

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing Study Guide

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing by Eimear McBride

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Plot Summary

“A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” is a young adult novel by Eimear McBride, which recounts the life of the unnamed narrator and her unnamed brother as he struggles with cancer, and she struggles with psychological, physical, and sexual abuse.

When the novel begins, the narrator’s brother has survived a cancerous brain tumor, and apart from bullying at school due to the scar on his head, the siblings seem to live a relatively normal life. The brother is, by far, valued by the mother over the sister for everything he has been through – but even this doesn’t pose too much of a challenge on the narrator. She mostly deals with the favoritism, even though she is unhappy about it.

Everything changes when the narrator is 13, however. The narrator becomes the victim of sexual abuse as she is raped by her uncle. Rather than speaking out about the crime, she tries to rationalize it. She comes to a place in which she is able to accept the rape as somehow normal rather than to reject the rape as wrong. The narrator then spends the next few years attempting to live normally, but her brother’s deteriorating health and her rocky home life compel her to seek out relief elsewhere.

As a result, the narrator spends much of high school sleeping with as many boys and men as she can, for it gives her a sense of power. When she goes away to college, she continues to sleep with men, and begins a sexual affair with her uncle. This sexual affair with her uncle continues unabated for months, and only stops when the narrator goes home on breaks. What is surprising is that the narrator is the one who initiates many of the sexual encounters – a reversal of power for the narrator.

As the narrator’s brother’s cancer returns, the narrator becomes more and more lost emotionally and mentally, finding relief only in painful sexual encounters – many of which she encourages to the point of violence, where she is slapped and beaten. Eventually, the narrator has had enough, and decides to be better for her brother’s sake. She knows that some good must come out of her brother’s death.

However, the narrator’s uncle refuses to let her go, and continues to sexually molest her. Shortly after her brother dies, the narrator is raped and beaten while out walking. Returning home, the narrator’s mother insults her and tells her she is, in effect, a horrible person – that she is a disgrace. The narrator herself goes out into the night, heartbroken, and commits suicide by drowning.



Part 1

Summary

Part 1, Chapter 1 – The unnamed narrator’s brother suffers from a cancerous brain tumor. Their mother seeks a second operation to attempt to remove the tumor, but this is not possible. Chemotherapy is undertaken, which shrinks the tumor. The family thanks God for the success. The father later leaves the mother with a fifty-pound note, and then leaves the family. All of this is recounted from the time the unnamed narrator is in her mother’s womb.

Part 1, Chapter 2 – The narrator is now two. Her brother is four or five. The narrator hates getting baths and brushing her teeth.

Part 1, Chapter 3 – The narrator is now five. Her brother is seven or eight. The family lives, isolated, in the countryside. The narrator and her brother like to find slugs in the house, and their mother wonders where the slugs are able to get in. When it rains or snows, the house leaks. While the narrator frequently gets in trouble for the slightest things, her brother can get away with anything. Her brother, the narrator explains, has turned their mother’s good eyes blind.

Part 1, Chapter 4 – The narrator’s grandfather comes to visit unexpectedly. He is enraged that the father has left the family, and says he knew it would happen, for the man has no sense of responsibility. He also says that his daughter should be grateful for what he had – such as her son continuing to survive. He thanks God for it, and the grandfather wonders why the narrator’s mother has never thanked her for the money he gave to help her out at the hospital. He questions his daughter on the way his granddaughter is dressed, with her underwear exposed, and says it is Godlessness. When the grandfather leaves, the narrator’s mother smacks her in the head over and over again, causing her nose to bleed. She also attacks her son, and then retreats into her room. The narrator’s brother then leads the narrator into the bathroom to clean her up.

Part 1, Chapter 5 – The narrator, her brother, and their mother, attend Mass. The narrator struggles to see what is going on. She is intrigued by church, though like any child, she would rather be elsewhere, but her mother makes her attend. The narrator wonders about all the wounds Jesus received before His crucifixion, and she wonders how bad it felt.

Part 1, Chapter 6 – The narrator belongs the farm girls down the road, and refers to them as the “stink girls” due to their smelling like a farm. They reenact Masses on their own, and make fun of it. The narrator overhears gossip when the mother of the farm girls meets with her rosary group, such as the wife of the politician, whose husband is always running around with different women. At school, the narrator’s brother hates



talking to girls, who always make fun of him for the scar on his head from his surgical operation years before. The narrator dreams of being pulled out to sea that night.

Analysis

“A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” is a young adult novel by Eimear McBride, which recounts the life of the unnamed narrator and her unnamed brother as he struggles with cancer, and she struggles with psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. When the novel begins, the narrator is still in the womb, but she is aware of everything going on around her relating to her brother’s near-death experience with cancer –one which has been narrowly averted. From this point on, the mother’s attention will almost exclusively be devoted to the son at the expense of the narrator, and the theme of family is readily apparent as a detrimental, rather than positive and affirming, aspect of life for the narrator.

Indeed, from the very start, family is an overwhelmingly negative thing for the narrator. Her father leaves before she is born, demonstrating his own lack of responsibility and commitment to his family. While the mother begins to become more and more religious through the course of the novel (and here, the theme of faith moves forward with family), the mother is unappreciative of the support her own father has given her for her son’s battle with cancer, demonstrating her own lack of respect for family. After the grandfather leaves the house having criticized the way the narrator is dressed, the narrator’s mother brutally beats her, signaling the appearance of the theme of violence in the novel. From an early age, the negative aspects of family and violence are routine for the narrator.

Early in the novel, the theme of faith – both in terms of personal faith, and religion – can clearly be seen as well, manifested by members of the narrator’s family. The narrator’s grandfather is devoutly Catholic and believes in the presence of God in everyday life. The narrator’s mother believes in the presence of God in everyday life, and moves more and more into Catholicism, proper, as the novel progresses. For example, she joins a rosary prayer group.

The narrator herself begins a difficult relationship with both her personal faith, and the Catholic faith. For example, while she doesn’t mind attending Mass as a little girl, she is also keen to making fun of church with her friends. In a normal circumstances, this would be attributable to the mere incomprehension of childhood, but for the narrator, this seemingly normal act portends a coming difficult relationship with faith.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe the author of the novel chose to begin with the narrator still being in the womb? What purposes could this possibly serve, as a social statement and a matter of importance for the plot?



Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator's mother so savagely beat her following the visit of the narrator's grandfather? How does the narrator respond to this beating?

Discussion Question 3

How does the faith of the narrator's mother – both personal and religious – change as a result of her son's survival?

Vocabulary

Incarnate, perpetual, prolapsed, demure, admonition, blasphemy

Part 2

Summary

Part 2, Chapter 1 – The narrator is now 13. Her brother is 15 or 16. Their hormones are going crazy. The siblings learn that their father has died of a stroke. The narrator, her brother, and their mother will be moving, but the siblings do not want to leave. Their mother explains that they will be provided for, now. The family moves, and the narrator hates being the new girl at the new school. Her brother is bullied, and the narrator is constantly asked if there is something wrong with her brother. The narrator prays and keeps her mind focused on her dreams and on the past to deal with the present, but it doesn't always work. The narrator notices a handsome boy, however, with blue eyes.

Part 2, Chapter 2 – While driving with her mother to pass a Virgin Mary statue from Lourdes to the next house, the narrator accidentally breaks the statue. The narrator gets Bs and Cs on her report card.

Part 2, Chapter 3 – The narrator's wealthy aunt and uncle come to visit. They drive a Jaguar. They believe that the narrator's brother should be sent to a special school. At school, the narrator is heartbroken to see other kids continuing to make fun of her brother. The narrator's uncle begins to sexually molest her, and rapes her over the weekend when everyone is sleeping. The aunt and uncle leave soon afterward. The narrator doesn't completely understand what has happened, but she feels a little dead inside as a result.

Part 2, Chapter 4 – The narrator is now 15 going on 16. She has a best friend, and the two girls do everything together, from hanging out to studying. Meanwhile, the narrator and her brother drift apart. He is now 18, and will be graduating from school. The narrator enjoys reading F. Scott Fitzgerald, and imagines she would want to be his wife, Zelda, and believes the suffering would be worth it. Her best friend prefers Rossetti.

They go to read by the lake, but a group of boys come along, and don't understand how the girls could possibly want to read. The narrator wishes they would go away, preferring the silence. The boys recognize the narrator as the sister of the boy with the cut on his head, and the narrator is quick to defend her brother, telling the boys they are horrible to be making fun of him and treating him so cruelly. The narrator then insults the boys, and pulls one of them off into the woods to have sex with him. She then has sex with several more boys over the next several days, and encourages her best friend to do it, too.

Word gets around about the narrator, and soon she is having sex continuously, though she picks and chooses who she sleeps with, and feels powerful as a result. Word also gets to her narrator's brother, who confronts her about what she is doing, and attacks her for it. After school ends for the summer, the narrator's brother goes to join the army, but is rejected and returns home in late August.

Analysis

Part 2 of the novel contains pivotal scenes and events which will shape the rest of the narrator's life – and these should be paid careful attention by the reader. The narrator is now 13 years old. In many ways, she is still only a child, and still has so much to learn about the world. She is still innocent as a person, apart from the physical and emotional abuse she has suffered. However, all of this changes between the second and third chapters of Part 2. In the second chapter of Part 2, the reader should pay careful attention to the breaking of the Virgin Mary statue. This is not a random scene or a chapter written to fill up the book, but is important symbolically and ominously. The breaking of the statue of the Virgin Mary comes to symbolize the shattering of innocence, and the loss of virginity for the narrator, as – still 13 – the narrator is brutally molested and raped by her uncle. Her childhood has been stolen from her, as well as her rights and power over her own body. She herself is like a statue that has been broken, handled only by others.

This powerless sexual act suffered by the narrator ultimately awakens a hunger for power through sex in her. Here, sex becomes an important theme in the novel, and an aspect of the narrator's life. As she moves through her 15th and 16th years, the narrator begins to have sex with all the males that she can, for it feels empowering to her, and she is able to control and handle her own sexuality as she wants. Indeed, she has so much sex that she comes to have no shortage of boys and men who want to sleep with her, and so she assumes the power of being able to pick and choose with whom she has sex. None of these sexual encounters, however, are meaningful emotionally for her in any way shape or form. She feels as empty – perhaps emptier – after each encounter than she does before, as her sense of power is constantly fleeting, and constantly needs to be revived through yet another sexual encounter.

Violence, thematically, can also be seen in Part 2 in two distinct ways. The first act of violence is sexual, taking the form of the rape committed against the narrator by the uncle. The rape itself is truly a brutal act of violence against the girl. The second form of violence in the novel comes by way of the narrator's own brother beating her for the sexual reputation she has acquired in school. The violence here is purely physical in nature rather than sexual, but it is enough to continue to shake the narrator, and set her along another course.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe the narrator refuses to tell anyone about the rape she experiences at the hands of her uncle? How does the narrator handle the rape? How does her life change as a result?



Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator seek out so many sexual encounters when after she is 15? What does this mean for her?

Discussion Question 3

Explain the symbolism of the breaking of the Virgin Mary statue. What does this serve as an omen for?

Vocabulary

probate, transplanted, adulation, diversion, magnitude, assimilation, equivocation

Part 3

Summary

Part 3, Chapter 1 – The narrator is now 18 and preparing for final exams. She looks forward to getting her own place and leaving her mother and brother behind.

Part 3, Chapter 2 – The narrator is now living in the city, is attending college, and is homesick. The city is full of strangers and it is a startling experience to the narrator. She listens to all of the other students talk about what they did over the summer, such as going to the United States or London. She meets a girl in class who invites her out for a drink, and explains she and her family lived in Sweden for a while. The narrator's mother calls that night, reminding her to say her prayers and tells her that drinking is the devil's work. The narrator is invited to a party which she attends, and she considers it a lot of harlotting. Nevertheless, when a man comes to speak to her and encourages her to smoke weed, she decides to do so. She smokes with him for hours, and then drunk and stoned, they have sex with each other, but barely remember one another the morning after. The narrator realizes she hasn't been dragged down to Hell for what she has done, and then decides she has definitely changed her life.

Part 3, Chapter 3 – The narrator begins sleeping with every guy she can. She doesn't care how she has sex, as long as she has sex. The narrator goes home for Christmas, and her mother is not thrilled about the way she is dressing now. The narrator's mother also complains about how the narrator's brother has a job but won't give the mother any money, and won't help out around the house. The narrator confronts her brother about this. He promises to do better. Back in the city, the narrator continues to sleep around with everyone she can, and continues to smoke weed. At Easter, the narrator returns home for a visit, unhappy to be doing so. The narrator's grandfather dies, and the family gathers together for the funeral. The narrator has never seen a dead body before, and puts her finger in her dead grandfather's suit jacket, discovers a toffee chew in his pocket that hasn't gone stale yet, and eats it. She thinks about her being raped by her uncle at 13, and feels it doesn't matter anymore, for she'll be leaving to return to the city soon. In a private moment, the narrator's uncle asks her about the experience, telling her he feels guilty about it. She tells him she is fine and then they kiss, but she tells him to stop. She later throws up. The narrator's uncle gives her his number as the family parts after the funeral, telling her he wants her again. Afterwards, the narrator prays.

Analysis

In Part 3, the narrator's self-destructive behavior continues. Now in the city, she is exposed to more possibilities, and she partakes in heavy drinking, smoking marijuana, and even more random sexual encounters. Interestingly enough, the theme of faith returns to the fore in this section of the novel, as beyond sex, the narrator is unsure about the entire partying atmosphere, considering it "harlotting", and alternating



between binging in that lifestyle, and seeking forgiveness through prayer to God. At the same time, the narrator's mother, rather than attempting to keep her daughter straight, chooses to insult and condemn her instead. Again, family becomes important thematically, not in a positive way, but in a very negative way. The narrator rebels against her mother without consciously accepting it as such, but the actions of the narrator also serve to heal emotional pain, which she likewise does not consciously accept yet – though it is very clear to the reader.

The reader should also pay careful attention to the scene between the narrator and the uncle while the family is gathered for the grandfather's funeral. Though she is older at 18, the narrator still does not seem to truly understand the wrong that has been committed against her by her uncle – who claims (disingenuously and easily seen as such by the reader) that he feels guilty about what he did to her when she was only 13. She also does not seem to have moved beyond the age of 13 emotionally in many ways, for she remains stuck in a world of sex sought out for questions of power. Her kissing of her uncle and her forcing him to stop is an attempt at regaining power over her uncle, but he ultimately gains the upper hand over her by passing along his phone number to her, and making his intentions to see her again clear. This demonstrates the narrator's detachment from life, that she is unable to blame her uncle for the rape. This detachment is further defined by the scene where the narrator eats a piece of candy found in the suit on her dead grandfather. There is no respect or reverence for the situation in which she finds herself – the wake before a funeral – and demonstrates the narrator's own detachment from reality due to her lifestyle and her past experiences. She has been dehumanized, and is continuing to dehumanize herself.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator not hold her uncle responsible, or in the wrong, for his rape of her when she was 13?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the author include a scene in Chapter 3 where the narrator eats candy out of the suit of her dead grandfather? What does this mean for her character?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator's mother insist that the narrator speak to her brother about his laziness? Why does she not do it herself? Why does the narrator agree to speak to her brother?

Vocabulary

gluttony, sacrificial, iniquity, bewildered, irreverence, exasperate, gallivanting

Part 4

Summary

Part 4, Chapter 1 – Back in the city, the narrator returns to drinking and sex. The narrator rents a flat with a female friend. The narrator's mother calls to explain she is still having problems with the narrator's brother, and after several such calls, the narrator agrees to go home. Her mother and her brother are at each other's throats, and the narrator's mother wonders if the narrator's brother ever loved her at all. She believes the narrator's brother is going mad.

Part 4, Chapter 2 – The narrator's mother calls to tell the narrator her brother got a nosebleed, fell over at work, and cracked his head. The narrator is terrified that her brother's cancer has returned. She rushes to the hospital. Her mother doesn't believe that God will take her son away from her, but does believe that her faith is being tested. The narrator goes to the hospital chapel to pray for her brother.

When he awakens, he tells his sister he will be alright. The doctors reveal that little, if anything, can be done any more for the narrator's brother. He has about a year left to live, they say. The narrator ends up calling her uncle, and they chat for a few minutes about how life is going, before the narrator reveals that his nephew is going to die.

Part 4, Chapter 3 – The narrator thinks about running away to New York. Instead, she invites her uncle over to her flat. She is distraught, and asks her uncle to help her escape by having sex with her, which he does. While out the next evening with her roommate, the narrator denies anything going on with her uncle sexually, but the roommate is not convinced.

Part 4, Chapter 4 – The narrator goes to visit her brother. He wonders what it would be like to live life over again, or how they may have turned out differently if he had never had cancer. Nevertheless, the narrator's brother says he is okay. The narrator seeks out her uncle again for escape, this time insisting he give her anal sex so that she will be hurt. A Christian group comes around to speak to the narrator about her brother, saying that chemo will not help her brother, but only God will – and the narrator curses them and tells them to go away.

The narrator tells her brother that he'll be fine. She keeps vigil with him some nights, making sure he has everything he needs. At the lake, the narrator comes across a group of older men and has sex with one of them. She feels better feeling used and sore. She prays before she goes to bed that night.

Part 4, Chapter 5 – The narrator continues to sleep with her uncle, encouraging him to get really rough with her. She begs him to take all of her that there is left, including to smack her around during sex. The narrator feels this is the closest thing she has to love.



The roommate becomes unnerved by all of this, and forbids the narrator from letting the uncle come back.

At the same time, the doctors reveal the chemotherapy is not working, and the tumor in the narrator's brother's head is continuing to grow. The narrator and her mother decide to bring the narrator's brother home for the remaining time he has left. The narrator then finds a random stranger to have sex with, telling him to hurt her until she is outside of pain. She then has sex with another stranger in a bar bathroom. The narrator then returns home to visit her brother. He is getting worse and worse. She tells her brother he was her first love, and that she wishes she could take away everything that hurts him.

Analysis

In Part 4, things change dramatically for the narrator in two major ways. The theme of family returns to become central to the novel as the narrator's brother's cancer returns, and this becomes one of the major changes that affect the narrator's life. She begins to spend more and more time at home to see about her brother, making her realize just how strong the bond is between the two of them, and making her realize just how much further removed she is from her own mother.

The family may not be perfect, but that it doesn't exist, or that exists in a wholly negative way, is certainly not the case when it comes to the narrator and her brother. Indeed, she tells her brother that he was her first love – and in so being, the only real love she has ever received from anyone. This is a haunting and tragic contrast to the fact that she feels the closest thing she has ever received from anyone in the way of romantic love has been from her sexual relationship with her uncle.

The nature of the narrator's sexuality also changes dramatically as her emotional turmoil increases. She seeks out anal sex, violent sex, and physically-abusive sex from her uncle, and from the random men she comes across. In fact, she even begs her uncle to take all that there is left of her, demonstrating how corroded and hollow she has become. Her enjoyment of sex as a method of empowerment has now given way to her addiction for sex as a way to escape emotional pain by the infliction of physical pain through sex. Here, the theme of violence – through sex – can also be seen. The narrator actually tells one random man to have sex with her in such a violent fashion so she can be outside of pain.

At the same time this occurs, the narrator's difficult relationship with God and faith continues unabated. In some instances, she is outwardly hostile to religion, such as the Christian group that comes to speak to the narrator about her brother; yet, she prays frequently to God for her brother, and for her own forgiveness. The narrator's mother's personal faith also becomes readily apparent, as she says that God is testing her faith, and that she does not truly believe God will take away her son, for it would devastate her. The loss of the brother would also devastate the sister, for she finds herself wishing



there was a way to take away her brother's pain – not a light consideration given that her brother is dying of cancer.

Discussion Question 1

What happens to the narrator's brother's cancer in Part 4? How does the narrator respond? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator begin seeking out rough, and then violent, sexual interactions with men? Is this fulfilling for her? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator begin having sex with her uncle? How does her roommate ultimately respond? Why?

Vocabulary

stave, blather, fathom, obliging, sedated

Part 5

Summary

Part 5 – The narrator has now been home for several weeks, and keeps watch over her brother. Her mother's rosary circle of friends have arrived, and the narrator takes to running outside of town until she throws up. The narrator's mother calls the narrator's aunt and uncle to come and visit. When the narrator's mother and aunt have gone out, the uncle forces himself on the narrator, only to have her tell him it will be the very last time they ever have sex. While walking that evening, she runs across one of the older men she had sex with before, and they have sex again. Her uncle comes across them, and he physically assaults the man. He then smacks around the narrator, bites her breast, and orders her to get dressed, telling her she'll always be his in the end.

The narrator's brother is getting even worse now, becoming incoherent as the time passes. He has weeks left to live at most, the doctor says when he visits. The narrator's mother meets with the undertaker; the uncle offers to pay any cost needed. The funeral is planned. The brother soon begins breathing haggardly – the death rattle. The narrator sits in with the rosary group praying for her brother. The narrator later holds her brother's hand as he dies. The narrator prays for her brother.

While she is out that evening near the lake, the man her uncle had beaten off of her in turn now beats and rapes the narrator. He then pushes her into a gully, and the narrator struggles up and gets home. Her uncle comes in on her while she is attempting to clean herself up in the bathroom, barely recognizing her own reflection. Her uncle then forces himself on her.

The next day, the narrator's mother says that the narrator's swollen face and injuries will teach her about going around at all hours of the night. The narrator's mother tells her she is a disgrace. The narrator then drowns herself in the lake, hoping to see her brother again, and hoping that her sins will all be cleansed.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, things continue to spiral out of control for the narrator, including the death of her brother. The narrator's frail attempt to correct her life – to get back onto a path of normalcy – are undermined by her uncle, who refuses to let her go when she tries to end things with him, and when she is raped and beaten by the man at the lake – an unwanted and demeaning sexual encounter that results in her mother's calling the narrator a disgrace. These events are enough to push the narrator over the edge, and decide to commit suicide.

The reader should pay careful attention to the ending of the novel. It is not accident or mere plot convenience for the narrator to commit suicide by drowning. Here, the importance of faith again comes to the fore. Water is an important aspect and element



of Christianity, and Catholicism in specific. Water is used in the Rite of Baptism, in which an individual's sins are forgiven, and symbolically washed clean. The narrator believes she has no other way out apart from death. To die, she will drown herself in a body of water – symbolic of cleansing and cleaning – and therein, as she dies, she prays for forgiveness, and to be washed clean of her sins.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator try to break things off with her uncle? Is she successful? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

The first and last time that the narrator ever has a sexual encounter, it is rape. Why do you believe the author intended this?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator decide to commit suicide by drowning? What does she hope will happen as a result?

Vocabulary

genuelect, incoherent, desiccation, contrition, heartily



Characters

The Narrator

The narrator, never named, is 18 and 19 years old for much of the book. She is the narrator of the novel, is highly introspective, and is apparently quite attractive. She is the younger sister of her brother, and always falls in his shadow due to their mother's constant concern for the brother after he has survived cancer. When she is 13, the narrator is raped by her uncle, and this sets her on a course of wild, and later violent, sexual encounters, ranging from boys and men she barely knows, to complete strangers. She even begins a sexual affair with her uncle, for she finds escape from the pain she feels in her life through violent sex. The narrator continues to spiral out of control when she learns her brother's cancer has returned, and she attempts to briefly right herself for his sake, though this does not work out in the end. After her brother dies, the narrator drowns herself.

The Brother

The brother, never named, is two to three years older than his younger sister, the narrator. Given chemotherapy and surgery for a cancerous brain tumor when he is younger, the brother spends much of his school days being bullied and made fun of for the scar on his head. When the brother's cancer returns, it does not respond to treatment. The brother later dies.

The Mother

The mother, never named, is mother to the narrator and the brother, and is the daughter of the grandfather. The mother becomes increasingly religious over the course of the novel, and frequently both relies on –and berates – the narrator as her brother succumbs to cancer. The narrator's mother is horrified by her daughter's lifestyle choices, and tells her she is a disgrace at the end of the novel before the daughter commits suicide.

The Father

The father, never named, leaves the narrator's mother not long after the narrator's brother is cleared of cancer. The father is noted as having long been irresponsible, and later dies of a stroke.



The Grandfather

The grandfather, never named, is a very traditional, and very opinionated man, who insists that his daughter raise his grandchildren in a very Catholic fashion. The grandfather later dies.

The Uncle

The uncle, never named, rapes the narrator when she is only 13. He claims he feels guilty about this to the narrator years later, but she absolves him of guilt, and begins a sexual affair with him instead. Each time they have sex, she pushes him to find ways of hurting her, ranging from anal sex to beating her. The narrator attempts to break off the sexual affair after her brother dies, but the uncle will not relent.

The College Roommate

The college roommate, never named, is a friend of the narrator's from college, with whom she shares a flat. The roommate discovers the sexual affair the narrator is having with her uncle, and when the sex becomes violent, the roommate forbids the narrator from allowing her uncle to continue coming to the flat.

The Doctor

The doctor, never named, appears periodically throughout the novel, especially with respect to the narrator's brother's cancer. It is the doctor who first tells the narrator and her mother that the narrator's brother's cancer has returned, and only has about a year left to live. The doctor later confirms months later that the brother is getting worse, and has only a few weeks left to live at most.

The Man by the Lake

The man by the lake, never named, has a random sexual encounter in the woods with the narrator when she is 18. The following year, while repeating the encounter, the man is beaten up by the narrator's uncle. The man then later beats up the narrator and rapes her, before dumping her in a gully.

Men

Men, never named, many of them much older, are sought out by the narrator for random sexual encounters. Many of the narrator's later sexual encounters are with men whom she encourages to be violent with her.



Symbols and Symbolism

Fifty-Pound Note

Fifty pounds are given to the narrator's mother by the narrator's father before he leaves the family following the successful conclusion of the narrator's brother's chemotherapy. The fifty pound-note represents the strongest memory that the narrator and her brother have of their father between his leaving and his death later in the novel.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is a treatment for cancer that seeks to use radiation to destroy the cancerous cells. The narrator's brother undergoes chemotherapy and surgery successfully while very young to beat his cancer into remission. But later in the novel, when his cancer returns, chemotherapy is ineffective for the brother.

Rosaries

Rosaries are strings or chains of beads and crucifixes used for prayer in the Catholic faith. Each bead represents the recitation of a prayer, and rosaries are often prayed in groups. In the novel, the narrator's mother is a member of such a group, and this group prays for the narrator's brother. The narrator herself sits in on one such prayer group as well.

Virgin Mary statue

A Virgin Mary statue from Lourdes is carried by the narrator as she and her mother bring the statue to the next house at which the statue is to be kept. The statue is passed between members of the Catholic community for safeguarding and prayer, but the narrator accidentally breaks it. The breaking of the Virgin Mary statue is symbolic of the narrator's own impending loss of innocence, of her virginal state, from being raped by her uncle.

Alcohol

Alcohol is consumed in copious amounts by the narrator when she is 18 and on her own in the city attending college. The narrator's mother criticizes the narrator heavily for drinking, and the narrator does back off drinking to a limited extent.



Marijuana

Marijuana is smoked heavily by the narrator for a period of time while attending college in the city. It leads to a sexual encounter where, the morning after, she and the man she has slept with barely remember one another or the night before.

Toffee Chew

A toffee chew is found by the narrator in her dead grandfather's suit jacket while he is lying in wake. The narrator eats the toffee while looking at his dead body. This demonstrates, and is symbolic of, the emotional detachment that the narrator has formed for much of her family. She feels relatively little at her grandfather's passing, and is glad that the toffee chew has not gone stale.

Injuries

Cuts, bruises, and swelling are received by the narrator at various points throughout the novel. The most notable injuries the narrator receives are when she seeks out violent sexual encounters with her uncle, and with other random men, and when she is beaten and raped by the man by the lake toward the end of the novel. These injuries lead the narrator's mother to call the narrator a disgrace.

Scar

A scar is visible on the narrator's brother's head from where he received a surgical operation to treat his cancerous brain tumor. The scar becomes a physical reminder of what once nearly killed the brother, and what threatens to kill him again. The scar is made fun of and mocked by everyone at school, from the time the brother is younger, through his high school graduation.

Water

Water is seen in the novel as symbolic of cleansing, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Each of the narrator's sexual acts and encounters never take place near the water of the lake, but always in other places. When the narrator commits suicide, she does so by drowning in the lake, asking to be cleansed of her sins in the process.

Settings

Lough Corrib

Lough Corrib is a lake near which the narrator and her family live in Ireland. The lake factors heavily into the novel, as both a place the narrator and her friend go to read, and as a place where the narrator seeks to escape the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse she has suffered in her life. The water of the lake becomes symbolic of cleansing, and it is directly intended that the narrator should commit suicide by drowning in water, asking to be cleansed of her sins.

The city

The never-named city is located within driving distance of where the narrator's mother and brother live. The city is full of strangers and strange places, and is jarring at first to the narrator. Soon, she comes to relish the pleasures the city has to offer, from alcohol to marijuana to the limitless number of men that she may sleep with.

The flat

The flat is rented out by the narrator and one of her college friends. The flat comes to serve as the location for repeated sexual encounters between the narrator and other men, especially her uncle. When the sexual encounters between the narrator and her uncle become violent in nature, the narrator's roommate tells her she may no longer meet her uncle there for sex.

The country

The country near Lough Corrib is where the narrator and her family live. Even the town they move into after living in the country is still technically in the country, and near the lake. When they are younger, the narrator and her brother relish the countryside for its quiet isolation. It is also in the country where the narrator's mother first begins to become more religious, joining a rosary group, among whose members include the mother of the farm girls that the narrator befriends.

The hospital

The hospital is where the narrator's brother is diagnosed with, and treated for, cancer at a young age. The hospital is where the narrator's brother is later diagnosed with cancer out of remission, and where he initially undergoes chemotherapy without success. The brother is then taken out of the hospital to spend the rest of his life at home.



Themes and Motifs

Coming of Age

Coming of age is an important theme in the novel “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” by Eimear McBride. Coming of age involves the personal, spiritual, moral, or emotional growth and maturation of an individual often based on real world experiences. Usually, coming of age is a positive thing – but in “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing”, coming of age is far from empowering or strengthening. In fact, it proves to be the opposite, setting the narrator up not for life, but for death as her coming of age means spiraling out of control.

Indeed, even the title of the novel should not be missed by the reader, which indicates that the narrator is only half-reared, half-ready, half-capable of handling the situations in which she finds herself. (Indeed, nothing ever truly comes to the girl fully-formed: everything is half-formed that she receives, from love to sex to her family situation.) A girl is indeed only a half-formed thing: a girl is a half-formed woman, a half-formed adult.

Coming of age most specifically deals with the unnamed narrator, who recounts her 19 years on earth from her time in the womb through her suicide at the end of the novel. When she is younger, as a child, the narrator does not have an uncommon childhood. She lives in the shadow of her brother, favored by their mother, and doted upon by their mother due to his survival of cancer. The narrator is saddened by the favoritism, but it is nothing overwhelming to her, for she usually gets along well with her brother.

Interestingly enough, the narrator's brother is nearly always her constant companion, and the two are heartbroken when they must move out of their house in the countryside – leaving their rural isolation behind. The narrator leaves her innocence behind as well, as the change in location also means a change in her life.

In her new home, the narrator moves into her teenage years. When she is 13, she is raped by her uncle, exposing her to sex at far too early an age. This experience proves to be traumatic and corroding, for the narrator will spend the rest of her short life seeking out sex in more extreme and violent ways to fill the hollow in her begun by her uncle. Indeed, rather than becoming stronger as a result of overcoming the rape, the narrator succumbs to it, finding power in seducing boys and men and having sex with them.

Soon, she becomes well-known at school as being easy, and she is able to pick and choose who she wants to have sex with, and the sex occurs frequently and wherever she can manage it. This is only exacerbated by her moving to the city to attend college, where she first begins to drink and smoke weed, leading to even more sexual encounters – mostly with random, much older men – as a result of her new experiences in the world.



As the novel progresses, the narrator stunningly seeks out her uncle to begin a sexual affair with him after she learns her brother's cancer has returned. The sadness of her childhood, the emptiness she has felt, and the pain of her brother's cancer cause her to want to escape the hurt, and so she finds release in sexual pain – insisting her uncle have anal sex with her, and later, insists her uncle physically beat her before and during sex. She extends this physical punishment to her random sexual encounters, and feels as if her life is draining away.

When the narrator's brother shifts toward death, she decides to attempt to right her own life, to make herself better – but her attempts do not succeed. Her uncle will not let her go, and the narrator is later raped by a man her uncle beat up. Her mother then tells her she is a disgrace, and the narrator believes that there is no way that she will ever be able to get better. As a result of her experiences, what she has been through, and what she has done, the narrator decides suicide is the only option for cleansing herself – and she does so by drowning herself in water, hoping that it will cleanse her of her sins.

Faith

Faith is an important theme in the novel “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” by Eimear McBride. Faith in the novel, thematically, speaks to faith in terms of religion (specifically, Catholicism), and faith in terms of personal belief. Both kinds of faith affect various characters in the novel in different ways, and the novel is replete with Christian symbolism in general.

When it comes to faith in terms of religion by way of Catholicism, the strongest adherents can be seen in the characters of the narrator's grandfather, and mother. The grandfather is a very traditional, and very devout Catholic, living rightly by what he believes. For example, when he sees his granddaughter improperly dressed early in the novel, he considers that the house she is being raised in is Godless. This appears to be a moment of change for the narrator's mother, who through the rest of the novel, grows into devout Catholicism. She not only prays the rosary, for example, but joins a rosary prayer group. She hosts the Lourdes statue of the Virgin Mary at her house, and passes it along to the next family on the list for hosting the statue. The narrator's mother also makes sure that she and her children attend Church each week.

When it comes to faith in terms of personal belief, the strongest adherent can be found in the form of the narrator's mother. Catholicism, which holds that God is personal, concerned with, and involved in the daily lives of human beings, strengthens the mother's personal beliefs as well that God is a concerned and personally involved presence in her life. For example, her prayers to God early in the novel that her son will come through the surgical procedure on his brain tumor come not just from her Catholicism, but her genuine, personal belief in the presence and mercy of God. Later in the novel, the narrator's mother prays that God will not take her son from her, for she would not be able to survive without him.



Like her faith in God, the narrator's mother's faith in her son is also tremendous – and to the detriment of her daughter, the narrator, who constantly lives in her brother's shadow. Faith in the son blinds the mother to having faith in the daughter. Whereas the mother entreats the son to do better as a matter of faith in his character as a person, the mother harbors no such faith in her daughter, routinely criticizing her even when undeserved, and calling her a disgrace.

The narrator herself has a difficult relationship with faith – both of the religious and personal kind. When she is younger, the narrator dutifully attends Church with her mother and her brother, but finds little substance for herself in Catholicism, proper. Nevertheless, she does believe in God and prays to Him regularly, both that He might forgive her, and that He might heal her brother. The narrator's faith is thus incredibly personal and intimate to her.

When it comes to faith by way of Christian symbolism, the author is particular and careful about what she uses, and how. When the narrator is 13, she accidentally breaks a Virgin Mary statue. In the following chapter, the narrator, still 13, is raped by her uncle. The breaking of the Virgin Mary statue becomes symbolic of the shattering of innocence and portends the breaking of the narrator's virginal state by the uncle. Additionally in the novel, water proves to be a powerful symbol. In Christianity in general, and in Catholicism specifically, baptism is given for the forgiveness of sin, and so water becomes symbolic of cleaning, of cleansing, and of purity.

During the novel, all sexual exploits the narrator has are away from water, specifically, away from the lake she likes to visit. During these particular instances, sexual encounters are had in the woods rather than near the lake – thus, the narrator is lost in the trees rather than pure or whole beside the water. When the narrator commits suicide at the end of the novel, it is not random or unplanned that she chooses to drown herself. As she drowns in the water – again, a cleansing element and symbol in Christianity – she asks for forgiveness, and that she may be washed clean of her sins.

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” by Eimear McBride. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family may be a positive factor in events in a novel, or it may be a negative factor in events in a novel. In “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing”, family is more a negative thing for the narrator, and a positive thing for the narrator's brother.

When he is very young, the narrator's brother nearly dies of a cancerous brain tumor. This is only staved off by chemotherapy and a surgical operation. The cancer goes into remission as a result, and the mother, panicked she has nearly lost her son, orients her life around him in response. She places tremendous faith in his character, and goes above and beyond to prioritize him, care for him, and to see that he has everything he



needs. The brother, who is keenly aware of his own mortality and lives under the constant threat of the return of his cancer, benefits greatly from the favoritism shown to him by his mother, suffering from no shortage of love, though he later becomes spoiled and lazy as a result, refusing to contribute to household costs and household chores.

However, the favoritism shown toward the narrator's brother comes at the expense of the narrator herself. Their mother always believes the son over the narrator, and the narrator is always to blame for everything. The narrator comments as a child that her mother turns a good eye in blindness toward everything that goes on. The narrator herself is saddened by the half-love she receives from her mother. Whereas her brother can get away with anything, the narrator's first time out at a pub – where she doesn't even get drunk – is cause for her mother to condemn her and castigate her behavior. Indeed, as time goes on, the mother spares no expense to criticize the narrator's lifestyle and choices, whether or not the criticism is deserved.

However, whereas the mother will not angrily confront her own son about his laziness – leaving it up to the narrator to do it for her – the mother will not approach the narrator herself with compassion when it comes to life choices. Indeed, when the narrator is young, physical violence against her from her mother is routine. Rather than attempting to reason or even sternly admonish the narrator about what she does, the mother resorts to cruelty and emotional abuse. Indeed, the tipping point for the narrator appears to be a combination of her brother's death, and her mother's declaration that she is a disgrace – which begins a chain of events leading to the narrator's decision to commit suicide.

Yet, whereas the bond between mother and daughter, and mother and son are as varied as night and day, the bond between brother and sister is fairly strong. Growing up in the country, they have only each other for friendship and to rely on early on. As they enter a new school, the narrator is constantly defensive of her brother and his scar. When she is beaten by her mother, it is the brother who cleans and tends to the narrator. When the brother falls ill from cancer once more, the narrator spends more and more time with him, and even attempts to straighten up her life. When the brother dies, and the narrator commits suicide, she hopes she will see her brother again as she prays for forgiveness.

Violence

Violence is an important theme in the novel "A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing" by Eimear McBride. Violence is the physical act of injuring another person's body, and comes to form a core contingent of the plot. Violence is chiefly associated with the main character, the narrator.

When the narrator is younger, she, and even sometimes her brother, are beaten severely by her mother for real and imagined offenses. For example, following their grandfather's visit when he criticizes the fact that the narrator is improperly dressed, the mother takes to pummeling the narrator, specifically focusing on her face and upper



body, causing bruising and bleeding. The mother never apologizes for this violence, and it is the brother who must tend to the narrator's wounds.

When the narrator is 13, she is brutally raped by her uncle. It is a frightening and painful experience which the narrator does not quite comprehend or understand, and it will have a lasting impact on her for the rest of her life. This form of sexual violence committed against the narrator leaves a lasting hole in her emotionally, and this will also affect her actions for the rest of her life.

As the narrator moves through her teenage years, she begins sleeping with as many boys and men as she can, finding power in sex. This includes having a sexual affair with her uncle – the same one who raped her as a child. As her emotional turmoil mounts, her longing to escape it through sexual violence also increases. She insists her uncle have anal sex with her, and later, that he physically beat and injure her as well. The narrator also seeks out such violent sexual encounters with other men, many of them strangers and randomly chosen, for to the narrator, the physical sexual pain numbs the emotional pain that she feels.

Sex

Sex is an important theme in the novel "A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing" by Eimear McBride. Sexual intercourse proves to be central to the life of the narrator as the novel progresses, and becomes key to who she is psychologically as a person.

When the narrator is just 13 years old, she is molested and then raped by her uncle. It is her first sexual encounter of any kind, and it alarms her. Because she is so young, she has no idea what to truly make of what happened, or to truly understand what has happened to her. She attempts to rationalize what happened with little success, however, never being able to hold the uncle responsible for what he has done. It becomes merely something that happened, rather than something that was wrong, and should not have happened. Years later, when the uncle claims to feel guilty about what happened, the narrator tells him she does not hold any ill-will or feelings toward him, and later begins a sexual affair with him.

Yet, the implications of the rape are clear. The narrator feels hollow inside, and feels as if she has been made powerless by the rape. As she moves through her teenage years, she seeks out sex frequently with innumerable boys and men, finding there is power in whom she decides to sleep with – and she has no shortage of willing volunteers. The sex she has also offers the narrator a means of escaping her family turmoil, and the emotional distress brought on by the return of her brother's cancer.

Indeed, the narrator becomes so aggrieved that she finds emotional escape in physical abuse, especially when it comes to violent sex. She insists her uncle have anal sex with her, and later insists that he physically beat and smack her around as well. This results in bruising and swelling to the narrator's face, but it also gears her toward more and more extreme sexual encounters. The random men that she sleeps with she also

instructs to physically abuse her as well. The last sexual encounter that the narrator has before she commits suicide is actually a rape at the hands of a man with whom she has had previous sexual encounters.

Styles

Point of View

Eimear McBride tells her novel “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” in the first-person limited-omniscient present-tense perspective from the point of view of the main character and narrator, the unnamed narrator. The novel is deeply introspective and personal, and is therefore told in the first-person narrative mode. Much of the novel involves the secretive thoughts and explanations rendered by the narrator, which are accessible only to the reader, but not to other characters, and this is possible through use of the first-person narrative mode. Because the story is so personal, and deals with such intimate things, the first-person narrative mode creates a private glimpse into a private life. Because the novel is told in the first-person present-tense as events unfold, the narrator does not know everything that is going on around her beyond her own experience of things as they happen. As such, the reader only learns about and comes to understand things as the narrator herself comes to see and understand them. Because the narrator is not reflecting on the past, but speaking to the present as it unfolds, the present-tense format is utilized –and this is especially important given the narrator commits suicide at the end of the novel, and would thus be unable to sit down and reflect on the past as she dies.

Language and Meaning

Eimear McBride tells her novel “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” in language that is simple and straightforward, but the construction of the sentences themselves is very dense, fractured, and oftentimes incomplete –reflecting the title of the novel and the fact that the narrator herself is only half-formed. As such, great effort is often required to traverse the novel. Consider, for example, a brief passage from Part 5: “I go walk blacks of road go cars there white as. Rubbish passing on my feet are hurt and. Blind my lips. All that’s. No speaking. No speaking here where the sunlight and cold wind blow me quiet. Burning motors.”

Structure

Eimear McBride divides her novel “A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing” into five parts, with each part (except for Part 5) subdivided into chapters. Each part deals with a specific period or set of events in the narrator’s life. For example, Part 1 primarily deals with her childhood, while Part 2 involves the narrator’s early sexual encounters, from her rape at 13 to her becoming known at school for being easy to sleep with. Each chapter in each part further deals with specific sets of events or situations relating to the overall part. For example, Part 2, Chapter 2 deals with the breaking of the Virgin Mary statue, while Part 2, Chapter 3, deals with the narrator’s rape at 13. The fifth part of the novel is one long

continuous section, with no chapter breaks, and deals with the death of the narrator's brother and her decision to commit suicide.



Quotes

You'll soon. You'll give her name.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects on the very beginning of her life in her mother's womb. The narrator is without an identity apart from her existence in the womb, and here, she comments on the idea that very soon, her mother will give her a name – though at the time, her mother is preoccupied with her brother's battle for survival against cancer. Additionally, the reader should note that the narrator – nor any other character in the novel – is ever named.

No you're better. No you are, turned her good eyes blind.

-- Narrator (Part 1, Chapter 3 paragraph 7)

Importance: As the narrator's brother recovers from cancer surgery and treatment, he becomes his mother's favorite child, often at the expense of the narrator. As such, the narrator explains how their mother turns a blind eye towards bad behavior when it comes to the narrator's brother, but not the narrator herself.

Where's that father? Mine? Who belong to was part of me?

-- Narrator (Part 2, Chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator, here, reflects on how little her father has been in her life, and how minimal an impact he has had on her – and yet, what a large impact he has had on the family in his absence. The narrator is a part of her father, but only in a biological sense of belonging. Her father matters to her in no other way.

Everyone's quiet. They're moved on to greener fields. Are grazing there on someone else. Just feel a scald of it now and then and think I'd like to get away.

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 1 paragraph 12)

Importance: The narrator, as she moves through high school, watches as kids move away to go to college, or move away to begin new phases in their life. The narrator, too, longs for such an escape, although hers is not yet arrived. She longs to be free of her family and her own life.

What'll I be?

-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 1 paragraph 14)

Importance: When the narrator finally graduates and heads to the city to begin college, she feels as if her whole life is ahead of her, and hers for the taking. She asks herself just what it is she will be in the coming years – but the answer is not what she expects, as the hope and promise of the future quickly give way to self-destructive behavior.



I am leaving home. I've picked up and left. Fresh. I'm already gone.
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 2 paragraph 25)

Importance: Here, the narrator symbolically speaks to the fact that she is a changed person, having "left home". This is a statement made after the narrator has become drunk, smoked marijuana, and had numerous sexual encounters with different men, many of them strangers. After her behavior, she believes there is no going back to the way she used to be.

In the new world I am do this every single time I can.
-- Narrator (Part 3, Chapter 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Having committed to her new life, the narrator takes great delight especially in having sex and doing deviant things. Sex, and other self-destructive choices, continue to be central to the narrator's life, as she seeks to empower herself through use of her body, and later, as she seeks to erase her emotional pain through the infliction of physical pain.

I've come out. To be in the cold. To see again for a long way off. Out there somewhere is. New York. What if I could go? It would be so. So far I cannot even see.
-- Narrator (Part 4, Chapter 3 paragraph 1)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects on her loneliness and how she wants to leave everything behind. She even considers heading to New York, a place so far away that no one else can see it, including her. It would be a chance at a new life, but rather than taking a chance, the narrator returns to the past by beginning a sexual affair with her uncle.

What if we were young, were small again? And if all this wasn't to be, what'd we be then? What I'd be. What I'd do.
-- Narrator's Brother (Part 4, Chapter 4 paragraph 1)

Importance: The narrator's brother, as he is progressively getting worse from cancer, begins to look back on childhood. He wonders what his life would be like without cancer, or if he had never contracted cancer in the first place. For the narrator, her own cancer is the rape she experienced at 13 by her uncle. While she suffered emotional and physical abuse at home, she was not foregone, and might still have changed her life for the better. But this is not so anymore, as the narrator is also wasting away.

The word. I want that. Hurt me. Until I am outside pain.
-- Narrator (Part 4, Chapter 5 paragraph 20)

Importance: The narrator's emotional turmoil becomes so powerful that violent sex – where she is hurt and made sore – is the only thing that relieves the emotional pain. Here, the narrator begs an unidentified, random man that she has decided to have sex with, to hurt her so bad that she will not feel pain again. This speaks to the dire situation psychologically in which the narrator finds herself – but no one else sees.



Days longer sleeping all the time. I am. Working on the. I am here.
-- Narrator (Part 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: As the narrator's brother heads toward death, he begins to sleep more and more – and the narrator makes sure she is around more and more, to be there for him. His body is slowly shutting down, just as the narrator is as well.

Narrow. I'm running.
-- Narrator (Part 5 paragraph 28)

Importance: As the narrator's brother dies, and as the narrator heads toward her own suicide, she talks about running through the trees and through the land outside of town – which becomes narrower not just physically, but symbolically as well. Her life is closing in around her, and she is coming up on her own end. She is running not to avoid the end, but running towards it.