back on the pivotal events that occurred when she was 24 years old. The story takes place in X-Ville, a place named so by Eileen because of its generic qualities as a typical New England town. Working at a male juvenile penitentiary she names Moorehead, Eileen lives with her retired police officer father who is an abusive alcoholic suffering from delusions, with her independent sister Joanie occasionally coming to visit. Steeped in self-loathing, Eileen dresses in her dead mother's old garments and works diligently to remain physically small through poor diet, fantasizing about an eventual escape to New York City.

Working as a secretary at Moorehead, Eileen helps begin preparations for Christmas at the facility, including decorating a tree and manning the spotlight at the annual Christmas Day pageant. Not finding any comfort in her work, Eileen focuses her attention on Randy, one of the guards at the facility who she places at the center of her fantasies. Randy is quiet and strong, and Eileen bounces between her sheer determination that Randy is only attracted to more attractive women while occasionally indulging in the idea that her and Randy will stumble into a relationship.

Spending most of her time mired in self-loathing or staking out by Randy's apartment, Eileen's world is shook when Rebecca Saint John is hired as the new director of education at Moorehead. She is different from the middle-aged curmudgeons that Eileen has been working for during her time at the facility. Rebecca is the definition of a beautiful woman, tall and lithe with red hair, and Eileen becomes enamored with her, doing everything in her power to be appealing to the newcomer. Their first exchange is a positive one and Eileen is ecstatic, fantasizing that Rebecca will be a turning point in her life, someone who will understand her and be her friend. Rebecca shows an interest in Eileen as well and they both have drinks at the town bar, O'Hara's, where Eileen is emboldened by the attention she receives as she accompanies Rebecca. Eileen gets black-out drunk and almost crashes her father's car outside their house, waking up in a puddle of vomit and being abused further by her father.

Around the time Rebecca is appointed at Moorehead, a new inmate arrives at the facility. Leonard Polk has been convicted of murdering his father, a police officer, in his sleep. Rebecca arranges to have Polk's mother visit, after which Eileen witnesses Rebecca's close contact with Leonard. Rebecca invites Eileen to her place for Christmas Eve, the latter further immersing herself in fantasies about the growing friendship between the two. Simultaneously, Eileen continues her plans to leave X-Ville.

When Eileen arrives at Rebecca's home on Christmas Eve, she is surprised to find a broken-down home in a shabby neighborhood of town. Further, Rebecca is distant and



cold, their early chemistry not at play. Eileen makes multiple attempts to leave but is held back by Rebecca, who finally reveals that the home is not hers, but belongs to Mrs. Polk. Rebecca confesses that she spent time with Leonard Polk and learned that he had been raped by his father, with the full awareness of his mother. The earlier visit was an attempt by Rebecca to draw a reaction from Mrs. Polk, whom she eventually confronts and attacks, tying her in the basement. After being begged by Rebecca, Eileen agrees to intimidate Mrs. Polk with her father's gun.

After repeated attempts to coerce a confession, Mrs. Polk confesses her crime to Eileen, acknowledging that she was aware of the rapes and played along due to the improving relationship with her husband. Rebecca attempts to get a written confession but accidentally shoots Mrs. Polk in the arm. Eileen takes control of the situation, creating a plan that includes driving Mrs. Polk to her home, shooting her to death, and putting the gun in her father's hand. Rebecca reluctantly agrees and promises to meet Eileen later in order to escape the city together.

Knowing that she will never see Rebecca again, Eileen drives Mrs. Polk out of the city, leaving her in the car while she walks a distance and hitchhikes to New York City. An older Eileen reflects on the transformative week in her life, thinking about the change in her life and personality and how much happier she is now. She thinks about her final memories of the day she left X-Ville, her lack of regret at leaving the town and her father behind, at peace with herself with the decision she made.



# 1964

## Summary

The story is told by Eileen, who is recounting the year she was 24 and ran away from home. She is an inconspicuous girl who is unremarkable physically but could be better looking if she put more effort into her appearance. However, she constantly frets about her appearance without any effort to do anything to change it. She is anxious and self-loathing, hating everything and everyone around her. Dressed in her mother's old clothes, she puts effort into making herself approachable, refraining from accessories.

Eileen then focuses the reader's attention to the last days of the old, angry Eileen, which took place in the last days of December in a cold New England town steeped in snow. The lack of sun and warmth freezes the snow, icicles forming on Eileen's porch. Her sidewalk is swept by the neighboring Lutherans, who leave a gift basket for Christmas. Her father distrusts them because he is a Catholic. He is an alcoholic who mostly drinks gin and his alcoholism makes the young Eileen nervous, a fact supported by the older Eileen, corroborating the fact with the many alcoholic men she has been with over the years.

After her mother's death, their house has fallen into a state of disarray, with garbage piling up and no attempt by father or daughter to clean up. Eileen sleeps on a cot in the attic because her own room is adjacent to her dead mother's, who used to call out for her during the nights before her death. Her father sleeps in a broken reclining chair in the kitchen. Her father is abusive towards her, rarely showing affection, and on this day, orders her to visit the liquor store for more alcohol. Eileen describes him as someone who was cruel his entire life, and in his old age is childish, regretting not being able to grow a beard. Eileen absorbs his abuse with silence and subservience.

Whenever angry or depressed, Eileen finds comfort in her obsession with her looks. She is someone who appears to be a quiet, shy girl but secretly she is full of mire and suppressed rage, kicking bathroom doors as a means of venting her frustration at her father. Eileen is interested in books about morbid topics that she checks out of the library, along with National Geographic magazines about strange people with macabre rituals.

Eileen does not mind the relationship she has with her father and often fantasizes about suicide, despite not wanting to die. She imagines death by being impaled by one of the frozen icicles hanging on the front door. Her father is unfit to drive so she drives his old Dodge, keeping a dead mouse in the glove box. She reveals her preference for cold weather over hot, worrying about her sweat in the summer. She deliberately abstains from liking anything popular, thinking that avoiding convention will allow her to be in control. Her car has a broken exhaust pipe so she has to drive with the windows open, which becomes problematic in the cold. She likes to drive by the quiet houses decorated for Christmas and envision a possible life within them.



Entering Lardner's, Eileen remarks on the bell that jingles when the door opens, citing her familiarity with the store, knowing exactly where the gin is located. She drives back home, taking the long route home. Once home, she gives the bottle to her father and goes back to the attic to read her magazine before bed.

Older Eileen interjects directly here, laying the foundation for the upcoming story. The story is set when Eileen is 24 years old, works at private juvenile correctional facility for boys that she names Moorehead in retrospect. The tale she is about to tell is about how she ran away from home a week after that day.

## Analysis

The opening chapter of the novel sets the stage for the events to follow and serves as an introduction to the character of Eileen at the age of 24. Eileen's depravity is at full display, as she is narcissistic, obsessing over every aspect of her being. Even if she finds fault with her appearance, the focus is always on her. She can only make connections to the outside world through the image of herself and how she would be presented. Yet, she puts forth no effort to change herself into someone that would be appealing, finding comfort in the routine that she has set for herself. She does not clean up around the house and wears her mother's old clothes. There is a contradiction present in her character, as she frets about her appearance yet is willing to wallow in self-loathing rather than make an effort to improve her image.

Eileen's relationship with her father is introduced in this chapter as well. He is a retired police officer who is an alcoholic, spending his days drinking and hurling abuses at his daughter. In response to him, Eileen keeps her anger bottled up, even reveling in it to a point, using it as a means of passing the time. For the most part, she avoids him, which allows her to spend more time within her own head and with her reading material. The choice of reading material, usually of a grotesque subject matter, is used to further establish her character. Instead of conforming to the standards of entertainment that her cohorts do, Eileen finds comfort in her unique entertainment. It allows her to believe that she is different and in control, which is another contradiction, as she is always in control of her body, puts no effort into her appearance, yet is obsessed with the fact that she does not look good enough.

The town that Eileen lives in is presented as an idyllic New England town, with the generic bounty of winter snow and polite neighbors who clean her sidewalk and leave a gift basket. Within the town is a little circle of chaos that is Eileen's home, where her father drinks himself into a stupor all day long and there is garbage piling up within the house. The town is quaint and beautiful, with Eileen finding in the quiet of the town's night. The contrast between the rest of the town and the Dunlop home further serves to highlight the eccentricity of Eileen's character and her circumstance. Outside, the town is blanketed in pure white snow while her front door has dangerous icicles and the inside of the home is never cleaned.



The narrator is introduced in the opening chapter as well. It is a first-person point of view using the past tense. Older Eileen, speaking from 50 years in the future, is the one telling the story about the 24 year old Eileen. This distance in time allows for a certain license, as she is able to interject continuously and offer comment on the situation evolving in the past, since she has more clarity in the future. She says she is happier and in better circumstances in the present, and is thus able to analyze her younger self better, especially during the transformative week that changed her life forever.

## **Discussion Question 1**

How would you describe Eileen as a character? Consider time and place as factors.

## **Discussion Question 2**

In what ways does Eileen contradict herself when describing her habits and inner thoughts?

## **Discussion Question 3**

The narrator is an older Eileen, recounting the events 50 years after they transpired. Is she a reliable narrator?

## **Vocabulary**

staunchly, cleaving, qualms, conscientious, glutton, vacuous, carnality, faddish



# Friday

## Summary

The following day, Eileen is at work and introduces Moorehead, the boy's correctional facility where she works as a secretary of sorts. She arrives in the morning, locks her bag in her trunk, and packs a spare lunch of Wonderbread buttered with a can of tuna. Her coworkers are two middle-aged women who spend the majority of their time reading novels and shirking work. Eileen wonders about their depravity and comes to the conclusion that of all the people she has met over the years, those two were not the worst. She also mentions her disdain for the correctional officers, who spend the majority of their time disciplining the boys in an abusive manner. Despite her general dislike for the officers, she is smitten with one in particular, Randy, a tall muscular man. She spends a majority of her time idealizing him and imagining the type of woman he would find attractive, driving by his apartment on the weekends.

Eileen reveals further details about her mind, talking about finding comfort in the image of her face despite loathing it. She also humanizes her two coworkers by imagining them engage in a sexual encounter. Having read a book about casts of faces taken after death, Eileen introduces the concept of her death mask, the face she wears to protect herself from scrutiny, since she is sensitive and constantly in a state of inner flux. The mask comes in hand considering the environment she works in, where boys are constantly abused by guards. Thinking about the boys at the facility, she frets about whether they would like her or not and makes herself feel better by imagining them as intellectually inferior. Facing boredom, she fantasizes about Randy and her body, commenting on her feelings of inferiority regarding her small breasts.

Despite her prudishness, Eileen thinks it a safer option than her sister Joanie's life, who became pregnant at a young age and is crass and openly vulgar about her sexual relationship with Cliff, her boyfriend. While her sister has a sexually fulfilling life, Eileen wonders about her own desires, citing a desire not to end up like Joanie but to have a quiet affair with someone like Randy. The same day, the old psychiatrist, Dr. Frye, is retiring and a retirement party is held for him. He has spent his time there drugging the inmates and Eileen remembers their absolute lack of interactions over the years. Earlier, she scratched an itch in her underwear and she shakes Dr. Frye's hand with the same unwashed hand.

Talking about X-Ville, the generic New England town she has named so because of its generic qualities, Eileen tries to envision her life outside the town. Having spent her entire life there, she fantasizes about disappearing to New York City. She is saving money and indulges in the fantasy quite often, though she never shares the plan with anyone. She would not receive any sympathy for her plight, as people like Mrs. Stephens and Mrs. Murray, who never offered condolences after Eileen's mother's death, are abusive towards her, teasing her about a possible relationship with one of the inmates. She compares their awful manners with her own, focusing on her mouth as a





place of disease and her constant use of Listerine, mint chocolates, and sweet vermouth to clean it.

Among her duties at Moorehead, Eileen also has to supervise when someone comes to visit one of the boys. There is usually a long line of visitors who have to wait an excruciatingly long time to see someone. Most of them are mothers and Eileen tries to distract them by giving them questionnaires with trivial questions. Eileen wonders about the boys and considers them mostly harmless kids from across the state. When a young woman comes that day to visit her rapist, Eileen wonders how it would feel to be raped by someone like Randy. The visits are an opportunity for Eileen to be closer to Randy, who she likes to smell and whose sexual life she imagines. She wonders a bit more about their union, thinking that her appearance is not unappealing but her presentation is.

Eileen is asked to decorate the Christmas tree, during which she talks about scents and how they function as predictors of personality. She is also asked by Mrs. Stephens to man the lights at the annual pageant, after which Eileen further thinks about the amount of hate she doles out to Mrs. Stephens. On the drive home, she thinks about the calm nature of her town and how there is not much fault to be found with it. When she gets home, there is a police officer with an official warning because her father has been throwing snowballs at schoolchildren who walk by. Her father dismisses the warning and talks about his imaginary hoodlums, people he thinks are lurking everywhere and coming from him. She is further humiliated about her appearance when Joanie comes to visit, after which Eileen goes up to her attic, chewing and spitting out chocolates as she reads her magazine.

## Analysis

In this chapter, Eileen's character moves beyond the house and the reader is allowed to witness her depravity within the space of her employment. In the space of her occupation, there are more characters to despise, such as Mrs. Stephens and Mrs. Murray. Eileen's self-loathing continues but she also directs her hate and anger onto the characters at Moorehead, a task that she seems to be doing mostly for the sake of passing time, even if the women are occasionally abusive and lack any sort of empathy towards her. Within the environment of her father and Moorehead, Eileen learns to hide herself with her death mask, which is the process of her hiding her true self from the people around her. Considering herself to be a sensitive individual who is deeply affected by the craziness around her, she claims that the death mask allows her to negate some of the consequences of being in direct contact with the depravity around her. Living with an alcoholic father and working at a juvenile correctional facility where everyone is abusive to the inmates, the only way she can appear to function normally is by donning a fake persona.

Randy is introduced and positioned at the center of 24-year-old Eileen's fantasy. She is obsessed with him, spending the majority of her time at work observing him and thinking about a possible relationship she could have with him and all the reasons why he would



not engage with her, emotionally and physically. Her self-loathing prevents her from thinking about a possible relationship in a positive manner, preferring to fantasize about the type of woman he might be interested in and improbable situations in which Randy might engage with her romantically. In relation to her idealization of Randy, Eileen's sexual naivety is expressed here as well, as she refers to sex as "coupling," and constantly unrealistic expectations of what would happen if a man and woman would have a relationship. Yet, she does not find out because she is obsessed with her own small body, and cannot disengage with her self-loathing to begin a healthy relationship.

Eileen's abhorrence for her own body is further developed in this chapter. Close contact, real or imaginary, spurs Eileen on another binge of degrading her own body. She laments the size of her breasts, thinking them too small yet is disgusted by the perceived largeness of her body, choosing to hide it underneath her mother's clothes. Her mouth is a source of anxiety, which she tries to compensate for by keeping Listerine, sweet vermouth and chocolate mints close by, using them at any attempt to improve the smell. Joanie's introduction heightens Eileen's shame of her own body, as her sister appears to be someone who is more comfortable in her body.

The introduction of Moorehead as a prominent setting helps to further develop Eileen's character. It is a morbid place that is full of abuse and unsavory characters who underscore Eileen's own perversity. While Eileen may be self-loathing and full of dark thoughts, she channels it inside, while people at Moorehead direct their hate and abuse outward. Either the correction officers are verbally and physically taunting the boys, or the middle-aged coworkers are being unsympathetic and rude to Eileen. Some of the characters are indifferent towards her, such as Dr. Frye, who has never spoken a word to Eileen throughout her time there. Randy, the center of her fantasies, never directly interacts with Eileen either. In such an environment where she is surrounded constantly by a large number of unremarkable human beings, Eileen stands out as more sensitive than anyone there. She wonders about the inmates, thinking them innocent children caught in unfortunate circumstances. The surveys she provides to visiting mothers is another example of her positive character. She cannot provide them with much comfort directly so she gives them trivial written surveys that help to pass the time for the mothers while they wait long times to see their sons.

There is more interjection by older Eileen through the chapter, as she stops the narrative to explain the emotional attachment to Randy. She clarifies that the story is not a love story involving Randy but he is still an important part of younger Eileen's emotional landscape. The focus is primarily on monitoring the Eileen through the week before she runs away from home. Older Eileen also mentions for the first time Rebecca, saying that love is something that easily moves from one person to another. Her continued intrusion makes the reader wonder how she is affecting the facts of the week from her narration from the future.

## Discussion Question 1

In relation to Randy, is Eileen's obsession dangerous?



## Discussion Question 2

How do the characters at Moorehead affect Eileen's emotional stability?

## Discussion Question 3

Eileen mentions her death mask for the first time in this chapter ("Friday"). How resolute is the mask she wears when interacting with other characters?

## Vocabulary

pungent, disparaging, gluttonous, strangulating, impelled, postcoital, garlands, coiffed



# Saturday

## Summary

Waking up in the morning, Eileen debates whether to get out of bed. Sleeping on a cot in the attic, she envisions herself on a camping trip, even keeping a mason jar for urination. Eileen then delves into her bowel movements and the extreme difficulty she faces in their regularity. Her problem is compounded by her inability to share a bathroom with her father, since he induces further anxiety in her, complicating her bowel issues. She takes refuge in the basement bathroom, where she is free to do as she pleases but which also reminds her of her mother.

Visiting the kitchen, Eileen remarks about the disarray in the house, especially the kitchen. The uncleanliness is a non-issue because neither father or daughter invest time in preparing meals; they both have inconsistent diets. Eileen relies mostly on plain bread and nuts. As her father yells at her as per his routine, Eileen talks about his past employment as a police officer in the X-Ville police department. He loved his profession, wearing his uniform everywhere and sleeping with his gun, even if his job did not entail dealing with dangerous criminals. His alcoholism has roots during his time as a police officer, as he would spend a lot of time drinking mostly beer at O'Hara's, a local pub. After the revelation of Eileen's mother's illness, Eileen's father began to drink gin, which Eileen wonders might have something to do with gin smelling similar to her mother's perfume.

While cleaning her driveway, Eileen thinks about Pauly Daly, a young boy who used to come clean her snow for her. During their last encounter, Eileen affectionately kissed him on the cheek and he never came back. After the shoveling, she decides to go by Randy's apartment, where she sits in her car outside and fantasizes about his life and their possible relationship. She puts on her mother's sunglasses before going out, lying to her father that she is going to the movies with a friend. He yells at her and chides her for her lack of social life, which she acknowledges is hurtful. He is generally delusional, claiming that hoodlums are after him. After his retirement, he had his license revoked from driving in the wrong direction, and after disappearing with a car during a bender, Eileen locked his shoes in the trunk to prevent him from driving anymore. She mentions that his gun has always been prominent in her life, always in visible sight growing up.

Anxious once more about who might be having relations with Randy, she drives over and finds that he is not home since his bike is not parked outside. Eileen thinks about movie actresses making her feel inadequate from a physical point of view, offering that the only hope she has with Randy is if he needed to grieve after his mother's death and she was there to offer a consoling shoulder. While driving to the movie theater, Eileen envisions killing herself and thinks about her father's caustic response if she did. She reiterates that she does not wish to die, wanting eventually to run away to New York City.



While watching the film "Send Me No Flowers," Eileen finds herself bored and thinks about how unremarkable Doris Day is in the film. After leaving, she catches her reflection in the mirror of a boutique and is horrified at her appearance. She goes in and asks to try on a party dress that is on display in the front window. While the salesperson tries to retrieve the dress, Eileen steals some hosiery and puts it in her bag. The dress is too big for her and she leaves the store quickly, driving past Randy's apartment before heading home. Her father and her drink whiskey brought by a police officer and Eileen thinks about the good side to her relationship with him, as she has sentiments that she shares with him and occasionally sobers up to engage with her, such as paying bills in a timely manner. They engage in a ritualistic conversation where they talk about the broken television and Joanie. She wistfully thinks about if he would change and become kinder to her the way he is to Joanie.

Thinking about Joanie, Eileen mentions the contrast in their personalities growing up. Eileen was always awkward while Joanie more personable, which attached the latter more to their father. Eileen remembers an old July 4th party where she was groped by a rookie police officer. She thinks about her experience and remarks that, while it was traumatizing, other women have gone through worse. While her father falls asleep from the whiskey, Eileen goes down to the basement, thinking about a time when her mother was chasing her and she fell down the basement stairs, no one coming to her, family or dark monsters. Sitting on the toilet, she wishes that one of her father's dark angels would come and get her, and after a while she manages to find herself on her cot in the attic.

## Analysis

This chapter continues Eileen's obsession with her body, turning the spotlight inside. She focuses heavily on her bowel movements and the difficulty she has with them, only able to have normal bodily functions with the aid of laxatives. They seem to be induced by the constant state of anxiety she is in socially, with her father and with anyone she interacts with. The retention of body matter can be paralleled with her retention of every emotion that passes through her mind. She has minimal outlets for her emotional turbulence and that manifests itself into her outward "prudishness." The inability to express emotions manifests physically in her problems with bowel movements, where she needs chemical aids to assist her. The irony is that while she is able to release physical tension, she does not able to do the same for her emotions. The physical release is the only relief she is able to achieve, and its significance is evident in the apparent ecstasy she feels anytime she is able to go after taking laxatives. It is a literal and figurative explosion, which allows her to feel hollowed out.

The basement serves as an important setting for Eileen, doubling as a sanctuary and also as a harbinger of demons. Early in the chapter, she talks about the bathroom in the basement as the only place in the house where she feels comfortable and relaxed. The bathroom upstairs she would have to share with her father, which induces another wave of anxiety in her. Without his constant abuse and alcoholic perversity, she is able to let her guard down in the basement bathroom and release any built up tension. She also



mentions as a place that evokes memories of her mother, who spent a lot of time there, something that remains a mystery Eileen to date.

However, there is a figurative darkness that the basement embodies as well. Eileen mentions an incident from her childhood where her mother was chasing her and she fell down the stairs. In the aftermath, she was in the basement, in dark, for an entire day. While recalling the incident, a lonely image of Eileen emerges. Not the adult Eileen but the child Eileen. Stuck in the basement, she wished for anyone to come for her, parents or the monsters that inhabit the basement. Yet, no one ever came for her. While using the toilet, she imagines her father's "dark angels" coming to envelope her as well, hoping that they do. The basement is a place of protection but also a place of vulnerability. She was vulnerable there as a child and is still vulnerable there as an adult. In her vulnerability, Eileen hopes for some sort of intimacy, real or imagined. She is desperate enough to wish for monsters, childhood monsters and her father's alcoholic demons. Amidst the release of tension, the basement allows Eileen to fully expunge her death mask and bare her internal angst that she never verbalizes.

Eileen's place as a woman during that time and place becomes more clear as well. Her interaction with Pauly Daly highlights her status as an atypical woman, as she tries to show him genuine affection, in a very non-sexual manner, but is rebuffed. His innocence ignites a sense of decency in him but the squalor of her house and her physical appearance is hard to overcome for the young boy, who refers to her as Mrs. Dunlop and never appears again. The choice of the film that Eileen watches is a deliberate attempt by the author to highlight her status as an outsider. Eileen's insecurities are amplified when confronted with film actresses, and Doris Day in the movie heightens her insecurity to the point that she walks into a boutique and asks to put on a party dress. The dress she chooses is on display on the street and is worn by a mannequin. This highlights the artifice of public appearances that is prevalent at the time and is exemplified by actresses such as Doris Day. The dress, however, is too big for Eileen. She is miscast for the role of a party girl. While she normally wears her mother's clothes in an attempt to look different, changing clothes does not help either. She is a misfit in the society she inhabits and changing clothes will not change that.

The relationship with Joanie is explained a bit more in this chapter as well. Joanie, who is four years older than Eileen, always had a better relationship with their father. Throughout childhood engagements, Joanie is put out with more pride than Eileen. The incident on July 4th is key to describing their relationship. Eileen is labeled as "jail bait" by her father when seated next to a rookie police officer. His sexual perversity extends to his 12-year-old daughter, who is later sexually assaulted by the same police officer. This creates an environment of sexual freedom for men and Eileen is punished her entire life for not being like Joanie, for not being receptive and welcoming of such sexual advances. Her explanation to herself is in a very rational language. She puts forth the idea that the event was traumatizing but worse has happened to other people. Yet, the effect seems to linger with her, as the memory of the incident sticks with her and she still carries resentment against her father for the incident.



## Discussion Question 1

How does Eileen's personality manifest in the basement?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the importance of Doris Day in the chapter "Saturday," and the film Eileen sees her in?

## Discussion Question 3

While in the boutique, Eileen steals some items. What connection is there between the theft and Eileen's nonconformity?

## Vocabulary

torrential, reverie, brininess, baubles, hypochondria



# Sunday

## Summary

Waking up the next day hungover, Eileen has to help her father get ready for Mass, shaving him and changing his shirt in the midst of the dirty kitchen. Eileen comments on their relationship, him getting angry at anything and her deliberately provoking him. While shaving him, Eileen thinks about killing her father. She never reveals her emotions because she does want him to have the power from the knowledge that he upsets her. She wonders about him chasing after her if she leaves and who would take responsibility for him in her absence. After her aunt Ruth takes her father to church, Eileen thinks about the tactics she used over the years with different men and her father, trying to win their affection by baring her soul and innocence. While she would temporarily win the affection of men with this tactic, her father was never able to return her affection.

After he leaves, Eileen leaves and does not shower, thinking of it as her own form of rebellion despite her father's caustic comments about her smell. She puts on winter clothing and decides to drive to the library, from where she has borrowed a book on Suriname, and one about astrology, the former having provided her with pictures of nude men and women she enjoyed, while the latter she wanted to read to be able to predict a better future for herself. Thinking of church, Eileen remembers her father taking her and Joanie every Sunday. Due to her close relationship with their father and her better features, Joanie was able to flout her way through mass while Eileen would have to face her father's scrutiny, often wilting under the pressure of his gaze. Her father always made excuses for their absent mother, who would spend her Sundays on the couch and telling her daughters about the non-existence of God. Eileen remembers thinking about God as a white-haired old man in a robe, someone who would have special plan for her. She is not angry at her father for his religiosity but his treatment of her, preferring gin to loving her over the years.

Finding the library closed, Eileen thinks about her familiarity with the building, the librarian and even the stains on the different books in the place. Standing in front of the library, she feels the aftermath of her hungover, a feeling of well-being enveloping her. Driving away, Eileen thinks about visiting her old college, in a town not far from X-ville. She enjoyed her time there even though she was failing her classes, but was only able to attend for half a year before being pulled out by her father so she could take care of her dying mother.

Driving with the windows closed, Eileen begins to drowse and is stopped by a police officer, from whom she manages to not receive a ticket by claiming to be worried about her sick father. He allows her to leave on the condition that she get coffee at the next exit, which she does, arriving at a street called Moody. Seeing a dog, she remembers her own dog, Mona, whose death affected her just as much as her mother's. Driving up to a coffee shop, she thinks about her drive out as a test for her eventual escape,





realizing that the car would be a failure. Sitting in the coffee shop, Eileen is overcome by self-consciousness about her image and becomes angry, which prompts to buy ice cream and eat it with hot tea.

As she walks out, Eileen wonders about her aunt Ruth, who is judgmental and does her best to not speak directly to Eileen. On one occasion that Ruth came home, Eileen heard her aunt chiding her father about the mess in the house, placing the blame on his children. They did not know Eileen was there. Her father made a weak attempt to defend her before she was discovered, then he ordered her to take out the trash.

While walking down Moody Street, Eileen witnesses a teenage couple kissing in an alley. She is fascinated by their brazen behavior and feeling overwhelmed, leaves to her car, stuffing snow into her pants. She drives by Randy's apartment again, fantasizing about his body and another situation where romance might bloom between them. As she sits in front of his house, she ends up vomiting out the ice cream she ate earlier.

Arriving home, Eileen changes clothes and gives a bottle of gin to her father who is sitting on the toilet. Standing in the bathroom, she is disturbed by the quick glance she gets of his pubic hair, diverting her attention by focusing on his nearby gun, envisioning what would happen if she shot herself in the skull while hovering over her sleeping father, her dead body slumping onto him. Lying in her attic, she feels the cold coming, preferring to imagine better times than fixing her problems. She thinks about the possibility of an uncle, someone who would fix her attic with tools and perhaps have an apartment with her mother. Eileen remembers sifting through her mother's wardrobe, looking for signs of adultery or any indication that her mother loved her. While her father thinks she wears her mother's clothes in remembrance, Eileen knows she only does it to mask her true identity.

Looking around the attic, Eileen focuses on the disarray that is present there as well, with drawers full of clothes spilling out and old records she never plays. There is a window through which she can view the spot where she buried Mona, which prompts her to remember her mother's last days when Eileen would feed her the same chicken soup every day and her mother wishing a quicker death. The image of her mother prompts Eileen to think about Mona's death, who she found lying dead in the backyard as she was putting up laundry. She covered the body and visited it later, vomiting the contents of her stomach out, chicken and vermouth. She herself took a trowel and dug a hole that she kicked the dog in, not wanting to touch it. Not sharing the information with anyone, she was able to let out her emotions a few days later when her mother passed.

As she sits in her attic looking out the window, Eileen cries and thinks about digging out Mona, but is stopped by the cold soil that must be difficult to dig through, since her life is not a movie. She wonders how people in the past buried their dead during the cold, and whether or not they stored the bodies in a basement to wait until the soil thawed.



## Analysis

The chapter further explores the relationship between Eileen and her father, taking a closer look beneath the surface of contempt that they have created for each other. The opening scene involves Eileen helping him prepare for Mass, shaving him and changing his shirt. Despite the bitterness between them, Eileen wonders how he would react if she went away or died, whether he would chase after her or never think of her again. Despite at times wishing for his death, whether by shaving razor or icicles, Eileen's utmost desire is really for him to show affection to her and provide her with a much needed self-esteem boost. To that end, Eileen mentions getting drunk and baring her thoughts to her father, who never responds to her but with small, mean comments. She has done the same with other men since then and is able to acquire some affection. This revelation sheds some light on the effect her father has had on through the years. Not able to access the love of her father, she spent her later years with other men doing the same, showing her vulnerabilities to win their affection, trying to find the love her father never gave her in other men.

The role of religion in Eileen's life at the time is given a spotlight in the chapter. Her father seems to come off as a devout Catholic despite his alcoholism and the deliriums that accompany his condition. In the first chapter, Eileen mentions that her father hates his neighbors on account of them being Lutheran. That comment summarizes the extreme nature of religion in the novel, as personified by Mr. Dunlop. While being prepared for Mass, he requires the assistance of Eileen and his bottle of gin. He cannot confront God sober and must do so with the help of his daughter who he despises, and a sister with whom he only interacts with on Sundays.

Eileen's memories of going to church as a child shed light on the nature of religion in the novel as well. Her father wore his uniform and Joanie was free to do as she pleased while Eileen would have to put on a show of sincerity, all the while their mother would be at home drinking alcohol. Joanie's lack of sincerity is not a detriment to her, but instead, endears her even more to her father because of her good looks and vibrant personality, while Eileen attempts to be sincere but is bullied by her father at all times. The insincere characters, her father, Ruth and Joanie are all part of the New England town contingent that attends church and is part of everyday life while Eileen and her mother, outsiders but the only genuine individuals, do not attend church and are vilified constantly for their personalities. Eileen's childhood image of God is corrupt as well, as she envisions Him to be an older man with white hair and a robe, comparing the image to her father's current state. She worships her father, who she equates with God, yet her love is not returned. In a manner of speaking, it is as if God has abandoned her along with her father.

Eileen's sexual naïveté is built on this chapter during the scene on Moody Street where she witnesses the teenage couple kissing. She finds herself fascinated by them, observing the two in light of the different methods of kissing she has heard about, which she describes in a very clinical, detached manner. The language used illustrates the lack of familiarity Eileen has with physical intimacy, as she is drawn to them since she



never engages in similar acts. She becomes overwhelmed and has to stuff snow in her pants as a means of calming herself down, the snow that is the hallmark of X-Ville, the quaint New England town that prides itself on convention and religion. Driving away, she immediately escapes into another fantasy about Randy, which is her refuge for whenever she is disturbed.

While her father receives a fair amount of attention, Eileen's relationship with her mother is explored as well, albeit indirectly. The time around her mother's death is explored through Eileen's relationship with her dog, Mona, and its death a few days prior to her mother. The dog is someone who she loved very much and whose death was not easy to confront. Upon confronting the dead body, Eileen vomits the contents of her stomach, described as chicken and vermouth, two of the items that are constantly associated with her mother. She is not able to shed tears until her mother's death a few days later, though she is crying mostly for her dog, often mentioning that the dog's death affected her just as much as her mother's. Her relationship with her mother during her life was distant as well, as her mother would spend her days drinking and berating their father for believing in God. Eileen goes through her mother's clothes, hoping to find a sign of adultery, a sign of her mother loving her. Adultery and love are equated here, with Eileen hoping that she had a different father, someone who is helpful and loving. If her mother gave birth to her through an affair, then it would mean that she loved Eileen.

Eileen's window out of the attic symbolizes her position in life as well. She is required to stoop to see out of it and the only thing she can see is the site of her dog's body, who she buried herself. She thinks about digging the body out but is stopped by the thought of hard soil preventing her from doing so, thinking about people storing dead bodies in basements while the soil thawed outside. Eileen thinks about a damp place where a dead body could be stored, and the first thought in her head is a basement, a place where her mother's secrets are buried and where she goes to secretly live in her shame.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Eileen's mental instability fluctuate when she is on Moody street?

## Discussion Question 2

While Eileen does not attend Mass, can she be considered a religious person? If so, in what way?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Eileen's relationship with Mona, her dead dog, help explain her relationship with her deceased mother?

## Vocabulary

languish, liturgy, slogged, surreptitiously, runt, flaccid



# Monday

## Summary

In the morning, Eileen once again obsesses over body and its small dimensions, saying that she was never able to grow out of the insecurity that accompanies puberty. She refers to herself as a spinster, having only kissed one boy, Peter Woodman, at the age of 16. He was the son of a father's cop friend who was senior when she was 16 and took her to the prom. They did not dance and at the end of the night he lightly kissed her, which prompted Eileen to bite him on the neck. She clarifies that he is not to be focused on as a romantic ideal, and that Randy is the primary romantic interest at the time.

Wearing the clothes she stole from the boutique, Eileen drives to work, detailing the different methods of escape to New York City. She thinks of checking out the finest books from the library and taking them with her, which would make it appear as if she was following her normal routine. She thinks it important that no one know that she purposefully ran away from home, and they rather think she died in a ditch somewhere. She wonders how her father would react to her disappearing, hoping that he breaks down and finally acknowledges his love for her.

When she arrives at work, she notices that the boys are wearing holiday sweaters knitted by a charitable group of people, and that one, navy sweater with an "S" has been left at her desk by the warden. Eileen wonders if the warden likes her, and that perhaps the sweater is his way of saying so without arousing suspicion that he would if he were to send a box of chocolates. During the afternoon, the warden brings in a man and a woman, the latter being exceedingly beautiful and instantly the target of Eileen's scorn. The man is revealed to be Dr. Bradley, the new psychiatrist, while the woman is Rebecca Saint John, a Harvard educated woman hired as the director of education at the facility. Eileen is handed her sweater and given the responsibility of helping her settle in. Rebecca's beauty makes Eileen insecure and begin to chafe under the pressure. As Eileen helps her with her lock, Rebecca remarks casually about preferring flat-chested women when comparing the locker combination with her measurements. Eileen is surprised at the comments and finds herself agreeing, a sense of well-being swelling inside her. Rebecca talks further about not caring what people think of her, and Eileen forces to herself to agree out loud before they part ways.

Back at her desk, Eileen is consumed with thoughts about Rebecca, coming up with different ways she could strike up a conversation with her without revealing her insecurities. She thinks of appearing indifferent, holding back herself until Rebecca fully reveals herself. Heading to the Christmas pageant, Eileen belittles her face again and her choice of lipstick, Irreparable Red. Faced with menstruation, she decides to stuff toilet paper in her underwear rather than going to her car for supplies. She feels self-conscious again heading down the hallway, thinking what the boys would think of her. Eileen flashes the spotlight onto the stage, comparing the set up to a Bugs Bunny



cartoon as the boys walk up. She becomes concerned when Rebecca walks in, and seeing her stand close to Randy, envisions immediately an attraction between the two and heartbreak for herself. When a fight breaks out between the boys, Eileen realizes that she only loves Randy for his body.

The warden stands up and introduces the Nativity reenactment by the boys, stressing the ability of Christmas to uphold society's principles. Eileen realizes she has a crush on the warden due to his self-confidence, then remembers he might have been a homosexual due to his penchant of spanking boys in his office. As the performance unfolds, Eileen notices Rebecca's reaction and thinks about the humiliation the boys endure but no one has the courage to stop. When Rebecca walks out, she makes eye contact with Eileen, who thinks she will be in solidarity with Rebecca no matter what.

When the performance ends and the warden begins a speech on sin, Eileen leaves the pageant and walks through the building, eventually arriving in the kitchen. After taking some milk, she witnesses a boy in the solitary meat locker behind the kitchen, who had been there for several weeks. She recalls his name being Polk and her father mentioning him. As she stands, she sees him touching himself and is fascinated. The following day, she learns his name is Leonard Polk and he has been incarcerated for murdering his father. Eileen is interrupted by Rebecca when handling his file, who takes an interest in the case and takes the file home with her. On her way back home, she stops at a drugstore and pays for cigarettes, a glossy fashion magazine, and a new red lipstick called Passionate Lover, which she applies blindly on herself. Once home, her father takes the alcohol from her and mentions the unseemly color on her face, saying it is not her color.

## Analysis

The chapter introduces Rebecca Saint John, an important character that instigates the climactic events of the novel. Upon first arrival, she is seen as a threat by Eileen, who groups her into a class of attractive women similar to Doris Day. Eileen envisions Rebecca as having empty brains despite her good looks. Eileen's initial reaction to Rebecca is typical of any reaction she would have with a normal, attractive woman, that makes her insecure - Eileen unleashes a wave of intense hatred. Yet, Rebecca is able to charm Eileen through her rebellious streak, claiming an admiration for females with the body type of Eileen. Immediately, Eileen is smitten by Rebecca and finds hope that she has a new friend who she can share her thoughts with. All Eileen ever wanted was someone who thinks just like her and she finds that person in Rebecca. Unlike Randy, who she realizes she only loves for his body, Eileen is admiring of Rebecca's looks and brains.

The role of religion at Moorehead is introduced through the Christmas preparations and the annual holiday pageant. The boys are wearing clothing provided by do-good citizens and are prompted into a performance reenacting the Nativity. Since there are no female inmates, the boys are forced into roles of different ages and gender, often failing to live up to the spirit of the performance. The insistence upon religion highlights the



consistency that is established in the town of X-Ville, the typical New England town with ideal citizens and shimmering Christmas decorations. The inconsistency of that image is evident in the Dunlop house, and it extends to Moorehead as well. The boys are regularly abused by the officers in the facility, with the warden partaking as well. The children that they are, the boys become unruly during the performance, eliciting a physical response from Randy and a speech about sin from the warden.

The choice of the Nativity for performance is ironic, as the boys are meant to convey the innocence of Christ and the holiness of events surrounding His birth. But their lives are not innocent and they are perpetrators and victims of horrendous crimes. The moral complexity of their age is evident in their inability to act out the scenes of Nativity, as they cannot portray an innocence and purity that they no longer possess. The insistence by the warden and the institution to engage in Christmas and celebrate the values of the holiday are just an attempt to complete the image of the New England town.

There is another incident of Eileen's voyeurism that comes up in this chapter, as she witnesses Leonard Polk touching himself in his solitary confinement. Having left the show of purity and virtue behind, Eileen finds herself looking on as the boy quietly touches his groin. She is transfixed, unable to look away until a loud noise signaling the end of the performance forces her to leave. Eileen does not have relationships with men herself, as she can only view her body through a filter of self-contempt. She can never admire herself enough to think that she can provide comfort to herself since she does not look like a Doris Day or Rebecca. The incident also illustrates Eileen's obsession with seeing people emotionally and physically vulnerable, as the teenage couple on Moody Street were unaware of her looking, and it was only then that Eileen was able to witness them. Similarly, Leonard Polk does not know that Eileen is present, which allows her to witness him touch himself.

The character of Leonard Polk is in ways a foil to Eileen. She despises her father, occasionally hoping to kill him, and is ashamed of her body to the point of not being able to touch herself for pleasure. Leonard Polk is incarcerated for murdering his father, and is comfortable touching himself in his body. He shows the male aspect of the Eileen's person-hood, as he is able to act on different emotions instead of wallowing in self-pity like Eileen.

Eileen's appearance throughout the chapter is set up by the author anticipating Rebecca's arrival. In an act of foreshadowing, Eileen decided to wear some of the clothes she stole from the upscale boutique a few nights prior, blue stockings. While she does not change her appearance completely, she does take a small step to wear more contemporary clothing, which would allow herself to feel more presentable to Rebecca. She also changes her lipstick, going from Irreparable Red to Passionate Lover. Before she was damaged goods, full of self-loathing with no way out of her existence. Now, with the arrival of Rebecca, there is hope for her.



## Discussion Question 1

What kind of environment do the Christmas preparations create at Moorehead for the boys?

## Discussion Question 2

Other than expressing similar beliefs to Eileen, how does Rebecca stand out from the other women that Eileen usually encounters but despises?

## Discussion Question 3

Does Rebecca truly signal an emotional shift for Eileen, or is she just another person onto whom Eileen pins her fantasies on?

## Vocabulary

dillydallied, jowls, taffeta, rosacea, dereliction, fey





# Tuesday

## Summary

Eileen talks about her stunted emotional growth during those years, as the violence occurring at Moorehead against the boys never registers with the young Eileen because she is always consumed with herself. Instead of her typical Tuesday, where she would plan an escape from X-ville and fantasize about Randy, she focuses her energies on thinking about Rebecca, who is the new hope of her life. Dressing specially for the occasion, Eileen and Rebecca exchange banter again in front of the locker, with the former desperately trying to keep up with the charm and wit of the latter. Eileen notices her fur coat and customized cigarette case which has her initials. Rebecca smokes Pall Malls, with the pack having the quote "Per aspera ad astra," and Eileen takes one, not able to hold in the smoke without coughing. Rebecca sees her teeth and is consumed with awe at their perfection. Eileen mentions her penchant for candy and Rebecca praises her body, wishing she were the same dimensions, as she complains about her height.

After her meeting with Rebecca, Eileen finds herself dealing with visiting mothers, the first one visiting an arsonist. She notices how the boys hold up a facade of strength until their mothers start crying, at which point they begin to cry themselves. When the arsonist's mother attempts to give him a handkerchief, Randy and Eileen intervene, the latter telling the mother she cannot give him anything for the child's safety, which Eileen knows to be untrue but something she regurgitates because of her strict Catholic upbringing. The warden has made it clear that this is to make the boy's desperate because only a desperate person wants to atone for their sins. The next mother is Leonard Polk's mother, who Eileen notices as obese but with an intelligence in her eyes. She tries to talk to Leonard but he looks above her, grinning. Rebecca arrives and begins to take notes while observing the two. Eileen notices that the tattoos on Leonard's knuckles spell out love. After the mother leaves, Rebecca breaks protocol and talks to Leonard, comforting him by touching his shoulder and knee. She creates more stir when she takes Leonard herself instead of through an officer. Eileen is distraught when viewing the interactions between the two, as she feels betrayed and imagines an affair between the two.

Eileen notices Rebecca's notebook and decides to venture to her office and confirm her suspicions. Despite being with Polk, Rebecca is pleased to see her and touches Eileen's shoulder, asking to meet her for drinks after, which erases any concern from Eileen's mind. Eileen suggests that they meet at O'Hara's, the only bar in town, and leaves early to prepare for her outing with Rebecca, mentioning it as a bar for blue-collar workers that she has been many times to pick up her father. She recalls an incident when driving back with her father, he reaches over and tries to touch her breast, calling out Joanie's name when she stops him. Full of nervousness, she buys liquor and showers before she heads out. Once there, she notices the entire bar full of men entranced by Rebecca. While Rebecca drinks martinis, Eileen has some whiskey



and then beer, which elicits a response from her that makes Eileen think about the way she talks, how it reflects an affluent upbringing. Rebecca engages in conversation, jumping from topic to topic, mentioning her upbringing as an orphan, refusing to let the men pay for her drink, and finally landing on Polk, at which point she tries to get a response from Eileen regarding the earlier visit, mentioning a conversation with the warden regarding the boy.

When engaged by the men, Rebecca says her name is Eileen, referring to Eileen as Rebecca. After flirting with them a little, Rebecca and Eileen dance together, with the latter absolutely ecstatic in the moment. Sandy Brogan, the bartender, tries to flirt with Rebecca and Eileen mentions that she finds him repulsive, remembering him from the days when she would have to come to O'Hara's after her father. After Rebecca leaves, Eileen goes back to the bar and enjoys herself in the afterglow of her friend, eventually waking up the next morning and finding herself parked in a snowbank in front of her house, vomit frozen in the seat next to her, and her keys and purse missing.

## Analysis

The idealization of Rebecca by Eileen continues in this chapter, as Randy takes a backseat to the enigmatic woman that has shown some affection for Eileen. There is a balance to Eileen's image of Rebecca. Whereas with Randy the focus was purely on his physical attributes and the emotional reactions that Eileen attributed to him, Rebecca appeals to her not only through her body but also her mind. Rebecca's physical makeup is initially a source of disgust for Eileen because it forces her back into her insecurities. Rebecca's nonchalant acceptance of Eileen and her body is what endears her to the latter. In Rebecca, there is finally a justification for Eileen for her own image. Steeped in self-loathing, Eileen has never been able to feel confident with her body and the perception of her that it might create for the inhabitants of X-ville. Rebecca is beautiful like Doris Day, a figure who is the epitome of beauty. If she thinks Eileen is beautiful, then Eileen must be so. Despite her conscious disdain for Doris Day-like figures, Eileen clearly looks to them for self-justification. Rebecca does not just help Eileen come to terms with her body, but also herself, since Eileen's singular focus in life is on her body, associating her being and personality with her body.

Eileen's turbulent state of mind is reflected in the manner she reacts to the connection between Rebecca and Leonard Polk. After his mother's visit, during which he gives of an appearance of amused indifference, Leonard is confronted by Rebecca, who bears witness to the entire exchange between mother and son. Rebecca speaks to him, drawing an emotional reaction from him, which prompts her to touch him on the shoulder and on the knee to comfort him. The physical contact inflames Eileen, who sees it as a betrayal and a detraction from the earlier affection shown to her by Rebecca. Disturbed and feeling alone, Eileen immediately withdraws into fantasy again, wondering if both of them are having an affair and if Leonard is caressing Rebecca with his knuckles with the tattoo of the word "Love." She tries to observe Rebecca's note taking during the mother's visit but cannot understand the words that she is writing. Her frustration builds up due to her inability to understand Rebecca's behavior or her



inability to comprehend the words she is writing in relation to Leonard. Yet, she is comforted when Rebecca touches her shoulder and asks her out for drinks. The physical contact Rebecca employed with Leonard works with Eileen as well, who immediately dispels any notions of betrayal at the instant of contact and reasserts her idealization of Rebecca.

The author uses the drinking at O'Hara's to deconstruct both Rebecca and Eileen. Rebecca is drinking martinis while Eileen simply asks for beer, eliciting a strange response from Rebecca, who claims it to be neat. Eileen wonders about her background and comes to the conclusion that she must be from an affluent family, mostly because of the cocktails and the way Rebecca speaks. Rebecca further endears herself to Eileen by focusing her attention on her instead of the men who are circling like hawks, ready to do anything for the beautiful Rebecca. There is a moment when Rebecca and Eileen switch names, and this highlights the emotional transformation Eileen is experiencing through Rebecca. Adopting the name Rebecca, Eileen is able to dance and move freely, engaging with the men without reservation. She is ecstatic and, even after Rebecca leaves, is able to go back to the bar and continue drinking, even if she does not remember it in the morning. Rebecca asserts her independence throughout her time there, batting off the attentions of Sandy and the other men, while also insisting to pay for her's and Eileen's drinks. She wields a power over the men because of her looks that Eileen is not able to do. With the name Rebecca, Eileen is able to feel a drop of that confidence that someone like Rebecca might feel, and while it provides her with some fun, it lands her in trouble the next day when she is in her car having lost her keys and purse.

There is a mention of Oedipus in relation to the boys of the facility, especially when their mothers come to visit. Eileen judges Polk's mother's body as if she were assessing it if she were suitable for an Oedipal relation. Later, when talking about O'Hara's, Eileen mentions an incident where her father, while drunk, attempted to reach for her breast, mistaking her for Joanie. The prevalence of corrupted parental relations ties into the deconstruction of the New England town. The constant snow acts as a blanket cover, with discrepancies happening underneath the surface and not openly acknowledged by people.

## Discussion Question 1

While Rebecca is the one who interrupts the meeting between Leonard Polk and his mother, is Eileen engaging in voyeurism in that scene as well?

## Discussion Question 2

Eileen provides a hint of distaste for Sandy Brogan, the bartender. In what way does he resemble her father, the only man she actually interacts with?



## Discussion Question 3

What does Rebecca's choice of clothing say about her in light of her rebelliousness?  
What about her choice of cigarettes?

## Vocabulary

angora, hussy, proselytized, vitriol, fuchsia, gregariousness, modulated



# Wednesday

## Summary

Eileen sees her father sleeping through the kitchen window with shoes on his feet, a clear sign that he extricated the keys from the car. Worried about what he might have done, since he has a history of disruptive behavior whenever he has access to his shoes, Eileen wonders what is the point of preventing him since he would never receive more than a slap on the wrist from the police. She tries to break in through the cellar door with no luck, wondering if she slitting her wrists by breaking a window might draw her father's attention. Returning to the front of the house, Eileen sees her father missing and tries to call out for him, wary of the neighbors, who generally do kind things such as keep up the grass but keep a distance from the Dunlops. She realizes that the windows of the car were up and that her father had saved her by taking the keys out, even if it was inadvertent since he wanted his shoes.

Finally managing to get in through an unlocked room in the living room, Eileen is confronted by her father who chides her for irresponsible behavior, telling her she cannot receive the car keys until she reads *Oliver Twist* from cover to cover. He reveals to her that she is wearing the same dress her mother did for his father's funeral, and belligerently asks to know the name of the man she was with, not believing Eileen she says she was with a female friend from work. Relenting by telling him that she was with a man named Leonard, she retrieves the keys and goes to O'Hara's for a bottle of gin. She is given one by Sandy, has a drink with him before he tries to caress her, which leads Eileen to think that he might have tried to kiss her the night before. After cleaning some of the vomit, and transmitting some of the smell to her coat, Eileen is confronted by the police officer Bucky Brown, someone she went to grade school with, and told that her father's gun, a Smith & Wesson Model 10, has to be transferred to her because he has been pointing it at children walking by to school. Driving to work with the gun, she feels its power and is comforted by it.

Her head throbbing from a hangover, Eileen barely gets any work done and her only solace the weight of the gun in her purse, which she takes into Moorehead with her. While in the bathroom, Eileen is invited by Rebecca for drinks on Christmas Eve at her apartment. Eileen writes down her number on Rebecca's arm and rejoices in the knowledge of her friendship with Rebecca. For her lunch break, she leaves the building for milk and cheese crackers, thinking about the positive direction her life has taken and feeling one again the power of the gun. A new prisoner arrives at the facility, convicted of infanticide, and Eileen rejoices in the chance to do the requisite work for his admission, too happy to feel any sympathy for him as he sits and cries. She tries to fantasize about Randy but comes up short, realizing she must have declared her love for him before Rebecca's arrival.

Driving home with the gun in her purse, Eileen wonders about her father, thinking she could use the gun to end his life and put him out of his misery. She mentions her



mother's pills as an alternative to the gun, pills for pain management that were prescribed to her mother and were taken by her as well, since they helped her deal with her mother's decaying health. Once home, Eileen finds the kitchen clean and her father missing from his usual chair. He is found to be sleeping upstairs in her mother's bedroom. Eileen thinks about taking her mother's pills then but decides against it, instead taking a bottle of gin up to the attic. Thinking about the reassurance that she feels from the gun underneath her pillow, Eileen thinks about her house and how clear images of events over the years elude her. Reading through some pornographic magazines, she eventually falls asleep.

## Analysis

The chapter records Eileen's transformation from a vulnerable little woman at the mercy of her father's cruelty to a someone with power. The device used to convey this is Mr. Dunlop's gun, a Smith & Wesson Model 10, something that he carried with him throughout Eileen's childhood and adult life. It left a mark on her and she eventually comes to associate it with her father as a person. He always keeps it with him, drawing from the authority it provides even after he loses the privilege of his car and shoes. Throughout the novel, Eileen complains of the lack of enforcement by the police in regards to her father, how they always laugh off his dangerous antics and tacitly blame her for letting him loose. It is an almost ritualistic moment when the gun is transferred to Eileen, an official authority figure presiding over the transaction. Her father seems defeated while Eileen herself feels emboldened, carrying the gun in her purse and eventually taking it with her to work, drawing on its power to feel comfort and confidence in herself. While Rebecca might have instigated Eileen recognizing her self-worth, the gun further solidifies it.

While Eileen begins to account for some measure of personal power, her father begins to face a reversal of fortunes. As the chapter opens and Eileen comes to realize the predicament she is in, her father derives authority from his possession of the car keys and his shoes, something that allows him to control Eileen's movements to an extent. While the possibility exists that he saved Eileen's life, it is just as possible that he did so only to gain access to the key and his shoes, which would allow him to assert his control over her again. While she is cold and vulnerable outside, his behavior is teasing, showing another facet of his cruelty. The choice of forcing her to read *Oliver Twist* is interesting, as he seems to be deliberately drawing a comparison between the two, him sitting at the top of the stairs while she is at the bottom, desperately playing to his compassion so he would give her the keys. It is not until after he extracts the information he wants that she is able to go on her way.

However, when Eileen makes her way back to the house from the car, the arrival of Bucky Brown spells the end of Eileen's father's power trip. While he has been unkind throughout the novel, this final surge is a sign that things are coming to an end for him. Once the gun is taken from him, he appears subdued while Eileen gets ready for work. The biggest sign of his transformation is when Eileen finds him sleeping in his dead



wife's bed instead of his chair in the kitchen. With the gun no longer providing him with his power, he retreats into himself as Eileen begins to take control.

Physical intimacy is persistent through the chapter. Eileen's relationship with the gun is both literal and figurative, as she not only draws personal comfort from the idea of the gun, but also its physical weight in her hand and in her purse. Later, while in the bathroom at work, Rebecca shares with Eileen that she also does not like to shower, a fact that elates Eileen. Furthermore, Rebecca asks for Eileen to write her phone number on her arm, a physical gesture that solidifies their friendship in Eileen's mind, especially now that she has been invited for drinks on Christmas Eve to Rebecca's apartment.

## Discussion Question 1

Who has a more direct influence on Eileen's emboldening: Rebecca or the Smith & Wesson?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Eileen using Leonard Polk's name as an excuse in front of her father?

## Discussion Question 3

Does the gun change Eileen's behavior in any negative way? If so, is she emulating her father when he had the gun?

## Vocabulary

indiscretions, self-abasement, appease, extricate, vexed, voraciously, callous, quandary



# Christmas Eve

## Summary

The older Eileen talks about the state of her family while her mother was alive. Her mother was not someone who invested too much time in cooking food or nourishing her family. Family meals were barely palatable, even on holidays, while the alcohol flowed freely. Eileen was involved in family activities such as creating fun cocktails, events where even her Aunt Ruth would come. After her mother's death, Eileen and her father tacitly agree to discontinue any holiday festivities.

Waking up in the morning, Eileen lays in bed and considers everything that is transpiring, thinking about the money she has, \$647, which she thinks she might use to run away with Rebecca, with her father's gun. After putting on a grey pantsuit, her father yells at her and forces her to drive him to Lardner's. Throughout the entire drive to and back from Lardner's, he is paranoid while Eileen has fun seeing him vulnerable, wondering if the loss of his gun has set him off. Eileen remembers an incident during her childhood where her father physically poked her, commenting on her lack of figure. Her mother intervened and said she was too old to be touched in that manner.

Having fallen asleep, Eileen is awoken by her father's yelling, telling her she has a phone call. Rebecca is her normally joyous self and gives her address to Eileen, which she realizes is in the wrong side of town. While driving, Eileen sees a Nativity scene where the figure of Mary's face is vandalized with red lipstick. Seeing the baby Jesus wrapped in a golden cloth, she takes the cloth and wraps her wine with it. She is surprised when she gets to Rebecca's neighborhood, as the run down houses do not coincide with the image of a wealthy, cultured, Rebecca that she has in her head. When she arrives at the house, Rebecca is out of sorts and the house is a mess, with corny love songs playing in the back. Their interactions are awkward and Eileen notices that Rebecca is not in her element. Slowly Eileen begins to tire of her, especially after Rebecca keeps bringing up Moorehead and the boys' innocence.

When Eileen tries to leave, Rebecca holds her back and tells her that she tried to confront Rita Polk earlier, because Leonard had told her that he was being raped by his father. Mrs. Polk denies any knowledge even though she gave Leonard enemas consistently. When Mrs. Polk keeps denying it, Rebecca attacks her and locks her in the basement, where she is now. Desperate, Rebecca implores Eileen for help, which she agrees to reluctantly. She covers her face and takes her gun out, using it to intimidate Mrs. Polk. After taking control of the situation, Rita Polk agrees to a confession and Rebecca leaves to get paper. While she is gone, Polk confirms her son's rape but justifies it by saying that during the time it was happening, her husband was finally finding her attractive again and that they were making love. Her self-image was being restored after years of marital neglect and she continued with the charade at the expense of her son.





Once Rebecca is back, Polk refuses to write down the confession. Rebecca is upset and takes the gun from Eileen and drops it, which results in a misfire that gives Polk a flesh wound. While she is in hysterics, Rebecca takes the tranquilizers in Eileen's purse, her mother's pills, and forces them down Polk's throat. Eileen comes up with a plan where she will drive Polk to her father's house, shoot her, and leave the gun in her father's hands. Rebecca reluctantly agrees to the plan and Eileen drives away with Polk, yelling out a plan of escape to Rebecca before she does, asking her to meet her by her house.

## Analysis

The background Eileen provides early in the chapter gives insight into the state of the family and provides some explanation of her character. Her mother never invested in food and nutrition, providing bare bone meals, which explains the kind of food that Eileen eats. The family's holiday activities provide some context for her father's overt alcoholism, something that Eileen does not ever acknowledge herself but which she engages in as well. Instead of mistletoe or other holiday games, Eileen spent her Christmases inventing cocktails, which were a priority. It was the one time of year that her Aunt Ruth would join them as well, drinking gin martinis. It was only under the cover of alcohol that the family could pretend to enjoy the holidays. Eileen's childhood does not lead her to have high expectations for holidays as an adult, which is why Eileen is excited to be a part of something fun and exciting with Rebecca.

The mental deterioration of Mr. Dunlop continues in this chapter, as does Eileen's bravado. While driving to Lardner's, Mr. Dunlop's behavior is edgy and he is constantly on the lookout for the hoodlums that seem to be after him all the time. Eileen's reaction to all this is met with derisive amusement, as she casually indulges him while not letting his behavior and mildly abusive comments dampen her holiday spirit. Eileen acknowledges that the loss of his gun might have been the last straw for him, and now he does not seem to have any sense of his bearings. When they arrive back at home, he desperately tries to get back into the house, clawing like an animal while Eileen laughs at his behavior. The reversal of power is complete, as Eileen finally has power over him while he has become completely dependent on her but is losing more of his mental faculties.

There is another mention of Eileen's father as a sexual predator, as she mentions an incident during her childhood where he physically poked and prodded her, commenting on her figure while her mother interjects and says that she is too old for him to touch her like that. This ties into an incident mentioned earlier where Eileen talks about driving her father from a hospital and reached over to touch her breast, thinking she was Joanie. This would perhaps might explain her father's differing behaviors with his daughters. The implication is that Joanie has always been the target of his sexual abuse, which is why he treats her better. Eileen does not have the body that he would find attractive. This revelation further informs the relationship between Eileen and Leonard Polk as foils. Leonard is who Eileen would have become if she had been the direct recipient of her father's sexual abuse. However, Joanie is never shown to harbor any resentment



towards her father but that might be because the reader only receives Eileen's perspective, who mentions that her father always gives Joanie money and she in turn always comes to visit him. Yet, it is Eileen who lives with her father, not Joanie. Joanie's revenge against her father, as a woman, might have simply been to leave and not be responsible for him, like Eileen eventually does.

Religion is used as power throughout the novel and it plays a part in this chapter as well, albeit as a conduit for the transfer of power to Eileen. Driving to Rebecca's, Eileen encounters a Nativity scene where the figure of Mary is vandalized with red lipstick, a motif throughout the novel. Red lipstick is used constantly by Eileen as a means of improving her self-image. While religion is used to assert power, here the lipstick is used to subvert the power of religious scenes, specifically the Nativity scene that was used to control the boys at Moorehead during the Christmas pageant. Eileen finds the image of Mary with lipstick amusing, and in her elated humor takes the golden cloth wrapping baby Jesus to wrap her own wine, completing the rebirth that she has experienced.

The basement is a pivotal location throughout the novel and plays an important part in this chapter as well. The final confrontation between Eileen, Rebecca, and Rita Polk occurs within the confines of the Polk basement. For Eileen, basements represent secrets of her mother's that are inaccessible to her as a child and as an adult. The basement is also a place of release, somewhere she can expunge physical and mental tension without the pressures of the outside world bearing down on her. Here, the relationship between Eileen and Leonard plays a factor, as the mother figure's secrets are key to the tension created by the author. Rita Polk, under the threat of Eileen's newfound power, caves in and divulges her dirty secret, giving details regarding Leonard's constant rape at the hand of his father. There is a final catharsis but one that Eileen does not have access to. While Leonard was not there to hear his mother's confession, he already murdered his father in an act of releasing his emotions. Eileen is in the basement when Rita Polk confesses but she will never be able to hear her mother's confession, whose secrets will stay buried in the basement of their family home.

As events unfold around her, Eileen finally begins to leave her world of delusions and fantasies behind, getting a stronger grasp on reality. She finally comes to terms with her own power as an individual, as a woman. Her father is no longer able to hurt her through his abuse, instead becoming even more reliant on her. When Eileen gets to Rebecca's house, she is able to pierce through the facade the latter is creating and recognize the tension that permeates the air. When events begin to spiral out of control, it is Eileen, not the charming Rebecca, who displays an unflappable side to her and takes control. Eileen is the one able to control Rita Polk and then deal with the situation after she is shot. While she does not explicitly say it, Eileen's emotional transformation can lead to the conclusion that she is aware Rebecca will not be accompanying her at the end. She is much more realistic and her last words, yelling out a plan of escape to Rebecca, are just on a whim without any real conviction behind them.



## Discussion Question 1

In what ways is Eileen similar to her mother, whom she describes in the beginning of the chapter "Christmas Eve"? How are the two women different?

## Discussion Question 2

Eileen notices that Rebecca's house, which is actually Polk's, does not fit the image of the affluent, cultured individual she knows Rebecca to be. Are there instances through the earlier chapters where Rebecca contradicts her cultured background?

## Discussion Question 3

What are some of the parallels between the Polk and Dunlop families?

## Vocabulary

maraschino, provenance, sumptuous, dowdy, liturgy, restitution



# The End

## Summary

Eileen does not leave with any family mementos, thinking about the shifting memories of her house she still has. She remembers the day of her mother's death, her father's reaction and the final state of her mother's frail body. Eileen thinks a bit more about her own body, as she deliberately malnourished it over the years to attain the frail body that her mother was proud of. After leaving X-ville, she plans to pay better attention to her health and gain some weight. For her, Rebecca was the hope to become a better person and accomplish something in life. Now, as an older woman, Eileen spends her days by herself and finds pleasure in life, which is sharp contrast from her first day in New York where she was alone and miserable.

Once she gets home from the Polks', Eileen finds her father drunk. He is delirious, talking about his hoodlums, so she takes him to her mother's bedroom and puts him to sleep, kissing his hand before she goes. While washing her hands in the bathroom, she notices that she looks like a completely different person. Instead of crying about her departure, she is calm and leaves without saying goodbye, thinking about her father who she is leaving behind, as he has finally lost his mind. Eileen wonders the state of her family, saying that they received bad luck since they were not bad people, considering that more violence might have saved their family.

Driving through X-ville, Eileen envisions what would happen if Rita Polk switched places with Rebecca and her father met her. No one ever comes looking for Eileen, as she eventually changes her name and even gets married, which allows her to further change her identity. Having met Rebecca, Eileen is able to leave X-ville without regrets, since she is able to come to terms with herself. Had she not met Rebecca, she would have continued to be the self-loathing girl she was before Rebecca's arrival. As she drives through the town one last time, Eileen is able to experience the tranquility that the town is trying to convey to her, something she longs for later in life. She is driving with Rita Polk, who is still unconscious. She leaves Polk in the car with enough gas to leave the car running for a few hours, and then hitchhikes to New York City, crying in a car while a man tries to comfort her, which is her final goodbye as she leaves her hometown.

## Analysis

The final chapter is an epilogue and serves to wrap up the events of the novel, especially in light of Eileen's rapid growth in the previous chapter. Elder Eileen's presence is more profound in this chapter, as she comes into the narrative to conclude the story of the 24-year-old Eileen. There is a clearer image of the person she has become in the present, 50 years after the fact. Having spent years trying to find love among other people, with a long list of lovers, she is able to find comfort in herself and



enjoy the vitality of life through her own being. Yet, she still reminisces about her last days in X-ville in an appreciative tone, as the day marks the transformation in her life.

Eileen's behavior through her final hour in X-ville is calm and collected. Gone is the girl who could be excited by the prospect of drinks at a bar. She is transformed significantly, which is visible in how she deals with events in the aftermath of the previous chapter's events. She calmly drives to her house, puts her father in bed and drives the still-injured Rita Polk out of the city. The change in temperament is reflected in the way she treats her father and Rita Polk. Eileen recognizes the situation she is leaving her father in, as he lost his mind and is now losing his daughter. She is not spiteful but quietly somber, kissing his hand before she leaves him. Her fantasies about his reaction after her departure are no longer dramatic, instead she envisions him defeated and alone as opposed to cruel. She saves Rita Polk's life as well, not carrying any feelings of anger towards her, essentially saving her life. There is a quiet acceptance to the end of her relationship with Rebecca as well, as she acknowledges her friend is not coming with her, not harboring any hard feelings.

There is a sense of gratitude towards Rebecca and the events she helped instigate preceding Eileen's eventual departure. Had Rebecca not arrived, Eileen acknowledges she might have left as the same person she was before, insecure and self-loathing. Instead, she is transformed into a confident woman who is resolute, something she is thankful for. Finally, she feels in tune with the peace of X-ville, the typical New England town, enjoying the sunshine as it falls over the quiet town. Despite her stoicism, Eileen drops her guard and lets out tears as she drives away from X-ville and towards New York City.

## Discussion Question 1

Eileen thinks that her family did not consist of bad people but that they were just struck with bad luck. Is she right?

## Discussion Question 2

Would the old Eileen, insecure and self-loathing, have saved Rita Polk?

## Discussion Question 3

How would you describe Eileen's feelings towards X-ville as she finally leaves her hometown?

## Vocabulary

homely, ramshackle, decrepit, certitude, convoluted, reverent



# Characters

## Eileen Dunlop

Twenty-four years old at the start of the novel, Eileen Dunlop is a quiet, self-absorbed girl who is deliberately malnourished and living with her alcoholic father in the quiet town of X-ville, a generic New England town. She spends the majority of her time within the confines of her own mind, alternating between self-loathing, being ashamed of her body, and engaging in fantasies of either escaping X-ville or falling into a relationship with Randy, a corrections officer who works at Moorehead. For the most part, Eileen has nothing but contempt for anyone she encounters during her days in X-ville but that mostly stems from her being isolated and no one making an effort to reach out to her. She has an older sister, Joanie, who she avoids, and her mother has passed away, while her father's sister, Ruth, does not engage with her.

Obsessed with her body, Eileen spends a lot of time talking about her disgust for her physical features. She is desperate to keep herself thin and her diet of almost nothing plays a part in it. She will eat almonds and some slices of bread here and there, occasionally chewing chocolates but always spitting them out. Like her father, she is an alcoholic, drinking a lot of sweet vermouth to not only keep her mouth's smell bearable, but also as a means of calming down. Ashamed of her body but unwilling to do anything to change it, Eileen always wears her dead mother's clothes, which are larger than her frame but do a good job of deflecting attention from her, allowing her to blend into the background where no one will see her.

Eileen undergoes a personality change upon the arrival of Rebecca Saint John, who is the first female to reach out to her as a person. Rebecca supersedes Randy and becomes a source of hope for Eileen, someone who will help her become a more worldly person and also be her most intimate friend. With Rebecca, Eileen feels more comfortable revealing her inner perversity, as Rebecca portrays herself as a rebellious woman. Eileen admires her, and after her arrival, changes her behavior to appear more appealing to her new friend.

The friendship with Rebecca allows Eileen to gather self-confidence, which she uses to deflect her father's abuse and take control of a volatile situation at the Polk house. Standing in front of a mirror, Eileen realizes she is no longer the girl she was earlier in the week; she is now strong and capable of handling stressful situations, whereas prior to the events of the novel, her coping mechanism was either alcohol or receding into fantasy.

While Eileen talks constantly about her death mask, which allows her to deflect attention from the outside world, she is sensitive on the inside, desperate for intimacy and love. While her father is abusive and a raging alcoholic, she longs for his love, wondering how he will react when he discovers that she has run away. Her sister Joanie was always preferred growing up and Eileen was put on the back burner, never able to



develop an intimate relationship, which is why the prospect of being friends with someone like Rebecca elates her, and she does everything in her power to ensure the promotion of their friendship.

Along with 24-year-old Eileen that the novel centers on, Eileen also narrates the novel from a perspective of 50 years later. From the future, Eileen is able to parse through her younger self's thoughts and emotions, providing commentary from the vantage of someone who is older and mature. She interjects throughout the novel, providing clarification and context, such as assuring the reader that the novel is not about a love story with Randy despite the constant fixation on him initially.

## Rebecca Saint John

Harvard educated, Rebecca Saint John is hired as the new director of education at Moorehead, making her first appearance on Monday. Eileen compares her physically to Doris Day, in that she is someone who is the epitome of a beautiful woman during the time period that the novel takes place, 1964. While she is cold and distant from the rest of the staff at the facility, she instantly forms a bond with Eileen, who is ecstatic to have her as a friend.

Rebecca is the catalyst by which Eileen undergoes her transformation as a person. She comments positively on Eileen's body, allowing Eileen to become more assertive and self-assured. Rebecca uses physical contact throughout her time in the novel to extend intimacy with people, doing it first with Leonard Polk in the visiting room and then with Eileen, which allows her to indirectly calm Eileen's fears. Rebecca has a confident, educated demeanor that reveals her affluent background, which Eileen takes to be either Cambridge or Massachusetts. Rebecca dresses very elegantly and drinks martinis, which adds to the allure of sophistication that Eileen prescribes to her.

Despite her charm, Rebecca is manipulative in a very discreet manner. She lowers Eileen's guard by complimenting her small body and trying to come off as someone who does not care for social conventions, yet she embraces them in her dress. She manages to gain access to Leonard Polk's secret by physically touching him, which she also does to Eileen. But her appearance as a resolute and confident woman is shattered when Eileen discovers her at Rita Polk's house, where she is out of her wits and has to rely on Eileen's newfound assurance and confidence to help her out of the situation.

## Mr. Dunlop

Eileen's father, he is a retired police officer and an alcoholic who is beset upon at most times by delusions of being attacked hoodlums. He is abusive towards Eileen at all times, commenting on her lack of social life and always telling her she will amount to nothing, despite her being his primary means of sport. His relationship with his wife was strained and he loves his older daughter Joanie, never passing on an opportunity to rub that in Eileen's face.



Gin is his favorite drink and he always sends Eileen out to Lardner's to purchase large quantities of liquor for him. Like Eileen, he does not eat healthy meals and relies primarily on alcohol to get him through the day, while occasionally engaging in snacks as a means of sustenance. He derives a lot of his power from his gun, which he carries with him at all times and the loss of which prods him into complete insanity. The police do not treat his behavior seriously and his punishment never amounts to anything more than a slap on the wrist.

There are also hints throughout the novel of him having a sexual relation of sorts with Joanie, his older daughter. While drunk, he confuses Eileen with Joanie and tries to grab her breast, while also prodding Eileen's body and expressing disappointment with it, which elicits a response from his wife that Eileen is too old for him to treat like that, suggesting that he began with Joanie when she was younger.

## Randy

The primary source of Eileen's fascination in the early portion of the novel, Randy is a corrections officer at the Moorehead. Eileen spends her days fantasizing about him, eventually realizing that her attraction to him is purely because of his physical attributes. He never speaks to Eileen and eventually recedes into the background when Rebecca comes into the picture.

## Joanie

Eileen's sister Joanie, who is four years older than Eileen, is the favorite child for her father. Eileen describes her as someone who is very self-assured and comfortable in her body, even vulgar to a point, as she describes to Eileen her boyfriend performing oral sex on her. Her relationship with Eileen is non-existent, as she always teased her sister growing up and did not make an effort to be intimate. As a result, Eileen does her best to avoid Joanie when she comes to visit.

There are also hints that Joanie's father had a sexual relation with her, as he confused Eileen for her once, reaching for Eileen's breast while drunk. Her mother's comment that Eileen is too old to be touched sexually by her father also hints to Joanie being an object of his sexual perversion from a young age.

## Leonard Polk

An inmate at Moorehead, Leonard serves as a foil to Eileen. He is someone who Eileen might have turned into had she been the recipient of her father's sexual advances. His father is a police officer who raped him constantly until Leonard murdered him. Leonard's mother was aware of the situation between her husband and son, but she did not intervene.





Leonard is punished by the warden for touching himself, which Eileen witnesses him doing while he is locked in a solitary meat locker. During his first appearance, he mockingly smiles when visited by his mother but breaks down his armor when confronted by Rebecca, eventually becoming the cause of her crusade.

## **Mrs. Stephens**

A woman who works at Moorehead in the same office as Eileen, Mrs. Stephens is a middle-aged woman who is regarded with derision by Eileen. She is careless and displays little enthusiasm for her job, occasionally directing caustic remarks towards Eileen. At one point, Eileen accidentally calls her "mom," which does not provoke her emotionally, and Eileen remembers her not extending any sympathy after her mother's death.

## **Rita Polk**

Rita Polk is Leonard Polk's mother. She is aware of her son's sexual abuse by her husband but remains quiet until forced to confess at gunpoint by Eileen. Physically unattractive, her primary defense is that her husband began to find her more attractive once he started raping Leonard, and she never envisioned her son acting the way he did since he was always a quiet boy and never wanted to upset anyone. Rita is accidentally shot by Rebecca, and while Eileen initially plans to kill her and blame her death on her father, she is spared and left in Eileen's Dodge by the road.

## **Warden**

As the warden at Moorehead, he is abusive towards the boys while parading a religious streak that he enforces in the facility. He punishes the boys for indulging in self-pleasure and Eileen thinks that he is a homosexual since he spansks boys in his office behind closed doors.

## **Sandy Brogan**

The bartender at O'Hara's, Sandy is regarded with contempt with Eileen, since he enabled her father's alcoholism while he was still on the force. He tries to engage Rebecca's attention when she and Eileen are there. He also later tries to sexually advance on Eileen, possibly doing so when she was drunk.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Dodge

The car is representative of the broken condition of the Dunlop family, as it is barely chugging along, while also serving as a symbol of hope for Eileen. Originally Eileen's father's car, she inherits it after his license is taken away while he is on a drunken bender. It has a broken exhaust, which leads to the car filling up with carbon monoxide unless the windows are open.

Eileen plans to make her getaway with the Dodge despite its failure to get her far. At the end of the novel, she ends up leaving it behind along with her father. The last vestiges of Eileen in X-ville are encapsulated in the Dodge, with her father's shoes still locked in the trunk and a bleeding Rita Polk inside.

## Red Lipstick

Red lipstick is part of Eileen's death mask, her attempt to appear normal. Eileen always wears red lipstick throughout the novel, as it allows her to provide herself with a sense of comfort. The names of the lipstick reflect her change in personality, as she goes from Irreparable Red to Passionate Lover on Monday, the day Rebecca arrives. Eileen's father constantly chastises her for her lipstick, which ties into his general disdain for her physical figure.

## Gin

The choice of drink for Mr. Dunlop, gin represents the instability and alcoholism that is rampant through the Dunlop family. Eileen mentions that her Aunt Ruth used to drink gin martinis during the holidays, which points it to being a family drink. It is often the only source of interaction between father and daughter, as he always forces her to go buy large quantities of gin for her.

## Basements

Basements represent dark secrets throughout the novel, as it is the basement where Eileen's mother spent a majority of her time, and it is a basement where Rita Polk is confronted about her son's rape. Basements are also a place of catharsis, since Eileen uses her basement as a place of releasing physical tension and Rita Polk confesses in her own basement.



## Smith and Wesson Model 10

Mr. Dunlop's gun represents power and intimidation, and it (and all it represents) is eventually transferred from father to daughter. Mr. Dunlop kept the gun his entire life to assert his power over his family, while also using the sense of power to be cruel to his family. When the gun is transferred to Eileen, her father loses his last remnants of sanity while she gains self-confidence that allows her to change into a different person and eventually leave X-ville and her father's house.

## Doris Day

The star of a movie Eileen watches, Doris Day is the epitome of beauty in the novel. Eileen finds her repulsive mostly because she appears as someone who is comfortable in her own body. Doris Day is eventually compared to Rebecca, as Eileen is jealous of both of them for their good looks and the assurance they have in their own skin.

## Clothes

Clothes serve to show off whatever a person chooses to reveal about their personality, part of an individual's death mask. Eileen wears her mother's large clothes in order to conceal her small body and portray to the world that she does not care for her own appearance. Her father barely wears clothes, baring his vulnerability to the world. Rebecca dresses in a very affluent manner, a part of her personality that she is trying to convey, which impresses Eileen.

## Snow

Snow is the blanket that envelopes X-ville and every other New England town like it. The snow gives off an image of tranquility and also hides small-town depravity underneath it, as sexual abuse happens in families and young boys are violently abused in the correctional facility. The snow is similar to a death mask, as it gives off a sense of normalcy while there is turbulence underneath.

## The Body

The physical state of a person's body helps inform their self-image, as evidenced primarily in Eileen's constant disgust aimed at her physical features. Rebecca's and Doris Day's ideal bodies allow them to come off as confident and provide a sense of stability to the world. Eileen's body does not change but her feelings regarding it change when Rebecca comments on it positively, and similarly, Rita Polk excuses her husband raping her son by saying that his renewed attention to her aging body made her feel better.

## Books

In a society like X-ville that is so closed, and where normalcy is enforced constantly and there are so many taboo subjects, books are a window into the outside world and any possible perversity that might be contained in it. The library books that Eileen checks out, books about morose objects, allow her to indulge in her own twisted sense of life. Her National Geographic magazines are a portal into the world outside X-ville, as she is able to read about distant societies and different people that she will never meet in X-ville.



# Settings

## X-Ville

The tranquil New England town, it is the place where Eileen grows up and where she undergoes her transformation. It is a generic New England town that has a festive Christmas tradition, with boys who clean driveways and a correctional facility that uses religion to cure sin from young boys.

## Moorehead

The boys correctional facility, Moorehead is where Eileen is employed in her early twenties and is where she first meets Rebecca. It is also where Randy works, the main object of Eileen's fantasies pre-transformation. There is a religious streak to the facility enforced by the warden, who has carte blanche to be verbally and physically abusive to the inhabitants.

## Lardner's

Lardner's is the liquor store where Eileen purchase her father's alcohol. Her visits there are so frequent that she has the layout of the store memorized, knowing exactly where the gin is located.

## New York City

Some distance away, New York City is a fixation in Eileen's head, as she dreams of eventually running away there to start a new life. Older Eileen mentions that when she eventually got there, she was greeted by seediness and some of her hopes in life were dashed. It is also where Eileen first gets married and changes her name.

## O'Hara's

The only bar in X-ville, O'Hara's is where Eileen's father developed his alcoholism. It is also where Eileen and Rebecca spend their first night out together as friends.

## Dunlop Home

This is the house where Eileen grew up, the site of her being abused and neglected by her father. The house is never cleaned and there is garbage everywhere, including the windows being mired with dirt. Her father spends the majority of his time in the kitchen

while Eileen makes sure to stay away from him, staying in either the attic or the basement.

## **Polk Home**

The Polk home is the place of Eileen's final transformation, where she is able to see through Rebecca's false stoic exterior, and where Rita Polk confesses to her crime of ignoring her son's abuse. The house furthers the connection between Leonard and Eileen as foils, as the inside is in shambles, just like the Dunlop home, and the basement serves as a place of catharsis.



# Themes and Motifs

## Religion as Power

Throughout the novel, religion is used as a tool to enforce societal conventions and prop up an image of normalcy in a small New England town such as X-ville. Eileen's father uses religion to discriminate against his neighbors, claiming that they are duplicitous because they are Lutheran while he is Catholic. Despite his alcoholism, Mr. Dunlop makes sure to attend mass every Sunday, keeping up appearances in a town where people know of his behavior but never confront him about it. He is allowed to rage against his daughter and stew in his own depravity as long as he keeps up the appearance of going to church every Sunday for Mass. Eileen's Aunt Ruth uses her religious nature as a means of self-righteousness any time she enters the Dunlop home, judging Eileen for her uncleanliness.

Religion is used at Moorehead to establish control over the inmates, who are forced to engage in Christmas festivities and play in an annual pageant, where they act out a Nativity play. The warden uses religion to justify his cruel behavior to the boys, giving a speech on sin after the pageant, while also using it as a basis to deprive the boys of control over their own bodies, as they are not allowed to touch themselves. An attempt is made to give the boys a religious birth by forcing them to act in a nativity play, where they appear clumsy and out of sorts. But the play is an annual ritual and points to the facility's dedication to use religion as a means of cure.

While religion is used as a suppressant, the power it holds can also be used to grant a sense of freedom. When Eileen is driving to Rebecca's house, she sees a defiled nativity scene where Mary's face has red lipstick on it. The image amuses and emboldens her, and she takes the golden cloth wrapping the baby Jesus to wrap her bottle of wine. Even amongst the holiness and religious sobriety that pervades X-ville, Eileen is able to derive a sense of power when religion is played with.

## Body Image As a Means of Control

The issue of body image is used by the author to provide commentary on societal conventions and the effect a rigid sense of body image can have on an individual. Eileen is constantly fixated by her own body and it is a source of shame for her. Her entire life, her father has told her that her body was not up to standards, at one point even physically prodding her to make his point. He considers her a disappointment in terms of how her body developed over the years, and it is something that she becomes obsessed with. Eileen hates her body but cannot stop thinking about it. She considers herself perverse and is anorexic, always depriving herself of food in order to maintain the thin stature of her body.



Rebecca uses Eileen's body against her as a means of asserting her control over her. While Eileen is unduly harsh on herself in terms of how she judges her body, no one has ever reached out to assure her that her body is okay. Rebecca possesses a socially ideal body, similar to Doris Day, which Eileen despises but admires at the same time. When her body is complimented by someone like Rebecca, Eileen is ecstatic and is able to gain a measure of self-confidence. This also raises Rebecca's stature in Eileen's eyes, and she is willing to go to great lengths to please her new friend, including possibly murdering a person. Eileen is eventually able to break free of the influence that Rebecca has over her, it does not diminish the authority she is able to derive from a simple admiration of Eileen's body.

For Rita Polk, she has no control over her decaying body. She has to contend with her husband's lack of interest in her. When he starts raping his son, Leonard, he begins to have sex with her again, which allows her to gain a sense of comfort in her own body. The state of her body has not changed, but her own perception of it has changed through her husband's increased attention. Indirectly, by having sex with his wife and restoring her confidence in her own body, he is able to prevent her from taking action against him.

## Inviolability of Police Figures

Law enforcement officers throughout the novel are able to exercise their authority without fear of repercussion and do so in the name of bettering society. The institution of the police is also on a different plane from the rest of society, as anyone associated with the police, or in a similar capacity, is able to enjoy the benefit of protection from the institute at all times. This is evident in Mr. Dunlop's treatment by the police department of X-ville. While his alcoholism developed during the latter stages of his career, he is simply pushed into retirement and is able to retain his pension. No matter what he does as a raging alcoholic, he is treated with reverence by the police department, who even send him alcohol.

While he is never directly confronted about his behavior, the police always admonish Eileen for not paying him enough attention. Her father's behavior puts other people's lives in danger, including children, but he is never arrested, nor do any of the neighbors ever complain of his behavior. His past as a police officer allows him to skirt any sort of moral responsibility even as his alcoholism worsens and his delusions begin to solidify.

The corrections officers at Moorehead are also police figures who are able to wield power without any measure of regulation. The warden uses the officers as a conduit for his religious morality being enforced on the boys at the facility. The officers are abusive, verbally and physically, but their behavior is ignored by everyone, including Eileen. Violence is used as a measure of control, such as when Randy uses force to quell unruly behavior at the pageant, and the warden spanking boys in his office. The warden's speech about sin after the Christmas pageant helps illustrate the reason why the facility is able to act the way do with the boys. Their purpose is rooted in religious





morality, and since they possess the power, the boys must be sinners, justifying the officers' behavior towards them.

## Death Mask

Death masks refer to different characters putting on fake personas for the sake of appearing normal to the outside world. Eileen's death mask allows her to hide her insecurities and mask her self-loathing. Her death mask is derived from her appearance, such as the clothes that she wears. Wearing her mother's clothes allows Eileen to appear as someone else and protect her true identity. Wearing red lipstick is another element of Eileen's death mask, since the lipstick provides a cover to the mouth she hates so much and is not part of her personality, pointed out to her constantly by her father.

Rebecca's death mask is rooted in her appearance as a beautiful young woman who hails from an affluent background. Harvard educated, she comes off as sophisticated with her fashionable clothes and her assured manner of speaking. Yet, underneath her mask, she is manipulative and weak, as evidenced by her behavior when it comes to Leonard Polk. She complements Eileen's body to gain her confidence and uses physical contact to deepen their intimacy. However, when confronted with a crisis, her mask slips off and Eileen is able to see her for who she really is. She loses all her confidence and has to rely on Eileen to take control of the situation.

Mr. Dunlop is someone who never wears a mask, highlighting the reason why death masks would be so important in a town such as X-ville. He makes no attempt to hide his alcoholism and the resultant cruelty and perversity. He ignores his personal hygiene and threatens the lives of others. Yet, he is able to carry on without a death mask, mostly due to his position as a former police officer.

## Fantasies

When confronted with a personal crisis, the characters in the novel recede into personal fantasies that allow them to either escape their problems or confirm their view of life. Whenever she feels disturbed or has to face her father's abuse, Eileen begins to fantasize about an escape from New York City, or a fantasy about either Randy or Rebecca. She knows she will never act on her fantasies but they are still a place of comfort for her, allowing her to escape the drudgery of her life in X-ville as she works at Moorehead.

Eileen's father also engages in fantasies, albeit paranoid ones where he is being hunted by hoodlums that he thinks are chasing him from his days as a police officer. The delusions are solidified as his alcoholism worsens and finally reach a breaking point when his gun is taken away from him. The hoodlums that chase him can be construed as his guilt chasing him, as he has been a cruel husband and father his entire life, even sexually abusing his daughter. His hoodlums chase him until he eventually loses his mind at the end of the novel, trying to find comfort in his wife's bed.



# Styles

## Point of View

The novel is written in the first-person point of view, the story being told in past tense through the eyes of Eileen. As the narrator, Eileen tells the tale of the 24-year-old version of herself from 50 years in the future. The time passed has allowed an older Eileen to add clarity to her own story. The older Eileen interjects continuously throughout the novel, pausing the narrative to provide some sort of explanation or justification for the actions of her younger self. The first-person point of view in the past tense gives the reader an in-depth access to the mind of Eileen, her deepest thoughts and darkest secrets. The narrator does not hold back when it comes to revealing thoughts about herself and the people around her.

While the use of the first person point of view gives unlimited access to Eileen's mind, the thoughts of other characters are out of reach. The reader only has access to these other characters through Eileen's descriptions of them or through dialogue, whenever they speak to her.

## Language and Meaning

Set in a generic New England town, the language of the residents mostly reflects the setting. When speaking to each other, the characters use a fairly standard English that reflects a small-town mentality. Rebecca, as an educated individual from Harvard, speaks in a more sophisticated manner, which adds to her persona and charm as an outsider.

The majority of the novel is narrated through Eileen's head and delves into the deepest recesses of her mind. Here, the language becomes more sophisticated, as older Eileen, more mature and with more clarity attained over the years, is able to interject and add in a complexity of thoughts that would be absent if it was younger Eileen narrating. The complexity of thought provides a maturity and depth to the language being used to describe the events transpiring in 1964.

## Structure

The novel consists of nine chapters, each covering one day during a stretch of time when Eileen transforms as a person and is able to leave X-ville. The first chapter is "1964," which is Thursday, as the following day is Friday. Other than the first and last chapters of the novel, each chapter explores the events of the day from start to finish, from when Eileen wakes up in the morning to when she goes to sleep at night.

The first two chapters serve as bookends in terms of their length and their purpose. The first chapter, "1964," serves as a prologue, providing the introduction to Eileen as a

character, the setting, and some of the secondary characters. It is shorter than most of the chapters and only equal in length to the last chapter. "The End," the final chapter, serves as a epilogue, quickly ending the events of the novel, capturing Eileen's thoughts as she finally leaves X-ville. Both the first and last chapter of the novel do not cover the events of an entire day, as "1964," begins abruptly, presumably after the work day has ended for Eileen, while "The End" covers only the morning of the day of Christmas, following Eileen until she leaves the boundaries of X-ville.



## Quotes

I looked like nothing special.  
-- Eileen (chapter 1964)

**Importance:** This is Eileen's first mention of her physical being and points to her low self-esteem that results from the absolute manner in which she loathes her own body.

I tried to look the other way when things got hairy.  
-- Eileen (Friday)

**Importance:** This highlights Eileen's non-confrontational manner, as she takes every opportunity to avoid conflict. She does so with her father all the time, and here she does not interject when the corrections officers' abuse the boys at the facility.

Nobody's going to bother with a face like that one.  
-- Mr. Dunlop (Friday)

**Importance:** Mr. Dunlop's cruelty towards his daughter is reflected here. His disparaging comments about her body are a source of her body image issues that result in her lack of nourishing diet and lack of self-esteem.

He loved only himself and was full of pride and wore his badge like a gold star affixed to his chest by God himself.  
-- Eileen (Saturday)

**Importance:** Here, the intersection between the police and religion is introduced, as Eileen's father derives his cruelty from the power he attained as a police officer, all the while being devoutly Catholic.

The dress was heavy, like the hide of a strange animal.  
-- Eileen (Saturday)

**Importance:** Eileen attempts to wear a party dress that is too big for her, highlighting her difficulty in appearing normal to the outside world, as she only finds comfort in her mother's outdated clothes.

I felt like killing my father but I didn't want him to die.  
-- Eileen (Sunday)

**Importance:** Eileen's feelings towards her father are pointed out here, as she loves him despite his constant cruelty towards her. She is frustrated but still hopes that he can find a way to love her.

I remember conjuring up a new strategy for my getaway.  
-- Eileen (Monday)



**Importance:** Anytime Eileen is bored or confronted with a problem, she falls back into a fantasy, in this case thinking about a way she might escape X-ville and to New York City. Her fantasies are detailed in how she will run away but are never driven by a strong desire to act.

Once the drama on stage had unraveled, the warden reappeared and started a long soliloquy on sin.

-- Eileen (Monday)

**Importance:** Here, the religious aspect of the facility is on display after the boys have been forced to perform in a Christmas pageant. Religion is used as a means of authority and control in the facility by the warden.

See the discoloration? That's coffee and cigarettes. And red wine.

-- Rebecca (Tuesday)

**Importance:** Rebecca's dual nature is evident here, as she tries to intimate herself with Eileen by deriding her own body when it is clear that her features are perfect. This action provides comfort to Eileen, which furthers their relationship.

It meant I could hold the gun again, let the Dodge coast, feel the wind in my hair.

-- Eileen (Wednesday)

**Importance:** The change in Eileen is clear here, as she is able to be more self-assured after Rebecca extends her friendship to her and she is able to get her hands on her father's gun. She is the owner of a new sense of power and self-esteem.

The booze flowed freely over the holidays.

-- Eileen (Christmas Eve)

**Importance:** Eileen is talking about the holidays of her family, as the focus was less on food and more alcohol. This explains the drinking habits of her father, and of Eileen herself.

Was I not worthy of anything better?

-- Eileen (Christmas Eve)

**Importance:** Eileen's insecurities rear their head again when she sees Rebecca physically comforting Leonard Polk. This is before her true transformation has been initiated.

But after he went to bed with Lee, he'd come to me. And it was like a big burden had been lifted. He was relaxed. And it felt good, how he'd hold me.

-- Rita Polk (Christmas Eve)

**Importance:** This is Rita Polk's justification as to why she allowed her son to be raped



despite knowing about it. Her husband's renewed interest in her helped placate concerns about her decaying body.

There was a whole new look in my eyes, my mouth.  
-- Eileen (The End)

**Importance:** After the events at the Polk house, Eileen is fully transformed, changing into a person that she is able to live with. Before, anytime she confronted her own face, she was disgusted, but now she is confident in the change that has overcome her.