The Green Road Study Guide

The Green Road by Anne Enright

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Enright, Anne. The Green Road. W.W. Norton & Co, 2015.

The Green Road is Anne Enright's novel about a family from County Clare Ireland. The novel traces the falling apart and coming together of Rosaleen Madigan and her four children, Dan, Emmet, Constance, and Hannah. The novel is told in past tense, third person and it is split into two sections: Part I covers the children leaving their home in Ireland and the lives they attempt to build for themselves. Part II covers the children coming home to the family land, Ardeevin, when Rosaleen decides to sell it.

The novel opens with Hannah at 11 years old, when Dan told the family he wants to become a priest. Their mother Rosaleen (who was not yet named in the narrative) took to her bed while Hannah accompanied her father to his family's farm to kill a chicken for Easter Dinner.

The narrative then moved ahead in time, to the early 1990s, when Dan was living in New York city. Dan had not become a priest, and instead he worked first as a shoe salesman and then as an art gallery assistant. Dan took up with a gay man named Billy, but had trouble admitting his own sexual identity. He told Billy he would be getting married, but continued to sleep with Billy. After their affair, Dan went back to his girlfriend Isabelle, and he did not come to see Billy when he went into the hospital because of AIDS.

Years after Dan was in New York, the narrative turned to Constance living in County Clare not far from her mother. She found a lump in her breast, and the narrative followed her experiences as Constance waited for her mammogram and received a clean bill of health. As Constance waited, she talked with another woman, Margaret, who was not so lucky. Constance returned home to discover that her husband had not actually forgotten about her test.

While his siblings found themselves, Emmet lived in Mali by the early 2000s working for a relief organization and trying to save people. Emmet was in a relationship with Alice, who took in a stray dog despite dogs being seen as unclean by the locals. When Alice went back home for a bit, Emmet allowed the dog to go back outside, and when Alice returned, the dog was poisoned. When Emmet did not respond sympathetically to her mourning, she left him.

The narrative then turned to Rosaleen, who was still living in her family home, without her children around her. As she wrote Christmas cards to her children, she revealed her relationship with each of them. Disgruntled and unsettled to be stuck on the first floor of her house, Rosaleen resolved to sell the home and move in with Constance.

In the second half of the novel, the Madigan children came home.

Dan was now living comfortably with a man named Ludo in Toronto. When Ludo convinced him to go back to Ireland while he can, he realized he loved Ludo and agreed to marry him.

Hanna, who lived in Dublin, was an out-of-work actress and mother of a new baby. She was also an alcoholic, and between putting herself in the hospital (because she literally fell down drunk) and allowing the baby to get ahold of her water bottle, which contained alcohol, her boyfriend took the baby and told her to go to Christmas alone.

Constance picked Dan up from the airport and took him to Ardeevin to see Rosaleen while she went shopping for Christmas dinner. But Christmas Eve did not go well, as old injuries revealed themselves and the children ended up angry at Rosaleen and with one another. When they went off alone to cool off, Rosaleen wandered off on her own to think about her past and her regrets in life. She fell and, injured, tried to find shelter.

Meanwhile, the siblings put aside their differences and came together to search for her. They found her in an old abandoned cottage, sore but okay.

Following Rosaleen's rescue, the siblings returned to their separate lives, but something had changed. They were not necessarily any more connected with each other, but facing their mother's possible death had helped them to break through problems in their own lives.

The novel ended with Rosaleen showing up at Emmet's apartment. She told him that Constance had kicked her out, but in reality, Constance had a diagnosis that required surgery and she could not take care of her mother. Rosaleen ended the novel by saying that she should have paid more attention.

Hanna: Ardeevin, Co. Clare, 1980

Summary

The first chapter, like the rest of the novel, is narrated in the past tense, third person, but it is focused through the perspective of Hannah, who is 11 and the youngest of the family. Often this means that details and backstory go unexplained, because Hannah herself does not understand the complexities of the family dynamic.

In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the Madigans, an Irish family with four children. The mother of the family is a Considine, and in this chapter the reader learns that the Madigan and Considine families do not usually get along.

The story opens with Hannah. Hannah's mother asked her to get a prescription for Solpadine from Hannah's uncle's pharmacy in town. Hanna's walk from their farm, which was called Ardeevin, to the pharmacy introduces the reader to the town and the setting, County Clare. Hannah's Uncle Bart filled the order while Hannah admired the perfumes and luxury hair products. She also thought about the fact that some pharmacies made it more difficult for women to obtain birth control, although as a small child she did not quite understand the specifics of those products. Before she left, Hannah asked Bart if her mother would be okay.

The reader then learns that Hannah's mother had take to her bed after Dan, her oldest son, announced that he would become a priest. The announcement was accompanied by a flashback, to when the Pope visited Ireland and when Emmet (the second son) went to see him speak near Galway. Hannah believed the Pope's visit was the cause of her brother' decision.

The rest of the chapter then flashes back to the beginning of Holy Week, two weeks before the opening scene and the week following Dan's announcement. During this week, Hannah's mother remained in bed, something she had done before. Hannah's father took her with him to work the Madigan family land, a farm called Boolavan, and her Granny and father slaughtered a chicken in front of her. Her Granny also made Hannah go to the drug store, for some kind of personal cream, and Hannah reflected that Emmet would never have to know their Granny needed such a cream, because he was a boy. On Good Friday, the family watched a program about Irish missionaries in Africa, and Hannah understood that her brother was leaving and might not return.

After an Easter dinner that featured the chicken Hannah's father slaughtered, she went with Dan to Galway, to meet his girlfriend Isabelle. Isabelle still had no idea about Dan's plans, a fact that Hannah told her mother when she returned home. Hearing the news, her mother finally got out of bed and did the laundry in the kitchen. Her mother reflected that she made her son, but did not like him, and then sent Hannah back to the pharmacy for another round of Solpadeine.

Analysis

In this chapter, the novel shows the way that gender--especially the limitations placed on women by their religion-determines their possibilities in life and the community. Young Hannah is already aware of the separation between men and women in the text. As a woman, it is clear that she holds a less desirable position than her brothers, who are not asked to do many of the chores she is asked to do. For example, when she is asked to go into town to get some sort of personal cream (most likely for hemorrhoids) for her Granny Madigan, she knows that Emmet, her older brother, will never have to deal with such an embarrassing thing, because he is a boy. "Hannah walked down to the Medical Hall that evening feeling marked, singled out by destiny to be the purveyor of old lady's bottom cream, while Emmet was not to know their granny had a bottom, because Emmet was a boy" (23). Her realization of this difference reveals to her a basic inequality and unfairness.

This chapter also begins to demonstrate the way that religion, specifically Catholicism, influences and limits women's ability to obtain healthcare. As predominantly Catholic country, Ireland puts limits on the accessibility of contraceptives and prophylactics, necessities for women to be able to control their own reproductive health and, subsequently, their own futures. Moreover, the novel implies that these limitations might also affect the general healthcare women receive from more conservative doctors and pharmacists. Even at a young age, Hannah is aware that there were "unmentionable" things that women might ask a pharmacist for, most of which has to do with "matters 'under the bonnet'" (22). Immediately in the novel, the reader is aware that female sexuality and their very bodies places women within a specific, and often limited, space in the society.

Because narrative of this chapter is focused through Hannah's perspective, the details and thoughts the reader receives are those of a younger girl, and the novel is able to demonstrate how perception shapes reality. Although Hannah is an astute and watchful child, there is much she does not quite understand about her family, her town, and the dynamics of the people she knows. For example, while she does understand that her identity as a girl is the reason she has to help with her Granny Madigan's creams, she does not have the faculties or understanding yet to know exactly what the cream is even for--she can only guess. Likewise, she is clearly aware of the limitations women face when attempting to purchase certain health supplies from pharmacies, her perspective does not specifically reveal exactly what the nature of those products are. They might be anything from condoms to medication to cause an abortion. Because she does not know, the reader never completely knows. The reader's opening view and understanding of the Madigan family remains limited.

Finally, the plot of the first chapter is juxtaposed against Holy Week, perhaps the most important liturgical time in the Roman Catholic Church to demonstrate the often fraught relationship the family has with religion. In this chapter, the oldest son of the family, Dan, announces his intent to become a priest, and instead of being happy, as a reader might expect from an Irish mother, Dan's mother's response is to take to bed. The entire

chapter, then, becomes a irreverent revision of Holy Week. In the chapter, young Hannah travels down the road from Ardeevin to the pharmacy in town, a chicken is slaughtered, and then the bird is eaten on Easter Sunday. None of these events are at all reverent or religious in nature. They mirror the family's reaction to Dan's announcement, and together, these events hint at what is to come in the novel--while the Madigans are Irish and Catholic, they do not necessarily identify with the spirituality of religion. In addition, the chapter reveals that the Madigans are not alone in this. When Hannah walks to the pharmacy, she is aware that there are people on the birth control pill, "because they had access to the pill," which is explicitly against the teachings of the Roman Catholic church (5). However, no one in the text seems to judge the women on the pill in moral terms.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the narrative style of the first chapter. How does the narrative replicate the perspective and thought process of a small child?

Discussion Question 2

What does the awareness that Hannah has about her identity as a girl (or woman) tell us about the position of women in Irish society?

Discussion Question 3

What is the Madigan family's relationship to religion? How do their experiences and actions during Holy Week reflect this relationship?

Vocabulary

petrol, groovy, oblong, precautions, chignon, crucifix, russet, bonnet, purveyor, gentians

Dan: New York, 1991

Summary

In this chapter, the narrative remains third-person past tense, but the narration is told through an unnamed character. The chapter depicts a group of friends in New York City in the early nineties, the heart of the AIDS epidemic. From the opening line, "We all thought Billy was with Greg" (36), through to the end, the narrative voice created the feel of gossip. The narrator is someone within the community who does not reveal himself, but he treats the reader as though they already know the names he drops. The majority of the chapter is narrated as though Billy is the main protagonist of the story, rather than Dan. Through the narration, Dan remains almost a secondary character--a love interest for Billy, but not the active main character.

Although the chapter will eventually focus on Billy, it begins with a character named Greg and an explanation of Greg's past and his fear of getting AIDS. Greg's first lover, Christian, died of the illness, but Greg himself did not get tested. Greg was an art dealer, and when he learned that he too had the disease, he turned to an ex-lover, Billy, a younger man who lived out of the closet.

Billy tended to Greg willingly until Dan came into their group. Once Billy became interested in a relationship with Dan, Billy left Greg to go away to a house party on Fire Island with Dan. Though Billy and Dan shared a room, at first Dan did not allow Billy any intimacies beyond fellatio. Even that act is implied rather than outright depicted in the narrative. However, once Dan announced that he was going to get married, an attempt to claim he was not actually gay, the two became lovers for the rest of their time on the island.

The chapter then flashes back to five years before, the summer of 1986 when Dan arrived in New York and moved in with his girlfriend from Ireland, Isabelle. He obviously did not become a priest, as he had declared in the first chapter. Upon arriving in New York, Dan worked first as a shoe salesman. On one delivery, a rich old man exposed himself to Dan. Accepting this new reality of trading sexual favors for luxury, Dan then moved up as a photographer's assistant, where the narrative implies that he continued to flirt his way to the top. The narrative implies that he traded in sexual favors, but it remained unclear about how far physically Dan went with any man except for Billy.

Dan eventually left Billy alone on Fire Island and returned to Isabelle. After Fire Island, where Dan left him, Billy returned to helping to care for Greg, who had improved in health somewhat. Billy tried to forget Dan, but any time the two met up--even with Isabelle in the picture--Billy and Dan had sex.

At Christmas that year, Dan returned home to Ireland and when he returned, he rekindled his relationship with Billy. Isabelle had broken up with him (for another homosexual man). Dan took care of Billy, who had a cold, but when Billy's health

collapsed, Dan disappeared. It was Greg who rushed Billy to the hospital. Greg was there with Billy for both the results of his diagnosis and his death, not long after. Despite being notified and told to come, Dan stayed away.

Analysis

The narrative of this chapter mirrors the tone and tenor of gossip and in doing so demonstrates the way that community and isolation can be achieved through language. From the opening line, "We all thought Billy was with Greg" (36), the reader is pulled into a certain intimacy. The narrator speaks from the assumption that the reader is a part of--or familiar with--the community, using the word "tricked" to refer to sex (41) and referring to Isabelle later on as a "beard," or a slang term to mean someone who knowingly or unknowingly dates someone--in this case, a gay man, to conceal their sexual identity (58). This sort of narrative creates an intimacy that seems to go against what Dan ever allows any of the men he takes as lovers. While the chapter's narrator--an unnamed gay man who is apparently part of the community--pulls the reader into the community, giving away its secrets and fears, Dan remains aloof and apart from it. He continues to deny that he is, in fact, gay, even as he undertakes a sexual relationship with Billy, a man who is described as a "sweet" guy, "who lifted weights and fucked large, and slapped you on the shoulder when it was time to swap around" (36). Dan remains separate from the reader and from the gay community in the novel, and when Billy ends up in the hospital at the end of the chapter, Dan distances himself even further and does not come to the hospital. Because we never see Dan's perspective of these events, it remains clear that Dan is squarely outside of this community. The narrative, therefore, demonstrates through the very focus and language it uses the way a person can be part of a community or cut off from it.

Despite the tone of gossip, this chapter demonstrates the deadly effect of secrets on a gay community in the early 1990s dealing with the unknowns of the AIDS epidemic. Thematically, this mirrors the secrets and evasions that the Madigan family will trade on in later in the text, but with far deadlier results. The chapter might use the style of gossip, but part of the power of that mode of communication is in withholding information and the effects that a lack of information can have. In the same way, the men in the community here do not often talk about those of their friends and acquaintances that are showing symptoms of the disease or might be suffering from it. They do not get tested until health crises force them into the hospital, and even then, there is not a willingness to speak openly about what is happening to their friends or to warn prospective lovers of possible health dangers. Only when the disease became visible do the men in the community face it. "Of all the signs, the purple bruise of Kaposi's was the one we hated most because there was no doubting it...it gets hard to leave the house. Sex is hard to find. Even a hug, when you are speckled by death is a complicated thing" (37). Because of this, they do not share diagnosis with one another. "It was not Billy's fault he did not know Greg's test results, because Greg did not tell him his results" (43). The danger they put one another in is both necessary (to remain part of the community) and deadly (as Billy will eventually die before Greg).

This chapter uses the irony of describing Dan, a man who uses his body to gain luxuries, as holy to critique the shallow nature of both Dan's faith, and the rest of his family's by proxy. In the first chapter, Dan's decision to become a priest set off conflict within the family and served as the first hint that the Madigans might not be as pious or faithful as a reader might expect from a Roman Catholic Irish family. In this chapter, it is clear that not only has Dan not become a priest, but that he has moved even further away from the teachings of the church. He is not only promiscuous, but his promiscuity is with other men, a serious sin in the eyes of the Church. Nevertheless, the narrator of this chapter continues to see Dan as almost holy, though it is unclear whether anyone in the gay community (the narrator included) knows about his past desire to be a priest. It might be that the narrator does, indeed, know and is using the imagery to poke fun at Dan, but the lack of specificity in the chapter means that it is also possible that the narrator does not know about Dan's past wish, and that there is something preacher-like about Dan. For example, during a dinner party, Dan is seen as "raising his preacher's hands" (49) when he quotes Whitman (the most American and most bodily of poets) at a dinner party. The image here gives the implication that there is something holy about Dan, or, if not holy, there is something that smacks of the performance of a preacher. The irony of Dan both being described as having preacher's hands at the same time he is using men for the luxuries and comforts his various lovers can provide him underscores the shallowness of religion in the text. This further undercuts the importance of religion as a moral guiding line in the world of these characters. Dan, who presumably has personal knowledge of the Bible and his religion is perhaps the least moral or caring of the many characters, while the men of the gay community are often more willing to be selfless, even as they would be judged as sinners by the Catholic church.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative in this chapter (Dan: New York, 1991) create a feeling of intimacy and closeness by using language specific to the gay community?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the various types of community in this chapter (Dan: New York, 1991). How are people brought into the community? How are certain people left out of community?

Discussion Question 3

How do descriptions of Dan that allude to religion work in relationship to the gay community in the text? What argument might the text be making about spirituality, sexuality, and morality?

Vocabulary

hustler, risotto, extricating, tricked, engirth, Kaposi's, queer

Constance: Co. Limerick, 1997

Summary

The chapter begins with Constance driving to the hospital. The narrative in this section remains in third person, but unlike the previous chapter, which gives everything away in the style of gossip, Constance's perspective refuses to directly address the reasons for her being at the hospital, at least at first. The narrative follows her thoughts as she thought about everything but the symptom she was having, and the reader will only realize a little ways in that Constance found a lump in her breast and feared she had cancer.

As she drove to the hospital, Constance thought of her girlfriends from school, who had all gone off to various adventures. She was the only one who stayed behind, without any real career, and who married later. As the chapter progresses, her thoughts about her friends and her past are interspersed with her notice of the waiting room around her. She remembered past events, especially pertaining to her femininity and life as a woman: childbirth, losing her virginity, and working at a pharmacy selling condoms to the girls who came in from the country. The woman next to her, Margaret Dolan, was a large woman with scars from cutting herself on her arm, and Constance could not help but compare their situations.

When the doctor called her back for the tests, Constance revealed that her husband, Dessie, had forgotten about her appointment and tried to figure out how she would tell everyone she had cancer. She had not told anyone beyond her husband about her appointment - especially not her mother. Constance thought of Dan and her life with him, and as she waited, she remembered visiting Dan in New York. The narrative did not, however, reveal whether Constance knew that he was gay.

It became clear that the woman who had been sitting by Constance was diagnosed with something dire. Constance's test, however, came back negative. She was clear and did not have cancer. Constance returned home, only to find out that Dessie had actually remembered about the appointment at some point during the day. The chapter ends with Constance and Dessie discussing sympathy and whether everyone felt the pain of others the way she felt for Margaret that day.

Analysis

While the previous chapter (about Dan) uses the tone of gossip to show how dangerous information is revealed and hidden within communities, Constance's chapter uses its narrative perspective to examine the way that people deal with danger and fear through denial. As we encounter Constance's perspective, it becomes clear that she is attempting to think about anything but the thing which brings her to the hospital--the lump in her breast. Instead, we learn about how time has passed since she was a

young girl. "It used to be so epic," she thinks, rewinding through to her past instead of focusing on her present (73). Thinking of the distant past becomes a safer topic than thinking of the symptom that has brought her to the hospital. The narrative replicates the fear and the denial she feels by not revealing any more about Constance's situation than she herself is willing to admit. The closest we get to understanding what has happening is when she thinks of the gaping of her blouse that her "breasts had done their time" (74). Even once she sits in the waiting room, Constance remains more focused on everything around her, allowing herself only to think in unspecific terms.

Because Constance remains detached, the narrative replicates that. Once again, the novel seems to be using narrative perspective to show how reality is formed by perception. For the reader, Constance's chapter might seem disjointed or confusing, until she reaches the point where the reality of her present situation intrudes. "Her body was a stupid thing" (76) is perhaps the first indication that her waiting at the hospital is something more than a routine checkup. It is as though she can no longer avoid thinking of the way her body has possibly betrayed her. The way that the narrative circles around Constance's reasons for going to the hospital mirrors the experience of being in denial, or denying the danger that might await her in the diagnosis. Because the narrative replicates that, the reader is able to experience it with the character.

The novel uses the lump Constance has found in her breast to symbolize the dangers of womanhood. That the illness she faces--breast cancer--is intimately related to her gender is important. Her breasts visibly define her as a woman, and they have also defined her life experiences. They have been a link to sexuality as well as the way she nurtured her children. It is darkly ironic, then, that it takes the possibility of cancer for her to become more aware of herself as a woman: "This is the chest my husband loves and my children will love for a few years yet, and I never loved it, not much" (80). Her possible diagnosis brings attention to her body in a way that she has never felt before, despite having children and even working in a pharmacy that dispensed women's hygiene products and prophylactics. Her identity as a woman, including her relationship with sexuality has been a difficult one. Unlike her friends, who all went off to have exciting careers, Constance remained behind. Instead of marrying young, she describes her first sexual experience as a rape, and she married Dessie later in life, settling down finally. As she faces this new health crisis, however, she has to take stock of her life, and in doing so she comes to the realization that so much of her life revolves around her womanhood and the experiences she has had because of her sex. These will be the very things that her other siblings will look down at her for in other chapters, but even in this chapter, Constance does not seem completely fulfilled: her husband has forgotten about her appointment, and her children do not know what she is going through. It is only when her test comes back clear that she thinks "she had everything, more than everything, her life was overflowing" (99).

Finally, the chapter uses the conversation that Constance has in the waiting room of the hospital to argue for the importance of community and the danger and of isolation and separation. Constance approaches a sense of community when she talks to Margaret Dolan in the waiting room. Both women are stuck in the waiting room, a sort of limbo, and while they are stuck, there is a sense of community between them there might not

otherwise be. Outside of that space, however, there is a separation between women. Margaret is clearly in poor health, with ill-fitting clothes, and a history of scars on her arms that would indicate possible mental illness. In any other situation, it is doubtful that Constance would have reached out to Margaret, and it is clear from the end of the chapter (when Constance drives home, relieved) that she will not reach out and continue the relationship after, especially when it is clear that Margaret's diagnosis has not been as positive. Despite their differences, however, being in the waiting room forges a new type of connection.

Alone while she waits, Constance does not have a community of women to support her. She did not tell her mother about her mammogram or her girlfriends. They are all off, living their own lives, and it is clear that the distance between them is as much emotional as physical. As Constance thinks "on days like this she missed her girlfriends, who had their own lives and their own troubles in distant towns. Because Constance had two sons who told her nothing and a husband who told her nothing and a father who told her nothing and then died" (91). However, for a moment, she is able to share a single moment of connection with Margaret. She can see something in Margaret's humanity that she might not otherwise have felt. As ephemeral as this moment of connection it, the comfort Constance derives from it is clear. Compared to the other relationships she has in the chapter--with her husband, with her old girlfriends--this moment is rich with possibility and the novel uses it to show the importance of breaching the boundaries of isolation.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrator give clues to the reasons for Constance's visit to the hospital? What is the effect of the third person, omniscient narrator withholding so much information at first?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Constance's relationship with her own womanhood and femininity. Why does this particular health scare bring to mind her status as both a wife and mother?

Discussion Question 3

How does Margaret Dolan function as a foil for Constance? In which ways are they similar? How are they different?

Vocabulary

trance, trolley, carriageway, gnashing, deflowered, banquette, unaesthetic, orb

Emmet: Ségou, Mali, 2002

Summary

The chapter about Emmet's past is set in Mali, where he was working with some foreign aid organization. The chapter is told in third person, past tense narration, but there is a certain distance maintained throughout. The narrator will often address the reader directly, but will withhold some information. For instance, the narrative never clearly explains exactly what he was doing or who he worked for, because the narrator focuses instead on his relationship with a woman named Alice and the dog she adopted.

The chapter begins three months after Emmet moved in with Alice, a woman working in the third world to save children and babies. He had just returned from being on the road, and she greeted him cooly, asking him to bathe before they had sex. At the beginning of the chapter, Emmet saw a piece of china outside, and felt that something was wrong. The narrative did not explain the source of this feeling at first, but eventually Emmet realized that Alice found and adopted a ragged dog. Still, it was unclear why the china being used as the dog's bowl would make Emmet feel so uneasy.

As the chapter progressed, it became clear that the dog presented a problem, because the local Muslim culture saw dogs as unclean. Ibrahim, Emmet's cook and housekeeper was unhappy with the dog, as were the other locals, while Emmet himself was indifferent. Emmet saw the dog as part of the filth that caused so many diseases he was trying to fight, but his desire to have sex with Alice gave him an incentive to put up with the creature.

In the middle of the chapter, there was a flashback to ten years before, when Emmet returned home when his father was sick and dying. Emmet thought of the experience of returning to Ireland and to his childhood home, and he remembered how devastating it was to see his father die. Emmet also admitted to himself that he was in Mali, in part, to outrun a nervous breakdown. His relief work was a way to distract himself with the heat and difficulty of life in the jungle instead of dealing with whatever had set him running in the first place.

The chapter progresses over the course of the summer, and as the weeks went by, Emmet and Alice's relationship grew more tenuous. After she was followed by barking local children, Alice realized that the dog ate better than Ibrahim's children. The children had resorted to begging as dogs to get food. This fact did not make Alice change her mind about keeping the dog, however. After a while, Alice left Mali to return home for a visit. Without Alice to stop him, Emmet put the dog out in the yard while she was away, which made the local servants in his house happier. By the time Alice came back to Mali, a month later, he dog was no longer used to being in the house and Emmet had to struggle to convince the creature to come indoors. The day Alice returned, the dog was indoors, but a day later it began acting sick. The sickness progressed quickly, and the dog died in her arms. The dog was most likely poisoned by one of the locals. Alice was

devastated, but Emmet, who spent his time trying to save people could not find it in him to show an overwhelming amount of sympathy. When Emmet grew frustrated and told her the dog was not a person, Alice left him.

The chapter ends with Emmet alone, but instead of sulking, he went out to a local bar and had a drink. The narrative made it clear that he was not broken or even overly upset by Alice's departure, because he had expected it for some time. For Emmet, life had returned to its previous rhythm, and everything was as it should be. Still, the end of the chapter has a tone that remains closer to loneliness than hope, and there is the implication that Emmet really had loved Alice, despite telling her too late.

Analysis

The contrast between the intimacy projected by the third person narrator in Emmet's chapter and Emmet's own standoffishness demonstrates the importance of community in the face of isolation. For most of the chapter, the narrator remains detached, much like Emmet himself, but often it uses "you" to draw the reader in. This serves to make the reader feel as though they are a part of the narrative. Similar to the narrative in Dan's chapter, the narrator of Emmet's chapter projects an intimacy that makes the reader part of the community within the text. For instance, the narrative describes the refrigerator as "a squat, yellowing thing with a pull handle you don't see at home any more" (110). Just as in the chapter about Dan's life in New York, this narrator is part of Emmet's community--a fellow Irishman who considers Ireland "home," though in a way that Emmet himself might not. The use of the word "you" gives a sense of intimacy, as though the reader is one of them as well. Whether or not the reader is actually Irish, or whether the reader has ever seen one of the refrigerators being described, the tone and intimacy of the narrator serves to bring the reader in, and to make them a part of a larger community. This intimacy, again, is one not shared by Emmet, himself. Even as he undertakes a relationship with Alice and even as he works in humanitarian aid, Emmet remains emotionally separated from everything and everything around him. The reader cannot tell if this is part of his personality or perhaps a reaction to the nervous breakdown he claims he almost had, but the effects of the distance he maintains is clear. He has a relationship with Alice, but he holds himself apart from her, not allowing himself to attain any real closeness. He can not bring himself to feel sympathy for the dog either. His inability to allow himself to forge real emotional connections results, ultimately, in Alice leaving him.

The settings of the chapter, the jungles of Mali and the brief return to Ireland in a flashback, illustrate the extent to which the place of a person's birth can continue to follow them. The reader never really is told why Emmet fled from Ireland, and it is also not clear that Emmet himself understands what caused him to flee from office work and Ireland and into the third world. However, we do understand that there is something about Ireland--or about his life there--that caused him to leave. Throughout the chapter, the very idea of leaving the jungle and heat behind is enough to inspire a panic attack in him. "Sometimes, Emmet thought he wanted a nice air-conditioned office with Nespresso coffee and Skype on tap, but then he thought a nice air-conditioned office

was an open invitation to his nervous breakdown" (127). It is only the chaos of the work he does that keeps the breakdown away, because any time he inches toward places that are more developed he "felt it in the ducts, like Legionnaires" (127). Part of what he felt "in the ducts," however, is linked to his country of birth. Whenever he thinks of the coolness of Ireland or imagines himself there, he has the same premonition of dread that caused him to flee. The contrast between the country of Ireland (especially as the reader has already seen it) and the countries he finds himself living in conveys the desperation Emmet feels, but also the extent to which the places we flee from--those that form us--continue to have a hold.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Emmet as a character. What do you make of the contrast between his humanitarian work and his reluctance to form any real emotional connections with others around him?

Discussion Question 2

How do Emmet's memories of Ireland inform his current position? What might the novel be saying about the importance of place?

Discussion Question 3

How does the narrator position the reader in the text? How does the use of the word "you" to address the reader directly allow one to feel more engaged with the text? What keeps the reader from fulling understanding Emmet's story?

Vocabulary

pathetic, undone, generator, locusts, murmuring, baldy, vague, aggrieved

Rosaleen: Ardeevin, 2005

Summary

In the Rosaleen section, the reader finally gets to see the mother that the children have circled around for the first half of the novel. This selection marks the middle of the novel in terms of both plot and theme. From here, the children will not be "leaving," as the first section is titled (1) to "Coming Home" as the second half is called (166).

The style of Rosaleen's section represents a shift from the earlier narration. While it remains in the third person, the language of the narrative becomes more impressionistic and lyrical, often mirroring the thought process of an elderly woman on the verge of dementia.

The chapter opens in November of 2005 with Rosaleen deciding to write out her Christmas cards. Each card she wrote to her children made her recall memories about those children. As she thought about her children and who they had become, she also thought about poetry. She thought of lines from "Out Beyond Ideas," by Rumi , "Dark Rosaleen" by James Clarence Mangan, and "Fontenoy, 1745" by Emily Lawless at various points in the chapter, and the poetry often interrupted her regular thoughts.

In the chapter, time seems to happen all at once for Rosaleen. As she thought of her children, their pasts and presents collide and became a singular thing. Dan might be in his forties, but she pictured him as a child. She saw herself as both seven and seventy all at once. She recalled her children, now grown, and voiced disapproval at their refusal to call her "Rosaleen," and their insistence on calling her Mam or Mammy, names she despised.

Eventually, Rosaleen began to think of her husband and his death. The chapter then flashes back to Rosaleen's teenage years, when she met her husband, Pat Madigan. Looking back, Rosaleen understood that she married beneath her, even as she claimed that he was her one and only love. As the day stretched on, Rosaleen began to get confused about what time it was and what she was doing. It becomes clear to the reader that Rosaleen might be in the early stages of dementia as her thoughts bounced from one memory to the next, replaying moments of her past almost at random. At some point, Rosaleen's oldest daughter, Constance, arrived with groceries, to check in on Rosaleen. After Constance left, Rosaleen thought about how all of her children left or how she chased them away. Feeling even more uncomfortable in her own house, she made the decision that in the morning she would go talk to the auctioneer to sell it.

Analysis

The focus on motherhood in Rosaleen's section reveals the ways that motherhood and womanhood are often links while it exposes the fact that becoming a mother often erases the identity of the woman herself for the people around her. As Rosaleen thinks

about her life, she focuses on her life as a woman and especially as a mother, reliving much of what she has done, and what she has failed to accomplish. Most of those reminiscences revolve around experiences with her now-deceased husband and her children. These memories serve to reveal something about Rosaleen--a woman who had remained unnamed until this point in the text--that her children's perspectives have not revealed. Specifically, this section shows Rosaleen as a woman and an individual rather than simply as a person occupying the space of "mother." Until this point, the reader's only glimpse of the Madigan siblings' mother has been through the eyes of her children, and in Hannah's case, through the eyes of a literal child. We have seen Rosaleen as a dramatic, depressive woman who took to bed, and as a judgmental and overbearing mother whom Constance did not tell about her illness. In Emmet's section, Rosaleen was completely absent. In this chapter, however, the reader begins to see the mother as a woman in her own right, one who had hopes and dreams and a reality completely separate from her children. Like Constance, Rosaleen had a life as a woman beyond her role as a mother. As Rosaleen addresses her Christmas cards, the color red reminds her of a Matisse painting, which causes her to also think of the other art she has not seen and the places she has not visited. Her life has been limited to her identity as a Considine (the daughter of her well-respected father), as the wife of Pat Madigan, and finally, as a mother to her children. The novel makes it clear, however, that none of the people around her, except perhaps Dan who shares his travels with her, has any real understanding of the woman beneath those labels. If the labels fulfilled her, perhaps Rosaleen's chapter would reveal a different theme--the possibilities of fulfillment in motherhood. However, these roles do not fulfill Rosaleen. Unlike Constance, in an earlier chapter, Rosaleen does not derive happiness from this, but sees her children as ungrateful as they have left her behind and forgotten about her. "Because that is what your babies do, when they grow. They turn around and say it is all your fault" (152). She might have willingly occupied the space of mother and wife, but now that her role as a mother has changed an no longer focuses on the nurturing of small children, Rosaleen wishes to be seen only as herself. This wish, however, is one her children remain completely oblivious to, as they continue to call her Mam or Mammy when she specifically instructs them to call her Rosaleen. For then, Rosaleen is only mother, not a woman and not an individual apart from them.

The way the narrative replicates the thought process of an elderly person descending into early dementia reinforces the argument of consciousness and perception revealing and constructing reality. It becomes clear through the style of the narrative that Rosaleen might be suffering from early dementia. She forgets the time and becomes confused easily, and her narrative reflects this altered reality. Because Rosaleen's state of mind is often confused, the chapter itself can be difficult to follow. This means that the reader can only grasp snippets of Rosaleen's life and must piece together the events--and the veracity of those events--on their own. In addition to the disjointed nature of the narrative, Rosaleen's section also demonstrates how Rosaleen's confusion collapses time. What the outside world might see as a clear progression--child to adult--Rosaleen perceives as simultaneous. When she thinks of her children, they are always children. "All she could remember was his smooth eight-year-old cheek against her cheek" (146). This fact makes their abandonment and blaming of her much more frustrating for Rosaleen. While the children perceive themselves as having grown and separated, as

children are supposed to do, Rosaleen still sees her adult offspring as they once were--as children. For her, there should not be the divisions and separation between them, because they are still they same in Rosaleen's mind. The continuity of her children is not the only way the focus through Rosaleen's perspective bends reality, though. She sees herself, past, present, and future, as one self. "Rosaleen Considine, six years old, seventy-six years old. Some days, it wasn't easy to join the dots," she things (147). Together, time becomes both fluid and disjointed, which is mirrored by her actual experience in the chapter, when she finds herself in the darkened house and unsure of the time. Because the reader only gets their information about Rosaleen in this way, her reality becomes the reality of the text.

The novel in Rosaleen's chapter uses allusions to other literary texts to highlight the importance of the literary in developing one's understanding of the world. Throughout her section, lines from poems arise in Rosaleen's consciousness. Specifically, this section uses lines from Rumi's "Out Beyond Ideas," "Dark Rosaleen" by James Clarence Mangan, and Emily Lawless's "Fontenoy, 1745." The inclusion of these dramatically different literary voices tell us something specific about the character of Rosaleen Madigan--she is much more worldly and aware than her children give her credit for. These poets are perhaps not what one might expect from a novel about an Irish family set in Ireland. They are not Yeats or Seamus Heaney, but instead include Rumi, a Persian poet and mystic, and a lesser-known female poet from County Clare. Together with the poem by Mangan, the inclusion of these lines indicate that Rosaleen has a rich, imaginative personal life. To be able to bring such lines up from memory, even in the throws of early dementia, demonstrates that she has immersed herself in art and literature, reading these lines often enough to be able to memorize them. But the lines are not randomly interspersed in the text. When Rosaleen thinks of a line of poetry, it has a direct relation to the moment in time she is recalling. For instance, when Rosaleen thinks of her children sleeping in their beds, each of then sleeping so differently, she immediately thinks of the line from Rumi, "The whole night long we dream of you, and waking think we're there,--" (147). The line has immediate resonance for the image she is recalling, giving the sense that Rosaleen is using the poetry she has consumed in her life as a way to interpret the moments of her life. Poetry and literature become a way of understanding reality even as they remain a way to survive it.

Discussion Question 1

How do the specific lines from the poems resonate with the moments Rosaleen remembers in her life?

Discussion Question 2

How do the Christmas cards Rosaleen writes reveal the various relationships she has with her children?

Discussion Question 3

How does the narrative use memory to reveal Rosaleen's character? Compare the character of Rosaleen we see here to the one each of her children see or understand.

Vocabulary

impenetrable, ringlets, cistern, telly, blattering

Toronto

Summary

"Toronto" is the first chapter in Part II "Going Home" in the novel.

It is now 2005 and the novel shifts to chapters labeled by places instead of people. In the chapter called "Toronto," the reader again encounters Dan, though now older and more settled.

As the chapter opens, Dan's lover, Ludo, told him that he should go back to Ireland to see his mother. Dan at first refused, remembering all the ways his family failed to understand him and put unwanted demands upon him. As they talked, Dan realized--to his dismay--that he loved Ludo. The narrative then flashes back to the story of how the two men met. The next day, Dan found that Ludo bought him a ticket to Ireland, and Dan confessed his love. The two men decided to marry, and Dan realized he was bad at being human. However, Dan understood that he would take Ludo's love with him, as protection on the trip home to Ireland and as a promise that he would return to Toronto.

Analysis

This chapter uses Dan's character development, specifically his realization of what his relationship with Ludo has become, to demonstrate the way that connectedness is necessary for human happiness. In this chapter, the narrative shifts to an older version of Dan, one who is still not quite ready to see himself as settled, even if he has accepted his homosexuality. Dan has spent the majority of his adult life jumping from one place to another in search of greater comfort and luxury, but in the opening of this chapter, he realizes that it is not the wealth or luxury that keeps him with Ludo, but the comfort of their life together. As Dan performs the very homey chore of chopping vegetables, he looks out at the snow and realizes, "the blue of it took the money out of everything...all Ludo's cosy objects, and his middle age skin" (169). The comfort Dan feels at this moment, looking out into the whiteness of the snow is in direct contrast to the moment in his youth (earlier in the novel) when he stood in the white apartment and looked out at the city. Here, however, the purity is not artificial lacquer and industrial plastics, but the purity of the snow outside the home he shares with a middle-aged man he actually loves. The realization of his love for Ludo, though, is a "terrible" thing for Dan (174). He has always known that he liked Ludo, had even known that "Ludo had loved him. Totally. Abjectly" (174), but the realization that Dan returns that love shakes him awake. "The difference was the yearning he felt for a man who was within arms reach...without him he [Dan] was nothing. With him, everything. Wherever they were, the smell of Ludo's skin was the smell of home" (174). Until the moment Dan opens himself to this possibility, he does not realize that the connection afforded by this version of love gives him a centering strength. As he looks around the home they share, Dan sees it anew: "a sweetness coating everything Ludo possessed...everything full of

meaning, throbbing with it" (175). Dan's new vulnerability and connection with Ludo (despite the fact that their relationship is nearly five years old) allows Dan to realize that his fear of returning home to Ireland is a fear of being stuck and separated. His acceptance of his new love for Ludo, and his acceptance of Ludo's proposal, gives Dan a strength he did not previously possess. "He took the malty sweetness of Ludo's body as a memory and a talisman, to keep him company on the journey home" (181). If Dan's character had left home to search for something to complete him, it was not wealth or lifestyle that rewarded him, but vulnerability and connection. When he allows himself that connection with another person, he is no longer vulnerable to the fear of returning home and losing the self he has become to his past.

The chapter uses the status of Dan's sexuality to show the ways that family can inflict harm through misunderstanding and judgement, even as they love one another. While Dan has found connection and family and stability with Ludo, his identity as a gay man separates him from his biological family. Dan has not come out to his family, but he implicitly understands that they know he is gay. "No one told them that he was gay, they just figured it out for themselves" (172). But the Dan that he is with Ludo is not the Dan he can be with his family, because the weight of the past Dan shares with his siblings threatens to pull him away from the adult self he has become. "No, Dan could not go home. Or if he did go, it was not Dan who walked in the door to them all" (172). In this way, the narrative reveals a primary contradiction of family and the closeness it inspires. Those who are closest to us, related to us cannot always know us in the way we want to be known. More importantly, perhaps, those who we share a past with--especially our families--have the ability to wound us and leave us vulnerable in ways no one else can.

Discussion Question 1

How does Dan's realization of his love for Ludo forge a change in his character? How does this set him apart from other characters in the text? How does it make him similar?

Discussion Question 2

Why does returning home to Ireland and to his family feel so dangerous for Dan? What does he fear most?

Discussion Question 3

How does Dan's identity as a gay man separate him from his family? What does this separation mean for the idea of family in the novel?

Vocabulary

momentous, waistcoats, masochistic, kaffeeklatsch

Dublin

Summary

The reader has not seen Hannah since she was an 11-year-old girl at the opening of the novel. Although the first half of the novel was titled "Leaving," Hannah has never left. She did not leave in her first chapter and she remained absent in the consciousnesses of her siblings in their chapters. Here, during the second part of the novel, "Coming Home," Hannah does come home, even though her trip is a short few hours across Ireland, from Dublin to County Clare.

This chapter opens with Hannah, now 37, bleeding on the floor of her kitchen. The narrative followed Hannah's drunken thoughts as she attempted to figure out how she came to be on the floor and where all of the blood was coming from. Eventually, her boyfriend, Hugh, found her and called for an ambulance. Despite her injuries, Hannah found herself happy to be taken away in the ambulance, because it meant she would be away from the baby and her life, at least for a little while.

As Hannah waited in the hospital, the narrative flashes back at that point to cover the years that had led up to that moment. An actress, Hannah never left Ireland for LA, as everyone told her too. By 26 she was too old to try, and by 37 she had met Hugh and gotten pregnant. While she loved her baby, she was not handling motherhood well. At one point, she began spiking her own bottle of juice with alcohol, so that she could drink constantly without anyone knowing. When the baby got ahold of that bottle and drank the alcohol-laced juice, Hugh discovered it and decided not to leave Hannah alone with the baby anymore.

For the upcoming Christmas, the couple decided that Hannah would head to her mother's house and Hugh would take the baby to his family's place. Their relationship was clearly on the brink of breaking up because of Hannah's drinking. Before they part for the holiday, however, Hannah took the baby from Hugh for a moment and remembered a happy time the couple had together.

Analysis

In this chapter, the novel once again uses narrative style to mimic consciousness, and in doing so, builds on the argument for how perception shapes reality. When the chapter opens, Hannah is so drunk that she has fallen and injured herself quite badly. The reader, however, is not completely aware of what going on, as the opening lines of the chapter, beginning with "if only she could keep it in a box...to stop it crusting over where the liquid met air" are extremely confusing (182). The "it" in this passage, we eventually realize, is her own blood, which seems to be running out of her body at an alarming rate, but the narrative, focused as it is through her perspective, refuses to reveal much of anything for nearly four paragraphs. Finally we learn "she had slipped," and the

reader begins to realize that the blood that is oozing is Hannah's own (183). Hannah's narrative remains as confusing and disjointed as Hannah's own thoughts as she tries to piece together what has happened to her, but it remains fixated on minutia, jumping from the color of the blood to the thought that the baby was not crying all in the span of a few lines. The revelation that she has a baby also comes disjointedly, calling her child "a little opposite thing" and "a fight they wrapped in a cloth" rather than thinking clearly about herself as a mother or her relationship with her boyfriend. As the chapter progresses, and Hannah inevitably sobers up, the narrative becomes more consistent and easier to follow. But in these opening moments, everything the reader knows about the adult version of Hannah, her entire character, is formed through the perspective of a confused alcoholic haze. Inevitably, when Hugh eventually takes their child from Hannah, the reader might feel pity for Hannah, but they sense that ultimately, Hugh is doing the right thing.

Hannah's chapter also delves into the theme of motherhood, revealing the ways that having a baby compromises a woman's self. Unlike Constance, who deals with teenage sons, or Rosaleen, who regrets the way her adult children have left her behind, Hannah's understanding of motherhood is linked specifically to her infant. The baby has transformed her relationship with Hugh, putting her "semi-permanently in the wrong" (189) and has transformed her dreams from being merely delayed to completely gone. At 37 and with a child, she will most likely never become the actor she had once dreamed of becoming. She thinks, "when you have a baby there is no such thing as the end, there is only more of the same" (191). Hannah's disillusionment with her status as a mother and with her child echoes the same disillusionment Rosaleen felt in an earlier chapter. However, because Hannah never is able to see her mother as anything but a mother--and not as the woman she once was before children--Hannah never really gets to the point the reader does in seeing the similarities and connections between the women's shared experiences.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative replicate the thought-process and experience of being drunk? Why is it important that Hannah's narrative is not clear at the beginning?

Discussion Question 2

How is Hannah's experience as a mother similar to Rosaleen's? Why is Hannah unable to see her own experience and her mother's in the same way?

Discussion Question 3

How does Hannah's experience with the baby continue earlier themes of motherhood and family?

Vocabulary

ooze, operating theatre, savage, doozie, trajectory

Shannon Airport

Summary

As the family comes together in Ireland, the narrative shifts to combine their individual perspectives into single chapters. Where once the individual siblings and Rosaleen have had their perspectives separated into individual chapters, apart from each other even as they might have interacted, once the novel shifts to chapters in which a chapter shifts between perspectives, giving a more multifaceted understanding of the events of the text.

This chapter begins with the third person point of view narrated through Constance's perspective as Dan arrived for his visit in Ireland. After Dan's arrival, Constance realized she was already picking silent fights with Dan. The reader learned that Constance knew her brother was gay and while she might have accepted it, she still worried about what people in her town or people they met would think.

Halfway through, the chapter's focus shifted to Dan, who could barely stand the sight of the Irish sun. He pretended to sleep as they drove, but three miles to the house, they found Rosaleen driving her small car very badly down the road. Dan accused Constance of trying to kill their mother by allowing her to drive when she should not be.

Analysis

This chapter uses the meeting of Dan and Constance to explore the ways that our adult identities have not erased, but are simply layered over the identities we have as children. When Dan steps off the plane, Constance sees him both as her brother "she new him immediately" and as a gay man that she does not know "more camp than she remembered" (197). Both are her brother, but it is the eight-year-old Dan who anchors her affection for him. "In the place where Constance loved Dan, he was eight years old" (198). Because identity is not only how we see ourselves, but how those around us see and position us, Constance's view of her brother is important. In Toronto, away from the gaze of his family, Dan can be his adult self, but the history he shares with Constance has the power to remind him that he is not only his adult self. Beneath the man he has become is the child he once was, and both inform the whole character that he is.

Dan's arrival in Ireland, and his reaction to the place itself, reveals the importance of place for our understanding of identity. Ireland as a place has loomed for these characters even as they left it, but in this chapter, Ireland becomes a reality for Dan and he begins to realize that the land itself has loomed in his life as an anchor. Dan thinks as he drives, "He knew this place. It was a secret he had carried inside him; a map of things he had known and lost, these half-glimpsed houses and stone walls, the field of solid green" (203). Despite the familiarity, however, Ireland has changed for him because he has changed. For Dan, the light of the Irish sun brings this sense of

familiarity and being out of place all at once into focus. "Dan squeezed out the insistent light of home, which was the same as any other light, it was just at the wrong time" (200). After living in Toronto, it should not be sunrise when he steps off a plane after six hours. Dan is literally in the wrong time, as his internal clock is now set to North American time, and his body tells him it should be night. The flight across the ocean is both literal and metaphoric in this way, transporting him bodily while being still unable to rewind the years or minutes completely. Dan continues to feel out of time despite the familiarity of the place. This surrealness that Dan experiences underlines the larger theme of Ireland or home as a place of importance to these characters. Despite his attempt to disengage from Ireland and from his family, Dan's experience returning to Ireland after years away highlights the importance of place and land in the very formation of identity.

Discussion Question 1

How does Constance feel about her brother's sexual identity? Did Dan correctly predict how he would be seen?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Dan's initial experience of returning back to Ireland. How does the country feel the same to him? How does the country feel different?

Discussion Question 3

How does the narrative's shift between Constance's perspective of Dan and Dan's perspective of Ireland change the tone of this chapter (Shannon Airport)? Does this shift demonstrate connections, isolation, or some combination of the two?

Vocabulary

camp, inhabited, concourse, turbulence, bumbled

Co. Dublin

Summary

On Christmas Eve the siblings and family all gathered at Rosaleen's house to celebrate the holiday and eat a meal. In this chapter the third person narrative continues to shift between siblings rather than remaining focused on one.

The chapter opened as Emmett called his mother to let her know that he and his sister Hannah would be on the way soon. He told his mother that Hannah was not bringing the baby. He felt guilty that he was leaving his roommate – a Kenyan refugee – alone on Christmas to go to his mother's house. Still, he decided not to invite his roommate along because in the Madigan household family is not inclusive of outsiders.

After his arrival back at the Madigan house, Emmet's anger toward his mother was revealed through his reactions to almost everything Rosaleen did or said. Although nothing much actually happened, and although Emmet did not actually voice most of his opinions about his mother, the unspoken past hurts continued to come up for Emmet. It also became clear through things that Rosaleen says that she may not know (or admit) that Dan was gay.

After dinner broke up, Hannah could no longer stand the alcohol-free house, so she talked Emmett into going down to the local bar. At the bar, Emmet realized just how changed everything was from when they were children and how fake everything had become. He also noticed that Hannah seemed to change immediately as soon as she consumed the alcohol, and in recognizing his sister's problems, Emmet thought briefly about going back to counseling himself as he flashed back to a moment where he felt a child dying in his arms during his relief work. At the end of the chapter they left the bar before Hannah could spend the night with McGrath, who would be the one to auction off their mothers house, and they stopped at the local shop so that Hannah could get more alcohol.

Analysis

The revolving narrative perspective in the chapter (as it jumps between focusing through the various siblings) demonstrates the way that past hurts that have not been dealt with or healed can continue to intrude upon the present.

As Christmas dinner progresses, the narrative exposes the unspoken ways that families can interact, resurrecting old wounds without meaning to and falling into patterns that each individual person has attempted to escape. Much of this interaction has to do with the meeting of the relationships these people had as children versus the relationships they have as adults. As Hannah looks at Dan, she recognizes this duality. "Her knowledge of him came from two directions and met in the human being sitting at the table" (217). Throughout the chapter, individual characters reveal or react to past hurts,

which serves to expose that no matter how much people and places may seem to change, old wounds often remain the same. For instance, despite the pleasantries shared between Constance and Dan, Constance harbors a grudge about Dan leaving them all, especially in terms of knowing what was happening with their mother. When Dan tries to commiserate, Constance thinks "he had no way of knowing. How could he know? He had not been there" (199). Clearly, Constance is angry at him, and yet the two never speak of this. She remains silent, and that silence means that her anger and annoyance will only build throughout dinner and their other interactions. When Rosaleen asks where the baby is, Hannah is angry because they already told Rosaleen the baby was not coming when Emmet called. Hannah cannot see that this question has more to do with her mother's beginning dementia, because old wounds are reopened with the question. It is clear that Rosaleen had often questioned Hannah in this way, making her feel as though she was not enough in the past. Emmet feels the same way. When Rosaleen asks about Emmet's roommate, his internal reaction is to be angry. "She was an impossible woman...Emmet could not understand why the truth was such a problem to Rosaleen, why facts were an irrelevance, or an accusation" (214). His reaction seems strange considering the pleasantries they are supposed to be exchanging, but the emotional impact of these reactions reveal the fact that there are past wounds left untended. These wounds cause divisions in the family that even them coming together for a holiday cannot get escape.

Discussion Question 1

How does Rosaleen upset her children at Christmas dinner? Why is what she asks or says so upsetting? Does it reveal misunderstandings rather than understanding?

Discussion Question 2

How do the individual family members remain separate despite coming together for Christmas?

Discussion Question 3

What does Emmet's reaction to Rosaleen tell you about the person he has become once he left Ireland? How does it show you what parts of the younger Emmet remains?

Vocabulary

improbably, blatant

The Hungry Grass

Summary

Although this chapter comes after Constance picked up Dan from the airport, the chapter opens before that point, taking the reader back in time to the day before, with Constance shopping for a Christmas present for her mother, Rosaleen. Constance made a special trip up to Galway to select an overly expensive scarf so she could pretend that it was not a bother or expense to purchase it, but the entire chapter becomes a revelation of Constance's frustration with the failure of this goal.

After purchasing the scarf and picking up Dan, Constance shopped for Christmas dinner at the local market. The narrative has still not caught up to the previous chapter's setting, Christmas eve. During the shopping trip, Constance bought a lavish amount of food, spending $400 on the shopping bill, but as she loaded the bags into her car, she realized that she forgot the Brussels sprouts her mother always made. After a debate with herself, Constance made a second trip back into the market for forgotten Brussels sprouts and picked up even more food. Constance then drove to her home and then to her mother's house at Ardeevin to deposit the groceries.

The next day was Christmas Eve, and the narrative finally catches up to the time period of the chapter before. On Christmas day, Constance slaved away in the kitchen at Ardeevin, her mother's house, with Dan, who helped to cook, while Rosaleen went to church. Rosaleen was indifferent about the gift of the scarf, the first of many problems that would happen that day. As the narrative revealed the minutia of the siblings' relationships with one another and their mother, Rosaleen insisted she would sell the house and (to Constance's surprise and horror) move in with Constance.

The family sat down to dinner and continued to discuss the sale of the house. Tensions began to rise as the individuals around the table are faced with their present situations: what they have and have not accomplished with their lives. Constance declared suddenly that she did not want Rosaleen to live with her and that her mother could buy a small bungalow instead, which caused the entire family to go silent and retreat to separate corners of the house. Each of the siblings disappeared into old bedrooms and spaces in the house, avoiding the confrontation.

The siblings all began to realize how much they do not understand each other, which caused each of the children to examine the other connections and separations in their lives. Dan returned to the love he had with Ludo. Emmet realized that he had lost something when he let Alice go so easily, and that he might lose more if he did not figure out how to allow his girlfriend Saar in. Constance came to realize that her children have, in fact, given her the satisfaction she has never attained from her own mother. And Hannah realized that she knew her siblings more than she has imagined. Little by little the siblings come back together, though. Dan announced his upcoming wedding.

At the end of the chapter, this peace was interrupted when a call came on the phone for Rosaleen, and the children realized she was not there.

Analysis

"The Hungry Grass" uses the focuses of the narration through the various perspectives of each Madigan family members as they encounter each other and their mother to show how isolation and separation creates misunderstandings between people, even between family. As the children and Rosaleen sit around the dinner table, each struggles to understand--and often instead misunderstands--one another. The way the children react to each other reveals as much about their own situation as it reveals about their relationships with one another. What becomes clear is that the children's almost instinctive need to separate themselves as independent adults has worked, but it has also created distance and isolation from one another and their core set of relationships--their family. This isolation has repercussions in their lives.

Most starkly, we see through Rosaleen's perspective that she understands her children's failures perhaps better than they understand themselves. As they interact around the Christmas table, Rosaleen realizes that for each of her children, "...their failure gaped back at them, and they just stood there, looking at it. It was true. They had no money. And yet, and yet. They each struggled to remember this, they had enough" (236). Rosaleen, even in her dementia sees some wholeness within the separations each of her children have created between one another. Though they are different and have carved out separate lives, they have a shared reality, even if that reality was simply to leave Rosaleen and Ardeevin behind. As the stories each of the siblings tell themselves about who they are, who their mother is, and who they were once come into the light, causing each of them to have to face the truth. The truth, however, is not necessarily what the reader expects. After a novel that mostly left Rosaleen out of her children's consciousnesses, they realize that she has always been at the center of their existences: "he recognized, in the silence, the power Rosaleen had over her children, none of whole had grown up to match her" (240). Their separation and isolation, their desire to be apart from their family, their mother, and one another has not aided them in any way. If anything, they seem more cohesive and whole here, in this moment around the family table, than they did in any of their separate chapters.The way the narrative jumps through each of their perspectives allows the reader to experience this knitting together of family.

The focus Rosaleen serves as center of Christmas dinner displays the extent to which motherhood--both in the person and the category--functions as a way of forging connections. Even as the children have tried to leave their childhood behind, even as they have cut ties with each other and allowed her relationships to grow distant, their mother becomes the link that brings them all together and keeps them together. In part, this is because Rosaleen represents a shared reality that no one outside of the circle of their family understands. But it is not simply Rosaleen's children that come to understand how important and also how enigmatic the relationship with a mother is. Rosaleen recognizes, "it's a very hard thing...to describe your mother" (242). Partially

this is because the act of describing a mother is not one that gets to the core of a person. Mothers and motherhood is an identity, a category, but as Rosaleen, Constance, and Hannah's individual chapters have already revealed, the state of being a mother does not subsume the woman who occupies that space. The children a mother has, however, might never get beneath the office of mother to understand, experience, or even encounter the woman that existed before she gave birth. Certainly, Rosaleen's own children do not understand the woman she once was. It becomes even more difficult to describe a mother, however, because the rotating perspectives in this chapter reveal just exactly how different each sibling's experience is with Rosaleen as their mother. Each of the children know a different Rosaleen, so although she serves as the glue binding them back together, their experience of her remains disconnected and different.

Discussion Question 1

Describe how each of the siblings see themselves and each other. How do these differences in perspective and understanding keep the siblings separated from one another? How does the reader's understanding of all of these perspectives give a clearer understanding of the family as a whole?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Rosaleen's interpretation of her children's lives. Is she right when she sees their failures? Or is she still misunderstanding them as individual people?

Discussion Question 3

How do the individual siblings sitting around the Christmas table remain isolated? How are they still separated from each other and from the ones they have relationships outside that house?

Vocabulary

complexion, bauble, excruciating, undernourished, jackdaw, hearth

The Green Road

Summary

The chapter titled "The Green Road" remains in third person past tense, but where the previous chapters have shifted to focus through various perspectives of the Madigan family, this chapter is focused exclusively through Rosaleen's perspective. Following the uncomfortable argument around the Christmas dinner table about where Rosaleen would live once the house was sold, Rosaleen went out for her daily walk down the "green road." Because this chapter was focused completely through Rosaleen's perspective, it continued the style of her earlier chapter by mirroring the thought process of a sometimes-confused elderly person as Rosaleen reflected on her life.

Once she was out of her car and walking, Rosaleen's thoughts turned specifically to her dead husband, Pat Madigan, and their courtship. They often spent time together walking the Green Road, and as Rosaleen walked she retraced their past and grew more upset about the way her life turned out: the ungrateful children, the husband who was proud of her but never promised to love her. Rosaleen considered for a moment throwing herself off the cliffs and into the sea, but she rejected the idea immediately as not something she would do. She was not a woman interested in dramatics.

Rosaleen returned back to her car and drove out to the place where she and her husband used to go to be alone together when they were courting. Rosaleen realized that it was getting dark and admitted that old age brought a fear of things like the dark.

By the end of the chapter, the narrative shifts. Rosaleen's actual actions were narrated but there were no longer interpreted. That is, the reader sees the actions happening but it does not make any distinction between Rosaleen's confusion and her reality. By the end of the chapter, the narrative does not clarify whether Rosaleen had physically fallen into a gap, or if the gap Rosaleen was stuck in was metaphoric.

Analysis

This chapter once again explores the idea of narration mirroring reality, as Rosaleen's often confused state of mind is reflected in her experiences in the chapter. Much of the narrative is descriptions of actions rather than interpretations of those actions. For example, "She was sighing now, she was weeping now, she was feeding the wind with the little shards of her tears, that the wind blew back at her, hurting her own face" (259). The disjointed nature of the narrative replicates Rosaleen's own perspective. Instead of showing the link or the causal chain between action and reaction, the narrative leaves the reader nothing more than a series of actions presented through gerunds. Sighing, weeping, feeding...These gerunds mean that the action happens continuously and remains ongoing. There is no stopping or starting, and the simultaneity of the narrative reflects the experience of Rosaleen, a confused, elderly woman struggling to grasp the

moment enough to understand what is happening to her. She is aware that she is falling and crying, but one action bleeds into the next. The end of the chapter then remains unexplained. She has fallen into a gap, but the narrative does not make it clear whether this is a physical gap or a gap in Rosaleen's understanding and thinking, or whether perhaps it is both.

The chapter named "The Green Road" mirrors the title of the novel, and in doing so points to the importance of one of the central themes of this chapter: importance of the connection between memory and place. The Green Road, with its very fame, underlines the importance of place in the novel. In this chapter, Rosaleen walks along the "green road," a famous road in Ireland that we are introduced to in the very first chapter. The road goes "across the Burren, high above the beach at Fanore, and this was the most beautiful road in the world, bar none...famed in song and story--the rocks gathering briefly into walls before lapsing back into field, the little stony pastures whose flowers were sweet and rare" (15). The green road cuts through some of the most famous and easily recognizable scenery in Ireland, the Burren and the beaches of the wild Atlantic way. For many people who have seen Ireland travel guides or movies set in the country, their image of Ireland comes from this very area. In this way, the Green Road becomes synonymous with Ireland itself. In this section, though, the road Rosaleen traverses is more than simply picturesque or famous. Instead, the road is intensely personal for Rosaleen. It is the place where she was courted by her husband and decided to take the path of life she took. As Rosaleen returns back and retraces the steps she took on this land the land where she became the Rosaleen she became for her children, and the landscape itself it helps her to recover that past. The points she passes on the road correspond to moments she shared with Pat Madigan, and as she passes them, she remembers. Her experience of this land, at least in part, comes from her late husband: "And that is the way he saw the land, with no difference between the different kinds of yesterdays. No difference between a man and his ghost, between a real heifer and a cow that was waiting for the end of the world" (263). Rosaleen recovers this sense of continuity, and the power of it is such that it can guide her along the road.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel describe the Green Road? How does the topography and history of the land itself contribute meaning to the novel?

Discussion Question 2

How does the style of the narrative change in this chapter? How does it replicate the confusion Rosaleen experiences?

Discussion Question 3

What happens at the end of the chapter (The Green Road)? What is the gap that Rosaleen falls into?

Vocabulary

constitutional, foursquare, microscopic, gap

Untitled Sections

Summary

After Rosaleen falls into a gap in the chapter called "The Green Road," the style of the narrative shifts again. This time, it remains in third person, past tense, but instead of the chapters being labeled by separate characters or places, the chapters devolve into a selection of chapters that are short and untitled. The short sections revolve between Rosaleen as she tried to find shelter and survive in the darkened countryside and her children, who are searching for her.

In the first of these sections, the siblings learned that Rosaleen was missing. Everyone but Constance was drunk from celebrating Christmas, so it took some time to figure out how to call the Guards (police) for help and organize a search party.

The second section returned through Rosaleen's perspective. Realizing she was lost, she began to make her way toward an old famine cottage she remembered from her time with Pat Madigan. As Rosaleen walked, she thought about her children and, once again, as her own self as a woman and as a mother. She was aware of the darkness around her.

In the third section, the siblings were asked by one of the local authorities about Rosaleen's mental state. There was the hint that perhaps Rosleen was despondent and that her disappearance might have been planned and a possible suicide. The children, even though most had not been around to know Rosaleen's mental state, all denied this.

The fourth section returned to Rosaleen, who had made it to the cottage with the help (perhaps imagined) of her husband's ghost. Once Rosaleen was safe, the ghost of Pat Madigan disappeared, and Rosaleen found herself cold but still alive.

In the fifth section, the narrative returned to the children, this time Hannah, who was searching with Ferdy McGrath. Hannah and Ferdy go to the Madigan property, the same home she had visited earlier in the book with her father. Rosaleen was not there. Not long after, Rosaleen's car was discovered, and the search became more focused, but the darkness of the night made it more challenging.

Together the search party found Rosaleen in the cottage, and Hannah laid next to her, to warm her mother. Constance continued to insist that her mother had only gone for a walk, continuing her denial about her mother's mental health. The sections ended with Dan looking up at the rising moon and realizing that in the darkness, they could have been anywhere, an echo and reversal of his earlier dismay over seeing the Irish sun when he got off the plane.

Analysis

In these short, untitled chapter selections, the narrative uses its rotation between each of the children and of Rosaleen herself to show the way that trauma can cause connection despite separation. After the narrative has brought them together physically (at Christmas), and then broken them apart with the arguments over dinner, it uses the stylistics of the narrative to bring the family together emotionally in a way that they themselves are incapable of doing until their mother's disappearance does it for them. Despite the blame and shame and anger that each of the siblings feel for each other, despite the anger and irritation that all of them felt about their mother just moments before, Rosaleen's disappearance causes each of them to focus through all of the noise of their individual disagreements and onto their mother. Once again, the idea of a mother and specifically the person of Rosaleen becomes the central hub of their possible connections with one another. With the event of this trauma--the possibility that Rosaleen is lost or dead--past hurts fall away, or at least are pushed to the side, as each of the Madigan siblings understands implicitly what the loss of their mother would mean to them. As Hannah thinks while searching for her mother, the individual events of a single life are insignificant in the grand stretch of history. "So many things had happened in this place, and nothing happened" (282). The unimportance of the minutia in the face of her mother's disappearance allows Hannah--just as it allows all of her siblings--to focus on what they do share, their connections with one another despite past hurts.

These short chapters use memories of the past and Rosaleen's flashbacks to her courting with Pat Madigan to show the way that the past anchors and holds the possibility of recuperating lives. It is not the idea of a future that guides Rosaleen on, nor is it the idea of their mother with them in the future that drives each of the children to find her. Ironically, it is the past that guides all of them. Rosaleen thinks of the walks she had taken with Pat Madigan, and the memory of those walks literally (with the different landmarks) guide her onward toward safety. The past becomes embodied by the actual ghost of Pat Madigan who walks next to her. Whether the ghost is actually, physically present of a figment of Rosaleen's confusion is irrelevant. It is not the thought of living for the future or for her children that guides her to safety, but the memory of a time she was cared for and loved that anchors and guides her forward. For her children, they do not necessarily think about the relationships they will forge with their mother. Instead, they are driven on by the children they once were and the mother she had been to those younger selves: "She was somewhere out there, and it was unbearable. There concern was also a concern for themselves, of course. Some infant self beyond tears" (283). The loss of their mother is a loss of their pasts, as the adult children no longer need or rely on Rosaleen the woman. However, the adult children do rely on the memory of having a mother and what that meant for who they had become.

This section uses images of darkness as a metaphor for the fear the children have in the face of losing their mother. As he stands in the night, Dan feels the darkness around him: "the bight blinked and swallowed him. The darkness shifted, not to a place five feet away, but right up to his face. It stole his breath" (271). Later "Rosaleen's children stood

peering and calling into the black air. She was somewhere out there, and it was unbearable" (283). Their individual identities are lost for the moment, and they become only her children, facing a world dark without her.

Discussion Question 1

How does each child's reaction to Rosaleen's loss show something about her relationship with them?

Discussion Question 2

How does memory of the past save Rosaleen?

Discussion Question 3

How do images of darkness function in this group of untitled sections? Is darkness always dangerous, or are there possibilities contained in darkness for these characters?

Vocabulary

fretting, hurlers, famine, azure, gentian, wrenching, rubbish

Waking Up - Property

Summary

Following the unnamed selections are a series of very brief, titled chapters. In this section, the novel shows what happened for each of the Madigan siblings in the months after Rosaleen woke up in the hospital.

Waking Up

Rosaleen woke up in the hospital with Emmet near her bedside, and found herself happier than she had been. Emmet believed this was from the morphine, but Rosaleen's new mood lasted beyond the drugs and hospital. For a period of time, the trauma changed Rosaleen, and she began to enjoy her children, including Hannah's baby, Ben.

A Face in the Crowd

Dan returned to Toronto to find that Ludo had posted on social media about Dan's mother being lost. Dan was moved by this show of affection and Ludo's attempt to help, even from far away. As Dan looked at the post, he noticed a picture of Greg on Ludo's page, and Dan realized Greg was still alive. Dan sent Greg a message, and felt keenly the regret of once hating those who had been brave enough to be out before him.

The Eyes of the Buddha

Emmet returned to the apartment he shared with the Kenyan, Denholm. In February, he received an email from Alice and through emailing her back, he began to move past his regrets. He understood that he would never fall in love, and accepted that trait about himself.

Property

The chapter flashed back to before the house sale, when Hugh helped Hannah prepare the house to be sold. As they painted and cleaned, Hannah still struggled with her drinking. Hannah wondered what she wanted before alcohol, realizing that at one time she wanted a life.

Constance had a premonition that something bad was coming. Rosaleen's House sold quickly, but they were unable to find Rosaleen an adequate place to live. Rosaleen moved in with Constance, and the narrative implied she would stay there for the duration of her life.

Analysis

The narrative's use of separated chapters illustrates the ephemeral nature of connection and the lasting effect of the changes on the Madigan children. The siblings do not remain together after Christmas, and the novel reflects this stylistically by shifting from the untitled chapters to titled chapters, indicating that old separations might have reoccured. The children once again go back to their individual and separate lives.

At first it might seem as though nothing has changed, but the differences in the individual siblings are visible in the way they interact with the people back in their real, adult lives. Rather than be linked to regrets, each sibling begins to slowly move on and to move forward, forging connections they were not able to make before with the people in their lives. Dan is able to open up to Ludo, and then also to Greg, a man from his past that he treated poorly. When he realizes that Greg has survived "the relief he [Dan] felt was close to love. The fact that this human being, among so many human beings, should have survived" (294). Emmet realizes that his reliance on sex to forge relationships was never going to be enough, and yet, the idea of romantic love would still evade him. "Emmet would never fall in love...He would cure and guide, but he did not have the helplessness in him that love required" (296). Rather than this being a negative realization, the acceptance of this personality trait allows Emmet to move on. Hannah's realization that she once desired a life allows her to recognize that alcohol is something apart from that life. Still, even as the siblings have their moments of recognition, the narrative's separated chapters, however, makes it clear that the emergency with Rosaleen has not changed the substance of the siblings' relationships with one another. Especially with the family home sold off and boarded up, the connection between the siblings seem almost nonexistent in these sections.

Discussion Question 1

How does Dan's realization that Greg is still alive bring that story line full circle? How does it affect your understanding of the novel's themes of connection and separation?

Discussion Question 2

How has the experience of nearly losing their mother changed each of the children?

Discussion Question 3

How does Emmet work to move on from his regrets with Alice? Do you find his regrets surprising?

Vocabulary

paunch, extruded, refurbished, decisive

Paying Attention

Summary

Emmet returned home in November to find his mother at his house in Verschoyle Gardens. Rosaleen claimed that Constance had kicked her out, but when he called, he learned that Constance was sick. The diagnosis is never explicitly stated, but the reader can infer that it was the cancer she had feared in an earlier chapter. Rosaleen either did not understand the diagnosis or took Constance's immediate surgery and illness the wrong way. The book ends with Rosaleen's enigmatic realization that she should have paid better attention to things, but it did not explain what she had failed to pay attention to or how that would have changed anything for her or her children.

Analysis

The novel uses an open-ended claim from Rosaleen to illustrate the ongoing work of forging relationships and battling against isolation. The novel might seem to end on an anti-climatic note. After watching the siblings wrestle with their individual and collective demons, the novel ends with a strange admission from the woman that has kept them together--and apart. Rosaleen tells Emmet "I have paid too little attention...I think that's the problem. I should have paid more attention to things" (310). It is not clear what she should have paid attention to, or if paying attention is even possible given her often confused state of mind. Her admission of guilt or culpability here reveals a vulnerability that none of the children have seen yet. The reader, however, has seen this vulnerability in her--in her wish that she had her children nearby her, in her regrets for her lost husband. After the reader has encountered various versions of connection and isolation, after they have witnessed a family separating and then coming together again, this final statement remains enigmatic. It also allows the novel to remain hopeful and leaves the project of forging connections and dealing with the past open and possible. There is not clean, clear-cut ending where this family is complete. Instead, the novel uses this open ending to argue that the project of coming together and forging bonds is one that remains ongoing and incomplete. But because the novel as a whole has often used the past to draw on as a possibility to forge present-day connections, Rosaleen's claim that (in the past) she should have been more attentive does not mean that a different future is impossible. Instead, it leaves open the possibility of reclaiming and dealing with that past as the family moves on into their individual futures together.

Discussion Question 1

Do you feel that Rosaleen's final pronouncement is correct? Would paying more attention to things have solved some of the problems in her life or her children's lives?

Discussion Question 2

Do Rosaleen's children realize that she might be suffering from dementia? How might their denial or acceptance of that fact affect the reader's understanding of family in this novel?

Discussion Question 3

How does this ending work in relation to the rest of the novel? Has the novel provided closure or provided a space for more openness? Is the ending hopeful?

Vocabulary

pathetic, chipboard, handbrake

Characters

Hannah Madigan

The reader first meets Hannah as an eleven-year-old girl. The youngest in her family, she does not quite understand the dynamics between her siblings and her mother. In the opening chapter, she feels shame when the chicken is killed for Easter dinner, a mark of her softness and that she is not from a farm, despite growing up in a rural area. As the youngest in the family, she is angry at her own smallness. Though the reader sees her as a thoughtful but unsure child, her family sees her otherwise. They call her willful, disobedient, and messy.

As an adult, Hannah is very different from the child the reader encounters early in the book. Gone is the innocent child who doesn't understand her family dynamics. Instead, she is clearly an alcoholic, struggling to deal with her lack of a career in the theater and the new baby she had not been planning to have. She struggles in her relationship with Hugh, as she also struggles to get by without drinking. She feels belittled by her mother when she goes home for Christmas, but when her mother goes missing, Hannah is the first to rush to her and hold her tight, giving Rosaleen her warmth.

Constance Madigan McGrath

The reader first gets a glimpse of Constance through Hannah's eyes, but it is not until she is an adult that the novel reveals more of Constance's character. At middle age, she finds herself the mother of boys and married to Dessie McGrath, the son of one of the wealthier families in town. As an adult, Constance fears that she might have breast cancer and she takes herself to the hospital for a diagnosis. She does not seem to have anyone to confide in--not her husband or her mother--and her school friends have all moved away to exciting lives.

Constance is linked to the land. She dreams of going to New York with her friends, but she is committed to losing her virginity on Irish soil. Instead, she is practically raped by a married man in the back of a taxi.

Constance says that she was not raised to say no. Her character is defined by her upbringing--to be a good, Irish girl and a good, Irish wife and mother. She is unsatisfied with her career as a pharmacy assistant, but she loves her children.

Still, she struggles. She admits to being on anti-depressants and her goal is to make people happy. She has had an extramarital affair, but was disappointed in it. She feels her life is full in moments when things are okay, but when she is overwhelmed and upset, she will lash out at whoever is around. Everyone--including Rosaleen--assumes she will allow her mother to come live with her, but she stands up for herself and says Rosaleen cannot come. She relents, however, when Rosaleen cannot find a house to buy.

At the end of the novel, she has been diagnosed with something dire that requires immediate surgery.

Rosaleen Considine Madigan

Rosaleen is the often unstated center of the novel. Her children try to separate from her, but they also come back to her when she says she will sell their childhood home.

The first glimpse the reader gets of Rosaleen has her as a nameless mother figure, who has taken to her bed after hearing that her oldest son, Dan, wants to become a priest. This was not the first time she took to her bed, and it is clear that it most likely will not be the last.

When the reader finally encounters Rosaleen as a full character, it is long after her children have moved away. She finds herself alone and unsatisfied with her life. Her children have left her and she feels they blame her for everything. But Rosaleen was more than a mother at one time. The novel makes it clear that she was once a woman who wanted beauty in her life, but who never made it away from the town she grew up in. She married her husband because he worshipped her, but she is not sure whether he ever loved her.

She loves her children fiercely, but she does not necessarily like being a mother. She wants to be called Rosaleen, even though her children insist on calling her Mam or Mammy, names she detests. She liked her children as babies, but is indifferent toward (and even dislikes) the adults they have become. She feels as though she has been waiting for something all of her life, and it has never arrived.

Emmet Madigan

Emmet is the second son of the Madigan family. In early glimpses of Emmet, his siblings see him as cold, even cruel, but in his adult life he works for an aid organization in Africa.

Emmet is drawn to suffering, or so he thinks of himself, but his actions show otherwise. His lack of tenderness and kindness toward Alice's dog shows that his sympathy only extends so far. He is often tempted to kick the dog. He is constantly on the edge of a nervous breakdown. He used to meditate, but has given that up.Emmet continues to feel as though he is running from himself.

Despite his weaknesses, Emmet is aware that he lacks something in his life. He cannot bring himself to love Alice when he has the chance. He stays with her for the sex. He is late to love, but he understands that is his own failure. His goal is to find freedom from his mother, though why he believes he needs that is unclear. True, he is not the favored son, but the novel does not explicitly make clear what he feels like he needs to escape from, as she does not seem to do anything to him.

Dan Madigan

Dan is the oldest of the Madigan children. When the novel opens, he has announced his desire to become a priest even though he has not yet told his girlfriend, Isabelle.

As an adult, it becomes immediately clear that Dan did not follow through on becoming a priest. He moved to New York with Isabelle, where he worked as a shoe salesman until he was propositioned by an elderly man in a penthouse apartment. After this encounter, Dan works his way up until he finds himself working at a gallery where he meets Billy.

Billy is part of the gay community in a New York City struck by the AIDS epidemic. He goes with Billy to Fire Island, where he tells Billy he will marry Isabelle, but instead has a sexual affair with Billy that extends even to when he and Isabelle are back together. When Billy is dying of AIDS, Dan does not visit him.

Later in his life, Dan accepts his sexuality and finds himself living with Ludo, an older gay man in Toronto. His acceptance of Ludo's proposal is his final acceptance of himself. He is finally able to forgive himself for the way he used men in his youth when he discovers that an old friend, Greg, is still alive.

Dan is Rosaleen's favorite. It is not clear if he realizes this, however, or if he just has a relationship that is closer to her than any of his siblings.

Billy

Billy is an openly gay man in New York City who falls in love with Dan, even though he is closeted. Billy does not tell Dan that he was sexually intimate with Greg, who had been diagnosed with AIDS.

Greg

Greg is a gay man living in New York City who is friends with Billy and Dan. Greg is in love with Billy, who leaves him when Dan comes into the picture. He is a self-described neurotic, fearful of contracting AIDS. He is a art hustler and dealer. He is diagnosed with AIDS when he falls and breaks his collarbone.

Alice

Alice is a girl working for an aid organization in Mali who moves in with Emmet. She is drawn to suffering, and her goal is to save babies. Instead of helping the neighborhood children, though, she adopts a stray dog who she nurses back to help. Emmet sees her as deeply disillusioned about her work, a view that is corroborated by her relationship with the dog.

John Considine

John Considine is Rosaleen's father. He was one of the prominent members of the city, and it is implied that the Considine family is more wealthy than the Madigans. He works as a pharmacist, but he is not one sympathetic to women who need contraceptives. Rosaleen looks up to her father even as an older woman.

Pat Madigan

Pat is Rosaleen's husband and an absent character in the book. He briefly appears late in the novel, when Rosaleen believes she sees his ghost leading her along the green road after she gets lost in the dark. Pat asked for Rosaleen's hand in marriage without love. He wanted to marry her to climb socially, and she allowed it because he spent his life worshipping her. His children do not think much of him once he is gone, but they do come back when he is dying of cancer and for his funeral.

Symbols and Symbolism

The green road

The green road symbolizes the importance of Ireland for the siblings. The green road serves as the title of the story and the setting for Rosaleen's misadventure on Christmas Eve. The road runs along the Burren and the wild Atlantic way, picturesque parts of Ireland that appear on travel brochures and in movies. These are iconic parts of the Irish countryside, and the road in this novel both anchors the family to Ireland and represents the mythology of the country itself.

The chicken killed for Easter dinner

The chicken killed for Easter dinner symbolizes a profane version of the Easter sacrifice and the family's tangential relationship to religion. When the chicken is killed, Hannah feels shame, and when she sees it the next time it is roasted on the table, not resurrected. The chicken is one of the first indications that the novel will toy with reverence for religion, especially in a predominantly Catholic country.

The apple tart at Easter

The apple tart at Easter symbolizes the unity of the six Madigans and their eventual falling apart. When Dan cuts the tart for the family, the six pieces allow him to divide the dessert evenly and easily. This will be one of the last moments in the book where the six Madigans are together and easy with one another. By the book's end, the father will have passed away and the children will have grown apart, all of them leaving their mother behind.

The Central Park apartment

The Central Park apartment, owned by a wealthy client of the shoe shop Dan works for, symbolizes an inversion of purity. Everything in the apartment gleams white, and when the old man takes his penis out of his pants, it contrasts with the purity of its surroundings. This is the moment, however, when Dan feels himself open to something new, to a future he had not imagined before.

The seventh floor at St. Vincents

The seventh floor at St. Vincents hospital symbolizes death and the danger of contracting HIV. It literally is the place where many gay men ended their days, but the very notion of it within the community shows it to loom large, a warning about what might happen to any of them.

Constance's breasts

Constance's breasts symbolize the disappointment of motherhood. These breasts literally gave her children life, and in the book they have turned against Constance with their unknown lump. Throughout the novel, women struggle with being mothers and accepting the life motherhood gives them. Constance's breasts represent those disappointments and dangers.

The silk scarf

The silk scarf Constance purchases for her mother for Christmas represents the successes and disappointments of Constance's life. Her decision to pick out a beautiful but absurdly expensive scarf for a woman she knows is picky is, in many ways, a practice in futility. She expects her mother to not like the scarf, and at the same time she hopes the scarf will impress her mother and the others who see it. The scarf is a statement of her successes--that she is able to afford such a thing speaks to what she has done with her life. But the scarf is ultimately a failure, because it does not impress her mother.

Alice's white body

The mention of Alice's white skin symbolizes a larger history of colonialism and cultural appropriation. The text describes her skin as "her body of medieval whiteness" (128), a nod to the British Empire's long history. Her appearance in Mali is ostensibly to help the impoverished people, but she spends more time caring for a ragged dog than the children in the town.

The postcard of Matisse

The postcard of the Matisse painting that Rosalee loves is symbolic of all she has not done and all the beauty that she craves. The post card was sent to her by Dan, the child who seems to understand her best, and the color remains with her even into her old age. She has not, it is implied, actually been to a museum to see a Matisse painting.

The groceries for Christmas dinner

The groceries that Constance purchases for Christmas dinner symbolizes the excess and emptiness of materialism. When Constance purchases the large amount of groceries for Christmas dinner, she believes that she is providing and nurturing her family. She goes back for the Brussels Sprouts, because she knows her mother likes them, but her attempts are disappointed when Rosaleen tells her that no one eats them anyway. The wealth of food is not enough to fill the emotional needs of her siblings.

The house at Ardeevin

The house at Ardeevin symbolizes the connection to family for the Madigans. Though they have grown separate, the children are all drawn to the house. The house itself is filled with memories and love, its very walls absorbing the childhoods of the siblings in a way they cannot be free of.

Settings

Ardeevin

The house at Ardeevin serves as the opening of the story and the place where the climax of the plot takes place. The house has a small river in the garden and its own name. Set back from the town, it is separate, and the children spend their childhoods within its walls. Despite their desire to escape Ireland and their mother, the Madigan siblings are drawn back to the house itself.

New York City in 1991

As an adult, Dan lives in New York City in the early 1990s. Specifically, the novel focuses on the world of the gay community during that time. New York in the early 1990s is both a glittering, social world filled with gallery openings and house parties, but it is also plagued by the fear of HIV and the danger of being diagnosed with AIDS. New York City is in many ways the complete opposite of Ireland and the house called Ardeevin.

Mali in 2002

The town where Emmet lives in Mali is rural and secluded from the rest of the world. The weather in Mali, unlike that of Ireland, is oppressive with its heat and the danger carried by its mosquitos. In this town, Emmet and the other aid workers live in much better circumstances than the locals who work in their houses. Still, the house he lives in has no air conditioning, and the aid workers often travel into the city to use the tepid pool. Living in Mali is not safe, as Emmet and Alice are careful not to drink beverages with ice cubes or get the pool water on their faces.

Ludo's House in Toronto

Ludo's house in Toronto is a comfortable, spacious house that, in many ways, is different from the artificial sheen of so many of the New York apartments Dan frequented. Unlike the ultra-contemporary, all-white rooms of those other apartments, Ludo's house is traditional, a brick colonial. It mirrors the relationship that Dan and Ludo has, which is also more traditional and comfortable--and real--than any of the relationships he had in New York.

The White Apartment

When he first arrives in New York City in the mid-1980s and works as a shoe salesman, Dan delivers shoes to a rich man in an all-white penthouse apartment. The gleam of the

apartment's whiteness is a stark contrast to the way the man propositions Dan by simply unzipping his pants and exposing his penis. The apartment is similar to many of the spaces Dan inhabits in his early years away from Ardeevin. Sleek, sophisticated, and artificial, it provides a place for him to become someone else, but does not provide a space for him to become authentically who he will be.

The Hospital in Limerick

Constance travels to the hospital in Limerick to have the lump in her breast diagnosed. The hospital is a cold, institutional space, which strips Constance of her comfortable identity as the wife of Dessie McGrath. Where she might in her everyday life pose as a well-off, settled woman, in the hospital, she is no different from any of the other patients. The hospital breaks down the divides between people, as we see when Constance makes a connection with Margaret, a woman she would not otherwise associate with.

The Green Road

The green road is a stretch of motorway near the family's Ardeevin home in County Clare that stretches along the Burren and the Wild Atlantic Way in the west country of Ireland. It is a place of comfort for Rosaleen, but it is also an iconic landmark in Ireland. The green road serves as a connection between Ardeevin and the rest of the country, and it also connects the characters to their past and to the land itself.

Themes and Motifs

Shame

The novel uses the theme of shame to show the way that the feeling of shame can work through a person or a family in often unexpected and negative ways to drive people apart from one another. Early in the novel, the young Hannah is one of the first to exhibit the feeling of shame when she watches her father slaughter the chicken for Easter dinner. When her Granny tells Hannah to come and that she will teach Hannah how to kill the bird, Hannah begins crying and refuses. She (Hannah) "turned her face away in shame" when her Granny offers her understanding and sympathy (21). It is unclear why she feels shame--because she is unable to do what needs to be done, because they see her crying and show her sympathy, or because she does not want them to see her cry because her siblings often make fun of her crying. Whether it is one or more of these reasons, at the heart, the shame she feels comes from her feeling separate or different from her family. Hannah cannot kill the chicken, nor can she remain as stoic as her grandmother in the face of its death. Hannah experiences this wash of shame, and with shame comes the feeling of isolation that separates her emotionally from her family.

The novel does not only explore the way shame can separate people from their families, but the use of shame to drive people away from community. Not long after the incident of the chicken, Hannah thinks of her grandfather, John Considine, who ran a local pharmacy and who would physically toss women who asked for feminine products that he disapproved of out into the streets. Hannah is too young to understand what the products are the women asked for, but the stories of how her grandfather publicly shamed these women stay with her, and they also keep her from asking. "Hannah never knew what it was--you could die of the shame" (22). Here, the young Hannah hits on two meanings. It is very possible that the women tossed from her father's pharmacy could, in fact, literally die, depending on what the products they were seeking were. But the dying might also be more figurative: the embarrassment of being tossed out into the public street or the shame that the young Hannah might be subjected to if she asks any questions about what those products might be. Shame--or the fear of experiencing shame--keeps Hannah from overstepping her boundaries and kept women in the town from feeling confident and safe taking their health needs to John Considine.

Through the theme of shame, The Green Road demonstrates the lasting impact of feeling shame or being shamed on its various characters. What becomes clear is that even the safe, quiet upbringing of the Madigan children is not enough to protect them from shame. If anything, the opposite is true; shame becomes a driving force in their family and their memories of family. Like Hannah, Emmet experiences shame in stark and long-lasting ways. Even as he immerses himself in aid work, shame follows him. Emmet specifically sees the quietness of his upbringing as shameful when he compares it to the poverty of the world around him: "Nothing like a quiet upbringing to make you feel the shame of it" (122). The shame Emmet feels, however, is not simply the

comparison between the comfort of his childhood and the sickness around him. The shame of his childhood, whatever that might be, is what drove him to Mali in the first place. We see this clearly when, later, after Emmet has returned to Ireland and left his days as an aid worker behind, he wonders "what shame or sorrow afflicted him so badly he had to get it off his conscience" (222).

It is not important that the novel never reveals what the shame of his life might have been, because through the examples of Hannah's shame, like Hannah's, the reader is able to see that shame is not necessarily rational. Shame in the novel, and in life, does not have to be rational to be powerful and impactful. Both Hannah and Emmet do not have any overt reason to want to be away from the family home and from Rosaleen--nothing is shown in the novel to demonstrate their reasons for leaving. But the multiple mentions of the feelings of shame both have illustrate the way that shame can work throughout a person's life, shaping it in unexpected and often negative ways.

Religion

The Green Road uses the theme of religion to explore the way that religion serves as both a way to bring community together, even as it often functions as an empty practice. It should be no surprise that in a novel set in Ireland, religion--specifically Roman Catholicism--plays a consistent role throughout the story. The novel begins with Holy Week and the first chapter culminates on Easter Sunday, when Dan tells his family he wants to become a priest. The entire first chapter is structured by Holy Week. The family slaughters a chicken on Holy Thursday before the family attends the foot-washing services and then is eaten on Sunday, un-risen. This profane version of the holiest week of the year is refigured ironically in the text, and by doing so, the novel pokes fun of the Madigans, a family that "always went to Mass even though you didn't have to" (25). In part, this is because even though the Madigans are what any outsider would call devout Catholics (at least by virtue of the church attendance), the family's religiousness is often more surface display than true faith.

Because the Madigans often display a disconnect between their appearance of religious devotion and their actual beliefs and faith, the novel is able to demonstrate the often common hypocrisy of the so-called faithful. Though the family attends services, none of them seem to be believers in any devout way. The text makes it clear that even young Hannah understands the foot-washing on Holy Thursday is not a true cleansing, but simply a symbolic act: "The people all had their feet well washed before they came out of the house" (25). Dan's announcement that he will become a priest is not celebrated, as a reader might expect from an Irish Catholic family. Instead, his mother takes to her bed. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Rosaleen's disappointment stems from her own lack of conviction in the Catholic faith. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Rosaleen is not a devout Catholic, no matter how often she goes to mass. Rosaleen "had no interest in Mass" but went instead, "for the chance of company...If she'd had the choice, Rosaleen would have been a Protestant, but she didn't have the choice. So this is what she was reduced to" (150). Here, the matriarch who appears by all accounts to be a devout member of her church is attending simply to have a social

life now that she is alone after her husband's death. The claim that she would have been a protestant is doubly telling, especially since Ireland had such a tumultuous and often violent history with the Church of England.

Throughout the novel, the way the other siblings never seem to turn back to their religious upbringing in the face of their challenges continues to emphasize the unimportance of religion in daily life even as it suggests the lasting effects of being raised Catholic. Dan accepts his sexual identity, but only after a decade or more of using his body to gain an ever-more luxurious life. However, his refusal to initially accept himself as gay (or bisexual) especially his insistence that he is "going to get married" because he thinks it "feels right" (57-58). His insistence on his attraction to his girlfriend (and to her body, a female body, specifically) may be linked to his religious upbringing, especially because Roman Catholicism disavows homosexuality and sees relations between same sex people as a sin. Constance does not turn to her religion when she waits in the hospital wing for her tests. Instead, she focuses on the mundane minutia of her life and the events that led her to that moment. She never utters a prayer or hope to any higher power, nor does she seem to demonstrate any faith in anything beyond her material situation. Emmet faces death and uncertainty every day in Mali, and yet his desire to do aid work does not seem to stem from any religious or moral purpose. He is aware of local religion and custom, of "things being sacred, or defiled" (121), but he does not himself put any faith into those beliefs. This complete lack of attachment to religion, despite the family being raised in it seems to suggest that for all its trappings, religion and faith play very little role in their lives.

By the end of the novel, when the Madigan siblings are all grown, the trappings of religion have all but fallen away. The family gathers for Christmas, but the novel makes it clear that their gathering has more to do with Rosaleen's insistence on selling the house and less on any devotion to the religious celebration. The novel places emphasis, for example, on Constance's lavish and expensive grocery bill for dinner, while it makes no mention of any of the family (except Rosaleen) attending services of any kind. When the siblings and their families sit down to dinner, no one says grace at all. Dan, the sibling who would once have been a priest, simply says "Ta-dahh!" and the family gives Constance "a little round of applause" (238). For the Madigan's, religion has become another trapping, rather than a core of faith.

The Permanence of Family

The novel uses the leaving and returning of each Madigan sibling to demonstrate the the permanence of family ties and their continued effects despite distance and separation. The novel itself is organized and structured around the idea of leaving and returning to the family home, and subsequently, to the family itself. Each of the Madigans have attempted to break away from Rosaleen, Ireland, Ardeevin, and each other. It should be noted, however, that these leavings are not necessarily in terms of travel, but in a rejection of what they once were and what they had once been. In the first chapter, about a young Hannah, the girl never physically leaves her family, nor does she show any inclination to. Instead, it is the realization that Dan would leave and

therefore change the family by doing so: "Dan would leave Ireland for ever...Their mother had no power to stop him, anymore" (26). Here, we see through the eyes of a child the moment when she realizes that the family of birth cannot hold the children indefinitely. Until this moment, Hannah might have seen her family as the only structure guiding her life and her mother as an all-powerful being within it. However, her mother's powerlessness to stop Dan from becoming a priest, from leaving them "to save the black babies" is new realization for Hannah and represents the possibility for a larger break in the family as a whole.

The individual and very separate narratives for each of the siblings demonstrate that despite literal and physical separation, the family is linked together irrevocably through memory and relationship. Each of the children who leave may try to establish themselves as separate, as having broken away, but large parts of their identity is based upon their understanding themselves as Madigans and as Rosaleen's children. Constance, for instance, has followed in her mother's footsteps and become a housewife and mother, but she constantly seeks to distinguish herself from Rosaleen. When Constance told her mother about her life, "there was, of course, a fair amount of boasting in the complaints she made" (92). Constance's desire to make sure that her mother understood that Constance had succeeded beyond her was an important part of how she distinguished herself from her family. For Emmet, the memory of Ireland and his family ways on him constantly. The pressure he felt in Ireland, the threat of a nervous breakdown, follows him even as he tries to escape it in the jungles of Mali. The individual siblings no longer reside at Ardeevin, and many of them no longer have a close relationship with each other or their mother, but they carry the echoes of the childhood and the effects of being in that family with them throughout their journeys apart.

Through bringing the children back together again, the novel demonstrates that neither years nor distance can erase the effects of family or the connections to one another. The novel seems to suggest that there is something essential about the biological and familial relationships with one another. When Hannah and Dan reunite, Hannah realizes that despite not knowing the adult version of the man he has become, she still does know some essential part of him. "She [Hannah] had kept the rhythm of his footfall inside her, all these years. He came in; a handsome man who resolved himself into her brother as soon as he opened his mouth" (216). The past is there, beneath the miles and the years, because, as the novel demonstrates, these siblings have a shared connection that draws them together.

These connections are not all-powerful or magical, however, because the novel uses the continued divisions between the siblings to make clear that biology alone is not enough to heal the divides that have arisen between them. Even as the children return, they remain subtly apart from one another. Dan recognizes this will be the case even before he decides for sure to return. After Ludo prods him to go visit his mother while he can, Dan understands that he could never return, not really: "No, Dan could not go home. Or if he did go, it was not Dan who walked in the door to them all" (172). When Dan thinks about going back to Ardeevin for Christmas, he knows that he cannot go back as the Dan he has become, because the layers of his past and those relationships

he had as a child--and as a different person--will inform the relationships of the present. This is confirmed when Dan arrives at the Shannon Airport. Constance waits for her brother but she "couldn't remember what she was looking out for, exactly. There would be some unchangeable thing about her brother to say he was her brother" (196). However, when he finally appears, Dan is not the brother he had once been. He is instead "a gay man, as anyone might be able to discern...more camp than she remembered. Every time a little more" (197). As Dan grows into himself, he grows away from Constance's memory of him, and of the person he had once been with the Madigans.

Ireland and Place

The novel The Green Road uses the idea of place--through the images of Ireland, the green road, and the house at Ardeevin--to demonstrate the importance that place has for shaping consciousness and identity. Throughout the novel, Ireland and the land the Madigan's grew up on serves as both the place they leave and the place that continues to draw them back. The structure of the novel formalizes this idea of place as being of essential importance, while its very title--The Green Road--isolates the idea of specific places as being central to the novel itself.

Because each of the children leave Ardeevin, and some even leave Ireland itself, the novel is able to demonstrate the pull the country has on the individual psyche of each character, and collectively, the importance of birthplace to identity. For example, when a twenty-something Dan is asked whether he misses the land, he tells his New York friends that he does not. "Fuck no," he says, emphatically, dismissing the idea all together (56). He shows absolutely no desire to return to Ireland, even for a visit, even when he is older. Yet, when Dan does return to Ireland, he thinks, "he knew this place. It was a secret he had carried inside him; a map of things he had known and lost, these half-glimpsed houses and stone walls, the fields of solid green" (203). Despite his desire to see himself as cosmopolitan and changed, at the heart of who and what he is, the land itself--Ireland--speaks to him. Likewise, Emmet, who perhaps has traveled the farthest to escape Ireland, he finds himself drawn back to thinking about it. As Emmet lays sweating in his bed in Mali, he finds himself thinking about "swimming in Lahinch. He was walking the land in Boolavaun. He remembered the taste of fuchsia, when you such the nectar out" (119). Despite wanting to be away from the place of his birth, his mind returns to it without prompting. Each of the children return to the land and see it--and themselves in it--anew. The house at Ardeevin is both the place they have purposefully left and the very place they are drawn to because of the power than place has for each of them.

The novel, however, makes it clear that this focus on place is not simply a universal trait shared by humanity, but instead further emphasizes the importance of Ireland itself and Ardeevin as a place of special importance in history, linking the Madigan family's story to a larger narrative. The place the Madigans call home and where they return as adults is an ancient place, one that had anchored generations of their family. When a young Hannah climbs on the walls near Boolavaun, she knows even as a child that "they were

the oldest walls in Ireland" and were "thousands of years old" (18). The fact that Ardeevin and Boolavaunare ancient places serves to remind the reader that the Madigan family's story is set against a larger backdrop and is linked to a longer history of land and place that is central to Irish identity. This is a truth that Rosaleen echoes later, when she thinks of her dead husband and his belief that in the land there was "no difference between the different kinds of yesterdays" (263). Acknowledging this sets the novel in a larger context, linking the Madigans' history to the larger history of the country and to the wider context of family's over time.

While the novel sets the Madigans in a larger history, it also uses the focus on the literal house to demonstrate the link between family histories at large and the minutia of individual families. The house, literally, represents a better future for the siblings. "The truth was that the house they were sitting in was worth a ridiculous amount, and the people sitting in it were worth very little" (240). The sale of the house represents a financial salvation for Rosaleen's children, who have not managed to make much of themselves in terms of financial stability. However, the children and the novel both understand that the walls of the house have a second worth: "The house held memory and meaning that his [Dan's] heart could not. The house was full of detail, interest, love" (248). There is a central irony here, though. While even Dan is able to recognize the wealthy, both literal and figurative, held in the walls of the house, the very existence of it is not enough. It has not made the children successful or connected or even very well adjusted in their adulthoods. The return to the house, however, does present a second opportunity for all of the Madigans to take from it what they had not before.

Womanhood as Defined by Motherhood

The novel uses the theme of motherhood to critique the ways that having children and becoming a mother defines identity for women--both positively and negatively. Each of the female characters--Rosaleen, Constance, and Hannah--are faced with identities of being a mother and the realities of motherhood in the text, and through their various reactions to it, the novel teases out the complexities of this theme. At its most basic and general, women in the text are faced with the realities of their bodies as reproductive organs. Issues of health for women circle around the very notion of whether they can or will become mothers. In early chapters, the reader sees John Considine, the grandfather of the Madigan siblings, as shaming women for requiring certain reproductive health needs. Though they remain unstated, it can be inferred that the women sought some type of help with ending a pregnancy or perhaps with preventing pregnancies. Both are seen as shameful, and this shame relegates women in this town, who are beholden to these male pharmacists for their healthcare, to the role of mother. Simply put, in this world, there is no way to avoid becoming a mother if the men in charge of healthcare do not allow access to contraceptives. Without contraceptives (seen as a sin for the Roman Catholic church), women are at the mercy of their husband's sexual desires because there is no way to prevent motherhood.

The female characters in this novel each demonstrate the ways that motherhood--imposed and accepted--affects individual women. For Rosaleen, having adult children is

a disappointment. From the very earliest chapter of the novel, she confesses that she made Dan who he was and yet did not like that person, despite loving the child he had been: "I made him. I made him the way he is. And I don't like the way he is. He is my son and I don't like him, and he doesn't like me either. And there's no getting out of all that, because it's a vicious circle and I have only myself to blame" (34). Her relationship with Emmet and her other children is just as contentious: "Because that is what your babies do, when they grow. They turn around and say it is all your fault" (152). For Constance, motherhood is a source of deep contentment. It was a state that she actively sought out and desired, because it meant she finally fulfilled herself in life. Constance remembers the "undoing of her own bones as the children were born," the very physical transformation of her body from woman to mother. Constance's children--thoughtless and absent from her life as they might be--serve as a statement to the entire world of what she has accomplished and done for the world. For Hannah, motherhood is a surprise and a constant struggle that is always at odds with her struggle with alcoholism. Her motherhood is not planned or wanted: "it was in the course of one of their happy little fuck-fests, tender, savage and prolonged--well done, us!--that the baby happened. Happened. The baby arrived" (189). For Hannah, motherhood is something that erupts and happens to her, rather than a choice she makes. Her relationship with her boyfriend changed because of the baby, and her baby signals the final blow to her dream of becoming an actor.

Despite the female children becoming mothers, the novel uses their lack of knowledge of who Rosaleen is as a person to examine the deep rift within the connections that motherhood creates. Although each of her female children become mothers themselves, none is ever really able to see Rosaleen beyond her state. Even Rosaleen herself claims that "it is a very hard thing...to describe your mother" (242). This irony of being so completely close to someone and still not know them at all is a central theme in the text. None of the children really know Rosaleen. They only experience her as a mother and through their own relationships with them. None of the women in the texts will be known by their own children, as we see with Constance's relationship with her own children. Thus, while motherhood creates some of the most important and impactful connections and relationships in the novel--and in in life--it creates an impossible rift between people and characters, isolating them even as it brings them together.

Reality and Perception

With the third person narrator focusing its perspective through various characters, the novel continuously explores the theme of the way that perception influences reality, and in doing so it argues that reality and identity come exclusively from individual perceptions and that it is the ability (or inability) to understand the perception and experience of another that creates connection or isolation. Each section of the novel is told from a past-tense, third person narrator, which serves to create a sense of both formal and thematic continuity in the novel. However, each of these chapters are focused through the perspective and reality of distinct characters. In Hannah's chapter, the novel shows how seeing the world through the childish eyes of an pre-teen Hannah

creates confusion and misunderstanding. The reader is limited to what the child knows and understands, and because of this, we are kept from knowing much about any of the characters she interacts with. Her reality--and the reader's by association, is restricted and limited. The young Hannah's chapters are markedly different from the adult (and very drunk) Hannah. In both cases, the knowledge the reader receives from those perspectives informs the reality of the characters and shapes the perception the characters and reader has of the novel. Both are limited, but they are limited in different ways. Another example of how narrative shapes the reader's perceptions is also evident in the chapters told through Rosaleen's perspective, which is tinged with the beginnings of the confusion of dementia. Rosaleen's thoughts jump, often in a seemingly random way, and those jumps both blur the reader's comprehension of reality and allow the reader to understand something more about the character. For instance, the red of a Christmas card leads her to remember a card Dan sent her from a museum, which leads Rosaleen to remember everything she might have missed by never traveling or leaving Ireland.

In addition to these chapters that specifically deal with types of perception, the novel uses the contrast between types of narrative focus to show how perception defines and limits reality. In Dan's section, the narrative is focused through the point of view of an unnamed character, one who is a part of the gay community in New York in the early 1990s. The use of gossip in this section shows the way that community is formed, and the way community can exclude, through the sharing (or withholding) of information. Emmet's section in Mali is focused through the perspective of a fellow (again unnamed) Irishman, who shares a connection with Emmet by way of nationality and who implies that connection with the readers themselves. Again, their is the sense of building community through the information shared and passed between groups. Together, using these individual perspectives, the reader is able to build a picture more full and complete than any single sibling or perspective has. The reader can easily see how the children's sense of their mother is very different from a more complete truth about who Rosaleen herself is. The reader can also see how each sibling understands, and misunderstands, one another. By limiting the reader to the limits of the individual character's perspectives, the novel is able to show how perception defines and forms reality, and how that reality has the power to shape relationships.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is narrated in third person point of view. The focus of each chapter, however, shifts. At times, the point of view is limited to a single character for the chapter. Later in the novel, however, the third-person perspective becomes more omniscient, as it jumps between the perspectives and focus of various characters within a single chapter.

Because of the third person point of view focused through individual characters, the reader is able to see how multiple people can view the same event or the same person in very different ways. Because the point of view remains consistently third person, the novel remains unified.

The novel also uses point of view to explore the idea of how perspective shapes identity and reality. In different chapters, the third person narrator will take on other voices and tones: gossip, secrets, fellow Irishmen. At times the point of view mirrors the mindset of the character it is focused on. Sometimes it replicates drunkeness, childish lack of understanding, and even the confusion of early dementia.

Language and Meaning

The novel uses straightforward language that replicates contemporary, colloquial speech. Because the author and characters are Irish, the novel will often use Gaelic terms and words without translating them for a non-Irish reader. When the narrator is focused on the gay community in New York, various terms well known in that community (but not necessarily to those outside of it or unfamiliar with it) are used in the text. The narrative's refusal to translate or define these words has a dual purpose: It gives readers a feeling of being outside the community, but it also gives the feeling that the reader is being brought in and included in the community as well.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts: "Leaving" and "Coming Home- 2005."

In the first section, the novel is structured around chapters labeled by the character's names and locations. Each of those chapters shows a snapshot of the life of that character, allowing the reader to understand what has become of the Madigan children in adulthood.

In the second section, the structure of the novel changes. The chapters no longer are labeled with character names, and they no longer focus on single characters. Instead, the chapters bear the names of places, and the individual chapters might show various characters' experiences.

In the second section, after Rosaleen goes missing, the chapters are untitled. Rather than being divided by place or person, the novel represents the siblings coming together to find their mother by erasing those separate identifying features of the individual chapters.

Quotes

There were six Madigans. Five was a whole new angle, as he moved the cake slice through the ghost of a cross and then swung it eighteen degrees to the side. It was a prising open of the relations between them. It was a different story altogether. As though there might be any number of Madigans and, out in the wide world, any number of apple tarts.
-- narrator (Hanna)

Importance: In this quote we see Dan, the oldest, cutting the apple tart. With six people in the family, the tart is divided easily and equally, but if Dan leaves for the seminary, there will only be five. This is the first moment when Hannah realizes that her family is not a thing that can remain as it is. Her understanding of her family as an unbroken whole--the six of them--changes at this point, as she realizes people will leave and may not return. It is foreshadowing of things to come for the family.

The darkness of the theatre was a new kind of darkness for Hanna. It was not the darkness of the city outside, or of the bedroom she shared with Constance at home in Ardeevin. It was not the black country darkness of Boolavaun. It was a darkness between people: between Isabelle and Dan, between Dan and the priests. It was the darkness of sleep, just before the dream.
-- Hannah (Hannah)

Importance: This quote exposes one of the main themes of the book: separation between people. As Hannah sits in the theater, she knows she is not alone. The darkness is an artificial one, and yet the darkness there is one that separates people by experience. Each person sitting close to her is experiencing the same darkness, but they are also experiencing it differently depending on how they apprehend the play on the stage. In the rest of the novel, there will be multiple instances where people are separated by their experience of the same thing.

For a moment Dan was an open space, surrounded by a different future to the one he had brought in through the door.
-- Dan (Dan)

Importance: In this quote, Dan finds himself being propositioned by an elderly and rich client for shoes. It is the moment he recognizes himself as something different. In Catholic Ireland, the sexuality he is considering was not an option, but in this moment, looking over the dark city, he feels more possibilities.

But it was not a long time ago for Constance, who was still in it. Whose children were coming up to teenagers now, with no gap--or none she could discern--between breast-feeding and breast cancer, between tending and dying.
-- Constance (Constance)

Importance: This quote emphasizes the connectedness and simultaneity of experience

that they book often explores. Here, Constance does not see any separation between raising her children and the people they've become, and in her mind feeding her children has merged with the possibility of cancer. Everything happens at once, and yet everything leaves her feeling unmoored.

She did not know if other people felt this kind of thing; it was not something she had ever heard discussed.
-- Constance (Constance)

Importance: In this passage, Constance has a feeling of perfect sympathy for another woman who is completely different from her. That feeling of connection strikes her so immediately, that she wonders if other people feel this way. But despite the connection, she remains separate from it. This juxtaposition between connection and separation occurs throughout the novel.

The heat was worse at night--there was no shade, because it was all shade. In the dark, the heat was the same and everywhere, it was like drowning in your own blood-temperature blood.
-- Emmet (Emmet)

Importance: While this quote might appear to be simply about the weather in Mali, the image it reveals--the image of being one with the heat--is related to the larger theme of connection. In this quote, however, connection (to the heat, to the world around him) is oppressive, dangerous. Especially for Emmet, who cannot handle connection, the idea of being one with the world or of sameness is oppressive.

The red was very satisfying; not so much a sky as a background, like something you would see in a Matisse. Vermilion. Rosaleen closed her eyes in pleasure at a word she had not expected and at the memory of Matisse: a red room with a woman sitting in it, from a postcard or a library book, perhaps.
-- Rosaleen (Rosaleen)

Importance: Rosaleen's memory of the vermillion Matisse exposes something about her character that nothing in her children's chapters has prepared the reader for--a yearning and longing for beauty.

Rosaleen tried to think what he might look like, this very minute, or how he looked the last time he made the trip home, but all she could remember was his smooth eight-year-old cheek against her cheek.
-- Rosaleen (Rosaleen)

Importance: This quote ties into other quotes that show how lives are lived in order and still seem almost simultaneous. Rosaleen knows her child is grown now, but in her mind, he is always the eight-year-old boy.

Because that is what your babies do, when they grow. They turn around and say it is all your fault. The fact that people die. It is all your fault.

-- Rosaleen (Rosaleen)

Importance: Until this chapter, it is unclear how Rosaleen feels about the relationship with her children. Here, however, we see that she is not unburdened by their anger with her, and also that she feels she does not deserve it.

Beauty, in glimpses and flashes, that is what the soul required. That was the drop of water on the tongue.
-- Rosaleen (Rosaleen)

Importance: While her children seek for happiness in various material things, Rosaleen is different from all of them. Her yearning for beauty separates her from them in a way that was not previously revealed in their own experiences.

No, Dan could not go home. Or if he did go, it was not the Dan who walked in the door to them all.
-- Dan (Toronto)

Importance: In this quote, Dan reveals the difficulty of coming home as an adult. If he returns to Ireland, he returns to the person he was once as a child instead of the person he believes he has become.

As they travelled towards home, the landscape accumulated in Dan like a silt of meaning that was disturbed by the line of a hedgerow or the sight of winter trees along a ridge. All at once, it was familiar. He knew this place. It was a secret he had carried inside him; a map of things he had known and lost, these half-glimpsed houses and stone walls, the fields of solid green.
-- Dan (Co. Clare)

Importance: When Dan returns to Ireland, he recognizes something in the land that he had not forgotten. Place becomes an important part of identity, no matter how much he might have wanted to escape it.

Her knowledge of him came from two directions and met in the human being sitting at the table...
-- Constance (Co. Dublin)

Importance: Again the novel focuses on the idea of who we are as children and who we become. The bonds of family leave ties that cannot be erased, but they do not guarantee knowledge of people once they are grown or adults. Constance recognizes that the person sitting across from her is someone who was unknowable to her because she only had a portion of his life.

They looked at the plates heaped with food and marveled aloud at it, each of them silently shouting that she could not take it away from them, whatever it was--their childhood, soaked into the walls of this house.
-- The children (The Hungry Grass)

Importance: As the children sat around the Christmas table, they were each brought together by the one thing they had all tried to escape--the house itself. Despite their attempts to build other lives for themselves, they sare drawn back to place in a way that they are not even drawn back to each other.

And yet, everywhere he looked, the house held memory and meaning that his heart could not. The house was full of detail, interest, love.
-- Dan (The Hungry Grass)

Importance: Even as the siblings have trouble dealing with the conflicts between them, there are parts of their lives that proclaim something about their past they cannot escape.

Why she could not be nice to them, she did not know. She loved them so much. Sometimes she looked at them and she was so flooded with love, she just had to go and spoil it...they were so beautiful...it made her feel not good. Unappreciated. It made her feel irrelevant. That was it... But Rosaleen did not exist. Oh no. Rosaleen did not matter.
-- Rosaleen (Untitled)

Importance: In this passage, Rosaleen admits to herself that she has not been the mother she should have been. This passage gives the readers the clear understanding that Rosaleen's children were not completely wrong to see her as unable to be pleased. This passage also reveals something about motherhood. The one state that should foster connection, here, is exposed to do the exact opposite by take Rosaleen away from herself.