

# **In the Shadow of Blackbirds Study Guide**

**In the Shadow of Blackbirds by Cat Winters**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">In the Shadow of Blackbirds Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1, A Year the Devil Designed; Chapter 2, Aunt Eva and the Spirits; and Chapter 3, Mr. Muse.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4, The Mysterious Island; Chapter 5, A Transparent Figure; and Chapter 6, The Buzz of Electricity.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 7, Death; Chapter 8, The Expert; and Chapter 9, Blue Smoke and Whispers.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 10, The Butterfly and the Lightning Bolt; Chapter 11, Phantom; and Chapter 12, Come Talk to the Spirits.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13, Ugly Things; Chapter 14, Stay Safe; and Chapter 15, The Weight of Souls.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16, of Rats and Crows; Chapter 17, Keep Your Nightmares to Yourself, and Chapter 18, The Pirate King.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 19, A Bloodstained Sky; Chapter 20, Paul Spitz; and Chapter 21, The Compass Phenomenon.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 22, Living and Breathing; Chapter 23, The Cage; and Chapter 24, Discoveries.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 25, Cousin Gracie; Chapter 26, Soldier's Heart; and Chapter 27, The Darkest Hours..</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 28, Stephen's Room; Chapter 29, Death, Again; Chapter 30, I Do Lose Ink; and Chapter 31, Mary Shelley Black.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">36</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">39</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">41</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">42</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">45</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">47</a>



# Plot Summary

It is October, 1918, and 16-year-old Mary Shelley Black is sent from her home in Portland, Oregon, to live with her widowed Aunt Eva in San Diego. Mary Shelley's father has been arrested for treason for helping young men avoid the draft. The last days of World War I drag on and the Spanish Influenza is claiming thousands of lives all over the world.

Mary Shelley has been in love with a boy named Stephen Embers since they were children in Portland, and she is happy that she will be able to see Stephen again because his family now lives on Coronado, the island connected by a bridge to San Diego. Mary Shelley and Stephen renew their love when Aunt Eva takes her to the Embers' home for a visit. Mary Shelley is shocked to learn that Stephen has enlisted in the army and will be leaving immediately. Life is challenging for Mary Shelley and Aunt Eva who try to avoid catching the flu by wearing face masks everywhere and eating lots of onions.

Stephen enlists in the army and dies but soon returns in spirit form to Mary Shelley. Stephen's soul is tormented by blackbirds trying to kill him and he seeks her out to find out what really happened to him so that his soul can be at peace. Stephen's half brother, Julius, is a spiritual photographer who preys on the grief of suffering people by manipulating photo portraits to include what he says are images of their dead relatives' spirits. He even invites Mary Shelley and Aunt Eva to a séance to try to contact Stephen's spirit.

Mary Shelley is a scientist at heart and tries to methodically solve the problem of Stephen's death against the backdrop of rampant death, seances and fear of influenza. Mary Shelley's love for Stephen pushes her forward until she uncovers the real circumstances of his death. Mary Shelley meets a childhood friend and army comrade of Stephen's at a Red Cross house and he tells her the real circumstances of Stephen's death. Stephen had not died in battle in Europe but had come home suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome. In order to cover up what they consider to be a shameful secret, Stephen's family keeps him locked in his room where he is tied to his bed.

Julius and his accomplice, Aloysius Darning, another fraudulent spirit photographer, want to earn the prize money in a spirit photography contest and end up killing Stephen. Mary Shelley, claiming that she wants to connect with Stephen's spirit, re-enacts the traumatic event with the help of Julius and Aloysius. Stephen's spirit also gets involved and they are able to reveal the details of how Stephen was killed in that room.

Aunt Eva is hospitalized with influenza and Mary Shelley soon comes down with it too. They reunite in the hospital. Both women survive bouts of the influenza and a sense of calm returns to the household after Stephen's spirit is calmed and the threat of influenza wanes. They determine to carry on as the strong women they are.



# Chapter 1, A Year the Devil Designed; Chapter 2, Aunt Eva and the Spirits; and Chapter 3, Mr. Muse

## Summary

It is October of 1918 and Mary Shelley Black boards a train in Portland, Oregon. She is on her way to stay with her Aunt Eva in San Diego. The reek of onions permeates the train because people use them as a natural deterrent to the Spanish Influenza which is killing people all over the world. All the people on the train also wear gauze masks over their noses and mouths to prevent the spread of germs. Mary Shelley has her mother's doctor bag in which she carries some personal items and letters written to her by her longtime friend, Stephen Embers, who now lives near San Diego on Coronado Island.

In Chapter 2, "Aunt Eva and the Spirits," Mary Shelley waits for her Aunt Eva at the San Diego train depot. Mary Shelley takes in her surroundings including the posters advertising liberty bonds, navy recruitment and influenza reminders. Some army recruits flirt with Mary Shelley but she pays them no attention. Finally Aunt Eva arrives and Mary Shelley is surprised to see that she has cut her hair very short and is wearing greasy coveralls, having come from her job at the shipyard. Aunt Eva insists that they walk to her house because she shuns public transportation due to the flu. Aunt Eva tells Mary Shelley that so many places such as schools, churches and theaters have been shut down because of the flu epidemic.

As they trudge home, Mary Shelley can't help but look at a horse-drawn cart piled with dead bodies. Aunt Eva says that the flu has not touched her block yet so they must take all precautions to stay healthy. Aunt Eva's house smells strongly of onion. Mary Shelley meets Aunt Eva's magpie named Oberon as he talks from his cage in the living room. Then Mary Shelley sees a huge photograph of herself taken by Stephen's half brother, Julius, a spiritual photographer, on her last visit to San Diego in April. A big, transparent figure hovers next to Mary Shelley in the picture. Mary Shelley is upset that Julius has used her image to generate business from grieving people seeking solace in photographs in which they hope their dead loved ones will appear. Aunt Eva tells Mary Shelley that Julius thinks that Mary Shelley has the power to summon the dead. Aunt Eva also has a photograph of herself with a ghostly figure that she thinks is her deceased husband, Wilfred.

Mary Shelley is suspicious of Julius' photography of spirits but Aunt Eva shows her a newspaper article in which a man named Aloysius Darning exposes fraudulent photographers but could find no tricks in Julius' work. Mary Shelley is still skeptical because Stephen had always told her that Julius is an opium addict and a fraudster. Aunt Eva cautions Mary Shelley about maintaining contact with Stephen who is at war in France. Mary Shelley is still angry at Julius for lying that he saw her and Stephen



behaving inappropriately on her last visit before Stephen left for war. Aunt Eva tells Mary Shelley that Julius has invited Mary Shelley to the family home for another photo session and he also has a package for her from Stephen. Aunt Eva shows Mary Shelley to her room where she has left her a gift of Wilfred's nautical compass.

In Chapter 3, "Mr. Muse," Mary Shelley has a hard time sleeping so she gets out one of Stephen's letters written in May right before he was shipped overseas. Stephen had wondered why Mary Shelley has not mentioned the package he left for her and also requests that she send a picture of herself to him. He said that he would understand if she didn't want to get involved with someone away at war but he hoped to hear from her again. Mary Shelley then puts on the aviatrix goggles Aunt Eva had bought for her on another visit, the salesman telling her that they would allow her to see the future. But all Mary Shelley can see is herself coming to visit Aunt Eva and Uncle Wilfred last spring when he was dying of tuberculosis.

During that visit, Aunt Eva had had contact with Julius Embers in an attempt to summon Mary Shelley's deceased mother and believed that she has appeared in a photograph. Aunt Eva had also scheduled an appointment for Mary Shelley to have Julius take her photograph and they travelled to Coronado Island to visit the Ember family at their home. After Julius took Mary Shelley's photo, she learned that Stephen was leaving for war the next day. Mary Shelley found Stephen reading a book on a staircase. Stephen told Mary Shelley that Julius' spiritualist photography was fraudulent.

Stephen took Mary Shelley to another room to show her some of the photographs he had taken and she especially liked one of a butterfly. At the bottom of the photo, Stephen had written "Mr. Muse," an anagram so that Julius couldn't figure out the real title. Mary Shelley quickly solved the mystery that "Mr. Muse" was "Summer." Stephen told Mary Shelley that he was going to war because he wanted out of the house. Stephen and Mary Shelley kissed for a few minutes until they were interrupted by Julius who chastised Stephen for not being a gentleman. Stephen kissed Mary Shelley one more time and gave her the butterfly photo as a gift.

## Analysis

The author establishes several historical events as backdrops to the story. It is October of 1918 and World War I has been raging since 1914. The end of the war will come in November of 1918 and people will receive some much needed relief from the trauma and death experienced for so many years. Because the United States is at war with Germany, people with German heritage or German sounding names are suspect and open to abuse and harassment from some people in America. It is considered to be unpatriotic to even question the United States' involvement in the war so people have to be very careful about what they say and to whom they say it. Mary Shelley's father has been arrested for treason for trying to help young men evade the draft which is the reason for Mary Shelley's sudden departure from Portland. It was a time of suspicion and hate and people lived in fear of saying or doing the wrong thing. At one point in the story, Mary Shelley notes that a restaurant in San Diego can no longer sell



"hamburgers" because the word sounds too German. The sandwiches must be called a different name.

The other historical event taking place at this time was the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic which had struck all over the world. Almost 100 million people died during the flu crisis around the world. It seemed to attack people primarily 20-35 years old. The hysteria of this quick-moving disease has taken hold of the people in Mary Shelley's world. She has had teachers and friends die in Portland, and now that she is in San Diego, Aunt Eva is terrified that the flu will reach her neighborhood and she and Mary Shelley will be exposed and become even more vulnerable. Aunt Eva takes all the precautions at her disposal, making sure that she and Mary Shelley wear their gauze face masks when outside the home and making onion dishes for every meal. It was the popular thinking at the time that onions and garlic prevented the flu virus from infecting a person who ate enough of them and even wore poultices around their necks.

There is also an indication of the women's suffrage movement in America which was beginning to take hold at the time. Because so many men have gone off to war, women are filling in at the jobs that men used to hold. For example, Aunt Eva works as a shipbuilder, a profession which would have never been considered for a woman prior to the war. The women's suffrage movement had been gaining momentum and the onset of the war just facilitated the initiative. Mary Shelley has very modern ideas, too, as she has a scientific mind like her deceased mother who was a doctor. Her mother set a professional precedent for Mary Shelley and she looks at the world with a confident, independent mindset.

## Discussion Question 1

Why has Mary Shelley had to leave her home in Portland so suddenly to go to San Diego?

## Discussion Question 2

Why might Aunt Eva be especially frightened of the influenza pandemic?

## Discussion Question 3

Why doesn't Mary Shelley think very much of Julius' spiritual photography business?

## Vocabulary

clammy, reeking, hoisted, rustling, influenza, gauze, riddled, traitor, grotesque, fraying, censored, operative, gesundheit, amber, loomed, battalion, mosaic, Hun, propaganda, plague, wail, filthy, intermingled, quarantined, cannery, catastrophic, gaunt, fatalities,



BOOKRAGS

clapboard, immune, insignia, magpie, spiritualism, defiant, clairvoyance, supernatural, phenomenon, humiliated, fraud, despite, surname



# Chapter 4, The Mysterious Island; Chapter 5, A Transparent Figure; and Chapter 6, The Buzz of Electricity

## Summary

Mary Shelley wakes up in her bedroom at Aunt Eva's home and thinks about her father and whether he will go to trial in Portland. Mary Shelley dresses and puts on a necklace her father had made for her from the brass gear of a clock. Aunt Eva and Mary Shelley take the ferry to Coronado to the Embers' home where they see a line of people waiting to get in for photo sessions with Julius. People think Julius can summon their dead soldiers via his photographs. Aunt Eva and Mary Shelley are let into the house by a young woman named Gracie, Julius' cousin, who along with her brother, Grant, are helping in the studio since their mother died from the flu last month.

Mary Shelley is startled to see her portrait with a spirit hanging on the wall of the house and Julius tells her that the photo brings comfort to a lot of people. Julius is frustrated because Aloysius Darning had spent the last several hours scrutinizing Julius' studio work and equipment. Mary Shelley asks Julius for the package Stephen wanted her to have and he offers some of Stephen's novels too. Suddenly a loud banging noise comes from upstairs and Gracie reacts in horror but Julius just instructs her to change the music on the gramophone. Julius then gives Mary Shelley the package from Stephen and she agrees to sit for a photograph. The loud noises come from upstairs again and Julius says that they are normal house noises but people exaggerate them due to the nature of his spiritual work. Julius summons the spirits in the name of Mary Shelley who was named for the author of "Frankenstein" and who also believed in the power of electrical currents. The loud noises continue upstairs and soon Julius' mother stumbles into the room claiming to be hurt in the stomach. Aunt Eva and Mary Shelley are ushered quickly out of the house and on the way home, Mary Shelley opens Stephen's package and finds a photograph of a lightning bolt.

In Chapter 5, "A Transparent Figure," Mary Shelley hangs Stephen's photos of the butterfly and the lightning bolt in her bedroom. Stephen's anagram on the lightning bolt photo is "I DO LOSE INK," but Mary Shelly is unable to unscramble it. Aunt Eva plans to go to Julius' studio early tomorrow morning to get the photo of Mary Shelley. Aunt Eva cautions Mary Shelley about getting too emotionally vested in Stephen because he may not come home from the war but Mary Shelley is not ready to give up hope yet.

At dawn the next day Mary Shelley accompanies Aunt Eva to the Embers home but no one is up yet. Suddenly a car arrives and the driver lets a disheveled Julius out and wants to know if Julius wants him to open the studio today but Julius just stumbles toward the house. Julius looks so bad that Aunt Eva thinks he may have the flu but Mary Shelley thinks it is the effects of opium. When Julius gives Mary Shelley her photograph,





she sees Stephen's ghost standing behind her in the image. Mary Shelley realizes that this must mean that Stephen is dead and Julius confirms that they just found out that he died in battle. Suddenly Mrs. Embers screams out Stephen's name upstairs and Julius abruptly ushers Mary Shelley and Aunt Eva out of the house. Mary Shelley feels such pain that she can barely walk and they continue to hear Mrs. Embers' screams as they walk away from the house.

In Chapter 6, "The Buzz of Electricity," Aunt Eva leaves Mary Shelley at the ferry landing because she has to go to work. Mary Shelley had thrown the photo of her and Stephen's ghost into the bay. Mary Shelley tries to walk home in disbelief that Stephen could really be dead. She sees evidence of death from the flu all around her and thinks that death is coming for everyone. When Mary Shelley finally arrives at Aunt Eva's house, a telegram delivery boy gives her a telegram from her Uncle Lars in Portland telling her that her father is being held without bail and his trial is scheduled for December with a possible 20-year sentence.

Mary Shelley stomps up to her room screaming to be relieved of her circumstances and then realizes that a lightning storm is approaching. She pulls together the items to make a kite and heads outside wearing her clock gear necklace and aviatrix goggles. Mary Shelley then heads outside with the kite but it is quickly destroyed so she holds up the clock gear so that she can feel the electricity. She feels some static along her fingers and then after another bolt of lightning, she is hit and falls to the ground dead.

## Analysis

The themes of fraud and greed become important in this section. Julius takes advantage of grieving people by telling them that he can summon their dead in photographs that he takes. Logic should tell people that this is not possible but their grief, especially those who have lost people suddenly due to the war or the influenza, pushes them to make decisions based on emotion. Stephen had told Mary Shelley how his father had told him that Julius is a fraud in how he conducts the photography business but his greed in making lots of money right now is more important to him than telling the truth. Julius is capitalizing on the misfortune of others and his behavior is not only greedy, it is unscrupulous. Mary Shelley is especially angry with Julius when she sees a larger portrait of her with some shadowy shape hanging in the Embers' home to promote Julius' spiritual photography business. The ethical thing to do would have been to ask Mary Shelley's permission to use her photo but Julius knows that she wouldn't have given her permission so he uses it without even telling her. Mary Shelley feels as if she is part of the fraudulent business because her image is being used to promote it.

It is interesting to note that a fraud expert, Aloysius Darning, has supposedly examined Julius' photographs and can't find any wrongdoing. The author provides this element of foreshadowing that will become important at the end of the story. The strange noises coming from upstairs at the Embers home as well as Mrs. Embers' screams are all important to note, as their significance, too, will be explained by the story's end.



It is symbolic that Mary Shelley cries out in her room that she wants to be free of her situation after finding out that Stephen has been killed in the war. At the same time that a lightning storm comes up, she sees Stephen's photo of the lightning bolt. A few minutes later, she is hit by lightning and dies in the front yard.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mary Shelley think that Julius' photography work is a fraud?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of Mary Shelley's name in the spiritual or horror world?

## Discussion Question 3

How does death seem to become a character in the book?

## Vocabulary

mammoth, bewitching, supposedly, aviatrix, chaos, enchantment, preposterous, emerge, tuberculosis, boisterous, gleam, flabbergasted, twinge, monstrosity, robust, nape, awash, headstrong, pockmark, eavesdropper, scrawny, fraud, balusters, opium, phantoms, skeptical, afterlife, lecherous, anagram, corrupt, articulate, tipsy, humiliation, coward, impact, reorient, refugee, morbid, bombarded, camphor, ravish, bungalow, privets, rendition, amiss, mischievous, tampered, bulbous, trekked, bespectacled, apocalypse, reverberated



# Chapter 7, Death; Chapter 8, The Expert; and Chapter 9, Blue Smoke and Whispers

## Summary

Mary Shelley has an out-of-body experience and can see her smoking body as her spirit hovers in the eucalyptus tree in Aunt Eva's yard. Mary Shelley calls to the people gathering around her body but no one seems to hear her. An ambulance arrives and Mary Shelley can see the attendants lifting her into the vehicle. Mary Shelley realizes that it is not her time to die so she forces her spirit back into her body and it feels like she is diving into Arctic cold water. When the ambulance stops, the attendants are shocked to see that Mary Shelley is alive and she is quickly wheeled into the hospital which is jammed with beds holding flu patients. Aunt Eva soon rushes in to see Mary Shelley and tells her that the girl had died for several minutes. Aunt Eva is frantic but Mary Shelley's touch on her arm calms her immediately. Mary Shelley tells her that she wants to go to the library to find some books on life after death and Aunt Eva is shocked but interested in knowing more about Mary Shelley's experience.

In Chapter 8, "The Expert," Mary Shelley is released from the hospital and she tells Aunt Eva about the telegram notifying her of her father's court trial. Aunt Eva is unsure of what Mary Shelley's father did in Portland to be arrested and Mary Shelley tells her that he had helped men avoid the draft. Aunt Eva puts Mary Shelley to bed to recover and she soon notices that the needle in the compass on her bedside table no longer pointed north; it pointed to Mary Shelley. About a week later, Mary Shelley gets a letter from her father who is in jail in Portland. Her father tells her that he is sorry for the troubles she is experiencing by being displaced from home and hopes that one day she will understand his need to do what he thought was right, and that she should never let hatred, fear or ignorance get the best of her.

The next night, Mary Shelley thinks she hears her father's voice and bounds downstairs to find Aloysius Darning who has come to visit because he has heard about Mary Shelley's near death experience. Aloysius tells Aunt Eva and Mary Shelley that he can still find no evidence of fraud in Julius' photographs which Mary Shelley finds hard to believe. Aloysius invites Mary Shelley and Aunt Eva to his photo studio for a complimentary photograph sitting. Mary Shelley returns to her room and thinks of Stephen and his upcoming funeral. Mary Shelley then notes that the needle in the compass no longer points to her but to Stephen's photos hanging on the wall.

In Chapter 9, "Blue Smoke and Whispers," Aunt Eva wakes Mary Shelley with the news that Julius let her know that Stephen's funeral will be held this morning. Still healing from lightning burns, Mary Shelley dresses carefully and she and Aunt Eva take a cab to the funeral home. Mary Shelley is taken aback by the sight and unpleasant smell of a



purplish-blue haze caused by sulfur dropped onto hot coals to fight the flu virus. Mary Shelley's knees go weak when she sees a photograph of Stephen near his flag-draped coffin. Gracie tells them that Stephen's mother has gone away for awhile and Mary Shelley can sense a peculiar emotion related to the girl and tastes a rancid taste in her mouth. Julius introduces them to Grant, Gracie's twin brother.

Mary Shelley makes her way toward Stephen's coffin so that she can touch it. Mary Shelley whispers to Stephen and soon the flag underneath her hand sparks and crackles. Stephen whispers to her that something is very wrong and then he says the words, "blackbirds." Aunt Eva and Julius pull her away from the coffin and she tells them that Stephen had been whispering to her. Mary Shelley begs Julius to open the coffin but he says he can't because Stephen's head is too damaged. Aunt Eva tells Mary Shelley that she has to let Stephen go but Mary Shelley knows that Stephen is not completely gone.

## Analysis

The theme of death becomes very important in this section. Not only is Mary Shelley surrounded by the fear of death from the flu virus, but the specter of war hangs over everyone too. Now Mary Shelley experiences death personally when she is struck by lightning and dies for several minutes. Her out-of-body experience is both comforting and frightening for her but when she senses that it is not her time to die, she forces her spirit to re-enter her wounded body in the ambulance. She had lost her pulse for awhile and the ambulance attendants are shocked to see her awake when they arrive at the hospital.

Mary Shelley's senses are heightened as a result of the experience and she can now taste other people's emotions in her mouth. Just by touching Aunt Eva's arm, Mary Shelley is able to calm her down when she had been agitated in the hospital about Mary Shelley's accident. Mary Shelley can also taste a sour milk taste coming from Gracie when she is asked about where Stephen's mother is at the funeral. Mary Shelley also realizes that she is now magnetic as a result of being struck by lightning as evidenced by the needle in the compass which no longer points north but points at her instead. The only exception is when the needle points to Stephen's photos on the wall when Mary Shelley can sense that Stephen is near. Probably the most important aspect coming from Mary Shelley's near death experience is that she can now hear Stephen talk to her. It is almost as if she still has a part of herself that remains in the spirit world which makes it easier for Stephen's thoughts to get through to her. This will become even more prominent as the story extends.

The author uses very visual descriptions to lend an air of mystery and intrigue to the story. For example, when Mary Shelley and Aunt Eva enter the funeral home, Mary Shelley is shocked by the bluish clouds and plumes of sulfur dioxide floating about the room. This would have been very unnerving to experience in a funeral home but the author wants to insinuate the presence of spirits and this is a very visual way of accomplishing that.



## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Mary Shelley's being struck by lightning affect her after she comes back to life?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Mary Shelley upset about the advice her father gives her in his letter from jail?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Aloysius Darning want to photograph Mary Shelley after she has had her lightning accident?

## Vocabulary

comprehend, hypothesis, cumulonimbus, prone, torturous, stark, flailed, rancid, gurney, poultice, paranoid, convalescence, succumbed, wince, cordial, steadfast, plumes, sulfur dioxide, noxious, luminous, peculiar, bespectacled, ludicrous, incandescent



# Chapter 10, The Butterfly and the Lightning Bolt; Chapter 11, Phantom; and Chapter 12, Come Talk to the Spirits

## Summary

When Mary Shelley returns home from the funeral, she has the urge to write a letter to Stephen because that is what she has always done when something has upset her. In the letter Mary Shelley acknowledges that Stephen whispered to her and she wants to know if there is anything she can do to help him rest in peace. Mary Shelley puts the letter in a dictionary and warms some soup because Aunt Eva is working late. Soon she hears a voice saying hello from another part of the house and she freezes in fear. She then realizes that it is Oberon talking from his cage in the living room but then she wonders why Oberon would be saying hello if no one was in the room with him. Mary Shelley bolts into the living room and tries to quiet the bird but he keeps asking who is there.

When Aunt Eva returns home, Mary Shelley goes to her bedroom and notices that the air doesn't feel right. Suddenly the needle in the compass begins to spin in every direction and all Mary Shelley can do is stare at it. Finally she gets into bed but awakens at three o'clock and senses a presence in her room. When she turns over in bed she sees Stephen standing there.

In Chapter 11, "Phantom," Stephen suddenly disappears from Mary Shelley's room and the energy returns to normal again. Mary Shelley falls into a fitful sleep and wakes from a nightmare remembering only a bloodstained sky. Aunt Eva leaves for work in the morning and the compass begins to point at Mary Shelley again. Mary Shelley asks if Stephen is there but he does not come. As Mary Shelley fixes some breakfast, Julius calls, wanting to verify that she had actually heard Stephen's voice at his funeral. Julius invites Mary Shelley and Aunt Eva to a seance conducted by a spirit medium to be held later that evening. After breakfast, Mary Shelley thinks about communicating with Stephen again and realizes that she needs to approach it from a more scientific perspective.

In Chapter 12, "Come Talk to the Spirits," Aunt Eva comes home from work and finds Mary Shelley reassembling the telephone she has taken apart out of boredom. Mary Shelley tells her that Julius has invited them to a seance. Aunt Eva is flustered and Mary Shelley tells her that she knows that Aunt Eva is interested in Julius but Aunt Eva denies it. It is the night before Halloween and Aunt Eva thinks the seance is a grand idea but she is concerned that Mary Shelley is not ready to let Stephen's spirit go and warns her not to make a scene tonight.



As Julius picks up Aunt Eva and Mary Shelley in his car, Aunt Eva shrieks when an ambulance stops at the house across the street but he is able to calm her so they can get on their way. Another ambulance screams by and Mary Shelley can feel death breathing down her neck.

## Analysis

The author introduces more suspense in this section. When Mary Shelley is alone in the house, she is alarmed when she hears a voice say, "hello," but then she calms down when she realizes it was just Oberon. Then the thought occurs to Mary Shelley that someone must be in the house for the bird to say hello and ask who is there. The reader suspects that it is Stephen's spirit returning to the house to communicate with Mary Shelley but he does not materialize at that point. The eerie suspense returns when Mary Shelley awakens suddenly in the night and senses a presence in her room. Her body feels almost paralyzed and she debates whether to turn over in bed because she is afraid of what she will see. Eventually she does turn and shockingly sees Stephen standing by her bed. And before she can even comprehend the situation, Stephen's spirit disappears as if being yanked back by his shirt collar. This puts the reader on edge and wondering when and how Stephen will next appear.

When Mary Shelley falls asleep again, she soon reawakens from a nightmare, recalling only a bloodstained sky. The author uses this as foreshadowing as the bloodstained sky will be defined with more clarity toward the end of the story.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mary Shelley write a letter to Stephen even though she knows he is dead?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Mary Shelley think that she needs to approach communicating with Stephen with a more scientific approach?

## Discussion Question 3

Why is Aunt Eva afraid of what will happen at the seance?

## Vocabulary

amid, acute, elation, blanched, annihilate, intellectualism, eavesdropping, seance, talcum, perimeter, coaxed, filaments, disemboweling, plunked, turban, coiffure, fedora, helm, pristine



# Chapter 13, Ugly Things; Chapter 14, Stay Safe; and Chapter 15, The Weight of Souls

## Summary

Julius, Aunt Eva and Mary Shelley are greeted at the seance by a young woman named Lena Abberley and introduces them to a couple other people in attendance. Lena distributes sugar cubes soaked in kerosene as anti-flu snacks for the guests. Mary Shelley takes offense at Lena's asking who they want to contact because she thinks that if Lena is legitimate, she will bring through whoever comes, not someone already identified. Lena instructs the guests to stay in their chairs, keep silent and not break the ectoplasm which is the flow of spiritual energy coming from Lena. Lena begins the seance and soon there are knocks on the table which starts to shake. Mary Shelley stretches out her legs and feels a pair of female legs wrapped around the center post, shaking it hard. One of the feet then kicked Mary Shelley's calf. Lena tries to regain control of the seance and tells the participants to think of their dead loved ones.

Suddenly Mary Shelley hears Stephen's voice saying, "They're killing me." Mary Shelley reminds him that she had attended his funeral but Stephen persists and says that he has been tied down and blackbirds are killing him. Stephen begs Mary Shelley to keep him with her and not send him back. Lena gets up to turn on the lights and Stephen disappears. Lena is outraged that Mary Shelley made such a disturbance during the seance and orders her, Julius and Aunt Eva to leave. Outside, Julius wants to know if Mary Shelley can really see Stephen and she confirms that she does. Stephen has told Mary Shelley that he is terrified because big blackbirds are torturing him, trying to kill him.

In Chapter 14, "Stay Safe," Mary Shelley can't sleep so she re-reads some of Stephen's letters. Eventually she drifts off to sleep but awakens a couple hours later and is startled to see Stephen sitting on her bed. He is clearly terrified and begs Mary Shelley to make them stop. She reaches out and can actually feel Stephen as she strokes his hair trying to calm him. Suddenly Stephen crawls on top of Mary Shelley trying to save himself from big birds that he says are coming for him. He begs her to keep him with her to keep him safe and then he kisses her hard as if he wants his spirit to enter her to be safe. Mary Shelley is overcome with the weight on her body and she feels as if she is tied down with ropes. She tries to escape because she thinks she is going to die. Suddenly Aunt Eva scoops her up and wants to know why she had been screaming. Aunt Eva is afraid that Mary Shelley has the flu because she was talking so feverishly. Mary Shelley then falls deep asleep for the rest of the night.

In Chapter 15, "The Weight of Souls," Aunt Eva checks on Mary Shelley before she leaves for work and tells Mary Shelley to forget about the seance. Mary Shelley decides





to walk to Aloysius Darning's photo studio to get her complimentary photo. Aloysius remembers Mary Shelley from Stephen's funeral and she tells him that she is able to communicate with Stephen which is the reason for her visit today. Mary Shelley is afraid that Julius might tamper with her photo so she wants Mr. Darning to take a legitimate photo to see if Stephen's spirit appears on film. She also tells him that she can taste people's emotions and that the compass always points at her now instead of pointing north. Mr. Darning asks if he can see that and Mary Shelley invites him to come over to the house to see what happens.

## Analysis

The seance starts out like Mary Shelley expected it would, as a fraudulent attempt to take advantage of grieving people. This is evidenced by the female who rocks the center post of the table from underneath, validating for Mary Shelley that any attempt to contact those in the afterlife are scams. That soon changes, however, when Mary Shelley hears Stephen talking to her, asking for her help to save him from the blackbirds which are trying to kill him. The organizer of the seance is angry that Mary Shelley has outperformed her but in reality, Mary Shelley has had an authentic experience with Stephen's spirit.

The symbol of blackbirds becomes more important in this section as Stephen appears to Mary Shelley several times telling her that blackbirds are trying to kill him. When Stephen is in Mary Shelley's room and trying to get her to save him, she tries to take his spirit into her body and can even see the shadow of a big bird cross her room. She also feels weighed down and tied by ropes, an experience that foreshadows what will be revealed about Stephen's actual death at the end of the story.

Mary Shelley is understandably unnerved by her experiences with Stephen's spirit and she is determined to take a scientific approach to understanding what is going on. This leads her to Aloysius Darning who she thinks will be able to capture a photo of Stephen's spirit if he is truly with her. Little does she know yet that Darning is not as legitimate as she had hoped and there is nothing scientific about what he proposes to Mary Shelley.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is Mary Shelley especially skeptical of Lena and the seance?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Mary Shelley experience that shows that she is experiencing the terror that Stephen is trying to escape?



## Discussion Question 3

How does Mary Shelley show that she might be starting to believe in spirits?

## Vocabulary

kohl, cowering, grimaced, obscure, insinuating, rasped, ectoplasm, trance, exhalation, anticipation, momentum, fraud, investigative, monstrous, blanched, fraudulent, taunting, idiocy, lurking, budge, singed, wavering, makeshift, stern, partition, pandemic, prone, settees, repertoire, preying, compelled, bellows, intriguing



# Chapter 16, of Rats and Crows; Chapter 17, Keep Your Nightmares to Yourself, and Chapter 18, The Pirate King

## Summary

Mary Shelley goes to the San Diego library and tells the librarian that she needs books on topics such as German military practices, modern war poetry, blackbirds, lightning injuries, spirit photography and after death experiences. In the library's reading room, Mary Shelley sees a newspaper with an article about the opening of a Red Cross house for recovering veterans and she decides to visit to see if she can talk to the men to better understand what might have happened to Stephen in the war. Mary Shelley finds references to blackbirds and crows in a war poetry book and reads extensively on prisoners of war, spiritualism and shell shock but still can't understand what Stephen means when he says that blackbirds are trying to kill him. Mary Shelley asks the librarian for directions to the new Red Cross house which she supplies along with a pack of garlic gum to keep her safe.

In Chapter 17, "Keep Your Nightmares to Yourself," Mary Shelley takes a streetcar to Balboa Park where the Red Cross home is located. Mary Shelley enters the house and sees many wounded men on sofas, chairs and hobbling around on crutches. Mary Shelley tells a nurse that she would like to volunteer and the woman is skeptical that a 16-year-old girl could handle the men's trauma but eventually relents and gives Mary Shelley some oatmeal cookies to distribute to the patients. Most of the men are glad to see her and she deflects the flirtatious comments expertly. Soon Mary Shelley finds a copy of "Tom Sawyer" and begins to read to some of the men who are happy for the distraction.

In Chapter 18, "The Pirate King," Mary Shelley takes the streetcar home and it is almost dark as she arrives at Aunt Eva's. Mary Shelley puts on her aviatrix goggles and settles in to listen to a recording of "The Pirates of Penzance." Mary Shelley is startled to see Julius' Cadillac pull up with Aunt Eva inside. Julius had shown up at the shipyard and offered to drive Aunt Eva home after work. Aunt Eva goes upstairs to clean up and leaves Mary Shelley to entertain Julius. Mary Shelley is irritated that Julius is here but her mood lightens when she sees that he has brought her a crate of Stephen's books.

Julius acknowledges how close Mary Shelley had been to Stephen and asks if she will help remove his spirit from the Embers' house. Julius admits that he can't see Stephen but he hears his footsteps coming from the second floor all the time. Mary Shelley states that she is trying to help him but wants to know if Julius knows anything about birds trying to kill Stephen when he was overseas. Julius states that Stephen was shot by Germans and there were no birds involved but Mary Shelley knows that something terrified Stephen before he died and she is not satisfied with Julius' answer. At that



point, Julius tells Mary Shelley that he just heard Stephen say that he knows she threw the photo of her and his spirit into the bay. Stephen also tells Julius that he wants to see another picture of Mary Shelley and him before he can go to his rest.

Julius begs Mary Shelley to consent to one last photo so he can send it to a contest with a prize of \$2,000 which he will use to move out of the Coronado house. Mary Shelley objects, calling Julius a fraud and drug addict and he grabs her up from her seat in a threatening manner. Aunt Eva intervenes and Julius shoves her to the floor. Aunt Eva orders Julius from her house but he refuses to go so she throws the framed photo of Mary Shelley and Stephen's spirit at his head. Finally, Julius leaves and Aunt Eva admits that she was foolish to have ever wanted Julius after Uncle Wilfred died. Mary Shelley tries to reassure her that she is only 26-years-old and has plenty of time to find another husband.

## Analysis

Mary Shelley continues her scientific approach to her problems by loading up with books at the library. She is trying to find anything related to blackbirds, torture, war, the afterlife and even lightning strikes to help her piece together the elements of all that is happening in her world. She prides herself on her logical thinking and even carries the borrowed books in her mother's old doctor's bag. Mary Shelley then decides that firsthand research is in order so she proceeds to the Red Cross home to talk to wounded men who might be able to shed some light on Stephen's experiences so she can try to help his spirit find some peace. Most girls would not be able to stomach seeing the wounds on most of these men but Mary Shelley determines to keep a scientific perspective in the name of research. She is tender hearted too and she distributes cookies and reads to the men to help ease their distress if only for a little while.

The theme of fraud is important in Chapter 18 when Julius arrives and asks Mary Shelley to sit for another portrait in the hopes that Stephen's spirit will come through. Julius tells Mary Shelley that Stephen has requested the new photograph so that his spirit may rest easily. Mary Shelley is almost convinced to do it until Julius tells her that he wants to enter the photo in a contest in the hopes of winning a cash prize which he hopes to use to move out of the house on Coronado. Julius will most certainly alter the photograph to indicate a spiritual presence in order to win the prize, a thought which sickens Mary Shelley. Julius' true intentions will be revealed by the end of the story which will prove Mary Shelley to be eerily accurate.

The theme of heartbreak is important in Chapter 18 when Aunt Eva realizes that Julius was stringing her along only to get access to Mary Shelley. Aunt Eva had flirted with Julius during the last year after Uncle Wilfred died in the hopes that Julius might see her as marriage material. Now Aunt Eva's hopes for an imminent marriage are dashed and she feels as if she is destined to be a widow forever even though she is only 26-years-old. Mary Shelley, who is also heartbroken due to Stephen's death, tries to comfort her and tells her that they have each other.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mary Shelley think she can approach her problems by checking out books at the library?

## Discussion Question 2

Why has Julius taken such an obvious interest in Aunt Eva lately?

## Discussion Question 3

Mary Shelley almost agrees to sit for another portrait for Julius but changes her mind. Why?

## Vocabulary

surreal, stench, splay, compelled, rendezvous, dismembered, carrion, recuperating, quarantined, elaborate, rancid, amputees, delusion, lovesick, vigor, foul, prophesy, crackpot, maim, kaiser, giddy, briny, pockmarked, meddlesome, pip-squeak, inkling, stoic, verge, obscenities



# Chapter 19, A Bloodstained Sky; Chapter 20, Paul Spitz; and Chapter 21, The Compass Phenomenon

## Summary

Mary Shelley falls asleep while reading in bed but has a nightmare in which a huge crow sits on her chest and cuts her skin with its beak. Mary Shelley awakens suddenly and finds not a crow, but Stephen, sitting on her. She pushes him off but he lunges back at her and she warns him to stay back because when he gets too close, she can't think clearly because she takes on his fears. Mary Shelley implores Stephen to tell her what he has experienced so she can help him and he tells her about trenches filled with mud, gas masks and filth as well as bloodied bodies trapped on barbed wire and flashes of light that bring out the big black birds. Stephen tells Mary Shelley that the birds just keep showing up to watch him and kill him, that his wrists are tied and then they stick a tube from a copper funnel down his throat which gags him.

Stephen also tells her that he sees flashes of light over and over when the birds are torturing him and that when he's in his bedroom he sees a bloodstained sky. Mary Shelley wonders if it will help if she visits his bedroom but Stephen warns her to stay away from there. Stephen disappears when Aunt Eva comes in, disturbed by the noises coming from Mary Shelley's room. Mary Shelley lies back in bed but can't sleep after what Stephen has told her about the big blackbirds.

In Chapter 20, "Paul Spitz," Mary Shelley returns to the Red Cross home where she meets a young man named Paul Spitz. Paul is severely wounded but Mary Shelley persists in talking to him because he is also from Coronado and knew Stephen. Paul asks if Stephen is at home or in an East coast hospital which is what they thought would happen. Mary Shelley tells Paul that Stephen died in France in October but Paul says that can't be true because Stephen had been sent home alive and was not overseas in October. Paul tells Mary Shelley that Stephen lost his mind at war so he was discharged and sent home. Mary Shelley asks Paul if Stephen was afraid of the birds during the war and Paul tells her that no one liked the crows because they ate bodies, sometimes before the person was completely dead.

In Chapter 21, "The Compass Phenomenon," Mary Shelley returns late to Aunt Eva's house and encounters Grant on the front porch. Julius had asked Grant to bring something to Mary Shelley. Mary Shelley asks Grant about whether the family knows that Stephen had been sent back to the U.S. alive. Mary Shelley begs Grant to tell her how Stephen died and he mentions shell shock and says that that is what must have happened to the person who told her that Stephen came home alive because Stephen died in battle. Grant drives away and Mary Shelley finds a golden tin on the porch



containing all the letters that she had ever written to Stephen along with a letter of apology from Julius for his behavior the night before.

Mary Shelley goes to her room and writes a sequence of events related to Stephen's death including Grant's mention of shell shock. This helps Mary Shelley logically review the events. Suddenly Aunt Eva bursts in with the news that the flu has reached the next door neighbor's house and she immediately begins boiling onions and scrubbing down the insides of the windows with hot water. A knock at the door reveals Aloysius Darning whom Mary Shelley had forgotten about inviting to see the compass. Aunt Eva is angry when she learns that Mary Shelley had been to Mr. Darning's studio the day before because of her risk of getting the flu. She is even more outraged when she learns that Mary Shelley has been volunteering at the Red Cross home.

Mary Shelley lays the compass down on a table and Mr. Darning and Aunt Eva can see that the needle follows Mary Shelley wherever she goes. Mr. Darning wonders whether Mary Shelley is magnetized since her lightning experience or whether her soul is having a hard time settling back into her body. Mr. Darning asks Mary Shelley if she will come to his studio for a photo with his compass to show the effects she has on it. Mr. Darning contends that he dislikes fakes but he would love to be able to document proof of supernatural activity. Before he leaves, Mr. Darning tells Mary Shelley that no spiritual shapes were found in her portrait taken yesterday.

Mary Shelley tells Aunt Eva that Stephen did not die in battle, that he lost his mind in France and was sent home before October. This revelation proves that Julius has lied-- Stephen was not a war hero. Aunt Eva tells Mary Shelley that she must give up on her morbid fascination with Stephen but Mary Shelley is determined to see it through so that Stephen can find peace. Mary Shelley takes the compass back to her room and it suddenly starts going wild. Mary Shelley hears a loud noise and sees that the lightning bolt picture has fallen face down on the floor. Mary Shelley sees Stephen's anagram again--I DO LOSE INK--and she vows to Stephen that she will do her best to figure out everything that is going on.

## Analysis

Fear continues to be an important theme throughout this section. Stephen appears to Mary Shelley again and he has intense fear that he will be tortured and killed again by the huge blackbirds. Stephen wants Mary Shelley to save him by having his spirit enter her body but the last time he did that she could feel and experience everything he had experienced and it was terrifying. She tells him to stay back from her a couple feet because she is afraid of that happening again. Mary Shelley wants to visit Stephen's bedroom to see if she can get any clues there but he is afraid that the birds will get her and warns her not to go. They seem to be caught in a web of fear for each other with no real answer of how to stop it. There is still more fear when Aunt Eva hears the feverish noises coming from Mary Shelley's room and she thinks Mary Shelley has contracted the flu virus. There is also fear when Mary Shelley asks Grant about the real nature of Stephen's death and whether Grant knew that Stephen had been shipped home alive.



Grant is very skittish about being questioned and fearful about talking to Mary Shelley about the subject of Stephen. Then, of course, Aunt Eva's fears are realized when the flu reaches the neighbor's house. She flies into a panic, washing down the windows and boiling onions in attempts to keep the virus from her house.

The story reaches a turning point in Chapter 20 when Mary Shelley goes to the Red Cross home and meets Paul Spitz, a high school friend of Stephen's. Paul tells Mary Shelley that Stephen had lost his mind in battle and was discharged and sent home. This means that Stephen was not killed in battle as his family has told everyone and Mary Shelley now has a new mystery to solve as to what actually happened to Stephen and how he really died.

## Discussion Question 1

From what you know about Stephen's experience so far, what do you think has happened to him prior to his death?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss some of the references to different types of birds that the author uses throughout the book.

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Stephen somehow guided Mary Shelley to volunteer at the Red Cross home so that she would meet Paul Spitz and get closer to finding out what really happened to Stephen?

## Vocabulary

sweltered, careened, catastrophic, cawed, upright, clatter, awe, insistence, erratic, muddling, gesture, flirtatious, conceal, antsy, flitting, footfalls, flinched, leapt, tarnish, bribe, phenomenon, glare, otherworldly, tittered, apparatus, peculiar, psychical, hoisted, strewn





# Chapter 22, Living and Breathing; Chapter 23, The Cage; and Chapter 24, Discoveries

## Summary

Mary Shelley writes a letter to her father to tell him that Stephen has died and that she's learning about shell shock which she may be able to help people manage someday. Mary Shelley then reads the first letter Stephen had sent her after he moved from Portland to Coronado. Mary Shelley brings a dining room chair to her room so she can try to sleep sitting up so Stephen can't overwhelm her like he does when she is in bed. Mary Shelley falls asleep and dreams of a sound like a gunshot and sees streaks of red splatter a milky sky. She suddenly wakes with a start and senses that Stephen has grabbed her around the waist and buried his face in her stomach. Mary Shelley assures him that he is safe with her but she notices that he is wearing only an undershirt with his trousers and asks him to remember where he was when he dressed this way.

Stephen remembers only that he was in a place with too many windows and it was hot. Then he recalls that he had hurt his mother when he kicked her in the stomach and knocked her down. He also remembers hearing planes buzzing overhead all day and Mary Shelley recalls him telling her this about living in the house in Coronado. She then recalls being at the Embers' home the day that Mrs. Embers came running in saying that she had been hurt in the stomach. Mary Shelley now knows that Stephen had still been alive in the house, suffering from deep shock. Stephen then tells her that he can hear people talking about how long it will take. Mary Shelley tries to get him to think of something else so they won't be sucked into the terror so they concentrate on the day he kissed her at his house in Coronado. They soon lie on the bed to stay in the pleasure and keep Stephen calm.

In Chapter 23, "The Calm," a squawk interrupts Stephen and Mary Shelley which she says is Oberon and he says they need to kill the bird. Mary Shelley tells him that the bird is a pet but Stephen is adamant about killing it, telling her to get a knife or a pair of scissors. Mary Shelley's mouth begins to fill with the taste and feel of feathers so she heads downstairs to get the scissors from the sewing box. She then pulls off the covering of Oberon's cage and sees a huge black bird with hands like a man's. Just as she is about to strike, Aunt Eva screams at her and she yells back at her to get the gun and shoot the bird. Aunt Eva puts Oberon outside and yells something about calling a minister.

In Chapter 24, "Discoveries," Mary Shelley wakes up on the floor of Aunt Eva's living room and hears someone knocking on the door. She opens it to find a girl delivering groceries so she pays her but wonders where Aunt Eva is because it's Saturday and she should be at home. Mary Shelley finds Aunt Eva in bed and she throws up a big



crucifix to keep Mary Shelley away from her. Aunt Eva tells her that she set Oberon free after Mary Shelley tried to kill him the night before. Mary Shelley apologizes but Aunt Eva is traumatized by Mary Shelley's maniacal behavior. She has also hidden all the knives and scissors in the house and called her minister but he can't come because his family is ill.

Mary Shelley then tells Aunt Eva her theory that Stephen was still alive at the Embers' house the day they went for her portrait. Mary Shelley wants to go to the house to see Stephen's bedroom to see if she can put more clues together but Aunt Eva doesn't want her to get any more involved. Mary Shelley goes to take a bath and before long, Aunt Eva calls her to let her know that Gracie has come in the hopes of having a seance and finding Stephen.

## Analysis

Mary Shelley is able to put together more facts related to Stephen's mysterious death. She recalls being at the Embers home for a portrait when she heard strange noises and saw his mother in distress because she had been hurt in the stomach. Knowing that it was Stephen causing all that commotion is especially difficult for Mary Shelley. If only she had known that he was still alive, there might have been something she could have done to prevent his death. All things considered, Mary Shelley has been handling Stephen's death very well since he was her first real love. She has not had the chance, though, to grieve for him properly because his spirit keep appearing to her in such distress that she has not processed the fact that he is never coming back to her properly.

The theme of fear continues with Stephen's terror at being tortured and killed by the big blackbirds. Now he is even taking over Mary Shelley's thoughts and actions in that he convinces her that Oberon must be killed. Oberon has been a nuisance to her but it has never occurred to her that the bird must be destroyed. It is Stephen's overwhelming fear of birds that takes over Mary Shelley and drives her to the point of almost killing Aunt Eva's pet. Understandably, Aunt Eva is terrified of Mary Shelley who seems to be another person when she is in the throes of Stephen's spirit. It is almost as if Mary Shelley needs an exorcism and Aunt Eva wants to get her minister involved to help.

## Discussion Question 1

What pieces of information does Mary Shelley use to determine that Stephen had come home alive and was alive the day she and Aunt Eva had come to the house for the portrait?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Aunt Eva want to call a minister when she sees Mary Shelley ready to attack Oberon with a pair of scissors?



## Discussion Question 3

What does it mean when Mary Shelley looks in Oberon's cage and sees a big black bird with hands like a man's?

## Vocabulary

ruckus, pontoons, bickering, brigade, banshees, quivering, provocative, rapture, topsy-turvy, quivered, winced, oblivious, anticipation, luminous, batiste, infuriating, commotion, cascade



# Chapter 25, Cousin Gracie; Chapter 26, Soldier's Heart; and Chapter 27, The Darkest Hours

## Summary

Gracie has wanted to visit Mary Shelley ever since the seance when Stephen came to her. Gracie wants to tell Stephen that she is sorry and that she misses him. Aunt Eva discourages the idea of a seance but Gracie pulls off her wig and shows them some white hair that is starting to re-grow as a result of Gracie's having had the flu and almost dying. Gracie feels desperate to talk to Stephen before the possibility that Mary Shelley could die from it. Mary Shelley then agrees and leads Gracie and Aunt Eva to the round table in the kitchen. Mary Shelley asks Gracie some questions about Julius' integrity and she says that Julius used to burn Stephen's photographs so Stephen hid most of them before he went to war.

Mary Shelley then tells Gracie what she has heard about Stephen returning home alive from the war and Gracie begins to cry and says the family is not supposed to talk about it. Most families are embarrassed if their sons are sent home in shame so the Embers family decided to make up the hero's death story about Stephen. She further states that Stephen's mother had to pick him up at a hospital on the East coast and brought him home sedated. They hid Stephen in his room while they investigated asylums but they gave up when they found the conditions to be too barbaric. Julius was not happy with keeping Stephen at home because he started making noise and kicked their mother.

Mary Shelley then asks Gracie how Stephen died and she says that Stephen shot himself. She says that Julius kept a gun at the house to protect against intruders. Gracie said that one day she woke up and found Julius asleep in the living room of her house and he was not in great shape because he sometimes went to opium dens in San Diego. Grant then drove Julius home to Coronado but Stephen didn't open the studio that day because more and more people were getting word of the weird sounds in the Embers house and were afraid. Gracie says that later that morning, Julius called to tell them that their mother had found Stephen dead with a gun still in his hand. Their mother is now in a sanitarium and mumbles about poison, a gunshot and sleeping pills. The police confirmed Stephen's death a suicide but Julius paid them to keep quiet so he could say that Stephen died in the war.

Mary Shelley can feel Stephen's presence and his rage is palpable. His voice comes through Mary Shelley and he orders Mary Shelley to tell Gracie that he didn't kill himself, that someone was pouring poison down his throat to kill him. Suddenly the window cracks, the shaking stops and the room is silent. Aunt Eva collapses on the floor and Gracie grips the table to keep from fainting.



In Chapter 26, "Soldier's Heart," Mary Shelley and Gracie had managed to get Aunt Eva to her room to rest but she comes downstairs for a glass of water after Gracie leaves. Aunt Eva warns Mary Shelley to never talk like Stephen again but she ignores her and tells her that she can't believe that Stephen killed himself. Aunt Eva contends that no one kills someone out of embarrassment but Mary Shelley says they may not have known what else to do with Stephen in his condition. Aunt Eva demands that Mary Shelley stop contact with Stephen but Mary Shelley says she can't until she finds the truth and Stephen can be at peace.

Mary Shelley falls asleep but dreams of a bloodstained sky and a gunshot off and on for hours. Eventually she gets up and makes a new list of the events surrounding Stephen's death.

In Chapter 27, "The Darkest Hours," Mary Shelley falls asleep that night and awakens to a sense that Stephen is with her but she doesn't see him. Then she hears something wet splashing against the sheet behind her back and then Stephen begs her to keep him with her because they are killing him. She feels a warm liquid seep across the sheet and wet her nightgown. She asks Stephen if her mother was present when he was tortured but he says not, that it was enormous blackbirds with beaks like scissors. Mary Shelley insists that she needs to see his bedroom but he tells her not to go because they will kill her. Mary Shelley starts to cry because she doesn't know how to help Stephen. Finally she asks Stephen if he is bleeding and she gets up slowly and turns to see Stephen with blood caked on his face and head and his eyes and mouth had been blown away, exposing the interior of his head. Mary Shelley faints.

Mary Shelley awakens in the morning still lying on her bedroom floor. Stephen is gone and her sheets are clean and white. Mary Shelley goes to Aunt Eva's room to talk to her but she sees that Aunt Eva is shivering and sweating and she knows that her aunt has the flu. Aunt Eva wants Mary Shelley to pack her things and go but she can't leave her. Mary Shelley can't get a doctor but the operator puts her through to an ambulance dispatcher who tells her that it will be at least 12 hours before they can get there. For the rest of the day Mary Shelley tends to Aunt Eva and every time she calls the ambulance dispatcher they add another 12 hours to their arrival time because they are so overwhelmed.

Nearly 24 hours after she found Aunt Eva, Mary Shelley sees that Aunt Eva's skin is turning brown and she panics. She hears an ambulance, runs outside and sees that it is parked a few houses down the street. A young mother is being loaded into the ambulance and Mary Shelley begs that they take Aunt Eva too. The attendants tell her that they have no room and no stretcher but the husband of the young woman offers to help Mary Shelley carry Aunt Eva to the ambulance. Aunt Eva is squeezed in beside two other women and Mary Shelley panics when she sees how dark her aunt's feet are, a sure sign that death is not far away.



## Analysis

Finally Mary Shelley gets closer to the truth about what happened to Stephen before he died. His suffering from shell shock would be a normal reaction for someone experiencing the horrors of war but people back home expected heroics from soldiers. Stephen was no exception. Families considered it to be a negative mark on their name if someone could not hold up under the pressures of war. Unfortunately, the Embers family was like most others in this thinking. They were more concerned about what other people would think about Stephen instead of taking care of Stephen himself. It is interesting to note that Julius frequents opium dens to deal with his life which would be considered by most to be a big weakness. However, when someone like Stephen cracks under the horrible conditions of war, he is thought to be weak.

The theme of greed is important in this situation too because Julius wanted to be rid of Stephen whose random noises were frightening people and word got out about it and Julius' business was dropping off. It seems unconscionable that there was no other solution to help someone like Stephen and Julius' first thought was his own livelihood when Stephen's very life was at stake. But greed can be a powerful factor and many decisions are based on it when people let the lower elements of life take over in circumstances which call for integrity and doing the right thing. Stephen's greed and fraud continue when he lets everyone believe that Stephen shot himself. This will be revealed shortly at the end of the story.

Mary Shelley is doing the best she can to help understand what Stephen is so terrified of and she is literally getting closer in that area too. Stephen wants to get as close to her as possible in order to stay safe so now not only can Mary Shelley hear, feel and taste what he had experienced, but she also takes on the sound of his voice which is very disturbing to Gracie and Aunt Eva.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Gracie so urgently want to contact Stephen through a seance?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do the members of the Embers family react they way they do when Stephen is discharged from the army with shell shock?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does someone like Julius feel the need to go into San Diego to frequent opium dens?



## Vocabulary

inquisitive, corrupted, intact, unison, peered, retching, furrowed, searing, traitor, asylum, profound, bodice, opium, sanitarium, torso, pulsated, fathom, parched, nuzzled, espionage, anagram, luminous, flinched, quivering, oozed, innards, convulsed, potent, exquisite, splintered, contraption, cringe, lunged



# Chapter 28, Stephen's Room; Chapter 29, Death, Again; Chapter 30, I Do Lose Ink; and Chapter 31, Mary Shelley Black

## Summary

Mary Shelley is convinced that she has the flu too so she goes to Mr. Darning's studio to ask him to take her to the Embers' house before she collapses and dies. She tells him that Julius wants her picture with Stephen and Stephen's bedroom is the best place to get it. Mr. Darning accompanies Mary Shelley to Coronado but she refuses to enter the Embers house until he kills three crows sitting on the roof. The birds eventually fly away and she agrees to get out of the car. No one answers the door at the Embers house so Mary Shelley climbs in through the photo studio porthole window and comes face-to-face with Julius who demands to know what she is doing in his house. Mary Shelley lets Mr. Darning in through the side door.

Mary Shelley tells Julius that she is here so that he can take her photo with Stephen's spirit and that Mr. Darning will ensure that there is no fraud. Mary Shelley says that the photo must be taken in Stephen's bedroom. Julius objects but eventually relents and agrees to move the photo equipment upstairs. Mary Shelley encounters Stephen's bloody spirit on the staircase and he warns her not to go into his room but she persists. Mary Shelley sits on Stephen's bed and feels a jolt of electricity pulse through her before everything goes black. When she re-opens her eyes, she can see that her wrists are tied down to the bed with coarse ropes and she can hear two people whispering and soon two figures dressed in dark clothing approach but all she can see are their eyes and their white surgical masks. It seems as if one of the masks turns into a large beak and the creature looks like an ungodly bird with the body of a man.

Suddenly Mary Shelley is in a trench in France surrounded by rotting flesh being pecked by big crows. She shoots at the birds and then returns to the eerie scene in Stephen's room where one of the men holds up the back of her head while the other tries to force the tube of a copper funnel down her throat. Mary Shelley struggles but all she can see are those gigantic beaks. She can hear the voices talking about drowning him in acid so that he will look more like a flu victim in the photo if he is choking. Mary Shelley feels the fluid being poured down her throat which now burns. A light explodes and she is back in the trenches before returning to Stephen's room. The voices argue about a photograph and more poison is forced down her throat as she cries out in horror.

Another light flashes and Mary Shelley realizes that photos are being taken. The voices agree that Stephen looks like he is choking from the flu and they quickly remove the ropes because a flu patient would not be tied down. One of the voices said he is going to get a gun to put Stephen out of his misery but the other one contends that his spirit will leave too quickly and the photo won't be able to catch it. While the two men argue,





Mary Shelley turns to see the gun and decides to shoot them. A gunshot rings out and Mary Shelley sees a bloodstained sky. Mary Shelley becomes aware of voices again and one of the men slaps her to try to wake her. She opens her eyes to see Julius and a dark stained ceiling beyond him.

Mary Shelley tells Julius and Mr. Darning that she saw two men attacking Stephen and that he had wanted to shoot them but he must have grabbed the gun wrong and shot himself instead. Mr. Darning demands that Mary Shelley tell him who the blackbirds looked like and Julius tells her that boys like Stephen are better off dead. Mr. Darning suddenly starts to suffocate Mary Shelley because he is afraid she will tell what she saw. Julius claims that he doesn't want another murder here and Mr. Darning says that it isn't his fault that Julius' lunatic brother ruined their experiment. Mary Shelley tries to summon Stephen and suddenly a flash goes off indicating that a photograph has been taken and she knows that it is Stephen who has documented the scene. Suddenly Mary Shelley is pulled under the bed before the windows break and glass scatters everywhere. She then hears Stephen's voice urging her to get the photographic plate out of the camera because it shows Julius and Mr. Darning trying to kill her and she'll need it for evidence.

Mary Shelley rises and sees Julius and Mr. Darning lying bloodied on the floor and she tucks the photo plate in her satchel. Mary Shelley tells Julius that she is going to call the police but then Mr. Darning hits her in the head with the camera and she blacks out, her spirit rising toward the ceiling while her body hits the floor.

In Chapter 29, "Death Again," Mary Shelley can see her body lying on the floor of Stephen's room with a bleeding welt on her head. Mr. Darning seems to have lost consciousness and Julius lies on the floor sobbing. She looks to the right and sees Stephen also hovering near the ceiling, less bloodied but with burn marks around his mouth and a bullet hole in his temple. A woman calls from outside and Julius yells that he is bleeding to death and need help so she runs to find assistance. Stephen is incredulous that Julius and Mr. Darning had really tried to kill him to win a photo contest. Mary Shelley confirms that he and Mr. Darning were so desperate for proof of the afterlife that they were willing to do anything. Stephen recalls that Mr. Darning was a two-bit photographer going out of business so he teamed up with Julius to play the spirit photographer and fraud expert angle.

Stephen pushes Mary Shelley to return to her body so she can show people the photographic plates that will prove that Julius and Mr. Darning killed him. An older couple enters the room with bandages to administer first aid. Stephen kisses Mary Shelley and tells her to go back to her life to make the world a better place so she closes her eyes and lets him go.

In Chapter 30, "I Do Lose Ink," Mary Shelley returns to her body and retrieves the photographic plate from her satchel to hand it to the Embers' neighbor who has come to help at the bloody scene. She tells the man that the photo is evidence that Julius and Mr. Darning are monsters. At that moment, she sees a yellow light brighten and then disappear in the corner of the room.



After Mary Shelley's traumatic experience in Stephen's bedroom, she dreams about the I Do Lose Ink anagram on Stephen's lightning bolt photo and unscrambles it to read Look Inside. Mary Shelley awakens in a hospital room to see a toe tag on her foot meaning she is dead. Then a nurse sees her and is amazed that she has survived not only the head injury inflicted by Mr. Darning but also a week of the flu. Mary Shelley has been unconscious in the hospital for a week and she asks for her doctor bag where she finds the framed picture of Stephen's lightning bolt. Inside she finds a letter from Stephen in which he tells her he loves her and that he has left a safe deposit box key for her at the San Diego post office and she is to do with the contents what she wishes.

In Chapter 31, "Mary Shelley Black," Mary Shelley is released from the hospital on November 11, 1918, the same day that the war ends. She walks on shaky legs toward the hospital exit when she catches sight of Aunt Eva whose hair has turned pure white. Mary Shelley tells her that she was able to save Stephen's spirit and that he is at peace now. Aunt Eva still needs hospital rest so Mary Shelley walks to the post office to retrieve the safe deposit box key. Inside the box she finds a black leather case filled with photos Stephen has taken of various landscapes along with one of her when she was 11-years-old and one of himself taken almost a year ago. Mary Shelley then leaves the post office and walks toward home, determined to live and come back fighting.

## Analysis

The theme of death is very important in this section. Mary Shelley is terrified that Aunt Eva will die because she has come down with the flu. She's also worried about herself because she probably has the flu too since Aunt Eva does. Death seems to be breathing down her neck and she wants to find out what happened to Stephen before she dies herself so she puts herself in even further danger to learn the details of what led to Stephen's death.

The author uses the symbols of birds throughout the story and they are prevalent here too. When Mr. Darning takes Mary Shelley to the Embers' house, there are three crows sitting on the roof and Mary Shelley refuses to get out of the car until they leave. And, of course, the blackbirds that have been the source of Stephen's terror are finally revealed as Julius and Mr. Darning. As they attempted to poison Stephen in his bedroom, the play of lights and Stephen's own hallucinations make them look as if they are blackbirds with huge beaks ready to peck out his eyes.

Once again, Mary Shelley is able to take on Stephen's persona and experience what he did while being tortured by Julius and Mr. Darning. She can feel the poison that was poured down his burning throat, see the trench filled with dying men and even feel that she is tied to the bed with coarse ropes. At this point, Mary Shelley is Stephen but she must endure the horror in order to understand what happened to Stephen so that she can live to tell about it. She does live but not before she dies again and is able to truly see Stephen in spirit form. He now guides her in how to reveal the atrocities committed by Julius and Mr. Darning and he is able to leave now that the truth will be told. He loves



Mary Shelley but knows that it is not her time to die so he leaves for good and Mary Shelley can know that she helped his spirit achieve peace.

Mary Shelley escapes death yet a third time when she recovers from the flu after being in the hospital for a week. She and Aunt Eva are both strong women and they will recover and support each other as they learn to become even more independent as women living in the early twentieth century.

Finally, the themes of greed and fraud come full circle as it is revealed that Julius and Mr. Darning have been collaborating all along. Mr. Darning was a two-bit photographer who aligned with Julius, posing as a fraud expert who never finds any fraud in Julius' spirit photography. The two of them think that they can use the compromised Stephen as their photographic subject and then alter the image to indicate his soul leaving his body. Their plans to enter the image in a contest to win the prize money are thwarted when Mary Shelley learns the truth about them and they are finished.

## Discussion Question 1

How is Mary Shelley finally able to free Stephen's spirit?

## Discussion Question 2

How have Julius and Mr. Darning both profited from the grief of other people?

## Discussion Question 3

How does Stephen help ensure that Julius and Mr. Darning will be held accountable for their evil deeds?

## Vocabulary

flask, crematorium, stench, rumpled, nipped, sinister, caws, husky, trellis, swish, legitimate, scrutinized, bizarre, dramatics, pendulum, hypnotizing, synchronicity, toxic, petrified, petrified, pulsated, bellows, threshold, rancid, ravenous, carrion, lunatic, beckoned, intriguing, tangible, delirious, morbid, consciousness, flimflamming, scamming, excruciating



# Characters

## Mary Shelley Black

Mary Shelley is a 16-year-old girl who is the protagonist of the story. Her deceased mother had named her after Mary Shelley, the author of the book "Frankenstein" because of her mother's love of electricity and science. Mary Shelley's mother had been a physician and Mary Shelley has inherited her interest in science and logic. Mary Shelley lived with her father, a grocery store owner in Portland, Oregon, until he was arrested for treason. The charges against him are that he helped men avoid the draft during World War I.

Mary Shelley is sent to San Diego to live with Aunt Eva, her mother's sister, after her father's imprisonment. Mary Shelley reunites with a boy, Stephen Embers, she knew from Portland who now lives on Coronado Island near San Diego.

When Stephen is killed in the war, Mary Shelley is approached by Stephen's half brother, Julius, who wants to photograph her in his spirit photography business. Stephen's spirit appears to her for help in solving the mystery of his death so his spirit can rest in peace. Mary Shelley's scientific perspective on life is challenged when she experiences an after death experience when she is hit by lightning. From that point on, she can taste the emotions of other people and is so magnetized that the needle on a compass follows her instead of pointing north. Eventually, Mary Shelley finds out the real circumstances of Stephen's death and his spirit is free to move on while she and Aunt Eva will try to make a new life after the war.

## Stephen Embers

Stephen Embers is an 18-year-old young man who is the first love of the main character, Mary Shelley. Stephen and Mary Shelley were friends as children in Portland, Oregon, until the Embers family moved to Coronado Island near San Diego, California. Stephen and Mary Shelley reunite when she moves to San Diego to live with her aunt.

Stephen is a talented photographer who has an antagonistic relationship with his half brother, Julius. Stephen enlists in the war to escape his home life much to the dismay of Mary Shelley who wants him to stay home. Soon after Stephen leaves for war, the family announces that he was killed in battle in France. However, Stephen's spirit appears several times to Mary Shelley because he is being tortured by big blackbirds.

Mary Shelley learns that Stephen did not die in battle, but actually was discharged due to shell shock and his family covered up what they considered to be an embarrassment. When Stephen's psychological problems become a problem, Julius tries to subdue him and eventually poisons him along with Aloysius Darning. Stephen helps Mary Shelley illustrate who was responsible for his murder and his spirit is eventually able to go on in peace.



## Aunt Eva

Aunt Eva is Mary Shelley's mother's younger sister. She is just ten years older than Mary Shelley. She was married to a man named Wilfred who died from tuberculosis. Aunt Eva works at a shipyard in San Diego during the war. Aunt Eva is terrified of the influenza pandemic and constantly cooks onion dishes to keep the virus at bay from Mary Shelley and herself. Aunt Eva is still a young woman but she is always on the alert for a possible husband, including Julius Embers, because a woman is supposed to be married. Aunt Eva contracts the flu but eventually recovers after several weeks in the hospital.

## Julius Embers

Julius Embers is Stephen's half brother. Their father was a photographer on Coronado Island and Julius takes over his studio after his death. Julius becomes a spirit photographer and promotes his ability to summon the dead in his photographs. This practice is completely fraudulent and preys on the grief of people especially those who have lost young men to the war. Julius has a self indulgent personality, burning through all the money he makes and spending many nights in opium dens. Julius is concerned about his public reputation and Stephen's discharge from the army and resulting behavior issues are embarrassing so Julius determines that Stephen must be eliminated so that Julius' business won't be impacted negatively. Julius has some moments of remorse about killing Stephen but ultimately he participates with Mr. Darning because his greed overpowers any redemptive qualities he may have.

## Robert Black

Robert Black is Mary Shelley's father who lives in Portland, Oregon. He had owned a grocery store until he was imprisoned for treason during the war. He is accused of helping men escape the draft. Mr. Black is a man of high integrity who lives by his principles and he has tried to instill those same qualities in Mary Shelley.

## Aloysius Darning

Aloysius Darning poses as a photography expert who investigates Julius Embers' spirit photography for evidence of fraud. In truth, Mr. Darning is a two-bit photographer who aligns with Julius to perpetuate fraud on people who grieve for dead relatives, especially men killed in the war. Mr. Darning collaborated with Julius in trying to kill Stephen so that they could capture his death on a photograph and alter it to show his spirit leaving his body. Their hope was to use this photograph to win a contest and as promotion for Julius' business.



## Grace

Grace is a cousin to Stephen and Julius Embers. She is skeptical about Julius' motives in his photo business but she is compelled to work for him because she needs the money. She is completely ruled by Julius and her nervous personality suffers even more from his demanding, unethical behavior. Grace is a pathetic, dowdy figure who wears a wig because she had lost her hair after having the flu. She always appears frazzled, frumpy, and skittish.

## Grant

Grant is Grace's brother and cousin to Julius and Stephen. Grant works for Stephen in the photo studio and is savvy to Julius' unethical business practices. Grant is a person who will go along with almost any scheme and he frequently accompanies Julius to the opium dens.

## Paul Spitz

Paul Spitz was a high school friend of Stephen's. Mary Shelley meets Paul at the Red Cross home and he informs her that Stephen was not killed in battle but was discharged due to shell shock.

## Flu victims

Throughout the story, the specter of the influenza pandemic runs rampant with people dying in large numbers. Bodies can be seen lying in front yards waiting for ambulance drivers to pick them up. They are even stacked up in coffins at some funeral home locations. The hospitals are filled to overflowing with people who have contracted the flu. The victims are many but they take on the role of one person who is very ill and dying in the story.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Butterfly and Lightning Pictures

Stephen's photographs of the butterfly and lightning symbolize Stephen and Mary Shelley. A butterfly signifies the soul leaving the body as Stephen did and the lightning photo represents what had happened when Mary Shelley was struck by lightning. A lightning storm approaches as Mary Shelley cries out shortly after finding out that Stephen has died in the war. It is symbolic that she looks at Stephen's lightning bolt photo at the same time, indicating that perhaps there is more of a connection with the dead than she thought possible before.

## Uncle Wilfred's compass

Aunt Eva gives Uncle Wilfred's compass to Mary Shelley when she comes to live with her in San Diego. After Mary Shelley has a death experience when she is hit by lightning, she becomes magnetized and the needle of the compass always points to her instead of pointing north. The only exception is when Stephen's spirit is in the room when the compass needle goes crazy or points to the photos he gave to Mary Shelley which now hang on her bedroom wall.

## Photographs

Photographs in the story exhibit the concept of good vs. evil. Stephen's photos are of people or beautiful landscapes which are pleasant and enjoyable for people to view. Conversely, Julius' photographs come from a place of fraud and greed and they prey on people experiencing grief. They are manipulated to show dead spirits so they give false hope to people.

## Onions

A deadly influenza virus is killing hundreds of people all over the world during World War I. There was no real medical treatment at the time so people used folk remedies to keep the virus at bay. The biggest remedy was the use of onions and garlic which were thought to have medicinal properties. Aunt Eva is a devotee of using onions and creates all kinds of food dishes using them. People also wore them around their necks and covered people with onions in their beds to help stave off the deadly virus.

## Gauze masks

Gauze masks were commonplace during the flu pandemic and people wore them everywhere to avoid catching the virus. The gauze masks worn by Julius and Mr.



Darning when they are trying to poison Stephen appear to him as big beaks, making the men look like big blackbirds.

## **Birds**

The author uses the images of birds throughout the story. The main birds are the blackbirds which Stephen claims are trying to kill him but she also mentions crows, canaries and even Aunt Eva's pet magpie, Oberon, as symbols of death and fear which are omnipresent.

## **Mary Shelley's name**

Mary Shelley Black was named after Mary Shelley, the woman who wrote the novel, "Frankenstein." The book explores the scientific discovery of electricity and it plays a big role in the creation of the Frankenstein monster. Mary Shelley's mother was a doctor and Mary Shelley thinks that she has inherited her mother's way of thinking like a scientist.

## **Lightning**

Mary Shelley is struck by lightning, dies and comes back, altered, showing the power of the lightning and all natural forces. Stephen also gives her a photograph of a lightning storm over the Pacific and it has a polarizing effect on her.

## **Bloodstained Sky**

Stephen tells Mary Shelley that he sees a bloodstained sky and when his spirit inhabits her body, she can see it too. The bloodstained sky is the pattern of blood stains on the ceiling of Stephen's bedroom from when he accidentally shot himself with Julius' gun.

## **Doctor Bag**

Mary Shelley carries her mother's doctor bag with her wherever she goes. It serves as a great satchel but it is also a way of carrying her mother with her, including her scientific approach to life and logical perspective of the world around her.





# Settings

## San Diego, California

San Diego is a city in southern California where most of the story takes place. Mary Shelley is sent to live with her Aunt Eva who lives in San Diego when her father is arrested for treason during the war. Mary Shelley had hoped that fear of influenza would be less in San Diego because of the beautiful California weather but intensity about the flu is just as bad as it had been in Portland.

## Coronado Island

Coronado Island is an island close to San Diego. It can be reached by ferry or vehicle over a bridge. Coronado is a community of wealthy citizens who value their exclusivity. The Embers' home is located on Coronado and Julius' photo studio is located in the home. Hundreds of people line up at the house to have spiritual portraits taken at Julius' studio.

## Portland, Oregon

Mary Shelley and her father lived in Portland, Oregon, until he is arrested for treason. Mary Shelley must leave Portland to stay with her Aunt Eva in San Diego when her father can no longer care for her. Mary Shelley's father has been accused of treason for helping young men avoid the draft. He had run this operation from his Portland grocery store which must be sold when he is imprisoned.

## Aunt Eva's house

Aunt Eva lives in a Victorian style house in San Diego. It is a simple home with no electricity but Aunt Eva tries to make Mary Shelley comfortable when she comes to live with her. Much of the spiritual activity happens in this house when Stephen visits Mary Shelley in her bedroom.

## The Embers' house

The Ember family had lived in Portland which is where Mary Shelly met Stephen but they moved to Coronado Island. Stephen and Julius' father had a photo studio in the home and Julius took it over as a spiritual photography business after his father died.



# Themes and Motifs

## Death

The theme of death is an important one in the story. Death is prevalent during this time period due not only to the fatalities during World War I but also the deaths due to the global influenza pandemic. Young men like Stephen are dying young because it is thought to be noble to die for your country. Men like Mary Shelley's father think that this is a ridiculous concept because the men are too young to die for a cause they did not start and may not even believe in. Many deaths are occurring regardless and grief runs rampant.

People like Julius Embers take advantage of grieving people who think that he can summon their dead relatives in his spirit photography. Seances are also prominent during this period as a way to make money from grieving people who long to contact their deceased relatives and friends. Then there are people like Mary Shelley who take a more scientific approach to life and don't necessarily believe in spirits until she is struck by lightning and gets the capability to communicate with Stephen's dead spirit. Wanting to help Stephen drives Mary Shelley further into the realm of the dead and she claims that she can sometimes even feel death following her down the street. Mary Shelley beats death three times in the story and will probably live to become a capable woman like her mother.

## Fear

Fear is an important theme in the story because there is so much death and illness running rampant in the world during this period of time. People are afraid of the war and its associated horrors. They are even afraid of other people's perceptions of how they handle these horrors such as when Stephen is discharged for having shell shock. It would be quite normal to be afraid of the terrors experienced by these men during wartime, but having shell shock is a source of embarrassment for the men's families.

Julius would rather kill Stephen than have people know that Stephen suffers psychologically so he tells everyone that Stephen died in battle. Julius' main fear is that people will see and hear Stephen's odd behaviors and his photography business will suffer.

The influenza pandemic also adds debilitating fear to people during this time. Aunt Eva is a classic example of someone who is nearly paralyzed with fear that she or Mary Shelley will contract the flu virus and die. She takes all sorts of precautions such as cooking onion dishes for every meal, not taking public transportation, and not attending many public events. Fear has shut down public buildings and the society becomes more insular.



Probably the greatest outright example of fear in the story is when Stephen's spirit comes to Mary Shelley for help because he is being tortured and killed. Mary Shelley, in turn, is afraid of Stephen's feelings and she does what she can to resolve what has happened to him. Ultimately, she reveals the truth and Stephen's spirit can move on, released from the grip of fear.

## Greed

Greed is an important theme in the story because it drives inappropriate and even evil behavior. Julius Embers and Aloysius Darning embody the concept of greed with their photography businesses. Even though he knows he is committing fraud with his spirit photography, Julius is too greedy to stop the large inflow of money from people who are grieving the loss of loved ones.

Aloysius Darning had a failing photography business when he teamed up with Julius to make money in the spirit photography business. Mr. Darning posed as a fraud investigator of spirit photographers, but since he was aligned with Julius, never found any impropriety in Julius' work. The money continued to pour in for both of them based off their fraudulent and greedy behavior.

They are so greedy that they are willing to kill Stephen because they want to win the prize money from a spiritual photography contest. They are subsequently identified as Stephen's murderers proving that their greed had no value in the end.

## Fraud

The theme of fraud is an important one in the story. Julius Embers creates spirit photography in which he manipulates portraits of people to include the purported spirits of their dead relatives. Aloysius Darning positions himself as a fraud detector of spirit photographers and he supposedly has found no fraud related to Julius' work.

It is only later in the book that it is revealed that Julius and Aloysius are partners in the spirit photography business so, of course, he is not going to find any fraud with Julius' work. The end of Julius' business would end the stream of income for Aloysius too and they will not let that happen.

There seems to be no end to the fraudulent schemes that Julius and Aloysius will undertake and they even participate in Stephen's actual death because they want to capture a photo of him writhing in pain as if he were dying of the flu virus. The fact that they were pouring poison down his throat in order to make him appear agonized would never be known by the general public. It is only after Mary Shelley is able to determine the extent of their fraud and their contribution to Stephen's death that their fraud will be exposed.



## Heartbreak

The theme of heartbreak is an important one in the story. Probably the most obvious example of heartbreak is the death of Stephen, Mary Shelley's first love. They had known each other as children in Portland and Mary Shelley reconnects with him only briefly when she moves to San Diego but the love is still there between them.

Stephen is the only person who understands Mary Shelley and he feels the same way about her. Even after Stephen's death, Mary Shelley continues to communicate with him to tell him how she feels and his spirit returns to her for help when seeking the truth so that he may have peace.

Aunt Eva has also experienced heartbreak. As a widow at the young age of 26, she feels that her life is over and can only be good again if she remarries. She has more than a passing interest in Julius Embers only to learn that he finds her cloying and boring, a fact which breaks her heart.

Mary Shelley also experiences heartbreak when her beloved father is imprisoned for treason because of his beliefs about the war. There is also heartbreak in that Mary Shelley never knew her mother who died in childbirth. She longs to know more about her mother and is like her in her scientific approach to life. And, of course, the massive amount of deaths attributed to the war and the influenza pandemic has created heartbreak on a global scale.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is told from the first person narrative point of view. This means that the author tells the story directly in her own words. As the narrator, Mary Shelley uses the pronoun of "I" throughout because the story is being told just as she sees it or experiences it. With the first person narrative point of view, the reader has access to the thoughts and feelings of the narrator only. What is going on in the heads of any other people in the story is only speculative as the reader does not have the privilege of seeing them.

As Mary Shelley goes from present day to flashbacks in the story, she still maintains the first person narrative point of view. The story is hers and the reader will learn only what the author wants him or her to learn. The first person narrative point of view tells the narrator's story and the reader must take into account who the narrator is to understand the perspective. For example, a child will see a story from a different perspective from that of an adult and the reader should make allowances for that.

An example of the first person narrative point of view is when Mary Shelley states, "He comes to me at night. I've seen him. I've felt him. I think someone did something terrible to him. Don't be afraid of him," I said. "He doesn't seem to want to do any harm. He's just scared. I think between the war and the flu, no one's going to escape getting haunted. We live in a world so horrifying, it frightens even the dead." The author not only provides information from Mary Shelley's perspective about what she did, but also projects into Mary Shelley's thoughts about the impact the elements will have on her life. If this were written in another point of view, the speaker would be able to say that Mary Shelley said Stephen appears to her but would have no insight on Mary Shelley's thoughts about the horrors of the world she lives in.

## Language and Meaning

Because "In the Shadow of Blackbirds" is set in the early twentieth century, the language is current for the times. The author uses terminology and euphemisms from the 1900s in narration and dialogue to show authenticity. The author uses things like railroad and streetcar travel as well as the lack of electricity in Aunt Eva's home to indicate that the story is in keeping with the times. Morals and manners are also appropriate for the times as evidenced by what people think is appropriate for socially acceptable behavior.

The author also keeps the language authentic to the characters. For example, Mary Shelley is an outspoken, frank girl who is not afraid to share her opinions. For example, when the detectives want to talk to Mary Shelley about what is found in the photo studios of Julius and Aloysius, they warn her that some of the material may be inappropriate or offensive to her. The author writes, "We discovered some grisly



photographs in our searches through the two men's studios," said the older detective with the least compassionate voice. "The road ahead may be rather upsetting for a sixteen-year-old girl. I'm afraid your delicate female eyes and ears will experience some ugliness." "Oh, you silly, naive men." I shook my weary head and genuinely pitied their ignorance. "You've clearly never been a sixteen-year-old girl in the fall of 1918."

## Structure

The structure of a novel usually takes one of four forms: character, milieu, event or idea. And while a story can contain all four forms, one usually predominates. "In the Shadow of Blackbirds" is an example of a milieu structure. Milieu is just another word for the world according to the author's view. It is all the elements that combine to tell the story and share the point that the author is trying to make. In this book, the author wants the reader to care about Mary Shelley's journey and her persistence in trying to make the world better which aligns with the code that her mother probably shared. Mary Shelley has all types of unnerving experiences but each time she wants to find a solution and inject some care along the way. Whether it is helping out at the Red Cross home or trying to help Stephen's tormented soul find peace, Mary Shelley knows how things should be and works diligently to set them right again. The structure shares Mary Shelley's journey into unknown territory and feelings until she comes back out on the other side with more understanding and a feeling of having accomplished her goals.



## Quotes

My wife has allergies!

-- Man on train (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley takes the train to San Diego during the outbreak of the Spanish Influenza. People try to avoid public contact but if they must go out, they wear gauze masks over their mouth and nose and poultices around their necks. Everyone is suspicious of everyone else as being a carrier of the virus. When a woman sneezes on the train, the people around her begin to panic and become angry thinking that the woman has infected all of them with the flu virus.

I wonder if surgical gauze is really doing anything besides making us look like monsters from another planet. My science teacher, Mr. Wright, wore a mask, and he's just as dead as the people who didn't.

-- Mary Shelley (chapter 2 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley has a tendency to question authority and challenges previously held ideas. She has a scientific mind and old ways of thinking and folklore irritate her. She doesn't think that the folk precautions against the flu will do much in keeping it at bay and she is always quick with an opinion.

My father told me how Julius is creating his ghosts--doctoring the plates, creating double exposures, damaging his brain with too much opium until he convinces himself the mistakes he makes while developing the plates are spirit images.

-- Stephen (chapter 3 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Stephen tells Mary Shelley that Julius is a fraud in his spiritual photography. He plays on the grief of people to convince them that he can channel the dead to appear in photographs. Mary Shelley trusts Stephen and will return to his explanations about Julius later in the story.

I lost my innocence on April sixth, 1917. And it had nothing to do with Gray's Anatomy... the day this country declared war on Germany," I reminded her. "The day spying on neighbors became patriotic and boys turned into rifle targets. That's enough to take the sweetness out of a girl.

-- Mary Shelley (chapter 4 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley has tired of the world crumbling around her and her innocence has long been gone. She is impatient with Aunt Eva when she chastises her for speaking casually about sex when there are far much worse things going on in Mary Shelley's world than the understanding of intimacy between men and women.

I left my body and sat on the branch of your eucalyptus tree for a bit. I saw myself down there, with my clothes smoking and the neighbors gathering around me. It didn't feel right, like I was stuck between life and death, and I wasn't sure where to go.



-- Mary Shelley (chapter 7 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley tries to explain to her Aunt Eva what happened to her when she was hit by lightning.

That's right. Uncle Lars said your father was running some sort of group out of the back of his grocery store. Do you know how much trouble the rest of us could be in if anyone learns we're related to a traitor?

-- Aunt Eva (chapter 8 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** In addition to fear of catching the influenza virus and dying, Aunt Eva is petrified that someone will find out that Mary Shelley's father is in jail for treason. He has helped young men avoid being drafted into war and even though he feels it was the right thing to do, it is a treasonous act. Aunt Eva is skittish because Mary Shelley is very outspoken and she is afraid that the girl will say something inflammatory or incriminating and get both of them in trouble with the government.

Blackbirds.

-- Stephen (chapter 9 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** At his funeral, Stephen begins to communicate with Mary Shelley to let her know that something was not right about the way he died. When she asks him to explain all he says is the word, "blackbirds." This is significant because it will lead to the explanation of the circumstances of Stephen's death.

I wasted nearly a year of my life wanting that man. I spent Wilfred's last months hoping Julius would be my chance to have someone who wouldn't waste away and die on me. I had no idea he thought so little of me that he could come over and bully us like we were nothing. Why was he hurting you?

-- Aunt Eva (chapter 18 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** Aunt Eva has kicked Julius out of her house after he was abusive to Mary Shelley. She is sad that she thought he was a potential husband and has turned out to be a bully and a fraud. Aunt Eva feels bad for pushing Mary Shelley toward Stephen, too, because that meant that she could be closer to Julius. Aunt Eva is only 26-years-old and afraid she is too old to ever remarry and she is distraught at that prospect.

Trenches flooded with rainwater. Mud. Filth. Gas masks." He sat upright and pulled his knees to his chest. "Blood-soaked bodies hanging on barbed wire. Artillery shells whistling and screaming overhead. Rats the size of cats crawling over me. Flashes of light that bring out the huge, dark birds.

-- Stephen (chapter 19 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Stephen's spirit is finally able to tell Mary Shelley what he sees from the war. She is desperately trying to find out the significance of the blackbirds so that she can help his spirit be at peace.





Stephen sort of... well... he lost his mind over there in the trenches. Got to the point where he couldn't even move anymore. He'd just huddle in the mud, shaking. They tried to help him in one of the field hospitals once--examined him to see if he was faking. But then they sent him straight back into battle... and he got worse than ever.

-- Paul Spitz (chapter 20 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley learns from Paul that Stephen had not died in battle as his family has told everyone, but that Stephen got shell shock and was shipped home alive. This complicates Mary Shelley's investigation because she now needs to find out why his family lied to everyone and what were the real events that led to Stephen's death.

She was there. I was panicking about the planes, but she was there, and I hurt her.

-- Stephen (chapter 22 paragraph 18)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley has new clues from Stephen that prove that he was still alive when he came home and had been upstairs the day she was at the Embers' house for her portrait and Stephen's mother called out for help because she was hurt.

Oh, you silly, naive men." I shook my weary head and genuinely pitied their ignorance. "You've clearly never been a sixteen-year-old girl in the fall of 1918.

-- Mary Shelley (chapter 31 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Mary Shelley has experienced things that most people could not even begin to comprehend during this year so when the detectives tell her that she may see and hear things related to the investigation of Julius and Aloysius that may be offensive, she is amused by their ignorance of her situation.