

In a Dark, Dark Wood Study Guide

In a Dark, Dark Wood

(c)2016 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

In a Dark, Dark Wood Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1 – 7.....	5
Chapters 8 – 16.....	9
Chapters 17 – 24.....	13
Chapters 25 – 31.....	17
Chapters 32 – 36.....	21
Characters.....	24
Symbols and Symbolism.....	27
Settings.....	30
Themes and Motifs.....	32
Styles.....	36
Quotes.....	38

Plot Summary

NOTE: This study guide refers to the April 2016 First Scout Press/Simon & Schuster trade paperback edition of *In a Dark, Dark Wood*.

In a Dark, Dark Wood is a psychological murder mystery novel by Ruth Ware. The novel tells the story of unreliable, amnesiac narrator Nora Shaw as she attempts to recall the events of a bachelorette weekend in which a man was murdered that both she and the bride-to-be loved.

When the novel begins, Nora, a twenty-six year-old writer living in London, wonders why she has been invited to Clare Cavendish's hen do (bachelorette party weekend), because she and her old college friend have barely spoken for years. Nora consults her friend Nina de Souza, who has also been invited. Both girls decide to attend the weekend as long as the other goes.

Nora and Nina rent a car to drive to Northumberland to stay in a summer house in Kiedler Forest near the village of Stanebridge. The summer house belongs to the aunt of Clare's best friend and hen host, Florence "Flo" Clay. A few others are also in attendance, including Melanie, a new mother and old roommate of Flo and Clare's, and Tom, a gay playwright who works with Nora at the Royal Theatre Company. Tom is made uncomfortable by a shotgun kept in the house, even though it is only loaded with blanks. That evening, Nora goes out for a run, and encounters Clare on her way to the house. Clare explains to Nora that she needed to tell Nora face-to-face that she is marrying James, Nora's ex-boyfriend whom Nora never really got over. Nora is stunned.

As the weekend progresses, Melanie leaves early because she misses her family too much, while Nora and Nina note that Flo has obsessive behavior toward Clare thanks to an unknown incident in which Clare saved Flo's life. Nora also discovers that her phone has gone missing, and that a set of footprints is seen leading from the garage to the house. Late at night, a man appears in the house. Flo intends to scare him off with the shotgun, only to discover that it is not loaded with blanks. The injured man turns out to be James. Clare rushes to drive James to the hospital. Nora's memory becomes very spotty between here and her own arrival at a hospital with a terrible head injury which has cost her her short-term memory. The police come to consider Nora a suspect, for Clare is also in the hospital, and Nora struggles to remember what happened.

Nora ultimately remembers running to catch Clare's car on the night of the shooting, for Clare had left her jacket on the porch railing. Inside the jacket pocket was a shotgun blank, meaning that Clare had switched them out. Clare allowed Nora into the car, during which time Clare tried to kill them all. Only Nora grabbing the wheel stopped a serious accident.

Nora learns that Clare used her cell phone to lure James to the weekend house under false pretenses, dating back to the time Nora and James were in a relationship as teenagers. During her teenage years, Nora had been impregnated by James and had



an abortion because James insisted she do so. In reality, it was actually Clare, who wanted James for herself, that sent the text messages from James's phone, forcing the abortion and eventual breakup. Years later, James wanted to make things right before getting married so that Nora would know the truth. To prevent this and to retain her image as a perfect person, Clare decided to have James accidentally killed by using the story that Nora wanted a reunion with him. Clare is brought to justice, and Nora attempts to return to normal life.



Chapters 1 – 7

Summary

In Chapter 1, Leonora Shaw, called both Lee and Nora for short, is running from a car. She thinks of James, and wonders if she is too late. She throws herself onto the road. When she awakens, she is in the hospital and told she has a head injury. Everything hurts Nora, and she wonders what it is that she has done.

In Chapter 2, Nora decides to go for a run, comes home, showers, and opens up her e-mail. She lives in a small flat (apartment) in Newcastle in London and works from home as a novelist. Nora is surprised to discover an e-mail from Florence Clay, inviting her to a “Hen Do” (bachelorette party) on the weekend of November 14-16 for Clare Cavendish, someone she has not seen in ten years. Nora receives another e-mail from Florence, telling Nora that Clare really hopes Nora will be there. Nora then e-mails her friend, Nina de Souza, who is also surprised to be on the list and does not want to attend. Nina, however, promises to go if Nora decides to go. Nora and Nina both decide to go. Altogether, six people will be in attendance: Clare, Florence (Flo), Melanie, Tom, Nina, and Nora. Nora cannot figure out why Clare, ever the popular girl back during university days, would invite someone like Nora to a bachelorette weekend.

In Chapter 3, November 14 arrives. Nora and Nina rent a car to bring them to Kiedler Forest in Northumberland near the village of Stanebridge for the hen do. Nora still wonders why Clare would invite her, and if Clare intends to rekindle their friendship. At last, Nora and Nina arrive at the isolated house, a glass and steel building that looks horribly out of place. Flo is there to welcome them, and explains that the place is her aunt’s summer house. The inside is just as sparse as the outside, which makes Nora uncomfortable, and cell reception is horrible. Nora notices a shotgun loaded with blanks kept on the wall. Flo shows Nora and Nina to the room they will be sharing. Nora and Nina wonder about why Tom has been invited, imagining he must be gay, while Nora continues to wonder to herself why she has been invited at all.

In Chapter 4, Tom arrives. All the women assemble to greet him. Tom Deauxma, a playwright, is well-dressed, gay, and married to theater director Bruce Westerly. Tom explains that he met Clare at a Royal Theatre Company fundraiser. Tom finds the massive glass house to be like a stage, and he and everyone at the party as actors, while the audience is outside. Meanwhile, Flo prepares some tea as more introductions are made. Melanie Cho is twenty-eight, married to a man named Ben, has a baby, lives in Sheffield, is a lawyer, and shared a room at university with Flo and Clare. Nina de Souza, a doctor, was also at school with Clare and Nora. Nora then introduces herself as an old university friend of Clare’s. Tom explains university was not a happy time for him, and is interested in the fact that people have remained friends for so long. Flo then introduces herself and explains that she met Clare in Art History. Flo explains that Clare is her best friend, and that she would do anything for Clare. She wants the weekend to be perfect. When Flo leaves to make more tea, Melanie explains that Flo had a



breakdown in third year and never graduated as far as anyone knows. Nora is unnerved by how close to Nora Flo seems to be.

In Chapter 5, Nora is wheeled around the hospital from one room to another. She continues to ask what she has done. She has nightmares of being submerged in blood. Awake, Nora wonders if she has had an accident or been attacked. She has cuts and bruises all over her body, and suddenly realizes she has fired a gun.

In Chapter 6, Nora decides to go for a run before night falls. Flo recommends taking the footpath down to the main road, and gives Nora a headlamp in case it gets too dark. Nora explains to Nina she is going jogging, that she is feeling a little bit of cabin fever, and needs to get out for a while. Outside and running, Nora feels better and no longer feels as if she is being watched. As Nora heads out onto the road, a car comes past. Clare is driving the car, and asks what Nora is doing there.

In Chapter 7, Nora explains to Clare she is a hen, but Clare explains she meant what Nora is doing outside in the dark. Nora explains she is taking a run. Clare then gives Nora a ride back to the house. Clare seems happy to see Nora, and is impressed with Clare's career as a writer. Clare explains that she now does PR for the Royal Theatre Company. Clare apologizes for falling out of touch since college, especially because they had known each other since they were five. Nora then asks why Clare has reached out to her after all this time. Clare responds it is because she needs to tell Nora to her face that she is marrying James. Nora is shocked.

Analysis

Ruth Ware's psychological murder mystery novel *In a Dark, Dark Wood* is the story of amnesiac narrator Nora attempting to remember the events of a bachelorette weekend which culminated in murder. The reader is introduced to Nora and her memory loss from the very start. Ware thematically insinuates throughout her book that the past, in its various forms, is inescapable. Nora is struggling to remember the events of the weekend not only because someone is dead, but because the evidence –such as bruises –seems to suggest that it was she who may have killed someone. Here, the past is inescapable even if it cannot be remembered. Whether or not Nora can remember the previous few days has no bearing on the fact that someone is dead.

The past is also inescapable in Nora's invitation to a bachelorette weekend in the honor of soon-to-be-married Clare. Nora and Clare have not spoken in years, at least not since college. Why Clare should suddenly want Nora at her weekend party –and why she should want Nora most of all –is not only confusing to Nora and to the reader, but serves as an omen for future events. In other words, whatever reason Clare has for wanting Nora at her party is important, and is based on the past.

What that past is comes to light in Chapter 7. As Nora learns, Clare wanted her at the hen do weekend because Clare is set to marry James –Nora's ex from many years before, and with whom Nora has shared an immense amount of pain and hardship. The



past is inescapable for Nora once more –this time resurfacing in the image of a wedding between her ex and her old best friend. As the reader will learn in coming chapters, this is a serious point of contention for Nora.

At the same time, Nora, Nina, and Melanie feel pressured to be at the hen do weekend. For Melanie, this is because she is a new mother and already misses her husband and baby boy. For Nina, she has better things to do but has come out of a sense of expectation and obligation. Nora, likewise, could think of better things to do, as well as not wanting to face the ghosts of her past through Clare. Nora, Nina, and Melanie all have felt the sting of social pressure from Clare through Flo.

Nora consistently wonders why she bothered to accept the invitation at all, and why Clare could possibly want her at the weekend. While Clare explains it is because she wanted to tell Nora face-to-face about James, the reader recognizes that this is suspect: Clare could have easily met with Nora in person elsewhere, and could have easily called Nora up instead and been done with it. There is something else going on. The author allows this to serve as an important warning to readers to resist social and peer pressure, because caving in to do something could indeed have deadly consequences.

Another point to note in this section of the novel is the gun, presumably loaded with blanks, on the wall of the summer home. This gun serves as both a metaphorical and literal embodiment of the principle of “Chekhov’s gun.” Chekhov’s gun is a dramatic principle that states that every memorable element in a work must be necessary. According to Anton Chekhov, “If you say in the first chapter there is a rifle hanging on the wall, in the second or third chapter it absolutely must go off. If it’s not going to be fired, it shouldn’t be hanging there” (Valentine T. Bill (1987), Chekhov: The Silent Voice of Freedom, Philosophical Library). Thus, the shotgun hanging on the wall in Chapter 3 clearly foreshadows that the gun will play a prominent role in the events ahead.

Discussion Question 1

Why has Clare presumably reached out to Nora to invite Nora to her hen do weekend? Why is Nora so confused by the invitation?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Nora grudgingly accept the invite to the bachelorette weekend? Why does she consistently reconsider her decision but refuse to do anything about it?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Nora struggle to recall her memory in the hospital? What is it exactly that she is trying to remember?

Vocabulary

irrational, hen do, unfurling, admonishing, sentinel, minimalist, anonymous, exertion, absentmindedly, quarantine, disconcerting, morbid, allocated, diffuse, sophisticated



Chapters 8 – 16

Summary

In Chapter 8, Nora is stunned that Clare is marrying James. Clare says that neither she nor James has done anything wrong and both want Nora's blessing. Before anything else can be said, Flora appears in the doorway of the house to greet Clare and bring her inside. Nora is devastated, for she has spent ten years trying to forget about James. Yet, she realizes that she and James have been broken up for a decade, and so Clare and James really have done nothing wrong. Nora goes upstairs to shower, and cannot help but reflect on meeting James when she was sixteen. Downstairs, festivities get underway and Nora goes to join in.

In Chapter 9, Nora joins everyone else downstairs. There, she discovers that Flo is wearing the exact same clothes as Clara. Tequila, pita bread, and other light refreshments are brought out while pizza is prepared. Nora continues to have difficulty processing the fact that Clare and James getting married. Tom and Clare talk about having personal trainers and staying in shape, which causes Nina to become argumentative over body size expectations. Tom then brings out a bag of cocaine and encourages everyone to do a line. Flo and Melanie refuse to do so, but Nora and Nina join Tom and Clare. Nora realizes she is too old now to be doing such stupid things, but declares she is not drunk enough, and asks for more tequila.

In Chapter 10, everyone plays the drinking game "Never Have I Ever." Nora continues to wonder how Clare and James could be getting married. Nina then announces that she has never had sex with James Cooper, which causes Nora to curse at her and leave the room and throw up in the bathroom. Clare and Nina both follow Nora, apologizing for what has happened. Nora says it is alright, but that she is going to bed. Flo comes up a short time later to yell at Nora for nearly ruining things on the first night. Flo says she will do whatever it takes to make sure the weekend is perfect for Clare, and tells Nora she will kill Nora if it is all ruined. Flo then calls Nora a selfish bitch. Late that night, when Nina gets into bed, she apologizes once more for the earlier events. Nora apologizes for overreacting. Nina asks what happened with James all those years ago, but Nora refuses to speak of it.

In Chapter 11, Nora hears police voices outside her hospital room door, saying they should have checked the house. She also hears a female police officer speak about murder.

In Chapter 12, Nora goes for a run early the next morning after snow has fallen. When Nora returns, she discovers someone has been to the garage. Inside, Nora finds that Melanie is awake and making toast. She feels badly that she is not with her son. Nora asks about the garage, but Melanie explains she did not go outside. Nora begins to wonder if maybe someone entered the house from the garage, but dismisses it as silly. Melanie then discovers that the landline phone is no longer working. Nora thinks the



snow must have brought the line down. Melanie confesses she doesn't even know why she has come, which in turn causes Nora to wonder the same thing. Melanie then decides to pack and leave.

In Chapter 13, Nora remembers meeting Clare in primary school many years before, and how Clare was the kind of friend to just as quickly defend as to make fun –while she watches Flo attempt to talk Melanie out of leaving. Clare wakes up, and tells Melanie she is welcome to leave if she wishes. Melanie explains the landline is down, and then leaves. Flo begins crying, saying that she owes Clare her life. When Nora goes back upstairs, Nina is saying goodbye to her girlfriend, Jess. Nora fills Nina in on the events of the morning, leading Nina to believe that Flo is unhinged. However, neither Nora nor Nina decides to leave too, because they would feel too bad so soon after Melanie has left.

In Chapter 14, Nora is at the hospital and cannot determine who is dead and who is not. She struggles to remember anything at all, because she knows the police will soon question her.

In Chapter 15, Flo announces that the group will be going clay pigeon shooting at the range, but until they arrive, they will be doing a quiz game on “James trivia,” the rewards being skimpy pairs of underwear with “I (heart) James Cooper” on the bottom. Thinking about James and the entire situation makes Nora sick, so she has them stop the car so she can get out and throw up. Clare calls for a temporary break in the quiz game.

In Chapter 16, Nora is awakened by a nurse for a routine checkup. The nurse tells Nora that she has had a “bit” of a car accident. When the nurse speaks to the police officers outside, Nora hears pieces of their conversation, including the word “homicide” and a phrase in which someone “didn't make it” (p. 122). Nora feels horrible, and tries her best to remember who is dead.

Analysis

The past remains inescapable in this section of the novel. Nora continues to be stunned by the fact that Clare will be marrying James. Clare argues that neither she, nor James has done anything wrong by choosing to get married, but the effect on Nora is obvious. It is as if Nora were dating James, and James had an affair with Clare. Nora reasons this out in her mind as ridiculous, because she hasn't spoken to James in ten years. Nevertheless, the past is still very relevant to Nora, and it is clear that James still matters very much to Nora. However, why Nora and James ever broke up is something Nora has not yet revealed.

The author returns to her arguments that no one should bow to peer or social pressure, especially when such pressure runs counter to a person's nature. Nora and Nina, eager to get along and survive the weekend, bow to pressure in doing everything from drinking heavily to snorting cocaine. Only Flo and Melanie refuse to participate in these things –



Melanie because she is a responsible parent with clear morals, and Flo because she needs to keep her aunt's house in reasonably good order.

What is interesting, as the reader will note, is that immediately upon doing cocaine, Nora regrets the decision. She considers herself too old for such childishness anymore – but has nevertheless gone along with things in order to get along. Her mind, additionally, is still reeling from the idea that James will be marrying Clare. Nora continues to regret ever coming to the hen do, but still refuses to leave out of fear of offending the hosts or causing drama.

Melanie, however, has no such concerns, and leaves. Melanie represents a role model to the other young women in the house through her decisive action. There is something important that exists beyond Melanie for which she lives and which social pressure cannot obscure –her family. Even with Melanie serving as such a role model, Nora and Nina refuse to leave. The weekend has already begun deteriorating, but still Nora and Nina press on. Even though they have never before met Tom or Flo, and even though Clare means nothing to them now, they still refuse to leave. Thus, it could be argued that Nora's "tragic flaw" is that of conforming to society's expectations.

What makes this situation even worse is the fact that Nora is still reeling about James. The drive to the shooting range is interrupted by Nora having to get out of the car to throw up. It is probable that this nausea is not only a manifestation of her heartache, but of behaving recklessly the night before. Again, as Nora herself has noted, she is no longer a kid –and drugs and copious amounts of alcohol are never things to mess around with, anyway. However, the recollection of the shooting range potentially solves at least one mystery –why Nora has fired a gun. However, other mysteries now arise – such as a car accident, and the knowledge that not only is someone dead, but that the death is now being treated as murder.

Discussion Question 1

Although Nora does not particularly want to get drunk or do cocaine, she does so anyway. Why? Why does Melanie refuse?

Discussion Question 2

While Melanie presents a role model for the others in the house – she refuses to get wasted, get high, or stick around for the rest of the weekend – no one follows Melanie's example. Why?

Discussion Question 3

What apparently solves the mystery of the recoil bruise on Nora's shoulder? What new mystery, however, opens up by the end of Chapter 16?

Vocabulary

self-sufficiency, dregs, infamously, monotonous, bemused, insouciant, indiscernible, indignity, derided, tremulous, masochistic, theatrically, diffidently, vigorously, bickered, vehemently



Chapters 17 – 24

Summary

In Chapter 17, Nora, Flo, Tom, Nina, and Clare are welcomed to the Tuckett's Wood shooting range by Greg. Greg familiarizes the group with shooting, and warns them that guns are to be respected and treated seriously. He volunteers Flo to help him fire a gun to demonstrate the effects of shooting a person on a paper target. Everyone is stunned. Greg reminds them to be very careful.

In Chapter 18, back at the house, Tom and Flo are thrilled after the shooting outing. Nora says she sort of enjoyed it, but can already feel a bruise from the gun's recoil forming on her shoulder. Nina wants to make a call to Jess, but has no reception. Nora volunteers her phone, but realizes it is missing. Tom explains that he had a fight with Bruce before coming to the hen weekend, in which Bruce opposed the weekend because he had some history with James. Nora then reveals she met James at a school production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where James played Brick. Nora played Maggie as an understudy after Clare was cast as Maggie but could not perform due to illness. Nora suddenly feels as if everyone is being watched through the glass walls once more. Nora then mentions the footprints to Flo, who decides to lock up early for the night. She explains that her aunt had trouble from locals when building the place, because of the design and because it is on or near a national park. She explains there are a small cluster of homes and a farm about a mile up the road.

In Chapter 19, Nora chats with Nina in their room before dinner. Nina says she can't wait to leave because she suddenly feels as if she is back in high school thanks to Clare and Flo. Nina has also grown very tired of all of the wedding talk and Flo dominating conversation about the wedding. That night, Flo breaks out a Ouija board while everyone gathers around her. Flo seeks a spirit contact, and the name "Maxwell" is spelled out, along with the words "buy coffee (p. 150)." Flo becomes angry and blames Nora for the joke, but Nora denies having anything to do with it. Clare settles Flo down, and Flo returns to the board. Flo seeks another spirit, and the name "Papa Begby" is spelled out, along with the word "mmmmmmurderer (p. 154)." Flo says she know something about everyone in the room. Nora suddenly has a panic attack, but she writes it off as the wine. She goes outside for a breath of fresh air, and hopes that Clare has not told Flo about Nora's past with James. Nora also reflects on having learned that a crofter's cottage had stood and burned down on the site of the house before the house was built. Nina comes out to see how Nora is doing a short time later. Nora worries the Ouija board message might be a warning, but Nina dismisses belief in such things.

In Chapter 20, Nora is awakened that night by an odd sound coming from downstairs. She wanders out of her room to see what it is, and meets Flo, who has also heard the noise. Clare is awakened a moment later, and it is decided to awaken Tom. Everyone heads downstairs to see that the door is open and footprints are outside. Flo grabs the



shotgun, and the group finds no one in the cabin. The locks are all checked, and everyone returns upstairs. Nina awakens, and learns what has happened. Suddenly, Nora herself awakens from her memories in the hospital as a nurse tends to her. She begs the nurse to learn the name of who has been killed. The nurse heads out into the hall to see if it is alright to tell her.

In Chapter 21, Nora knows that the brain will sometimes create missing details that cannot be remembered. Nora knows she must remember what is true and what is invented. The narrative suddenly shifts from the hospital back to the weekend. Nora and Nina awaken later that night, hearing a door open and hearing more footsteps. Nora then realizes they never checked the rest of the house. Flo, Clare, Nora, Tom, and Nina all emerge from their rooms to find a tall, hooded man coming up the stairs. Flo orders him to leave, but he does not. She fires the shotgun at him.

Suddenly, the narrative returns to the hospital. The nurse and Dr. Miller have entered the room. Dr. Miller explains he will examine Nora to ensure she is up to speaking with the police. Miller says Nora is doing well, but her memory loss is troubling and may be stress related. Miller explains that the brain will sometimes suppress events it is not ready to handle. Miller consents to the police speaking with Nora. A police constable who resembles David Bowie's wife enters the room. Her name is Detective Constable Lamarr. Lamarr confirms that Nora is not a suspect, at least not yet. Nora attempts to ask who is dead, but ends up crying instead.

In Chapter 22, Nora rushes down the stairs to see the wounded man. Nina follows. They recognize the man to be James. Nina's medical instincts kick in, and she rushes to assess James. Flo faints and Nina orders Tom to pull Flo away. Clare suddenly disappears. James struggles to apologize to Nora, saying something about a text message. Nora says the past is forgotten. James then loses consciousness. The narrative then suddenly returns to the hospital, where Nora continues to cry. Lamarr presses for Nora's version of events, which she gives –including the Ouija board warning, which she now finds ironic. Lamarr questions if Nora fired the gun, because her fingerprints are on the barrel. Nora says she only grabbed the gun to keep it away from Flo.

Lamarr inquires about Nora's past with James, but Nora lies and says she is long over the past. Nora then returns to the events of the weekend. Clare reappears, having tried unsuccessfully to call an ambulance. Clare, Nina, and Flo decide to drive James to the hospital while Nora remains behind because there is not enough room in the car. But a misunderstanding of some kind leaves Tom and Nina behind. Nora then discovers a black leather jacket on the porch railing left behind in the panic, but she does not know whether it belongs to Clare or to Flo since they wore the same clothing. Nora then tells Lamarr she remembers running through the woods to try to catch Clare, but her memory here becomes confused. The nurse returns to the room and orders Lamarr out for the time being. Nora, meanwhile, struggles to accept the fact that James, the man she has always loved, is dead.



In Chapter 23, Lamarr speaks with Nora once more. Nora remembers running through the woods and trying to flag down a car. Nora asks how Clare is doing. Lamarr explains that Clare is fine, but was in the same accident as Nora. Lamarr inquires about Nora's cell phone, but Nora explains it has been missing. Nora now begins to worry. She knows by now that she is not a suspect, but she believes the police are investigating James's death as a murder.

In Chapter 24, Nina comes to see Nora in her hospital room. Nina explains the police are definitely investigating a possible murder, as either Flo's aunt did not actually keep her shotgun loaded with blanks, or that someone else actually loaded the gun. Nina then presses Nora for the truth about what happened with James, citing that the police will be looking for motives, and that whatever happened to cause James and Nora to break up resulted in Nora leaving school, shutting out half her friends, and not speaking to James for ten years. Nora says there is nothing to tell. Nina then says that had it not been for the car crash, James would have probably lived. Nora is horrified by this, and struggles again to remember the past. Meanwhile, Nina explains that Flo has had a breakdown, and that James's parents have already come to identify the body. Nora feels horrible about this, because James was their only child. Nora then notices the police guard outside her door is gone.

Analysis

The past continues to be inescapable in this section of the novel. The reader learns that Nora and Clare both first met James while working on the same school production, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, when they were all sixteen. This literary allusion is important because it points out the "love triangle" between Nora, James, and Clare. Clare, who originally played Maggie in the play, is later revealed to have pined for her co-star at the same time. Nora and James dated for several months, but ultimately broke up in a very bad way. This will be revealed in the coming chapter, but for now, remains concealed. As the reader notes, the past proves to be inescapable in a very dramatic and heartbreaking way. When James arrives at the cabin, he is taken for an intruder and shot. He dies soon after.

James's arrival and subsequent death are foreshadowed by several events in the novel which appear strange or downright disturbing. First, there is the information that Nora learns about an old building burning down on the property where Flo's aunt's glass house now stands. Second is that, to Nora, it appears as if the glass house is a stage where they are all being watched. In other words, a theater-goer watches the lives of characters played out on a stage in an acted story; now, it appears as if Nora's story, and the stories of others, are playing out in the glass house. Glass walls can be seen through. Nothing is obscured. The truth is plain to see. Soon, the truth behind the murder and the motives of each of the characters will be clear as well.

Other events foreshadow James's arrival and death. Flo relates how the locals were up in arms about a modern, glass house being built in a very traditional, rustic, and old-world area. Apparently, the locals tried to give Flo's aunt some sort of legal trouble to



prevent her from building, but lost out in the end. The footprints that Nora discovers leading from the garage to the house are just as disconcerting, as the intruder is quickly considered to be an angry, murderous local. Additionally, the spelling out of the word “murder” on the Ouija board also comes to portend a murder. And stranger still is Nora’s missing cell phone.

The past proves to be inescapable as Nora begins to recall all these things, for they all invariably either factored into, or directly led up to the murder of James. Nina directly asks Nora about the past, and the truth about what happened with James, but Nora will not talk about it. The distant past is too painful, and Nora is struggling trying to recall what happened only a few short days before. It is apparent that the police, however, are considering every possible avenue of a motive for the murder of James, including the avenue of Nora’s past. It is in this section of the novel that Nora finally, and fully, admits to herself that she is still in love with James.

Discussion Question 1

Who do Nora and the others assume James to be initially when he arrives in the house? What ultimately compels Flo to fire at James? If you had been in this situation, what would you have done? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What circumstances, events, and clues foreshadow the murder of James? Why are the police now considering James’s death a murder? Do these circumstances, events, and clues support their conclusion? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Although the police do not yet consider Nora a suspect, they are interested in her past with James. Nina, too, is interested to learn about the past – but Nora refuses to reveal it. Why?

Vocabulary

precautions, technicalities, pantomime, banality, invariably, noncommittal, punctilious, levity, malignant, patronizing, basilar, bereft, fantastical



Chapters 25 – 31

Summary

In Chapter 25, a man named Matt Ridout comes to see Nora. Matt explains he was James's best man for the wedding. He calls Nora "Leo" –a nickname that only James called her. He explains he and James became friends at Cambridge University. Matt explains that even with James's success on the stage, he never sold out. Matt says that there must have been a reason that James went up to the hen, because guys do not crash their bride-to-be's hens; and because James and Clare had not been getting along well lately. All Matt can think is that someone asked James to come. Matt promises to keep in touch as he leaves.

In Chapter 26, Nina sneaks into Nora's room with some real clothing so Nora does not have to wear her hospital gown any longer, and leaves Nora some money in case Nora wants to order food other than hospital chow. Before Nina leaves, she suggests Nora tell the police about her past with James. Nora then remembers how she became pregnant by James, and how she wanted to make a joint decision with James about how to proceed –but James put all the responsibility on Nora, and told her never to call him again. Nora remembers that it was Clare who brought Nora to the clinic for an abortion pill. The entire experience with James was humiliating, Nora remembers, and moving away was a way to escape and start over. While Nora blamed James at the time for his actions, she no longer holds him accountable, recognizing he was as frightened a child as she was. Nora is later awakened by Lamarr who enters the room with Nora's cell phone, and says she will now be questioned as a suspect.

In Chapter 27, Lamarr tapes her conversation with Nora. She asks Nora about calls and texts, but Nora explains there was little such activity because of the bad reception. She then asks Nora about her relationship with James. Nora confirms she had not spoken to James in ten years. Lamarr then asks about Nora's movements and activities at the house. Nora recalls them as best she can. She also makes note of the footprints leading from the garage to the house. Nora later learns she is well enough to be released from the hospital. Nora then receives a call from Nina, who explains that Flo has tried to commit suicide.

In Chapter 28, Nina explains that the suicide attempt happened in the bed-and-breakfast where they have been staying during the course of the investigation. Nina explains that they are all being considered suspects at the moment. Lamarr then comes back to see Nora with another detective named Roberts, bearing transcripts of text messages between Nora's phone and James's phone. The texts implore James to drive up in the middle of the night, with word that the kitchen door will be left unlocked, and that James should come up to her room at which time everything would be explained. The texts correspond to the times that Nora went out on her runs and went to the shooting range. Nora says she did not bring her phone with her on the runs. Lamarr then goes on to say that they know now what happened in the car – that Clare picked



Nora up and that Nora grabbed the wheel and forced the car off the road. Clare now displays defensive wounds. Lamarr believes that Nora never got over James, and when she found out about the wedding, Nora arranged to kill James. Nora then asks for a lawyer.

In Chapter 29, Nora tries to figure out who had access to her phone while she was out on her first run. Clare had not yet arrived; Melanie barely knew James and had gone by the time he arrived; Tom was the one who miscommunicated Nina's intention to drive along with Clare after James had been moved to the car, but Tom probably had no clue about the past and would not want to hurt Clare; Nina knows about the past, but Nora doubts Nina would have ever stooped to such a level; and at last Nora considers Flo, who is obsessed with Clare and is unstable. Nora begins to wonder if she herself really did lure James to the house and kill him, but her mind has suppressed the memory of doing so. She doubts this because she can remember enough of the weekend well. She begins to suspect that she is being set up, but has no idea who could hate her enough to do so. Yet, even this is difficult because she does not know that she can even trust herself. That night, Nora heads out into the hospital where she comes across Clare, still recovering. Nora promises the sleeping Clare she will get to the truth, then sneaks out of the hospital.

In Chapter 30, Nora hails a cab to bring her to the glass house. The driver looks concerned and asks if Nora is alright as she moves past the police barriers that have been set up. Nora contends that she is. As Nora heads up to the house, she begins to wonder again whether or not she or someone else is responsible for James's death. Nora presses on to learn the truth.

In Chapter 31, Nora circles the house, wondering how she can get in. Nora then discovers the lock of the kitchen door has been taped, meaning the door could not be locked. This is proof that someone set James up. Nora begins to retrace her steps, beginning with standing at the top of the stairs when James was shot. It is then that Nora remembers why she began running after Clare with the leather jacket –because there was a blank shotgun round in the pocket, which was substituted for the live round. This means that Clare had James killed –but Nora does not know why. Nora reflects on how Matt said Clare and James were having issues, and remembers how Flo threatened to kill anyone who would ruin the weekend. It then seems to Nora that Flo must have carried out the murder. Nora then falls asleep on the couch. When she awakens, it is night, and someone is in the kitchen.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, the past remains inescapable for Nora, who must finally confess her past with James because Nora is now being considered the prime suspect in his killing. It turns out that Nora became pregnant by James, but James irresponsibly foisted all of the responsibility for handling the pregnancy on Nora. Tragically, Nora might have kept the baby if James had owned up to his responsibility. Social pressure from James made Nora feel as if she had no alternative; and while Nora does the



respectful and responsible thing by including James on the decision, James did the most irresponsible thing possible by refusing to own up to his end of things. Nora, years later and in retrospect, does not blame James for this at all because both of them were really only scared kids, and had no real idea about what to do or where to turn. It is why Nora is still in love with James, and would never hurt him –or so she believes.

But as Nora later learns from Matt, no guy in his right mind would crash a bachelorette party without a reason. Lamarr finally finds Nora's cell phone, from which text exchanges between Nora's phone and James are transcribed. These text messages enticed James to come up to the glass house to meet with Nora. Nora does not remember sending these text messages at all, and the more she remembers about the past –the past now being inescapable in terms of her future being at risk –the more she comes to consider that she is being set up for a murder she did not commit.

Nora begins to consider each of those people present at the house, and who might be to blame for setting the murder up. Melanie and Tom are considered by Nora to be the most unlikely, meaning that Nina, Flo, or Clare must be responsible for the deed. The recent past is not only inescapable, but utterly crucial now as Nora must determine the few final missing pieces of the puzzle to make sense of everything. Nora continues to push into the past, during which time she is able to remember that she discovered a blank shotgun round in Clare's jacket pocket –meaning that Clare replaced the shotgun blank with an actual live round.

More than likely, Clare is the killer of her own fiancé. Here, author Ruth Ware presents the theme that even women are capable of murder. While traditional villains, criminals, and murderers are to this day usually thought of as men, Ware breaks this social conception by presenting a female murderer. Nora now knows that Clare is capable of murder, but her motivation is something Nora must still find out. Note that Nora originally considers Tom a potential murderer, largely because he is a man. However, reason soon takes over and causes Nora to reconsider Tom's motives, and ultimately to come to believe he is not the killer. A killer, as Ware again argues, does not need to be a man.

Discussion Question 1

What is the truth behind the past between Nora and James? Why does Nora, rather than being angry, forgive James for his irresponsibility from years before?

Discussion Question 2

What evidence do the police have that suggests Nora is the murderer? How is Nora able to counter this evidence, if it all?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Nora have difficulty at first considering the fact that Clare, rather than Tom, may be the murderer? What does this have to say about social gender conceptions and crimes?

Vocabulary

qualified, elaborate, speculate, brusquely, bewilderingly



Chapters 32 – 36

Summary

In Chapter 32, Nora is confronted by Clare, who is wearing gloves and smoking a cigarette. Nora asks what Clare is doing there; Clare says she could ask the same. Clare offers Nora some tea, which Nora accepts. Clare begins by trying to pretend to be a friend to Nora. Clare says that on the night of the accident, she picked Nora up, who declared she could not live without James, and then grabbed the wheel of the car to drive it off the road. Clare insists she doesn't know anything about a blank in a jacket pocket. Suddenly, Nora realizes what James meant when he spoke about a text message after being shot.

In Chapter 33, Nora recites the text James sent to her before the abortion, in which he called her "Lee" rather than "Leo." Clare then confesses that she sent that text to Nora ten years before because Nora was so young and it was for the best because neither Nora nor James were ready to be parents. Nora knows that Clare also wanted James all those years before—but James ended up with Nora at that time. Clare also confesses to keeping James away from Nora even after confessing the truth about the text by saying Nora did not want to talk to him but would contact him when she was ready. Clare explains that James wanted to call off the wedding and could not forgive Clare unless Clare told Nora the truth, which is why Nora was invited to the hen. Clare had two choices, Nora realizes. She could either tell the truth, exposing herself as less than the perfect person she pretends to be, or she could refuse to tell the truth and risk losing James, at which time the truth would come out regardless. It is then that Nora begins to feel lightheaded, as she discovers her tea has been laced with some sort of white powder.

In Chapter 34, Nora, losing control of herself, stumbles for the door. She rushes out into the night, pursued by Clare. She knows now that the footsteps to the garage were Clare using her phone to text James. Nora remembers how Clare drove off the road intentionally, with Nora trying to stop Clare from killing both them and James. Suddenly, there is a tremendous crashing sound. Upon investigating, Nora sees that Clare has wrecked her car, having slammed into Lamarr's car. Lamarr is calling for help and backup when Nora approaches. Lamarr catches Nora as she falls to the ground.

In Chapter 35, Nora awakens in the hospital. Lamarr is with her and explains that Nora is no longer a suspect. She reveals that at university, Clare hacked into a professor's e-mail address to send out inappropriate e-mails to female students soliciting sex for grades to use as blackmail against the professor if he failed her. Tom later comes in to talk to Nora. He explains that he and the others have figured that if Nora hadn't come to the hen, one of them would have been forced to take the fall, and that James still would have been shot.



In Chapter 36, Nora returns to London with Nina, driven by Jess who has come to pick them up. Flo has since died from her suicide attempt, and her aunt is now seeking to sell the house. At home, Nora checks her e-mail. One e-mail is from Matt, requesting a meeting for coffee. Nora does not respond and deletes the e-mail.

Analysis

In the climax of the narrative, Clare confronts Nora at the glass house, during which time Clare still attempts to place blame for everything on Nora. Nora learns from Clare the truth behind everything, including Clare's motives. The past has not just been inescapable for Nora, but for Clare as well. Even ten years later, Clare is still furious over Nora ending up with James in high school, made possible by Clare being sick. In Clare's mind, she, not Nora, should have ended up with James. This was why she, and not James, sent Nora the texts foisting all responsibility on Nora, and leading to the breakup. Here, Ware argues that women can be just as twisted and scheming as men can be.

But Clare's efforts do not end there. Clare's being capable of murder is grounded in events of the recent, inescapable past. As Matt previously revealed, Clare and James had been having issues. Clare reveals to Nora that these issues included James learning the truth surrounding the abortion years before, and James demanding that things be made right through Clare confessing to Nora. Clare recognized that she would be in a difficult position by doing so: either she could reveal the truth to Nora and marry James; or she could refuse to reveal the truth and not marry James, during which time the truth would come out anyway –and Clare would appear imperfect in both situations. This to Clare was not acceptable.

No matter what, Clare had to emerge unscathed by the fallout. In order to protect her image, in order to ensure that the truth could never come out, and in order to ensure that Nora could never have James again, Clare decided to concoct a scheme in which James arrived at the house, was confused for an intruder, and killed. Unfortunately for Clare, James did not die right away. It took the car accident to make that happen. Had James lived, the truth would have come out. Clare had to ensure that James was dead –and Nora ended up in the wrong car at the wrong time. Not only was Clare capable of murder as a woman, Ware argues, but Clare was capable of a twisted plot to make it happen –and to frame Nora for it.

As Ware also argues in summation through her plot, obsession deranges the mind. Flo, obsessed with Clare for saving her life, is willing to do anything for Clare. While Flo's true role in things is never revealed –her suicide attempt ultimately becomes reality –her guilt at having shot James and her potential role in the plot overrides her obsession with Clare. Nora's own obsession with James means that, for the past ten years, she has been unable to move on and start over completely. Now with James dead, she has no real choice. Clare's obsession with James has lasted ten years, and her obsession with herself has lasted her entire life. Her desire that no one else should have James, coupled with the image she has erected about being perfect, means that James had to



die. Here, obsession is downright deadly. The novel itself ends on an interesting note. Nora refuses to meet with Matt because she knows her obsession with James must now end because he is dead. She cannot love a ghost.

Discussion Question 1

What is Clare's motive in murdering James? Why does Clare ultimately try to kill herself in addition to James and Nora the night of the shooting?

Discussion Question 2

What truth does Nora learn about her breakup with James ten years before? Why does Clare confess this to Nora, especially given the original intent of the weekend (a hen do)?

Discussion Question 3

Ruth Ware argues that women can be just as scheming, and capable of murder, as men. How does she demonstrate this? Why do you believe she argues this at all?

Vocabulary

denouncing, incomprehension, laconically, deception, horrendous



Characters

Nora

Leonora “Nora” Shaw (also called Lee and Leo) is a twenty-six year-old writer and the narrator of the novel. Rendered an amnesiac based on traumatic experiences including a car accident and severe stress, Nora is an unreliable narrator, unable to accurately or completely recall the events of the past weekend. Learning that she is being considered a suspect in the murder of her old flame, James, Nora struggles to recall the events of the hen do weekend to which she was invited.

Nora, who at first would rather go along to get along than cause drama or disappoint others, agrees to attend Clare’s bachelorette weekend even though she and Clare have not really spoken since university. At the hen do, Nora drinks, does drugs, and participates in activities she knows she is too old for, or should not be doing at all –but does them anyway because of peer pressure. As Nora learns, Clare and James are set to be married, and as Nora later learns, Clare was the cause of Nora’s breakup with James ten years before. In the present time, Clare has attempted to have James killed, and then attempts to kill herself and Nora to prevent the truth from coming out. Clare is unsuccessful, and Nora must commit to making herself a stronger person, and getting over the past.

Clare

Clare Cavendish is the antagonist of the novel, and represents the idea that women are just as capable of men of murder and twisted schemes. Clare, set to marry James, receives an ultimatum from him: she must confess to Nora that she was the source of the breakup between him and Nora ten years before, or the wedding will be off. With no choice, Clara has her best friend Flo invite Nora to the hen do weekend.

Hoping to preserve the image of a perfect person that Clare has cast about herself, Clare decides to have James murdered to avoid the truth coming out. To do so, Clare lures James to the house by text messages from Nora’s phone and then ensures the shotgun Flo fires is loaded with live ammunition. Seeking to ensure that the truth does not come out, Clare is willing to kill herself as well as Nora on the way to the hospital, but the crash only kills James. Clare later confesses all of this to Nora, and unsuccessfully tries once more to kill Nora.

Nina

Nina de Souza is Nora’s current best friend. Nina is a lesbian doctor who approaches work in a detached, unemotional way, seeing it merely as procedure and business. However, when it comes to social activities, Nina is very much like Nora: they both go along with the crowd. Nina and Nora decide to attend Clare’s hen do together, during



which time Nina's own detachment shows here and there, such as during the drinking game "Never Have I Ever," when Nina uses having sex with James as a cause to drink. Nina apologizes for this. When Nora is suspected of the murder, Nina does all she can to help Nora, proving her own worth as a best friend by bringing Nora news, money, and clothing, and doing whatever she can to defend Nora against the police.

Flo

Florence "Flo" Clay is the current best friend of Clare, and is obsessed with Clare to the point that she dresses exactly like Clare. Flo does this because she credits Clare with having saved her life –but from what is never exactly revealed. Flo, at Clare's bidding, sets up the hen do weekend and ensures that Nora will attend. Flo becomes enraged when Melanie leaves and drama breaks out around Nora, because Flo wants Clare to have the perfect weekend. Flo ultimately comes to be the one to inadvertently shoots James with a live round from the shotgun, which traumatizes her afterward. Whether or not she is in on Clare's plot itself is never made clear, but Flo finally comes to commit suicide because of the shooting.

Tom

Tom Deauxma is gay playwright and member of the Royal Theatre Company. It was through a fundraising gala that Tom first met and befriended Clare. Tom has come to the hen do weekend at Flo's insistence, and is the one to bring out cocaine for most of the others to use. Tom is later briefly suspected of being the person to set up Nora and James in part because he is a man, but such suspicions are later abandoned.

Melanie

Melanie Cho is a former roommate of Clare and Flo from university, and is a new mother. Melanie isn't thrilled about coming on the weekend hen do because it has brought her away from her husband and her baby boy. Melanie refuses to get drunk or do drugs, adhering to her own moral conscience and resisting social and peer pressure from the others. Melanie serves as a role model that the others ignore. Melanie, not caring about making waves or causing drama, leaves the first morning of the hen do to return home.

James

James Cooper is the love interest of both Nora and Clare, stretching all the way back to their time in high school when they met in a school production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. James ultimately had feelings for Nora, and the two began an intense relationship that resulted in Nora becoming pregnant and both James and Nora terrified. It was at this point that Clare stepped in, pretending to be James and driving Nora away to pave her own path to James. When James later learns about the truth of things, he gives Clare



the ultimatum of telling Nora or losing the wedding. James is later lured to the cabin by Clare through Nora's cell phone, and is shot and seriously wounded. James is shortly thereafter killed in a car crash caused by Clare.

Lamarr

Detective Constable Lamarr is the policewoman designated to head up the investigation into James's death. Lamarr initially comes to suspect Nora as James's murderer, given the text messages sent to James from Nora's phone. Later, Lamar comes to realize that Clare used Nora's phone to send the messages, and that this is not the first time Clare has done such a thing. When Lamarr goes after Nora and Clare after they have left the hospital, Lamarr is lightly injured when Clare plows her car into Lamarr's.

Matt

Matt Ridout is the best friend of James, and is set to be the best man at James's wedding. He is devastated when James is killed, and travels to the hospital to see about the situation. He speaks briefly with Nora, saying there is no conceivable reason James would have crashed a bachelorette weekend without being invited. Matt later attempts to get in touch with Nora upon their return to London, but Nora refuses to meet him for coffee, wanting to be done with all parts of the past.

Dr. Miller

Dr. Miller is the physician attending to Nora during her stay at the hospital. Miller does his best to be kind and keep Nora calm, but Nora is often inconsolable. She becomes angry with Miller, believing he is only patronizing her instead of trying to calm her. It is Miller who ultimately clears Nora to speak with the police.



Symbols and Symbolism

Footprints

Footprints serve as an omen of murder in the novel. Footprints in the snow, leading from the garage to the house, are discovered by Nora while out for a morning run. The footprints at first suggest an intruder, likely an angry local, but are later revealed to be caused by Clare when she went out to the garage to text James from Nora's cell phone.

Ouija board

The Ouija board in the novel serves as an omen of murder. Flo brings out a Ouija board in the attempt to contact the other side, and for the purposes of entertainment. The word "mmmmurderer" is spelled out while Flo and the others are using the Ouija board, which frightens everyone and throws Nora off especially. Lamarr believes this was deliberately done by Clare.

Nora's cell phone

Nora's lost cell phone serves as an omen of betrayal and murder in the novel. Nora's cell phone goes missing through the course of the first full day at the glass house, which confuses rather than concerns her. Nora's phone resurfaces a few days later, when Lamarr reveals that numerous text messages were exchanged with James using the phone –text messages which invited James up to the house to be killed. Clare later admits to having used Nora's cell phone to achieve this end.

Shotgun

A shotgun with blanks is kept by Flo's aunt in her glass vacation house, and serves as an omen of murder. Tom says the shotgun makes him feel uncomfortable when he arrives, but Flo dismisses it as a way of scaring off animals. Flo later wields the gun in an attempt to ward off the intruder, who turns out to be James. However, by then, Clare has replaced the blank shotgun cartridges with live rounds.

Blank round

A blank round in the novel serves as an omen of murder. Nora discovers a blank shotgun round in the pocket of the jacket belonging to Clare. This causes Nora to recognize that Clara is responsible for the premeditated murder of James, during which time she rushes after the car carrying Clara and the wounded James to the hospital.



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a play performed by the high school that Nora, James, and Clare attended, and comes to be the source of Clare's motive for murder. James and Clare were both cast as lead roles, but Clare came down with an illness. Nora, Clare's understudy, stepped in. This enabled Nora and James to grow close and date, while Clare, who wanted James, fumed.

Breakup texts

Breakup texts were sent to Nora from James's cell phone when they were all sixteen. The text messages told Nora that being pregnant was her responsibility, not James's, and that she was never to contact James again. This led Nora to have an abortion, and for Nora and James not to speak to one another for a decade. It is later revealed that Clare is the author of those text messages, and must now atone for them if she wants to marry James.

Drugs and alcohol

Drugs and alcohol are brought out and consumed during the hen do by most of the attendees, and represent childish, irresponsible, and destructive behavior fueled by peer pressure. It is Tom who brings out the drugs in the form of cocaine, and urges everyone else to partake. Only Flo, worried about her aunt's house, and Melanie, who has very strong morals, refuse to participate. Nora, upon snorting cocaine, immediately considers that she is too old for such things anymore, but still goes along with the crowd at their insistence. She goes on to drink copiously as well, despite not really wanting to do so.

Laced tea

Tea laced with some kind of sedative is given to Nora by Clare when Clare confronts Nora back at the vacation house. Clare hopes the sedative will make Nora drowsy enough so that Clare may kill her. Nora, however, recognizes what is happening and bolts for the door. She has consumed enough of the sedative to cause her to pass out, but not right away. This allows her to make it to the road and to Lamarr's squad car just in time.

E-mail

Matt sends Nora an e-mail late in the novel, which becomes representative of the past. Nora, who at the beginning of the novel refused to delete the e-mail invitation to the hen do, now decides to delete Matt's e-mail which requests a coffee meet. Nora deletes this

e-mail because she knows she must get over the past, and Matt is an unwitting but direct link to the past.



Settings

The glass house

The glass house is a vacation home constructed in Kiedler Forest near the village of Stanebridge in Northumberland by Flo's aunt, and is symbolic of truth and theater. The house is starkly out of place in the wooded environment, for it is modern in design and composed of steel and glass walls wide open to the surrounding area. When constructed, the house was opposed by locals, for it was built on the remains of an old building, and because it was so out of character for the area. The glass house is selected as the location for Clare's hen do, during which time Nora, Nina, Flo, Tom, Clare, and Melanie come to stay at the place. Cell reception is horrible, and Nora feels totally exposed living behind glass walls. The glass house itself is representative of truth because nothing can be hidden behind walls that can be seen through; and the house is representative of theater in that Nora feels as if she is on display, which she is. Her life, and the lives of the others, will play out like the lives of characters in a performance. The glass house is where Clara's motive for revenge, and the act of murder in revenge itself, will play out as James is killed.

The woods

The woods of Kiedler Forest surround the glass house in which Nora and the others stay for Clare's hen do weekend, and represent confusion. Just as it is difficult to see through the trees, and for Nora to make her way through the trees, it is difficult for Nora to determine who would want to set her up for the murder of James, let alone murder James in the first place. Nora rushes out into the woods when Clare and James leave for the hospital. She becomes disoriented in the woods, trying not only to catch Clare's car but also to determine whether or not Clare actually had anything to do with James's shooting.

The hospital

The hospital is located not far from the glass house. Staffed by Dr. Miller and numerous other medical professionals, the hospital is where the injured Nora and Clare are taken to receive treatment. The hospital is where Flo is later taken in an unsuccessful attempt to save her from suicide. It is at the hospital that Nora learns about the death of James and that she is to be considered a suspect in his murder. It is also at the hospital that Nora begins to recall the events of the past weekend, struggling to remember what happened in order to defend herself against suspicions.



Nora's apartment

Nora's apartment is located in London, and is the place where Nora feels most comfortable. Nora's apartment is tiny but cozy rather than cramped. It is where Nora works as a writer, in the creation of novels. It is at her apartment that Nora is first invited to attend Clare's hen do, and at Nora's apartment that Nora agrees to go if Nina goes. When Nora is at the hen do, she desperately longs to return home to her apartment.

Clare's car

Clare's car is encountered by Nora while Nora is out jogging. Clare is just arriving at her hen do, and so gives Nora a ride up to the house. The car becomes a terrible setting to Nora, for it reveals in part why Nora has been invited to the hen do. Clare explains that her fiancé is none other than James, Nora's old boyfriend with whom much of a past is shared. Nora is stunned by the revelation, and cannot wait to get out of the car.



Themes and Motifs

Obsession

Obsession – intense thoughts, feelings, and actions of devotion toward a person, place, thing, idea, etc. – is to be found among several of the characters in the novel, and none of them have happy endings. Ware therefore makes the argument that obsession not only deranges the mind, but is dangerous in and of itself.

Nora's obsession is perhaps the mildest in the novel, but it is an obsession nonetheless. The object of her obsession consists of James and her past with James. For ten years, Nora has been unable to get over James. While her obsession might be characterized as love, her daily considerations of James and the past could indeed be considered obsessive. This obsession prevents Nora from moving on in life. Only at the end of the novel, by accepting that James is dead and by refusing to meet up with Matt, does Nora truly begin the process of moving past her obsession.

Flo's obsession with Clare is stronger than Nora's obsession with James because at least Nora can live without James. Flo, on the other hand, is so obsessed with Clare that she even dresses identically to Clare. Everything must be perfect for Clare, Flo explains. She is so serious that she says, without hint of a joke, that she will kill for Clare and do anything for her. This stems from an unknown situation in which Flo's life was saved by Clare. In the present, whether unwitting or duplicitous, Flo's participation in the killing of James leads to Flo committing suicide.

Clare's obsession with James, and with her own self-image, is the most dangerous of all. Clare has always believed that she, not Nora, should have begun dating James first. When her role in breaking up James and Nora is to be exposed, Clare would rather kill James than allow the truth to be known. While Clare is clearly obsessed with having James – to the point that she would rather kill him than risk him ending up with someone else or having her secret be known – she is revealed to be far more obsessed with her own self-image. Nothing can challenge Clare's veneer of perfection – not even the man with whom she is obsessed. As a result, James dies, Nora is nearly killed, Flo commits suicide, and Clare herself is seriously injured.

The Inescapability of the Past

In the novel, the past has tremendous bearings on the present and sets in motion the events which will ultimately culminate in murder. The past that is inescapable includes events recent and distant, personal and problematic.

When the novel begins, Nora is in the hospital and is desperately trying to recall the events of the past few days. At first, this is merely a personal issue: she simply wants to remember. However, when Nora comes to learn that someone is dead, she struggles to remember the past in order to determine who has died. When Nora learns that this



individual – James – has been murdered, and that she is considered a suspect, the effort of remembering becomes all the more personal and problematic. Nora may not remember the past, but that doesn't mean she can escape it or that she will not be held responsible for what she may have done.

For Nora, the attendance at the hen do weekend at all is a frightening venture back into the past. It brings her face-to-face with Clare, with whom Nora has not spoken in years; and it brings her face-to-face with the problem of watching her old boyfriend, James, marry her old best friend, Clare, forcing Nora to confront the fact that she never really got over James. Yet, the past is far more problematic than Nora originally suspects.

The past is inescapable for Clare for two reasons. First, Clare genuinely believes that she, not Nora, should have been the one to begin dating James all those years ago, a feeling which led her to break them up. Second, Clare's scheming threatens to expose her as the flawed and utterly imperfect person that she is. This revelation would destroy her carefully constructed appearance of perfection, and so Clare cannot let anything get in the way. Because the past is something Clare cannot escape, she decides to silence it for good by having James killed.

Women and Revenge

Author Ruth Ware argues that women can be just as twisted and scheming when it comes to in her novel *In a Dark, Dark Wood*. Ware constructs her story so as to allow the majority of characters to be women; and she arranges it so that all of the major leads –narrator, villain, investigator, best friend, and so on –are all portrayed as women. Much literature assumes that villains must be men, but Ware disagrees with this concept entirely, making the primary victim in the novel a man.

Ware disagrees with this concept by ensuring that her leading antagonist is indeed a woman. Not only that, but the motive for and method of revenge have entirely to do with the actions of women surrounding men. Furious that James has chosen Nora over her, Clara sets out to find a way to break them up. When she learns that Nora has become pregnant by James, Nora cunningly steals James's cell phone to tell Nora to deal with the baby on her own, and to never talk to James again. This shocking cruelty demonstrates the extreme degree to which Clara is prepared to go to get what she wants, and it demonstrates that she is very capable of scheming and manipulation.

Clare's scheming does not end here. When James discovers what Clare did to Nora in the past with the fabricated text messages, he threatens to break off the wedding plans if Clare does not confess the truth to Nora. Clare now has two options: she can tell Nora, marry James, and appear an imperfect person; or she can refuse to tell Nora, lose James, and have the truth come out anyway. Nora decides a third option will be best: James must be killed so the truth remains hidden and then no one can have James. Here, James, a man, is the victim; Clare, a woman, is the villain.



Clare determines to lure James to the hen do house by stealing and using Nora's phone. Predictably, James falls for the ruse and comes to the house. By then, Clare has switched out the shotgun's blanks for live rounds, so when Flo shoots to scare James believing him to be an intruder, she is actually shooting James to the point that he could die. Clare is thrilled with how things have worked out, but when Nora nearly stumbles onto the truth, Clare decides that all of them should die. She and Nora struggle for the wheel of the car which results in the death of James, an injury for Clare, and amnesia for Nora. This in turn later leads to Clare trying to murder Nora, and it leads to Clare snapping and crashing her car into Lamarr's.

The Dangers of Social and Peer Pressures

Social and peer pressure should be resisted if it runs counter to a person's desires, Ruth Ware argues in the novel. Social and peer pressure – the insistence that someone do something based on the idea that everyone else is doing it – weighs heavily on Nora in the novel. This occurs even when such pressure exists in opposition to Nora's desires or beliefs.

Nora is a kind person by nature, and would rather go along to get along than make waves or cause drama. Kindness is one thing, but this sort of caving to the desires of others is something else. Nora allows herself to be talked into attending the hen do by Flo, who says Clare really wants Nora there; and by Nina, who says she will go if Nora goes (itself a perfect example of socially dependent peer pressure). Right away, Nora regrets the decision to attend the party but refuses to leave because she doesn't want to cause drama.

When heavy alcohol and cocaine are brought out, Nora does not even try to oppose their use. Tom encourages everyone to participate. Nora, wanting to go along with things and not upset anyone, agrees to participate. Yet, as soon as she does cocaine, she tells herself she is too old for such things anymore –and then proceeds to drink heavily, resulting in vomiting. Between Nora's participation in such things, and her attendance at the hen do at all, Nora will face serious consequences that revolve around being framed for murder.

Only two people buck the trend of social pressure. Flo refuses to do cocaine or drink heavily because the house belongs to her aunt and she needs to keep the house in good order, and because she is responsible for conducting the hen do weekend. Melanie, on the other hand, is a very moral person who does not participate in doing drugs or heavy drinking anyway – but she knows she must behave well because she is a new mother and has her husband and baby boy at home waiting on her. It is because of this that Melanie is not afraid to make waves or cause drama, and so she leaves to go home early. She comes to represent a very responsible, very mature role model for the others – yet apart from Flo, none of the others follow Melanie's example.



Women and Murder

Women are fully capable of outright murder, Ruth Ware argues in her novel *In a Dark, Dark Wood*. Traditionally, villains, criminals, and murderers are thought of as men. Ware sets out to break these traditional conceptions by ensuring that women fill every prominent role in her novel, from narrator to police investigator to villain. In *Clare*, Ware creates a stunning villain.

Clare is motivated by a sense of revenge and obsession with James (see the other appropriate themes in this section). Clare's desire for revenge and her obsession with James are themselves intertwined with her obsessive desire to present a façade of perfection to the people around her. When James threatens this façade by demanding Clare present the truth about the past to Nora, Clare moves against even James to ensure this does not happen.

Clare then steals Nora's phone and uses it to send text messages to James, luring James up to the glass house. She gives James specific instructions for entering the house, which puts him right in harm's way when Flo appears with the shotgun. By then, Clare has replaced the blank shotgun cartridges with live rounds, meaning that when Flo fires the gun, she is not scaring James off, but actually shooting him. James is hovering near death, prompting Clare to decide to drive him to the hospital. Clare, however, has no intention of saving James. She needs him to die so that her secret will not be exposed. When Clare is joined by Nora, Clare realizes Nora is close to figuring out the truth behind the shooting. As such, Clare would rather everyone die than have the truth be known. Her attempt to kill all of them results only in the death of James, while Clare is injured and Nora is rendered an amnesiac.

When Nora escapes from the hospital and returns to the house to jog her memory and find out what really happened to James, Clare follows. She knows that Nora has either figured out, or is close to figuring out the truth. Clare cannot allow the narrative she has crafted around the weekend to be exposed, so she intends to kill Nora. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sedative-laced tea given to Nora, and the gloves that Clare wears. She has no concern at all in killing Nora –and later has no concern in attempting to kill herself when she crashes her car directly into Lamarr's.

Styles

Point of View

Ruth Ware relates the narrative of *In a Dark, Dark Wood* from the first-person limited and unreliable perspective of the protagonist, Nora. The entire novel is Nora's attempt to recall the events of the recent past (the hen do weekend and the murder of James), while trying to avoid the events of the distant past (her abortion and breakup with James). Because she is suffering from amnesia, many things do not make sense to Nora, and the events of the past and the present, the weekend and the hospital, blur together and sometimes become indistinguishable from one another. This illustrates the haze that Nora is operating in as she attempts to figure things out. She must do so because she is being considered a suspect in James's murder. From the start, Nora herself admits she is not reliable, as she asks, "What has happened? What have I done?" (p. 3). Indeed, Nora directly says she cannot trust herself in Chapter 29. Because of her amnesia, the reader does not know whether Nora herself can even be trusted, and only learns about the past as Nora herself remembers it or others fill in the missing blanks for her. This creates a sense of suspense and caution, as the reader wants to sympathize with Nora, but does not know whether this is a good idea.

Language and Meaning

Ruth Ware relates her novel *In a Dark, Dark Wood* in language that is brief, sometimes fragmented, confused, clipped, and constantly questioning. This is done to reflect the amnesia from which Nora is suffering and to underscore the point that she is an unreliable narrator. Nearly everything she does, she questions. Nearly everything she remembers, she questions. Nearly everything she cannot remember, she questions. Nora's second-guessing of herself is played out in the language that she uses and how she recalls past events. For example, consider these excerpts from her questioning of the dead in Chapter 14: "Murder. Murder. Murder. Can it be true? Can it possibly be true? Who is dead? Clare? Flo? Nina?..." and "I've only a got a few hours left to try to sort it out. Step by step then. What happened next?" (p. 109). The briefness of the language, the short sentences, and the questioning underscores the desperation in Nora to recall the events of the past as well. This is especially pertinent given that Nora is considered a suspect in the killing of James.

Structure

Ruth Ware divides her novel into thirty-six nonlinear chapters, numbered 1 to 36. The chapters weave back and forth through time, with most early chapters either occurring in the hospital, or during the hen do weekend. Middle and later chapters blur time at the hospital and time at the hen do weekend. Later chapters mostly take place in the hospital, and in Nora's return to the glass house to determine what happened to James

over the course of the weekend. The consistent alternating between past and present, between and within chapters, creates a sense of confusion which in turn underscores and reinforces the idea that Nora is suffering from amnesia – and is therefore an unreliable narrator. Some of the chapters are very short (Chapter 14 is only several paragraphs in length, occurs in the hospital, and consists of Nora telling herself she must remember the past) while other chapters are very long (such as Chapter 33, in which Clare and Nora confront one another about the past). Shorter chapters, such as Chapter 14, demonstrate the lack of clarity in Nora’s thinking, while longer chapters denote memory recovery and lucidity.



Quotes

What has happened? What have I done?

-- Nora (Chapter 1)

Importance: At the very start of the novel, the reader is introduced to both Nora, and the mystery surrounding her. Nora's inability to remember anything serves as a warning to the reader that Nora will be an unreliable narrator, especially given that she has suffered a head injury. It also means the truth behind the opening sequence of running and throwing herself on the road will be difficult to get to the bottom of.

The bruise is a recoil bruise. At some point in the recent past, I have fired a gun.

-- Nora (Chapter 5)

Importance: As Nora attempts to recall the past in the hospital, she realizes she has cuts and bruises all over her body. One such bruise she realizes is a recoil bruise, meaning she has fired a gun. The reader knows that Flo's aunt keeps a gun in her vacation home, but whether or not this is the gun that Nora has fired, and why Nora has fired a gun at all, is unclear. However, Nora's realization that a gun has been fired only adds to the mystery swirling around the bachelorette weekend.

It's James."

-- Clare (Chapter 7)

Importance: Nora finally receives an answer from Clare as to why she has been invited to Clare's hen weekend. Clare explains it is because she is marrying James. Clare is stunned because James is her old boyfriend from a decade before, whom Clare has never gotten over. This causes Nora a serious amount of pain, even though she knows neither Clare nor James is doing anything wrong.

Who is dead? Clare? Flo? Nina?

-- Nora (Chapter 14)

Importance: As Nora wakes up in the hospital, she hears the voices of police officers outside her door speaking of murder. Nora is terrified by this. She begins to wonder who has been murdered, and realizes she does not yet know for sure what has happened since the events of the weekend are so difficult for her to recall.

I must remember. I must try to remember what happened next.

-- Nora (Chapter 14)

Importance: Here, Nora begins to panic. She struggles to attempt to recall the recent past, but all of her memories are crowding together. She knows she must have information readily available, because it is only a matter of time before the police question her. Ironically, Nora does not even exactly remember what it is she should remember, but tries to do so by repeating the events of the weekend in her mind.



I don't move because I am afraid. Because I don't want to hear the name the police are going to say. And because I am afraid they are here for me.

-- Nora (Chapter 20)

Importance: As Nora learns in the hospital that someone has indeed been killed, she panics all over again that she may have been the one to have done the killing. Nora struggles to recall the events of the recent past, but is frustrated because it is such a difficult process. She is desperate to do so because she is terrified the police have arrived for her –which in turn only adds to the difficulty in remembering because she is panicked.

But sometimes, sometimes the brain suppresses events that we're not quite ready to deal with. I suppose it's a... coping mechanism, if you will.

-- Dr. Miller (Chapter 21)

Importance: Dr. Miller comes in to examine Nora. Nora believes her memory loss is a result of whatever physical accident she has been in. Miller, however, explains that this may not be the case at all. He believes Nora's memory loss could be related to stress – that Nora is unable to recall memories she is not yet ready to deal with. In other words, Nora is her own memory block.

James?

-- Nina (Chapter 22)

Importance: On the second night at Flo's aunt's house, an intruder is discovered. Flo orders the man out, but the man does not leave. She fires a gun in defense, and hits the man. Nora and Nina then rush down to see who it was, and it is Nina who first vocalizes that it is James. No one has any idea what he is doing there – and his death, which occurs moments later, transforms the weekend from an annoying obligation to a terrifying ordeal.

I knew him by heart. And he is gone.

-- Nora (Chapter 22)

Importance: Here, Nora forces herself to accept the idea that James is dead. She finally admits to herself that she has been in love with him for ten years, and has been unable to let him go. However, the details relating to the events surrounding James being shot are still blurred, at best. Nora continues struggling to remember, trying to determine just what happened immediately after the shooting.

What happened in the house was only the first half of the story. The real killing came later, on the road. I have to remember what happened.

-- Nora (Chapter 24)

Importance: Speaking with Nina in the hospital, Nora learns that the police are investigating James's death as a possible murder. She also learns that James would



have probably lived had it not been for the car accident. Nina is stunned by this. It becomes all the more important to her now to remember what happened.

Who can I trust, if I can't even trust myself?
-- Nora (Chapter 29)

Importance: When Nora is confronted with the knowledge that someone has sent text messages to James using her phone, imploring him to come up to the house the night he is killed, Nora begins to wonder who could have done it. Every person in the group could potentially be the plotter, but Nora struggles to understand who it could be. She reasons that whoever set her up must really hate her, otherwise, no one could do such a thing to her – but also recognizes that if she can't even remember what she did, she cannot even trust herself.

She had two options: tell the truth and expose herself; or refuse to go along with James's plan and lose her fiancé – and then the truth would have had to come out anyway.

-- Nora (Chapter 33)

Importance: Clare's obsession with James is detailed here – but it is an obsession that loses out to Clare's obsession with her own self-image. Clare would rather James die than the truth come out and ruin her image. She would also prefer that James die than end up with Nora, and she would rather than she, Nora, and James all die than allow anyone else to know the truth of what went on between them so many years before.