

Light a Penny Candle Study Guide

Light a Penny Candle by Maeve Binchy

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Plot Summary

Maeve Bincy's *Light a Penny Candle* follows two families, one English and the other Irish, through a period of twenty years (1940-1960). The families are first entwined when Elizabeth White, at age ten, is sent to Kilgarret, Ireland, to escape the German bombing of London and is adopted for five years by the O'Connors, whose daughter Aisling is also ten. Linked only by letters for most of the novel, as they mature and each find tragedy in love, Elizabeth and Aisling are reunited towards the end in London where, both widowed, they resolve to begin life again together.

The White family in 1940 sends sheltered ten-year-old only daughter Elizabeth from London to safety in Ireland in care of Violet White's school mate, Eileen O'Connor. Over five years, Elizabeth grows into an integral part of the boisterous clan. Tragedy strikes when her foster brother, Sean O'Connor, dies fighting in the British Army.

Elizabeth returns home to the aftermath of war, tries to explain her experiences, and finds it hard to cope with being parted from her Irish family. Violet divorces George, from whom she has long been emotionally estranged, and moves in with Harry Elton. Elizabeth is thrust into a conflict beyond her years and tries to help morose George, despite the fact that he cares only for himself. As Violet suffers schizophrenia, Elizabeth is drawn surprisingly to her resented stepfather's side. She is also drawn into the field of art and finds a narcissistic lover, Johnny Stone, whose baby she aborts without telling him, fearing she'd lose him otherwise.

Elizabeth makes a triumphal return to Kilgarret for Aisling's wedding, but the marriage proves a disaster because of Aisling's husband Tony's heavy drinking and impotency. Elizabeth tires of Johnny and marries seemingly safe lawyer Henry Mason. After a period of bliss and hope they begin quarreling, as Henry shares George's obsessive views on career. Elizabeth and Aisling are reunited in London when Aisling flees a beating by her husband.

When word comes that Eileen is near death, Elizabeth and her baby accompany Aisling to Kilgarret. Tony then dies in a sanitarium, leaving Aisling a wealthy widow, but Johnny, who has become Aisling's lover in place of Elizabeth, refuses to marry her. Aisling moves on to Henry's law partner, Simon Burke. Elizabeth's ten-year-old abortion comes public in the worst possible way, leading to Henry's accidental death under the influence of alcohol. Elizabeth and Aisling vow to start life over together.



Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 1

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 1 Summary

Finishing reading a romance novel in which the heroine is saved by her man, Violet White, misused by men and putting up with a frustrated husband George and a timid daughter Elizabeth, damns such novelists. Violet has been seeking rationed food and arguing with Elizabeth's teacher, Miss James, about evacuating her class from London, which is being bombed. She is surprised when her former classmate, Eileen O'Connor in Kilgarret, Ireland, agrees to take in Elizabeth. They have long been out of contact. Eileen has many children, including one Elizabeth's age. Eileen's husband Sean agrees to curb his sharply anti-British views. Elizabeth is entrusted to a stranger, Mrs. Moriarty, to get her to Dunlaoghaire, where Sean, Jr., will meet her.

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter introduces the White and O'Connor families. Violet White and Eileen O'Connor attend St. Mark convent school in Kilgarret, Ireland, years earlier, and have not kept in touch. Eileen remains there, marries, and has many children, while Violet moves to London, marries a dull banker who will never advance himself, and has Elizabeth, who is now ten. London is being bombed by the Nazis and children and old people are being evacuated. Food is both in short supply and expensive. Families in the English countryside take in evacuees gratis, as part of the war effort. Ireland, however, is not part of the war effort, and Sean O'Connor is a quintessential anti-British Irish patriot. Nevertheless, he agrees to take in Elizabeth, who sets out filled with her mother's bad memories of Ireland. The cause of this and Violet's other emotional dysfunctions will clearly have to be discussed going forward, and Elizabeth will face culture shock in her new situation. Irish politics will be a major concern of the novel.



Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 2,

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 2, Summary

In the O'Connor household, only Aisling and Donal are excited about the newcomer. Eileen worries that their noisy household may be traumatic for Elizabeth, but hopes that this will restore relations with Violet. When Elizabeth enters the men's room, being unable to read the Irish labels, young Sean is horrified at her ignorance. Elizabeth arrives in wet knickers, greatly embarrassed. Eileen rebukes her ignorant son, angering him further, and sets about getting Elizabeth ready for breakfast in a brisk manner, most unlike Violet's. Eileen is amused at Elizabeth's modesty. Aisling is tongue-tied but makes a sign for their bedroom that pleases the newcomer.

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 2, Analysis

Chapter 2 fills in lively detail on the turbulent O'Connor household, allowing each member a bit of focus while making clear that no-nonsense Eileen is the ruling force. The O'Connors struggle to understand the newcomer, who is an only child, ignorant of the most basic things in life, cannot tell the men's room from the ladies', and who cannot enter a corridor without being fully dressed. Elizabeth in turn appreciates Eileen's concern and help but finds it overwhelming after her mother's slow, methodical ways. The bathroom mix-up at the docks brings Elizabeth home with wet knickers, evidently a major infraction at home. Eileen laughs it off as ordinary and hurries her to clean up for breakfast. The cultural confusion promises to be a lively theme. Sean Jr.'s burning desire to enlist while under-aged also looks likely to develop into a major theme. Through his friend who is also trying to sign up, Sean sees training, pay, and service overseas through romantic lenses. His dissatisfaction with life causes his mother much anxiety, but she is oblivious to his growing rage.



Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 3

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 3 Summary

Elizabeth and Eileen's first letters to the Whites dwell on having Elizabeth excused from catechism classes and whether unbaptized kittens go to limbo. Violet wonders about the religious obsession and worries about Elizabeth's lack of homesickness. The two Seans irritate one another constantly, but when the younger fails his Leaving Certificate examination, his father puts his son in the store at regular wage and hours. Eileen is relieved that after hot baths and gin remove worry about another pregnancy.

Maureen O'Connor wants to be a nurse, while her friend Berna Lynch wants to be a secretary. Young Sean wants to enlist in the army, emphasizing the value of training for post-war employment with his father, who wants reparations from England for eight hundred years of humiliation before allowing him to fight. The girls are stuck between social levels in a town where teens are always on probation.

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 shows the early adjustments to Elizabeth and develops some of the O'Connors' characters. Young Sean is unusually distant from his mother until a joke about borrowing the proper Protestant Bible lets them share a laugh. When Eileen and Elizabeth both dwell on religious matters in their first letters, Violet is perplexed at such obsession. In writing to Mother Bonaventura to have Elizabeth excused from Catholic doctrinal classes, Eileen hopes that God will forgive her. She also decides that there is no reason to bother her father-confessor with information about hot baths and gin taking away the fear of another pregnancy. More details of religious life emerge as Eamonn's difficulties at the beginning of the school year are examined. His point of view is adopted in order also to characterize the family as a whole and as individuals. At eleven, he is most displeased. Older sister Maureen is also depicted, enduring her teenage years in straight-laced Kilgarret with friend Berna Lynch. The layering of Irish society is briefly sketched. Finally, Young Sean's disgruntlement allows his father's views on eight hundred years of English enslavement of Ireland to be vented.



Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 4,

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 4, Summary

Aisling uses Elizabeth as an excuse for getting out of things while Elizabeth gains self-confidence but cannot share personal matters. Joannie Murray leads classmates in questioning Elizabeth's Protestant faith and convincing her to let them baptize her. Elizabeth begins attending Mass. Looking forward to an Irish Christmas, Elizabeth is troubled that the celebration will be ruined when Maureen is caught having shoplifted gifts. There is a row, but nothing can spoil Christmas. Violet annoys Eileen by sending money for both girls' birthdays, having always overlooked Aisling; Donal's asthma worsens; and Sean Sr., damns his son for being absent from the shop.

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 4, Analysis

Chapter 4 continues contrasting the O'Connors' ways with Violet's. Notably, Elizabeth misses her London school teacher above friends and, it seems, even family. She quickly adopts the hurried manner required by a large family but retains her politeness. The religious theme is taken up as Elizabeth's schoolmates inquire about her religion, which gets her exempt from memorizing catechism every night. Elizabeth knows little about Anglicanism. The controversy is fairly well epitomized by the vocabulary of baptism versus christening. Elizabeth has a confirmation gown preserved in London in moth balls, so she is certain she must have undergone the rite. Without using the terminology, the girls decide to give her a conditional baptism, in case she has not received this grace, which they believe will solve many of her problems. They debate whether she must learn the Catholic faith first in order not to risk hell as a bad Catholic rather than limbo as a non-baptized child. They are scrupulous in getting the ritual words and acts correct. The nuns, who have bent over backwards to accommodate their non-Catholic student, do not notice that Elizabeth voluntarily begins attending Mass, which requires of the O'Connor children much scrubbing and polishing Saturday night in order to meet Eileen's standards for church appearance.

The religious theme continues in the contrast of an Irish Christmas with the drab observance in London. Elizabeth's excitement is crushed when Maureen is found to have shoplifted expensive gifts with her accomplice Berna. Sean shows his ugly, violent, paternal nature, which swiftly morphs into festal dancing with his errant daughter. His feisty son sticks up for Maureen, making the confrontation all the more violent. This ability to turn passions on and off confuses Elizabeth.

After reminding the reader of Sean Jr.'s devotion to the cause of joining the heroic war effort and his father's opposition, the chapter uses the device of examining events in the lives of many of the characters on a specific date: 1 May 1941. Sister Bonaventure is pleased with Elizabeth's adjustment, Eileen is annoyed that Violet for the first time sends money for Aisling's birthday after sending things to Elizabeth for years. The



correspondence allows for miserable conditions in London to be reviewed. Donal's teacher sends home a note, worrying about his asthma. Aisling and Elizabeth go to the shop to fetch Sean Sr., home in the middle of the work day, deepening his feud with Sean Jr., who has gone again to Dublin.



Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 5

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 5 Summary

Sean Sr., goes out drinking regularly after his son enlists and returns, mocking him. Maureen is moved up to first-born and goes off to nursing school in Dublin. Offered separate rooms, Aisling and Elizabeth refuse to be parted. Elizabeth prays that her mother will not come to visit, knowing that she will not fit in. Violet's note admits that she is depressed. After a drinking binge, Dr. Lynch visits the O'Connors to avenge his daughter Berna. Aisling stands up against his verbal abuse of Donal over his asthma and Eileen then laughs at him. Young Sean eventually writes from boot camp. His father seems not to read the letters and ages badly from the added work.

When Donal reaches the Brothers' school, he is picked on for his weakness. As Aisling grows defiant and neglects her schoolwork, Elizabeth does well and begins attending religion classes. Classmates baptize her four times but worry if it takes effect. Her conversion is not made public. She worries that Violet's letters never mention her father. A last letter comes from young Sean nearing Rome, but word them comes via his buddy Gerry's mother: Sean has been killed by a mine. Eileen keeps this secret for four days before telling the family and going on "pilgrimage" to Liverpool to see the Sparkses.

Part 1, 1940-1945, Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 concludes the first part of the novel. Matters come to a head between father and son as Sean Sr. reacts badly to his son's apparent enlistment, turns to the bottle, and disowns his namesake. Maureen moves up to the status of first-born over Eileen's resistance. The rift between parents deepens and each one's reaction, rather stereotyped by gender, is developed in detail. Maureen's move to nursing school in Dublin opens a room for Eileen to offer to Violet, whose disastrous earlier visit to Kilgarret is finally explained. Surprisingly, Violet had been a vapid "flapper" in the 1920s. Elizabeth prays that her mother will reject the invitation rather than coming to find fault with the O'Connor's unruly lifestyle, with which Elizabeth is fully content. The rejection is rather curt, inspiring Eileen to think along her husband's line: Ireland is comfortable because it has not meddled in European politics as England has. She refrains from saying so.

The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor changes the war, bringing in the U.S. and partially shifting the focus to Asia. It also brings Dr. Matthew Lynch back into the story and allows Binky to develop the evils-of-drink theme further. After a drinking binge, Lynch visits the O'Connor's home to pick a fight about separating their daughters. He childishly tells Donal that his asthma is more serious than they say, which brings increasingly fiery Aisling to her brother's defense. That the boy's asthma is not a minor thing is indicated but again played down. Eileen arrives and laughs at the drunkard,



warning what will happen if Sean finds him there. Waving a newspaper, Lynch predicts that two O'Connor sons will die in battle.

This segues nicely into Eileen's concern for the mothers who do not know their sons' fates. She lies to inquiring neighbors, saying that she receives positive letters from young Sean, while considering how to get him back from the clutches of the British military or at least how to correspond with him. She contents herself with considering him a runaway who will write soon. Eventually Sean writes, telling unapologetically about obtaining a copy of his birth certificate. He writes enthusiastically about boot camp and from North Africa and Italy. Gerry Sparks is briefly introduced as Sean's comrade-in-arms and Gerry's mother Amy as Eileen's anxious pen pal. Because Sean has used the Sparks's address on his enlistment papers, Amy gets the telegram about his death and informs Eileen. The final pages of Part 1 show her methodically preparing for a visit to the Sparks in Liverpool, and describes the siblings' various reactions to Sean's death, largely anger and denial.

In Liverpool, Eileen attends mass for Sean at the hospital and on the ship back to Ireland is thought by fellow passengers to be praying. Religion had already come up again in Chapter 5, as Elizabeth begins attending doctrine classes and classmates tell her about original sin and confession. They are shocked that she does not, like them, feel riddle by guilt. It is revealed that they have baptized her repeatedly and continue debating whether English is permissible in lay baptism.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 6

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 6 Summary

Elizabeth remains for the summer term and George grows moodier than ever as the war ends. Violet has fallen in love with Harry Elton, who is George's emotional opposite. What Elizabeth sees when she comes home is worse than the newsreels, but Violet has transformed into a woman of fashion. Although she longs for Ireland, Elizabeth is happy to be home. George worries that she will be as much a stranger as Violet has become. The atmosphere at home is tense. As her mother insists, Elizabeth makes friends with Monica Hart, for whom she had never cared, and the two girls find little in common. Many things remind Elizabeth of the O'Connors and bring on sadness. School smells of disinfectant rather than incense, and there are no prayers. She regrets not being able to practice Catholicism for the present. Like Aisling, Monica is an underachiever in school, while Elizabeth excels in most subjects.

Her father spends time with Elizabeth while Violet visits ex-factory friends. Elizabeth regrets talking bluntly with both parents about personal matters. Aisling writes that Sister Catherine is determined to expel her as a bad influence and Maureen is dating horrible Brandan Daly. Violet develops a bad flu before Christmas and finds being fussed over annoying. Recalling her last Christmas in Ireland, Elizabeth declares that Christmas cannot be spoiled, but her parents nearly succeed. Elizabeth figures out that Violet is about to run off with Elton and sees her father is in denial. Violet announces her intention on the eve of Elizabeth's sixteenth birthday. George says to do whatever she wishes. Elizabeth condemns the divorce but encourages her mother to cheer up and enter her new life properly. Elizabeth will care for her father.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 6 Analysis

Long Chapter 6 addresses Elizabeth's readjustment to English life in a city demolished by bombs and still suffering shortages, and in a household filled with parental tension. Before Elizabeth leaves, Eileen talks about her needing to compartmentalize her Irish and English lives, and the emotional struggle fills the chapter. Violet, who had been a flapper in the 1920s, shows up at the station looking like a fashion plate. Elizabeth soon learns that she spends much of her time with her munitions factory friends, a euphemism for her affair with Harry Elton. This new character contrasts in every respect with boring, depressed George White. Violet's attitude is seen at the station, when she talks about the gulls' eggs that George has procured for Elizabeth's homecoming and the "real cake" — with sugar and butter — that Elton is bringing to the celebration. Only at the end of the chapter, filled with bitter scenes in which the daughter is caught in the middle, does Violet confess her adultery and leave the marriage. Elizabeth is frustrated, trying to deal with two miserable characters.

A Christmas letter from Aisling and Elizabeth's reply deal with the frustrations the two young women are experiencing. Party-loving Aisling is on the verge of being kicked out of convent school. She is likened to Monica Hart, who becomes the foil for Elizabeth, explaining her Irish experience. The religious motif continues as Elizabeth contrasts public school unfavorably with the convent school and laments that she cannot find an attractive Catholic church in which to worship. She notes that her confirmation and first communion had never been arranged. The Catholic bias shows when Violet announces her intentions to divorce. Elizabeth is horrified by the act but urges her mother to make the most of her new life. Violet notes that many in England are making new starts.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 7

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 7 Summary

Letters are exchanged: Elizabeth writes about the dealing with over-eager "Uncle Harry" and her silent father. Aisling advises calling Elton Harry and to accept that half the English population is divorcing. Aisling wonders why Elizabeth spends a week at Monica's to give her parents time to talk rather than coming to Kilgarret. She reports that Donal has survived after receiving extreme unction.

Elizabeth returns from Monica's to find the house filthy; Her father has left a note about consulting a solicitor. Elizabeth wonders why her mother cannot put up with her life like other women and what happens if things go wrong with Elton. Elizabeth realizes that her father loves her no more than he does her mother, and she is tired of worrying about and consoling him. She returns to Monica's after giving the three adults a week to decide how to provide her a decent home. She refuses to deal with a pigsty. They decide that as a gentleman, George will give Violet grounds for divorce, although she is at fault; she will seek no alimony. Violet cleans the kitchen and arranges for someone to clean and launder. They find furnishings for Elizabeth's room. Violet and Harry move north and invite Elizabeth to visit any time, once they have made their fresh start. The parting is civil. Her mother wishes that things could be different. Elizabeth barely makes it upstairs before breaking into silent wailing.

Aisling is surprised to read how coolly Elizabeth takes her parents' arrangements — and at Eileen's laughter over broken marriage vows. Joannie wonders where Violet and Elton make love, opening a discussion of adultery, love, and sex. Aisling believes that intercourse is over-rated. Being at Joannie's is pleasant, particularly while Donal is on the brink of death. Extreme unction brings out odd religious thoughts. Joannie's boyfriend pushes her to skip school for a picnic that turns into sexual activity on her mother's bed, in which her brother Tony catches them. Joannie is sent off to a convent school in France.

When Sister Catherine suggests that Aisling go to a commercial college rather than completing her Leaving Certificate, her father laments that all of his children have turned out badly. Aisling resolves to do well and get a good job. In London, Elizabeth gets her father to learn bridge and tries to get along with her mother through letters. No one has time for Elizabeth as she ceases to be a brilliant scholar except the art master, Mr. Brace, a librarian, Mr. Clarke, and an antique dealer, Mr. Worsky. When she begins art school, Worsky offers her Saturday work, where she meets handsome Johnny Stone, who is instantly attracted. Meanwhile, in Ireland, Maureen and Daly marry and Aisling practices on Ned Barrett for when she someday marries.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 opens with four letters being exchanged between Aisling and Elizabeth, dishing up local gossip at each end but concentrating on the Whites's separation. The dynamics of what is nowadays called the "blending" of families begins to be investigated, concentrating on how Elizabeth is to address her soon-to-be stepfather. Mention of Flash Harry, a movie hero from the mid-fifties onward is in 1945/46 an anachronism. Correspondence over, the story resumes with Elizabeth realizing that her parents are both selfish and that talk of concern for her welfare is hollow. Elizabeth has been what is now called an "enabler" of dysfunctional situations. Finding the house as filthy as a pigsty, she boldly demands that the three adults act responsibly towards her. She realizes that she has come of age when her mother uses the principals' first names in agreeing. Several times Elizabeth has observed that people gets along better with other people's mothers than their own; Mrs. Hart notes that this is true in all relationships: closeness inevitably leads to trouble. Meeting with her mother, father, and Elton, Elizabeth uses silence as a weapon, making them advance the plans that they have developed. She is detached and efficient when she speaks, while wishing that her parents' little smiles would prevail and Elton would simply drive away. Elton makes more effort to win Elizabeth over than her mother. Several characters refer to how other women in unhappy marriages stick it out, but it is also recognized that divorce and starting over is a wide-spread reaction to the deprivations of wartime.

Sex is discussed as Elizabeth, Aisling, and their friends come of age, debating the "double standard" of sexual behavior for males and females. Pregnancy is the chief factor restraining females along with less intense concerns about honor. Aisling tongue-in-cheek talks about soliciting sex from a stranger in order to gain the experience necessary to advise her friend, Joannie, whose boyfriend is hinting at his needs. Although, the couple is caught in the act by her brother and forced to break up and Joannie is sent off to a convent school in France to learn to be a lady. Aisling practices kissing and petting with a boy she has no interest in marrying, gaining experience for when such talents will be needed. She and Joannie have a reputation as sex maniacs. This comes to haunt Aisling in the next chapter. Meanwhile, Maureen marries her exceedingly unromantic beau, providing colorful scenes of preparation and celebration.

Religion is discussed primarily in the context of Donal's health crisis. The priest tells the family before administering extreme unction (last rites) that the sacrament will either heal him or prepare him for a good death. Aisling cannot accept that God would strike down the good and allow the evil to prosper, a classic analysis of theodicy — why evil is allowed by an all-powerful God to exist. Eileen reacts harshly to perceived impiety in her family and in particular in her husband, whose frustrations in life are mounting. At the same time, Eileen is fed up with constant talk about sin. At Maureen's wedding, the priest is drunk and is kept from making a fool of himself only with difficulty. In England, Elizabeth is concerned at her own lost of faith, which had never been brought to sacramental fruition. Aisling's conflicts with Sister Catherine's overbearing personality brings little credit on the church.



The religious theme segues into the artistic. Elizabeth at the convent school is exposed only to religious artwork of inferior quality. In London, the art master takes an interest in her and steers her towards the great masters of Renaissance art. His knowledge of Catholicism is sparse, so she fills him in on those aspects that she understands. Their discussion of Lourdes brings a touch of humor. Elizabeth finds three mentors in the arts: the teacher, a librarian, and an antiques dealer. She enrolls in an arts college and is offered part-time work in the antiques shop, which introduces her to handsome Johnny Stone, whose immediately attraction for Elizabeth suggests a new romantic thread is in the offing. There are also abundant hints that Elizabeth may return to Ireland if conditions permit. Elizabeth is concerned about being missed there.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 8

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 8 Summary

Aisling interviews for a job at Murray's, bringing certificates from her school attesting to her skills, which meet the manager, Mr. Meade's standards, but Tony Murray rejects her application. Aisling applies other places, but no one is hiring. Dejected, she talks Eileen into hiring her to run the office.

Stone drives Elizabeth to Preston to visit Violet and Eliot in conjunction with a purchasing trip for Worsky's store. Elizabeth is dismayed at how little Stone offers people, but he explains that this is the nature of business. People are better off with a little cash than with junk lying around unused. They also stop to see Gerry and Amy Sparks. En route to Violet and Eliot's, they talk about Stone's dysfunctional family. Eliot is proud of the makeover to Elizabeth's room and he presses her to transfer to the local art college. Violet is thinner and more nervous than ever. After the visit, the road to London is washed out, forcing Stone and Elizabeth to spend the night in a hotel. Elizabeth is caught between fearing Stone's intentions and desiring them. In the end, they make love and Elizabeth wonders whether she or Aisling has won — and if being first to experience sex is actually winning.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 opens by showing how Aisling's past keeps her from getting the job that she wants and for which she is qualified. She speaks eagerly of wanting to work on her own and to be appreciated for her own efforts, but mean-spirited Tony Murray has the power simply to dismiss her as a "stupid thick girl" (Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 8, p. 172). By sharp contrast, Worsky is delighted with Elizabeth and teaches her much. Worsky gently warns Elizabeth that Stone is a ladies' man, but Elizabeth is so convinced of her own unattractiveness and is so busy with running the house alongside studying that she sees no danger. Binchy unfairly likens Elizabeth to sped-up Dora in *David Copperfield*; Elizabeth is very good at what she does, much of it detailed in this chapter.

Elizabeth and Aisling are both unable to see themselves as attractive. Eileen argues with Aisling about her perception that she will never have a man, but Elizabeth is on her own, looking into a mirror and lamenting herself, feature-by-feature. Stone and the possibility of romance — or at least of sex — stays in Elizabeth's mind through the end of the chapter where, having made love, she knows that she cannot share the news with Aisling. Binchy treats Stone with great sensitivity, such that the seduction can scarcely be called that. He gets his way, as he evidently always does, but is kind, helping Elizabeth see that she is not unattractive. Previously, the dynamic of male and female coming together is examined sensitively. Elizabeth mixes worrying about having sex for the first time, reviving all of the aspects that she has discussed with Aisling, and at the same time longing for Stone. He falls asleep in a separate bed while she tosses

and turns, but awakens to thunders, which terrorizes Elizabeth, giving him the opportunity to comfort her and suggest that if she is willing, he would like to make love. The event is handled obliquely, Elizabeth merely observing that it is not as painful as she has heard. She cannot bring herself to tell her friend about it.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 9

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 9 Summary

Aisling thanks Elizabeth for sending a picture book for her nineteenth birthday and complains that nothing seems different as she had hoped. She is watching for alternatives to Barrett. Both want the other to write in detail about their lives. Elizabeth writes candidly about Stone respecting her after sex, about no one noticing her loss of virginity except Worsky, and about growing conflicts with her father. She pictures how Eileen would condemn her actions, but decides that at nineteen she is beyond old-fashioned Catholic views. Elizabeth refuses to force Stone into a commitment, which complicates visiting Kilgarret as he suggests. Sex becomes routine for them. When he refuses to attend her father's birthday party and declares that one need not always do what others want, she sees that he will never meet her half-way.

Aisling brings O'Connor's Hardware around to proper business standards and her mother pushes her next to find a man. Aisling's brothers remark that Joannie's brother Tony is obviously keen on her. He asks her to a movie and soon they are necking. When Tony virtually proposes marriage, Aisling wants to gain sophistication first through travel, and the opportunity comes when Elizabeth both begs her to come to London and sends travel money. The plea comes after a fight with her father, on the very day that Elizabeth realizes that she is pregnant.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 again opens with correspondence, which allows Elizabeth and Aisling — and the reader — to catch up on developments in summary form. Each finds that the other includes too little detail. Eileen provides the information that Elizabeth craves: Aisling's business success, Maureen's baby son and difficulties with her in-laws, Donal's growing big despite his weak chest, and Peggy's new boyfriend.

Much of the rest of it is devoted to sex. In passages utterly charming in their naiveté, Elizabeth is confused by contraception and so embarrassed about Stone having ejaculated into the sheets that she tries to launder them before leaving the hotel. Stone promises to get something for next time. Stone dislikes condoms and Elizabeth has heard on the grapevine that female alternatives are worse. From living in Ireland she knows that rhythm method is useless. Elizabeth thinks about laughing with Eileen over the sexual double standard but then realizes that Eileen would be shocked at her behavior. Elizabeth constructs a lecture in her head and then breaks out of the Victorian attitudes that she has held. She maintains that she does not hold Roman Catholic attitudes on sin, immodesty, and impurity, which she has manifested throughout the novel. It is a jarring reversal,



for which Binchy has not prepared the reader. The first indications that Elizabeth and Stone's relationship will not endure come as he refuses to attend her father's birthday party. At this point, Elizabeth realizes that she is pregnant.

In Ireland, Aisling begins dating the much older Tony Murray. Her little brothers tease her about how obvious Tony's interest is in the shop and at Mass. Soon they are petting in his car, with Aisling refusing to remove her bra and Tony claiming to respect her principles. Aisling knows that she has gone further than this with others while practicing, but does not give in. The only thing that she dislikes about Tony is his sexual aggression. She is saved for the moment by being summoned by Elizabeth to London. In their correspondence about their lovers, Elizabeth and Aisling use movie star Clark Gable as their standard for comparison.

A second theme examines Elizabeth's relationship with her miserable father. She returns from her first sexual encounter only to be berated about not having prepared food for and serving his bridge game. She sees why her mother calls him a cold fish. He responds defensively that he has always known that Violet would set Elizabeth against him. Later in the chapter, Elizabeth wants to throw her father a fiftieth-birthday party, but he refuses anything beyond a small dinner party. Father and daughter spar about a woman who is pursuing him. With Irish-style openness, Elizabeth tries to get him to open his emotions but he adamantly refuses. He blocks out early feelings about marriage and fatherhood.

Aisling also contemplates that friendships are for children. She and Elizabeth no longer share and laugh together, just as their mothers, once good friends, are now strangers. This is a crystallization of an underlying theme that has run from the beginning.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 10

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 10 Summary

Aisling hits it off with Elizabeth's father, even making him chuckle at how her own father had celebrated his fiftieth. Aisling privately tells Elizabeth about disliking having to fight off Tony's sexual advances. Later, over sherry and whiskey, they discuss Elizabeth's pregnancy. Aisling is sidetracked into wanting to know what sex is like. Elizabeth does it only because it is a normal part of life for Stone. The doctor who confirms the pregnancy knows that Elizabeth is unmarried and claims that things often work out better than one thinks. Elizabeth wants Stone more than life and has decided to say nothing about the abortion she has arranged. After talking and drinking all night, Aisling agrees against her conscience to keep the secret and not interfere. Aisling finds Stone surprisingly not an ogre.

George is exceptionally jolly at the party, accepting superficial attention from Aisling. He grins like an idiot through all of the silliness that he normally detests. The night goes on and on, Elizabeth wishes that her mother could see her father singing like this. Sunday and Monday pass in a blur before they check into a cheerful guesthouse where Maureen assures them, based on experience, that the abortionist, Mrs. Norris, is very nice. She adds that it is best not to brood or talk about the event; it has been happening to women since Egyptian times. Elizabeth knows that Aisling wants her to change her mind, but Aisling keeps her promise to say nothing. Entering Norris's house is horrible for them both. By Tuesday Elizabeth feels well enough for a movie.

The house needs to be aired when they return, but her father is delighted to have them back. Stone is bored without them and hopes that whatever problem they had dealt with is resolved. He innocently assumes that they are discussing marriage. To have stories to tell in Kilgarret and to re-integrate Elizabeth into life, Aisling insists on sightseeing. Stone is desperate for sex but understands Elizabeth's role as hostess. Aisling renews her questions about sex, claiming that Elizabeth's silence makes it seem more mysterious. She reminds Elizabeth how much Kilgarret resembles a goldfish bowl.

Aisling is distressed by how Elizabeth cooks the household books, but since her father is ungenerous and unobservant, Elizabeth no longer believes that she can make him change. At a goodbye dinner for Aisling, Stone announces that he is leaving on a Mediterranean trip with Nick, who needs a break from his demanding girlfriend, Shirley. Elizabeth declares that she and Shirley can prowl for men, deflating Stone. Aisling and Elizabeth say how much they love one another before Aisling departs.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 10 Analysis

Chapter 10 brings Aisling to London to help Elizabeth through her father's birthday party and her abortion. George responds amazingly well to Aisling's flattery and his



personality contradicts all that Elizabeth has claimed. Elizabeth's nervousness dealing with him seems to be at the root of their problem, as Aisling remarks later, learning by letter that he reverts after having become accustomed to frivolity. Earlier, Aisling jokes about marrying George to become Elizabeth's stepmother. The matter of his divorce, however, would preclude a Catholic wedding, which is unthinkable.

Religion, of course, is a major theme in a chapter that deals with abortion. Aisling remarks that Elizabeth is lucky to live in a place where people do not count the months since one marries. Later she explains that the Kilgarret way is for the couple to marry and make the best of it for life or for the woman go disappear to a home run by nuns, put the baby up for adoption, and return home, claiming to have been to her granny's. The Irish system is meant to discourage women from sexual intercourse while allowing men their freedom, which accords with God's plan. Aisling likens sex to playing bridge or poker: one must know the rules and take only the right risks. Elizabeth declares that Aisling would make a great nun teaching sex education.

Aisling holds firmly to the doctrine that abortion flies in the eyes of God. She is willing to ask her mother to pray for a special intention for Elizabeth, allowing Jesus to hand the problem over to the appropriate saint, but cannot reveal the true purpose. Elizabeth returns to the old discussion of limbo, recalling the teaching that on the last day all of the souls there will attain heaven. She suggests baptizing the fetus inside her before the procedure. Aisling has no reply. When the time comes, Aisling accompanies Elizabeth but claims not to have prayed during the abortion as the practitioner claims. Eileen's success in restoring periods after a feared pregnancy is mirrored in Elizabeth's own failed home-remedy efforts and it is made clear that abortion in England in the 1950s is not a rarity. It is a problem as old as Egyptian civilization. It is worth noting that Elizabeth uses the arguments of the 1960s and later that the decision is up to the woman alone. She does not inform Stone and forbids Aisling to reveal the secret.

Elizabeth also does not satisfy Aisling's curiosity about what sexual intercourse is like, claiming that it is too intimate and personal to describe. Womankind is not divided sharply into those who have had sex and those who have not, she contends. She had figured that Aisling had experienced it, but finds that when taking Aisling on a tour of the art college, Aisling is shocked to see nude models. Elizabeth hopes that Aisling will not, once home, condemn her for the abortion, but is assured that this could never happen. Neither can live without the other. There is a hint of fear that they will never see one another again. The novel is moved forward by Stone announcing that he is starting a vacation in the Mediterranean.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 11

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 11 Summary

Elizabeth finds it harder than ever to write candidly about her life because of the secret that she and Aisling share from Stone. Tony is happy to see Aisling again. His mother has been pushing him to date a Gray. Eileen disapproves of Aisling keeping Tony dangling. Maureen finds Aisling cocky after London, and Joannie gets tired of hearing about Aisling. Sean tires of jokes about a Murray/O'Connor merger.

Violet is hospitalized for schizophrenia and Elton begs Elizabeth and Stone to visit. Elizabeth goes alone and comforts Elton. Violet is pleased to see her but easily agitated. A self-important doctor finds Elizabeth's acceptance of reality refreshing after dealing with Elton. Violet declares that Elton is the only man she has ever wanted, but sends greetings to George. Elizabeth gives her artificial violets, knowing that they will be taken away. At home, her father denies that Violet had been at all disturbed before going to live with Elton in poverty. Insanity is her just desserts. Elizabeth is disgusted by her father.

Elizabeth wonders how many other women have secretly aborted Stone's babies and worries about a *débutante* stealing him away. She pours out her general woes on Worsky, who assures her than any relationship with that woman will fail and is glad that Elizabeth realizes that Stone will never change: he is a take-it-or-leave-it-person.

Elizabeth passes her examination with distinction and is hired as a part-time teacher while taking a training course. Worsky hires her as an advisor/consultant/special buyer. Her father is unimpressed, wanting only that she marry. Stone is unemotional when his mother dies and comments obliquely that he does not want to see Elizabeth pregnant. She enjoys teachers' training class and actual classroom teaching. She visits gloomy Preston twice during the summer and manages to talk Elton out of wallowing in guilt. Stone is upset that Elizabeth visits her mother without telling him. She says that she does not want to upset him.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 has Elizabeth facing Design Finals with no one knowing or caring except Worsky. She finally pours out her frustrations on Worsky, who is teaching her to identify marks on porcelain. He serves as a substitute for the usual letter-writing ploy for providing character updates. Violet continues to withdraw within herself and Elton blames himself. Eventually Elizabeth helps him pull himself together. Stone nearly strays with a *débutante*, but his stubbornness and pride eventually derail them. Elizabeth realizes that he cannot be changed, so she has two distinct paths between which to choose. Graduation brings part-time jobs and teacher training, which annoy her father. He wants only that she and Stone marry. Given his own bad experience with the

institution, this seems odd. Elizabeth's friends are eloping or getting engaged, but she sees little hope.

At the end of the chapter, Stone declares that she is the only woman that he will ever love properly. Clearly, the relationship must soon be resolved, and given all that has been shown of Stone, a good outcome remaining with him seems doubtful. Stone has already in this chapter declared that he does not see pregnancy in his and Elizabeth's future. This is worked into a discussion of Princess Elizabeth (later Queen Elizabeth II) bearing a daughter after a son. Stone declares that children are fine if one is rich enough to afford servants. Elizabeth hides her feelings behind a smile and shake of her head, with no indication of how this plays upon her dread secret.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 12

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 12 Summary

Niamh is prattling about Tony Murray seeing a Gray girl as Aisling reads about Violet's attempt at killing Elton and herself. Aisling rails about Stone not helping Elizabeth cope before deciding that Tony would be supportive in such a situation. Elizabeth congratulates Aisling on her engagement but declines to be a bridesmaid or to invite Stone. Eileen urges Aisling to pay attention to Maureen, who is jealous of the attention that her wedding is receiving. Aisling picks up Elizabeth at the airport and they arrive at tea time. Eileen is amazed to see an elegant young woman in the place of the gawky child she recalls and Elizabeth spoils her entrance by great emotion. The house seems to have shrunk, is as shabby as ever, but completely welcoming. Donal laughs but is so white and thin that it pains Elizabeth, and Uncle Sean has aged more than Eileen. Eileen declares that she has missed Elizabeth as much as her Sean, whose name is never mentioned in the house.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12 opens with a staccato series of letters interspersed with twelve-year-old Niamh's gossip about Tony Murray possibly getting away. Her friends are debating whether passion or practicality are involved. One expects the next letter to Aisling quoted to be the Elizabeth's news about her mother's attempted suicide, but it is congratulations on her upcoming wedding. Elizabeth lets Aisling off the hook about being a bridesmaid: she knows Rome's rules. There is a hint that Aisling has thought up a work-around.

Elizabeth's determination never to confront Stone about anything is becoming obsessive, declining an invitation to Kilgarret without consulting him. His personal note to Aisling, slightly provocative, comes as a surprise. Later it is explained that Elizabeth fears that his good looks and charm would take away from the bridal couple. Maureen is shown overwhelmed by caring for three demanding children and constantly at odds with her mother-in-law. Aisling overcomes sibling rivalry to comfort her. It seems certain that the two sisters' marital situation will be contrasted for the rest of the novel and Maureen's fate will not be happy. Tony seems to be growing more genuinely caring, albeit frustrated that Aisling insists on withholding sex until the wedding.

Elizabeth's homecoming to the O'Connor house is told in great detail and with gentle pathos. Each of the maturing characters is sketched. Monica the kitten, who appeared when Elizabeth first arrived in Ireland, has just become a grandmother, offering a nice symmetry. The O'Connor house seems to have shrunk, much as Elizabeth's home in London had earlier seemed to do after five years away in Ireland. Everyone finds her elegant.



Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 13

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 13 Summary

Kilgarret has not recently seen such an elegant wedding. Aisling is a beautiful, confident bride. Sean looks as though he were walking to execution, leading her down the aisle. Eileen is stylish and happy that Aisling has been sensible about marriage. Tony looks jumpy until the service begins. Elizabeth hopes that Aisling will not be overwhelmed by her new life. Aisling looks forward to the reception being over, her virginity being lost, and her fear of Ethel being turned into Ethel fearing her. Asked about her wedding plans, Elizabeth realizes that she has not thought of Johnny in days.

At the reception, Elizabeth smirks at the hypocrisy of Fr. Riordan comments about humility. After dinner, Shay stumbles through reading telegrams and a terrible speech. Sean limits himself to introducing Fr. Mahony, who lauds the Murrays as central to the life of Kilgarret. Elizabeth is angry that the O'Connors are overlooked. She feels sympathy for drunken Tony reading his written speech. Singing "Danny Boy" seems to her a bit much. As the party winds down, Aisling begs Elizabeth to come back when things are settled.

Part 2, 1945-1954, Chapter 13 Analysis

Part 2 of the novel ends with Aisling and Tony's wedding, a bustling account rich in anecdotes of celebrations within Irish families. Alcohol and grand speech-making is particularly prominent. Aisling looks forward to making her mother-in-law fear her rather than vice versa. Given Aisling's track record as a trouble-maker in school, it seems likely that there are blow-ups ahead. Eileen tries to pacify her daughter and to make friends with the cold Ethel Murray. Giving Ethel her comeuppance is one element of a trio of things to which the new Mrs. Murray looks forward, the others being getting past the reception and the bleeding and screaming said to accompany first intercourse.

Recall that Elizabeth had also feared this but found it a false legend. The sexual theme is carried by the best man's drunken, off-color remarks about what Tony will do to Aisling. Tony, however, is consistently lauded as a good, kind man. The religious theme is underplayed, consisting primarily of Elizabeth's face-off with the old priest about her non-conversion to Catholicism and Eileen whispering to Elizabeth in the pews while pretending to pray. "Danny Boy" is once again sung, helping to tie the first two parts together, with the Irish striving stoically not to break into tears and openly tearful Elizabeth feeling that weddings are already emotional enough not to require that song.

Chapter 13 sets up a number of threads to be developed in Part 3: will Johnny's goodness suffice to overcome the bad influences of his friends? What will become of Maureen's marriage, given that its rockiness is not limited to in-law troubles? What will happen to the young John Murray, once he finishes seminary? What will become of the



youngest O'Connors, particularly sickly but consistently appealing Donal? Of particular interest is what happens to Elizabeth and Johnny, about whom she knows that she should be thinking during the ceremony but does not?



Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 14

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 14 Summary

Aisling books rooms at Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel for one night before flying to Rome. Tony insists on visiting a seedy bar, where he befriends a local drunk for five hours, ignoring Aisling, who can no longer just walk out. Ignoring them, she plans a romantic evening, which fails when Tony falls asleep before Aisling can emerge in her negligee. She writes Elizabeth that everything is super, followed by a series of postcards from Rome and a note on meeting the Pope and sightseeing.

Elizabeth's snapshots please Stefan and Anna but Father wants only to talk about her marrying. Elizabeth declares this unmodern. Meanwhile, Eileen talks Ethel out of meeting the honeymooners at the airport and, flying home, Tony accepts that they are equals in marriage. He is anxious that their sex life improve, but Aisling says that it just takes practice. She worries about Tony resuming his nightlife and Ethel dropping in casually.

At the five-month mark, Elizabeth writes Aisling about Violet under sedation behaving like a toddler. Father resumes being quiet after Elizabeth declares that if she does marry it will not be Johnny. Aisling replies that married life is as good as she had hoped but she misses work and suspects that being weighted down serves the purpose of keeping brides from doing anything foolish. Elizabeth is better off single. She answers Elizabeth's question about pregnancy curtly, bringing another letter, hoping that she has not offended her. Aisling insists again that she simply lacks the ability to write well. Elizabeth teaches adult education art classes while Eileen unsuccessfully seeks to learn what is bothering Aisling. Eileen recalls the frustration of having no one with whom to discuss intimacy early in marriage. When Aisling declines to open up, Eileen worries out loud at Sean.

Stefan suggests an end-of-semester party at his place, telling Elizabeth not to care what Johnny thinks. She is annoyed at having to tiptoe around Johnny. Johnny turns down Harry Elton's request to stay with him while visiting London, so Elizabeth arranges for him to stay with Stefan and Anna. Harry turns out to be the life of the party, while Johnny flirts with two attractive girls and Elizabeth feels drawn to Simon Burke, if only she were emotionally free. Elizabeth receives notes from her father at Brighton Beach, Niamh requesting the purchase of a strapless bra, Simon formalizing dinner plans, the Hospital thanking her for a floral arrangement that they will put in the day room, and Johnny from Wales, where he has run into Grace Miller from Elizabeth's class. Aisling writes from Rome, where John Murray has been ordained. She has hopes that her dream about a fight with Elizabeth is wrong.



Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 14 Analysis

Chapter 14 focuses on Aisling and Elizabeth's frustrations as they near their twenty-fifth birthdays. Aisling's honeymoon is disappointing. She is relieved that she will never face Elizabeth's dilemma as an unwed mother and has no one in whom to confide about her unfulfilling sex life. Her mother tries cautiously to get her to speak, telling of her own frustrations thirty years earlier, when sex was a taboo subject. She dares to offer that it is no sin for the woman to be on top. Eileen's discomfort is obvious, but she owes it to her daughter to help if she can. Eileen never talks like this with pent-up Maureen. Aisling keeps inside whatever is bothering her. The chapter begins with the first night in Dublin, a scene in which Tony is a bore and falls asleep before Aisling appears in her negligee. She has prayed in the bathroom that sex will not hurt. She cannot believe that God would allow that after she saves herself for marriage.

In London, Elizabeth continues cooling on Johnny, who can never be changed. She sees him as typical of a selfish younger generation. She proves successful as a teacher, but her father wants only that she marry. She says bluntly that if she does it will not be with Johnny. She is amused that her father would be so anxious for her to follow into an institution that has proven disastrous for him. Johnny disappoints Elizabeth twice in conjunction with the end-of-class party and in the last flourish of notes from various people to her hints at having met up with one of her female students. Elizabeth wishes she were emotionally free to flirt with one of her male students. Change seems to be in the wind.



Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 15

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 15 Summary

Aisling taking so long to get pregnant is a topic of discussion and solving the problem is on Aisling's mind when they return from Rome. Offending relatives by spending the first night alone in Dunlaoghaire, Aisling confronts Tony's constant drunkenness as a sign of trouble in the relationship. He declines to be nagged or psychoanalyzed about why in fifteen months they have yet to consummate their marriage.

At dinner with Elizabeth, Simon reports that Grace Miller and Johnny are together in Bangor. Elizabeth laughs off the idea that she might have been involved with him. She is working on a Christmas list when the hospital phones to say that Violet is dead of a massive heart attack. Elizabeth takes the train to Preston to console Harry and make funeral arrangements. She asks reliable Henry to tell her friends and leaves a note for Father. After fighting off a lecherous man on the train she agrees with his assessment: she is a "cracked prim and prissy old maid" (Part 3, 1954-1956, Chap. 15, p. 394). Only ten people attend the funeral. Harry doubts that Violet would enjoy the peace about which the chaplain preaches. She had wanted so little but been denied even that. At their last dinner, Harry talks about always expecting Violet to get better. Elizabeth politely agrees and only gradually breaks the news about Johnny, whom Harry likes, and about dating Henry.

Eileen learns of Violet's death when Aisling phones London and talks to her father. Eileen writes a non-nonsense letter than pleases George but pours out her soul to Elizabeth, urging her to remember the good and forget the bad as she has done with Sean. Eileen adds that a visit might do Aisling a world of good, but the timing is impossible. Johnny invites Elizabeth to a skiffle (jazz) club to take her mind off things and after she agrees, Henry phones, asking to cook her a meal and talk. She asks to make it the next evening. At the club, Elizabeth is just part of a crowd, but with Henry she is waited on with concern. Henry is going to his sister Jean's home in Liverpool for Christmas, a time which for Elizabeth alone with her morose father is always difficult. Johnny has the flu and Elizabeth visits to find Francesca nursing him. Elizabeth does not let on that they are long-time lovers. Henry returns early because he misses Elizabeth. She cooks for him on New Year's Eve, assures him that she no longer loves Johnny, already loves him, and accepts his proposal.

Eileen is sick in bed after Christmas when Ethel Murray visits unannounced to ask if Aisling is returning to work full time as she has heard rumored. Eileen rallies to attend New Year's Mass and accompanies Aisling to the bungalow, which is a wreck. Aisling refuses to clean because Tony will only make a mess again when he drops in to change clothes. Eileen demands that Aisling put the place in order fast and sets to work herself. When Tony comes in looking and smelling awful and primed for a fight, Aisling stays calm, offering not to go back to work if Tony agrees to see a specialist. Neither cares for



the other's behavior. Aisling writes Elizabeth to congratulate her and ask for full information about Henry.

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 15 Analysis

Chapter 15 is set over Christmas/New Years, a time that has had special meaning several times in the novel. Eileen is feeling poorly as Violet had before leaving her marriage. Eileen's temper has the advantage of her entering menopause. When Violet dies suddenly, memories churn up in Elizabeth, allowing the reader also to reminisce. George is as always a judgmental cold fish. Elizabeth is in the process of falling out of love with selfish Johnny and into love with compassionate Henry. The way that each treats her after the funeral clarifies everything. By New Year's Eve, Henry is ready to propose and Elizabeth accepts.

Less satisfying is the confrontation between Aisling and Tony on New Year's Day, after Eileen, fresh from her sickbed, helps her daughter clean the house that Aisling has neglected on the grounds that Tony will only mess it up again. He is rarely home, except to pick up fresh clothes. He immediately assumes that Aisling will nag him again — his self-defensive word for any discussion. She uses returning to work, which he declares would humiliate him, to get him to agree to marriage counseling. She is tired of being humiliated by his behavior and of living like a widow. This is Aisling's second attempt to get through to Tony, the first being on their return from Rome. She is willing to accept that she might not know how to satisfy a man and is open to doing whatever is needed. Tony claims to have read books on sexual dysfunction and is unconcerned. Whether there is a sexual component to Tony's nightly carousing with his mates is unclear. That Aisling is determined to solve the problem is abundantly clear.



Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 16

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 16 Summary

Everyone waits for Johnny's reaction to the engagement. Elizabeth's father worries only how he will live, never saying that he will miss her. She tells Henry the full truth and he admits to one affair, with Simon's sister, Barbara. When Elizabeth breaks the news to Johnny, he declares this ridiculous and resents her going behind his back. She resents being considered Johnny's property and reminds him that he has many lovers. Johnny eventually wishes her happiness but warns that she is making a mistake. Simon throws them a party. When Henry invites her to spend the night, she feels safe, happy, and loved.

Aisling writes about working at O'Connor's and never having sex. It will take a star over Kilgarret for her to have a child. Eileen is not well, will not admit it, and will not see a doctor. Sean is overworked and fights with Eamonn. Maureen looks like an old woman. Niamh is conceited. Donal is well and successful at Moriarty's. People blame Aisling for Tony's drinking, as they had Mrs. Lynch. Aisling looks forward to Elizabeth's wedding and hopes that Tony will not come. Elizabeth and Henry find a dream flat and plan a happy life with two children, but Aisling's letter brings her down. A few weeks later comes a cheerful letter about Tony taking the pledge. Elizabeth books a restaurant for the reception rather than holding it in her father's house.

Meanwhile, war is gathering over the Suez Canal. Simon and Henry are concerned, but Elizabeth doubts that war-weary Britons will allow it. The men disbelieve that she had been a mousy little girl, but she insists that Kilgarret and Violet leaving changed her. Tony does not want to go to a wedding where he cannot drink. He misses his nights with Shay and the lads. Eileen hopes that having children will help, as it did her marriage. Aisling confides the lack of sexual intercourse, flooring Eileen.

The bumpy flight to London prompts Tony to ask for a drink and he does not stop drinking after deplaning. People stare as Aisling runs impetuously across the restaurant to hug Henry even before being introduced. Donal cannot wait to hug Elizabeth. They proceed to dinner without waiting for Tony. Aisling expects to have him sober by the ceremony. Tony needs help, staggering in at 1 AM, endures an early-morning clean-up, and is locked in the bathroom as a precaution.

Elizabeth's father looks smart and is relieved not to have to give a speech. She thanks him for raising her and says that the money she has saved has paid for the reception. He tells her that she looks presentable but later admits that she has never given her mother or him trouble. The wedding at the registry is brisk but impressive, and Harry and Johnny help manage the reception. He makes shy Jean and Derek comfortable but George cannot be cheered. Aisling is stunned to find herself laughing with Harry, who is glad that Elizabeth has become such a good friend. He knows that she sometimes resents his stealing Violet away and hopes that she will be happy with Henry. Aisling



hopes that family history will not repeat itself. George say a few simple, touching words. As the guests sing, Aisling apologizes to Elizabeth for Tony's behavior. He mercifully goes to a bar.

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 16 Analysis

Chapter 16 concentrates on Elizabeth and Henry's wedding day. Out of superstition they have yet to sleep together in the wonderful flat that they find and furnish. Elizabeth is firm with Johnny about the break-up and her upcoming marriage. She explains that she has gotten tired of waiting for the unchangeable to change. She refuses to be viewed as property, which is still the prevailing male view of women. Surprisingly, Johnny rallies and becomes a great help at the reception. Father also rallies to give an impromptu speech that is perfectly touching. Elizabeth is careful to show separate kindness to him and her step-father. Harry realizes the occasional lingering resentment about stealing Violet away but also feels Elizabeth's sincere love. That Elizabeth bears Violet's genes is mentioned in a cautionary way, but the joyous spirit of the celebration sweeps that to the side. Whether Elizabeth will be as happy in marriage as she and Aisling had both anticipated is yet to be seen. Aisling is resigned to Tony's resumed drinking. It is hard not to believe that they are headed toward disaster. Aisling finally tells her mother outright that they have never had sex, stunning her. Eileen's failing health promises more sorrow.



Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 17

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 17 Summary

Britain goes to war in Suez on the day the O'Connors fly home and Eileen is upset, remembering young Sean. Aisling tells Ethel that Tony is drinking again and his behavior towards her is worsening. Ethel is in denial. Eileen confides to Aisling that she has gone to Dublin to have two benign cysts removed and insists that all is well. A variety of people mention seeing Tony driving under the influence. Aisling suggests that Ethel cancel Christmas, since Joannie and Fr. John are busy and Tony does whatever he wants. Niamh is depressed over losing her lover Tim. Reading Aisling's calm letter about the prospects of a horrific Christmas leads Elizabeth to warn Henry against turning to drink. She would leave him, something not done in Ireland.

George adjusts to life without Elizabeth, who invites him for three days over Christmas. When Elizabeth sells antiques as Christmas presents, he admits that she is a great businesswoman but predicts that she will soon be a mother. She learns only that day that she is pregnant. Henry is overjoyed. They settle on naming the baby George or Eileen after his mother. Elizabeth rejects Violet. Her father is delighted but embarrassed.

Ethel tries not to be despondent about spending Christmas with Aisling alone. When he stays out past 4 AM, Ethel finds excuses and Aisling elects not to discourage her. Hearing a sermon about love, kindness, and understanding, Aisling prays that Tony will reform for his mother's sake. They hear about Tony getting into a bar fight and Aisling finds him and Shay at the bungalow, nursing Tony's wounds. They lie about having an accident while avoiding the Coghlan boy on his new bicycle. Aisling drives Shay home. He denies that Tony is an alcoholic and refuses to embarrass him by trying to get him to stop. At Ethel's, Aisling handles dinner preparation silently. Recalling happy O'Connor Christmases, she resigns herself to this trio from now on.

Eileen is thankful for her blessings, particularly her medical news, and each of the children's blessings. Tony sleeps after dinner and insists on going home. He refuses to be treated like a prisoner and promptly leaves. Aisling concludes that they have never truly loved one another and she is being punished for marrying him. Aisling passes on the races in Leopardstown to talk with relatives. When she wonders out loud about an annulment, Eileen insists that she keep her solemn promise, despite technicalities. Ethel tells her not to reproach herself for she is a grand wife, but will not admit that Tony would be better off as a bachelor. Maureen declares her a spoiled child for thinking of separation. Aisling does not tell about the absence of sex.

Tony comes home at 1 AM, angry at Aisling for visiting Coghlan's. When Aisling calls him a fool, Tony hits her twice, drawing blood, and then feels remorse. While he sleeps, Aisling packs, writes him a note not to look for her and a long letter to her mother, allowing her to invent any excuse for her disappearance, but preferring she tell the truth:



Aisling refuses to be a battered woman. At the hospital no one believes that Aisling has fallen.

Part 3, 1954-1956, Chapter 17 Analysis

Part 3 ends with Aisling, battered by her drunken husband, leaving Kilgarret for good. Chapter 17 pictures in stark detail what alcoholism does to the drinker and those around him. Tony's mother in particular is in denial of any problem. All assume that Aisling is somehow failing in her wifely duties to bear children and point to enviable things in her life. Over the whole problem hangs the shadow of marriage for better or worse. Aisling knows that she has grounds for an annulment, which means a declaration that no marriage has ever existed, as opposed to a divorce, which simply breaks the legal bond. Aisling reveals to her mother that the marriage has never been consummated, but Eileen insists that the sacrament is eternal. Maureen is as adamant: stick it out and hope that children will change Tony. Aisling cannot bring herself to say what that will not happen.

Tony retrenches into his macho ego, equating any comment with nagging and recruiting his friends to his viewpoint. His rage rises throughout the chapter, ending in two blows to Aisling's face. The instant sobriety of fear and remorse comes over him but he quickly falls asleep. Aisling refuses to be a battered woman but also refuses to ruin Tony's reputation by revealing what he has done. She sets off for Dublin, wistfully. She will not know the outcome of what happens with her mother and siblings, which the chapter also summarizes. Aisling leaves completely reconciled with her mother-in-law, whom she had reviled at the time of her marriage. The two have grown together rather than being forced by common adversity. Eileen is too positive about her health scare for this not to be reversed in Part 4 and mention several times of the clouds of war in the Middle East must demand that character(s) be involved in it. Young Sean's sacrifice in World War II is also several times recalled, pointing to a delayed fulfillment of the drunken old doctor's prediction. It is rather disconcerting to reach the end of the novel with this thread left dangling.



Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 18

Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 18 Summary

Elizabeth has her happiest Christmas ever, despite her father's discomfort at being a guest and approval of Henry bringing work home over the holiday. Harry is delighted and asks to make a cradle. Elizabeth invites him to visit as a nursery consultant. She denies to Henry that Harry is a villain, because everything has worked out well.

Father passes Eileen's odd request to phone her at 10 PM at the shop. In order not to be overheard by the snooping postmistress, Eileen speaks in code about the break-up. Aisling arrives in London badly bruised, tells the story without melodrama, refuses to meet her mother, but agrees to phone. She wishes that things were different. Eileen reports that Tony is sober for twenty-four hours, regrets hitting Aisling, and wants her back. Adamant that she is gone forever, Aisling finds a job and flat. Johnny alone understands that Aisling needs to start afresh. Ethel is hospitalized for high blood pressure and nerves and Tony resumes drinking after three and a half weeks sober. Finally answering a letter from Tony, Aisling advises him to quit drinking for his own health's sake and to attend to the family business. He must not make either of their mothers believe that she will ever return or threatening suicide. He must get on with his happy pre-wedding life. Donal refuses Tony's request to act as intermediary. In general, Kilgarret takes the scandal in stride.

In the spring, Aisling takes charge of the rush to the hospital, where baby Eileen is beautiful and good-tempered. Aisling is surprised that they observe ceremony and tradition of christening the baby Protestant. After ten months' silence, Niamh writes to report that their mother's physical decline fails to get Aisling to come and talk her into seeing a doctor. Niamh follows up to say that their mother is improving and that she and Tim will visit London. Tony is reportedly in England to learn about diversification.

Aisling kicks herself for turning down Johnny first request to make love. She wonders why not how from an expert? Elizabeth assures her that he will ask again. Aisling accepts Johnny's offer of dinner and hint that she spend the night. Aisling apologizes for still being a virgin while undressing. Johnny is gentle, and Aisling wishes that they had met long ago. She recalls Elizabeth feeling the same way with Johnny.

Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 18 Analysis

Chapter 18 advances the principle story lines in parallel: Aisling appears in London, battered, finds work and a flat, determined to remain; helps Elizabeth to the hospital for the birth of her daughter, as she had accompanied her to the abortion, and falls for Johnny, who is utterly sensitive with her. She recalls Elizabeth telling about how natural first sex with him had been and how the stereotypes had been wrong. Johnny is considerably redeemed as a character as he admits that he might like a son (without



marriage). Elizabeth muses how he could already be eight years old, introducing a bit of ambivalence in her attitude. She also muses about how alike Henry and her father are in attitudes towards career. Details of how Violet had discouraged him early in their marriage finally emerge.

Meanwhile, in Kilgarret, the relatives find ways of covering up the split and urge Aisling, often quite vehemently, to reconcile. She is determined not to be a battered woman and at least intuits that she can never be safe, no matter what therapies Tony takes. She is not vindictive, simply cautious and determined. She puts off any discussion of annulment until one of them decides to re-marry and considers that Tony should be a priest; the clergy have well-established systems for supporting their own through alcohol addiction.

Largely through correspondence Aisling learns of her mother's deteriorating health, but agrees that it is probably exaggerated and declines to come home to reason with her about more aggressive treatment. It seems unlikely that Eileen will long survive and Aisling will have to deal with considerable guilt. Kilgarret's penchant for gossip, mentioned throughout the novel, is explored in some detail.

Newborn Eileen's innocence makes Elizabeth and Aisling consider their own lives and they assure her that they have not done anything too bad, but have coped with whatever bad luck has come their way. The long-standing theme of daughters not seeing their mothers' good qualities for what they are is developed as both make excuses for the other's mother's most annoying traits. Elizabeth reiterates that everyone has benefited ultimately from Violet's fleeing her marriage, but Aisling points out that George is a loser. Elizabeth does not for a change argue that he has always been miserable. Taking advantage of another Christmas season, however, Binchy shows George in rather good light, as he makes some effort to be a gracious holiday guest. He frustrates Elizabeth by still maintaining he has no memories of the times surrounding her birth.



Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 19

Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 19 Summary

Henry wants Elizabeth to stop teaching, Aisling worries about Elizabeth's residual feelings for Johnny, Elizabeth is annoyed at being troubled by the thought that Johnny might settle down with Aisling, and Harry reports that Tony is destined never to check out of the hospital. Donal alone in Kilgarret knows about Johnny and is supportive, wanting her to come to his wedding but understands if she cannot. Aisling agrees to visit Greece with Johnny.

On baby Eileen's first birthday, Sean phones to summon Aisling home to see her dying mother. Elizabeth accompanies her, taking the baby against Henry's wishes. Eileen has a matter-of-fact attitude about dying, worries about Sean and Eamonn, regrets not seeing Donal married, but is glad to have time for good-byes. She finally supports an annulment. Elizabeth assures Eileen that Aisling is well set-up in London and, when Eileen intuits that Aisling and Johnny are lovers, asks Elizabeth to send her home when they break up. Eileen is glad that Elizabeth tells the truth.

Eileen dies during a tearful family rosary. Elizabeth thanks her for everything and is surprised by Aisling's order to talk, laugh, and keep people's spirits up. After Eileen's coffin is carried to the church, people come to sympathize all evening and Aisling reminds Sean of how lucky they were for thirty-six years when he sees no reason to go on. Henry meets them after the fifteen-day trip. Aisling is angered that Johnny has gone to Greece without a word. Henry talks bitterly of being passed over for a promotion. Elizabeth sees George's tale repeated.

Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 19 Analysis

Chapter 19 deals primarily with Eileen O'Connor's death, but is woven into the increasingly rocky relationship between Aisling and Johnny. He wants to go to Greece, as he had mentioned earlier, and makes clear that he will do so with or without Aisling. He is unconcerned about the impact on her job. Aisling is ready to go when word comes that her mother is riddled with cancer and near death. Johnny makes no effort to accompany her to Kilgarret, just as he had absented himself from Elizabeth's life in her time of need. He then heads to Greece in her absence. In Kilgarret, Eileen tells Elizabeth that she senses that Aisling has a lover in London and intuits that it is Elizabeth's ex. Elizabeth marvels at her second sense (mind-reading).

Because Elizabeth and the baby accompany Aisling on her sorrowful journey, the differences in how Britons and Irish view death is examined. Elizabeth fears death while Aisling feels that it cheats the victim. That the Irish laugh and keep up one another's spirits through the wake and funeral amazes Elizabeth. The various rites are explained to her: wake, funeral proper, and burial. Aisling for the first time realizes that mourners



need the closure brought by watching the coffin go into the earth and be covered. When Sean gives up on life, Aisling invokes Mam's memory to force him to go on. She is unwilling to return to Ireland to help out, even though her mother says that it is her place. Elizabeth promises Eileen to persuade Aisling if her relationship with Johnny falls through, which seems inevitable.

The youngest O'Connors' fates remain to be tied up and, as the chapter ends, Henry's is also put in question. Like George, he is passed over for a promotion.



Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 20

Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 20 Summary

Johnny returns tanned and unrepentant and talking of someone named Susie on the trip. Aisling rejects him and then regrets it to Elizabeth, who advises apologizing and agreeing to play by his rules — as she had for seven years. Simon visits Elizabeth to express concern about Henry taking too much on himself at work and makes her uncomfortable by flirting. Encouraged by Elizabeth, who knows that Johnny has taken Susie to Majorca, Aisling goes to Kilgarret for a lonely Christmas. Sean tells her not to worry about them but to lead her own life. No one in Kilgarret mentions the Murrays. Back in London, Aisling is re-hired and given a raise. She hears of Henry making a public scene about not getting a raise and cannot convince him that they have enough money. He feels put down.

Ethel by telegram announces Tony's peaceful death. Johnny seems not to care that Aisling is now free. When Simon suddenly announces that he is marrying a pretty Welsh girl named Bethan, Elizabeth and Aisling wonder if she is pregnant. The abortion is mentioned for the first time in ten years. Aisling inherits a one-third share of Murray's Provisions and Vintners and owns the bungalow outright. The thought of being cut out angers Aisling, who threatens to detail what she has suffered at Tony's hands. Opposition fizzles and she is bought out, becoming a wealthy widow. When Aisling asks to marry, Johnny evades her and opens Aisling's eyes to Elizabeth and Henry's constant fighting. Aisling is leaning towards breaking with Johnny when Simon begins making passes. Eventually they end up in bed.

Stefan asks Elizabeth to buy the business when he retires. Johnny is of no account. Elizabeth pleads that they wait until Henry gets his promotion and her father retires and sells his house. Simon is in bed with Aisling when his baby is born. When Johnny visits Aisling's building unannounced, she and Simon hide. Simon agrees that she should not ruin a good thing by marrying Johnny. Elizabeth declares as ludicrous Johnny's fears that Simon is involved with Aisling, who curses when Elizabeth reports this. Elizabeth is reduced to tears when Harry arrives for a visit. Simon begs Henry not to make a scene leaving the office. They drink until they are cut off, Henry tearfully weighing his good points with what has befallen him. He declares marrying artsy, preoccupied Elizabeth a mistake. Leaving Simon, Henry confronts Aisling as a whore. She innocently lets drop Elizabeth's abortion, who phones Johnny about being a child-killer.

Hearing Henry out of control taking Eileen away from her fallen mother, Harry blocks the door. As Elizabeth throws herself into battle, Henry falls down the marble stairs. Elizabeth comforts the baby, claiming that Daddy will be home soon and all will be well. When an ambulance collects Henry's corpse, Elizabeth seems amazed at the news. Aisling expects the inquest to be torture, but it proves routine. Johnny thinks about the odds of Elizabeth and Aisling's husbands both drinking themselves to death. After an agonizing wait, the coroner takes evidence. Harry lies about hearing nothing until the



porter brings the fatal news, and Simon claims not to have known where Henry heads after parting. The finding is accidental death.

On a walk in the park, Aisling suggests that Elizabeth get on with making a life for Eileen, recalling everything good and putting aside all bad — as all people must. When Aisling laments them both being widows with dashed dreams, Elizabeth reminds her that Mam would not like such talk and advises her to think about all the good she did for Henry that no one else would have — and the way that Aisling could not for Tony. They talk about rescuing one another over the years and of the tensions of the post-war years — and rejoice that they have never fought. They have been stronger-willed than the nuns had predicted and must remain so as they start over, together.

Part 4, 1956-1960, Chapter 20 Analysis

The final chapter ties up many loose ends. Two deaths provide focuses: Eileen O'Connor's and Henry Mason. Eileen's daughters, still as close as Siamese twins, take baby Eileen over for the final days. Eileen is glad to have time for good-byes, mentioning the horror of sudden death like her son. She does not fear death and looks forward to seeing Sean and Violet in heaven. The order of Irish death ceremonies is described in detail. Elizabeth, who is terrified by death, learns that Irish funerals are different from English, primarily in being heartbreaking but not harrowing.

When they return to London, Aisling takes offense at Johnny's mocking of Irish wakes. Their rocky affair is drawing to a close, and Elizabeth has promised Eileen on her death bed to try to convince Aisling to return to Kilgarret when it falls apart. Aisling stands up to Johnny when he returns from Greece and he goes off with another woman to punish her. His ploy this time does not work. Even after Aisling fights to get her fair share of Tony's inheritance Johnny fails to respond to her desire to marry.

Johnny is the key to the first mention of Elizabeth's abortion in ten years, as Elizabeth warns that Johnny does not marry his pregnant ladies. It is said in the context of joking about Simon's sudden plan to marry. Simon's wife is, in fact, pregnant, and he and Aisling casually begin an affair. He is with Aisling when the baby is born and is nearly caught by Johnny, who asks Elizabeth about a possible tryst. The writing grows staccato as Binchy jumps from thread to thread, often devoting a short paragraph or even single sentence to each character before moving on.

The dread secret leaks out innocently as Aisling assumes that Elizabeth has included it in the course of filling one another in on their pasts while courting. They had talked about their lovers, but this detail is omitted. Passed over again for promotion, Henry gets violently drunk and goes to Aisling's to confront her as a whore. When she mentions Elizabeth's abortion, it sets off a chain of calls and confrontations among the principal characters. The final confrontation results in Henry's death, which is ruled accidental. The coroner neglects to interview all of the characters, who could not have corroborated one another's stories. Only Harry lies outright. The inquest hearkens back

to the scenario preceding Part 1, in which Aisling and Elizabeth agree that they must go forward together for the baby's sake.



Characters

Elizabeth White Mason

A timid, unsure ten-year-old Londoner, awkward like her father, Elizabeth is the novel's primary heroine and focus. She is introduced with short, fair hair pulled back off her face, which is red and white at the same time. Her mother Violet asks her childhood friend, Eileen O'Connor of Kilgaret, Ireland, to take Elizabeth for the duration of the German bombing of London. Elizabeth leaves, wondering why her parents are angry all the time, and anxious about descriptions of the town twenty years earlier when Violet had visited. Elizabeth sees from the start that things are done far differently from in London, but quickly adapts and enjoys life among the O'Connors. Elizabeth is excused from catechism classes in the Roman Catholic convent school.

Under the supervision of Aisling O'Connor, whose birthday is within days of her own, Elizabeth grows in confidence, stops apologizing for everything in the English style, but has trouble sharing secrets and memories of England. The O'Connors laugh when Elizabeth eventually begins speaking with Irish openness. Elizabeth hopes that her parents will not visit Kilgarret soon, for fear that Mother would remove her from the dirty household. By her first Christmas Elizabeth is stronger, healthier, and louder, writes home weekly, and voluntarily attends Mass. She amazes Eileen (and the nuns) by her consideration, making Eileen all the more rue her uncouth pack. Elizabeth's friends baptize her Roman Catholic on 2 Feb. 1941, the Feast of the Purification, in the Junior Girls' cloakroom, with Aisling and Joannie Murray presiding. They then wonder about arranging her first confession and communion. Her conversion is not made public.

After finishing summer session she goes home after VE Day. Elizabeth is struck by her mother's beautiful appearance but is saddened not to have Aisling with whom to sleep and talk. Elizabeth is happy to be back but cool towards striking up a friendship with Monica Hart, her one-time nemesis. She finds the secular atmosphere of her London public school strange and finds explaining the prayer life to Monica difficult. Elizabeth feels guilty about having failed to find an attractive Roman Catholic church to attend but considers it a "temporary lapse." Elizabeth claims to have worked hard on her studies in Ireland in order not to let Eileen down as Aisling does. She considers that maybe she and Aisling had gotten the wrong mothers.

Elizabeth soon finds herself caught between her parents as her mother spends time with Harry Elton and fellow workers in war industries. Both parents are uncomfortable being questioned about their relationship by their daughter. When Violet announces the break-up, Elizabeth is indignant but soon realizes that her father loves her no more than he does her mother. She is tired of worrying about him and consoling him. She writes to all three that they must decide on how to provide her a decent place to live and complete her studies. She will cook but not deal with a pigsty. Arrangements are made to her satisfaction. She lives with her father, cooks for him, and enrolls them in bridge classes.



Letters from Ireland grow rarer, Monica tires of her, and Elizabeth's grades slip. Only the art master, Mr. Brace, takes an interest in her life plans. She often visits the library to look at exhibitions, where Mr. Clarke helps her find art books and apply to the local art college. Her third artistic mentor is Stefan Worsky, proprietor of the antique shop. There, Elizabeth meets handsome Johnny Stone, Worsky's assistant, who takes an instant liking to her. Worsky warns her that Johnny is a ladies' man, but Elizabeth is too busy for romance, studying and running her father's household on a quarter of what it should take—claiming the surplus for herself. She accompanies Johnny on a buying trip to Preston, during which his business ethics shock her and a washed-out road puts them up in a double room and gentle sex. Elizabeth describes their relationship as comfortable but not a love story.

Elizabeth ignores signs of pregnancy until they are unmistakable. She pays for Aisling to visit and support her through an abortion, telling Stone nothing about it or her pregnancy. Elizabeth passes her examination with distinction and is hired as a part-time teacher while taking a training course. Worsky hires her as an advisor/consultant/special buyer. In her adult education course she meets barristers (lawyers) Simon Burke and Henry Mason and takes to Henry. She wishes that she were not chained emotionally to Johnny. They go out frequently but never have sex until they decide to marry. After a public registry wedding they move into a new flat to live a perfect life. Henry soon proves jealous of Elizabeth's earnings and obsessed with his own lack of progress in the law profession. He opposes Elizabeth's going back to work after the birth of baby Eileen, named for Henry's mother. Aisling moves to London when her marriage falls apart and the two again become close friends. Elizabeth is concerned when Aisling becomes Johnny's lover. When Aisling innocently leaks the abortion secret to drunken Henry, he confronts Elizabeth and demands to take the baby away. She pushes him and he stumbles down the stairs to his death. An inquest determines the death accidental. Elizabeth and Aisling, a rich widow, pledge to start over together.

Mary Aisling O'Connor (Murray)

Sean and Eileen O'Connor's second daughter, Aisling (pronounced like Ashleen) is the novel's secondary heroine beside her foster sister and best friend, Elizabeth White. She is ten years old as the novel opens, shown being slapped for inattention and claiming to hate her mother, Eileen. When the O'Connors take in ten-year-old Elizabeth White during the bombing of London, Aisling fears that she will find the family rude. She has long, curly, carrot-colored hair like a furze bush that gets a Saturday night assault by her mother, which she hates. Aisling is, as her mother fears, tongue-tied, but makes a sign that pleases the newcomer: "AISLING AND Elizabeth. PLEASE KNOCK. NO ADMITTANCE" (Part 1, 1940-1945, Chap. 2, p. 40). Aisling takes full advantage of being responsible for Elizabeth, both at home and at school getting out of things by claiming to have to help her. With schoolmate Joannie Murray, Aisling presides at Elizabeth's lay baptism.

Aisling first shows her spunk standing up to drunken Dr. Lynch, warning older boys that if they harm her sickly brother Donal, they will be be tried for murder. She has a taste for



power. She turns defiant in school, falling behind Elizabeth in her grades and becoming the special target of Sister Catherine, who eventually suggests that she give up academics and attend a business college. When she learns of her brother's combat death in Italy, Aisling goes into denial and cries on Elizabeth's shoulder. At the end of the war, Aisling wants Elizabeth to stay permanently, but her mother calls this selfish and infantile. Once Elizabeth returns to London, she and Aisling frustrate one another by writing rarely and too generally.

After a year's study, earning certificates in hand for typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping, Aisling applies for a job at Murray's Provisions and Vintners, but Tony Murray, who considers her and his sister Joannie sex maniacs, summarily rejects her application. She applies elsewhere in town, but no one is hiring. Dejected, she suggests succeeding her mother at O'Connor's Hardware. She insists on being called Miss O'Connor at work as she redoes the bookkeeping professionally. Turning nineteen, Aisling is bored, having practiced necking with Nedd Barrett and finding no one new and exciting arrive in town.

Aisling fails to recognize that Tony Murray is pining for her in the store and at Mass until her brothers point it out. She describes Tony to Elizabeth as very old, university trained but without earning a diploma, and inexplicably keen on her. She dislikes fighting off his sexual advances and refuses to be hurried. A letter comes just in time from Elizabeth, begging Aisling to come to England and enclosing travel money. She gets on well with Elizabeth's father and handles him well. Elizabeth sees her as a colored picture when everything else is in black-and-white. Against her Catholic conscience, Aisling supports Elizabeth through an abortion.

Aisling agrees to marry Tony and at her wedding she is hardly a demure bride, knowing how good she looks with elaborate bronze curls and a perfect satin dress. Tony drinks himself into a stupor on the first night in Dublin and throughout their honeymoon in Rome. She confronts him on their first night back in Ireland, suggesting that they get couples counseling. They have yet to consummate their marriage. This continues for years as Tony's drinking worsens and he is rarely home. When she confronts him again at Christmas, he strikes her and she heads to London. After recuperating from her bruises, she rents a flat on Manchester St. and works as a medical receptionist on Harley St. She reverts to her maiden name. Everyone argues that she must return and make the best of it, but Aisling refuses to be a battered woman. Eventually, Tony dies and Aisling fights for her rightful inheritance, being able to live as a rich widow. By this time she is involved with Elizabeth's ex-lover Johnny Stone. He refuses to commit to her and takes occasional lovers. When Elizabeth is also widowed, she and Aisling plan to rebuild their lives together.

Eileen O'Connor

The mother of a large, unruly brood of children, Eileen at age forty is a handsome woman with brown-red hair pulled up on the sides with combs. She is a strong partner to husband Sean at home and at work in the office of O'Connor's Hardware Store.



When Violet White asks her childhood friend to take in her ten-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, during the bombing of London, Eileen does not hesitate, although she resents the limited contact over the years. She insists that Sean stop running down England once Elizabeth arrives and sees Elizabeth as an excuse for improving the family's table manners. She worries how spoiled Elizabeth will react to their noisy family, but hopes that this will bring her and Violet closer together again.

Unable to leave work, Eileen sends seventeen-year-old Sean Jr., to fetch Elizabeth and encourages the children to be welcoming. She sees timid Elizabeth through the trauma of wet knickers and is drawn to the odd little girl, so gracious and less rough than her own brood. Fearing that she may be pregnant again, Eileen takes very hot baths and gin to restore her period, and sees no reason to mention this in confession. In weekly letters Eileen urges Violet to come to Kilgarret, while secretly praying that she will not come.

Sean Jr., disappears, worrying Eileen for ten months until he writes from boot camp in Liverpool. In all, four letters come, which she answers lightly and leaves the originals where her husband can read then, but is unaware if he does. Eileen learns from Amy Sparks that Sean Jr., is killed instantly by a land mine in Italy. She tells no one for four days, going about her work mechanically, forbidding herself to cry. Husband and wife do not touch as she delivers the news and listens to his ranting and sobbing. He refuses her offer to go on a sort of pilgrimage to Liverpool. She visits the Sparks and hears Mass said for Sean. When the time comes for Elizabeth to return to London, she carries one of Eileen's mottos, "Self-pity brings tears to the eyes quicker than anything else" (Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 7, p. 162).

Eileen often tells Aisling that she wishes she were more like Elizabeth. When Elizabeth returns for Aisling's wedding, Eileen declares that she had been as much a part of the family as any of the children and she has missed her as much as her Sean, whose name is never spoken aloud in the house. Eileen is attractive at the wedding, even wearing rouge but refusing to be dressed up like a Christmas tree. She is happy that, having waited a long time for a good man, Aisling will be well looked after. She is mainly happy for them. Eileen, whose own wedding had been drab despite her family's pretensions of gentility, does not let the Murrays dictate this wedding as she had her daughter Maureen's. When Aisling's marriage falls apart, Eileen insists that she stick it out like a good Catholic, even when she is amazed to hear that the marriage has never been consummated.

Only on her deathbed does Eileen accept that Aisling get an annulment. Eileen covers up early signs of cancer, stealing off to Dublin for a biopsy that she claims goes well. When she finally undergoes surgery, the cancer is so advanced that no treatment is possible. Sean summons Aisling home when Eileen has under two weeks to live. She is grateful to have time for goodbyes and looks forward to seeing Sean Jr., and Violet again. She urges Aisling to return to Kilgarret but also orders Sean not to beg her to come. Everyone talks of what a grand woman Eileen is at her wake and funeral.



Johnny Stone

A true narcissist and womanizer with a fear of commitment to any woman, Johnny is old Stefan Worsky's handsome, sharp-faced, black-haired twenty-one-year-old assistant (and later partner) in the antique shop in London, England. He becomes the lover, successively of Elizabeth White and her Irish best friend, Aisling O'Connor. On the side he has many casual lovers whom he drops if they get possessive. He is a real Prince Charming, which helps with acquisition work, but fatherly Stefan warns Elizabeth about him.

Johnny is instantly attracted to Elizabeth when Wosky hires her for Saturday-morning work while she is in art college. Elizabeth regrets that Stone spends much of his time hunting for acquisitions. Johnny flirts with Elizabeth, who never responds coquettishly. When Johnny invites Elizabeth along on a buying trip to Preston, Stefan is pleased — and certain that Elizabeth can handle this Romeo. They collect forty pictures from two houses for the frames. In private, Aisling deplores the tiny sum they pay the woman, but Johnny assures her that the woman is delighted and will use the money well. Johnny also reminds her of the shop's overhead and remarks that he would like her to be his young lady. Johnny takes Elizabeth to visit the Sparks and brightens up paraplegic clockmaker Gerry Sparks by suggesting to use his talents whenever they need fine craftsmanship.

When Elizabeth asks him to stay for dinner with her mother and her second husband, Johnny reveals that his father runs away from wives every ten years and his mother is the second of four. He and his father do not want to see one another. Johnny dislikes dramas and tears, although he realizes that this makes him appear cold, selfish, or flippant. Johnny hits it off with Harry Elton, freeing mother and daughter to talk privately.

A washed-out road on the way home forces Johnny and Elizabeth into a hotel, where he books a double room. Stone allays Elizabeth's fears by saying that there are two beds and promises to avert his eyes while she changes. When a thunder storm awakens then, Johnny comforts Elizabeth, while making clear that he would enjoy sex if she is willing. He is so gentle that she feels only discomfort rather than the pain that she has heard is common for virgins. He tells her that she is lovely. They become regular lovers, rarely at the flat that he shares with two roommates and often in her little bed daytimes while Father is at work. Johnny suggests a summer buying trip to Ireland coordinated with a visit to the O'Connors, but Elizabeth is hesitant about going back as a hustler and without an "understanding" about marriage.

Elizabeth describes their relationship to her friend Aisling O'Connor as comfortable but not a love story. She thinks he looks like a thin Clark Gable minus the mustache. Stone adamantly refuses to butt in on George's fiftieth birthday dinner and admits that he rarely does things that he does not want to. Elizabeth knows from an ex-girlfriend's experience that Johnny shuts down if pushed. She conceals her hurt at knowing that he will never meet her halfway on anything. She passes his test by not making a scene.



Johnny knows nothing about Elizabeth's pregnancy or abortion. For a while he is pursued by a *débutante*, but that ends quietly. When Johnny's mother dies he wants no one to go to the funeral with him. He and his brothers think that her death before she gets too old is for the best. Elizabeth does not pass on to Johnny the invitation to Aisling's wedding in Ireland, preferring to go alone, lest he steal the show with his looks and charm. He is annoyed. Grace Miller, one of Elizabeth's students, and Johnny run away together to Bangor. Elizabeth laughs off the idea that she might have been involved with him. When Elizabeth announces her engagement to lawyer Henry Mason, Johnny initially resists the idea as ridiculous, since they are a couple, but eventually becomes supportive.

Aisling moves to London after her husband abuses her and Johnny helps her get settled in a flat. They begin dating and become lovers. Soon, Johnny is seeing women on the side and refusing to accompany her to Ireland for her mother's funeral. Instead, he goes to Greece, where he becomes involved with another British tourist. The affair continues and Aisling gives him an ultimatum about marriage. Johnny laughs it off as tinkering with a good thing. As Elizabeth's marriage falls apart, Johnny learns of the abortion ten years earlier but stands by both women during the ordeal of Henry's death and the coroner's inquest into the circumstances. The novel ends with him not knowing where he stands with Aisling.

Ned Barrett

Aisling O'Connor's casual boyfriend with whom she goes for walks and movies and engages in a bit of messing around to gain experience for whomever she eventually marry.

Mr. Brace

The art master at Weston High School in London, Brace is the only teacher to encourage Elizabeth White. The girls call him "Beer-Belly-Brace" (Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 7, p. 161) behind his back and complain of his breath, but Elizabeth likes him and he explains things as though he and Elizabeth were on the same level. Brace's first wife had been Roman Catholic but had explained nothing about it to him, and Elizabeth has never heard of perspective. They enjoy learning from the other. Brace is the first person to show interest in her plans, steering her towards teaching, which she had been sure would not be her future.

Mary Brady

The most reliable and honest girl in the convent school in Kilgarret, Ireland, Mary is selected by Sister Catherine to accompany Joannie Murray home during a sickness that she feigns in order to go on a picnic with her boyfriend. Sister Catherine had avoided sending Aisling O'Connor as planned. Mary has made known that she intends to become a nun the day that she leaves school.



Simon Burke and Henry Mason

Barristers (lawyers) who enthusiastically attend Elizabeth White's adult education art class, Simon and Henry are not Nancy boys (homosexuals) as Henry Elton claims. They simply do not prowl for women constantly as the notorious Johnny Stone does. Simon is big and flamboyant, a troubadour or cowboy, while Henry is tall and pale with fair hair falling into his eyes. Elizabeth is particularly fond of Henry's self-mockery. He wants to study music appreciation and literature as well as art. To thank her for the marvelous course, they invite Elizabeth to dinner, with no ulterior motives. Elizabeth wishes that she were not chained emotionally to Johnny.

Henry's father dies before being inducted during World War II and his mother shortly after VE Day. Thus, Henry has no nostalgia for that period. His sister Jean is a nurse who helps him through law school. She is married to Derek and has a son, Henry. Henry goes to their home in Liverpool for Christmas, but returns before New Year's, missing Elizabeth. They go out frequently but never have sex. Henry seems worried about comparison with playboy Johnny, but Elizabeth declares that she is over Johnny and in love with him. They finally make love and rent and decorate a dream flat.

Henry displays many of the traits of Elizabeth's father: compulsive worrying about being left behind in his career. His paranoia deepens as he is passed over for a major promotion. After the birth of baby Eileen, named for Henry's mother, Henry does not want Elizabeth to return to work, although she out-earns him. She insists on continuing her teaching and work in the antique store and tensions rise. Soon they are fighting about anything that presents itself. Simon warns Elizabeth of ominous behavior at work, but she does not want to hear about it. Simon, married to a beautiful Welsh woman, begins an affair with Aisling, who has also broken up with Johnny, and is with her when his child is born. He intends to keep seeing Aisling while his wife is busy with the newborn.

When Henry is passed over again, Simon guides him out of the building without a scene and listens to his weeping in a bar until they are cut off. Henry sees himself as a victim and regrets marrying self-centered Elizabeth. He confronts Aisling O'Connor as a whore and, before being thrown out, learns that Elizabeth ten years earlier underwent an abortion. Henry informs the father, Johnny, and then goes home to rescue the baby from her unworthy mother. Defending herself, Elizabeth pushes Henry, he loses his footing, and plunges down the stairs, fracturing his skull. The coroner rules the death accidental under the influence of alcohol.

Sister Catherine

The sarcastic head of the convent school in Kilgarret, Ireland, Sister Catherine is determined to expel Aisling O'Connor for failing to work up to her potential and for serving as a bad influence on other girls. When Sister Catherine recommends that the O'Connors send Aisling to commercial school rather than completing her last year and receiving her Leaving Certificate, Aisling decides to apply herself to learning secretarial



skills and obtain a good job as a way of thumbing her nose at the nun. By contrast, Sister Catherine has a soft spot in her heart for Elizabeth White, the non-Catholic English refugee who adapts so well to the regime and works so hard at her studies, overcoming the disadvantage of her non-Irish-Catholic preparation.

Mr. Clarke

A kindly albino librarian with bad eyesight, Mr. Clarke in London helps Elizabeth White find art books and apply to the local art college. When she objects that she does not know anything about art, Clarke tells her that this is the purpose of studying. Clarke encourages her to ask the owner of Worsky's antique shop about the screens that she admires in the window. He assures her that people enjoy chatting about beautiful things.

The Coghlan

Dinny Coghlan is an employee of Murray's Provisions and Vintners, which prevents him pressing charges when drunken Tony Murray hits his son Lionel on his new bike, bruising him and cracking two ribs.

Brendan Daly

A stupid, buck-toothed young man who meets Maureen O'Connor at a dance and begins dating her, Brendan lives in a dilapidated barn and works in a food firm in Dublin. Maureen wants to marry but doubts if Brendan will propose. Aisling O'Connor cannot imagine being stuck with him forever. Their engagement is announced in the spring and a September wedding is planned. People joke about Daly proposing by asking if Maureen would like to be buried with his people. Together they have four children. Brendan does nothing to protect Maureen from his domineering family.

Maureen O'Connor Daly

Sean and Eileen O'Connor's eldest daughter, sixteen years old as the novel opens, Maureen does not look forward to having another silly ten-year-old come to live with them. Maureen's best friend is Berna Lynch. On Christmas Day 1940, it is discovered that the two shoplift expensive gifts. Sean beats Maureen violently and demands that every item be returned personally as soon as businesses open. Maureen endures this humiliation (most of the merchants blame Berna) and is put under a strict curfew after school. Contact between the girls is prohibited by her father.

Maureen is accepted in the Dublin hospital for nurses' training and is taken there by her family, is cautioned to behave nicely, and is given eleven stamped envelopes to keep her writing weekly until Christmas vacation. When Maureen learns of her brother Sean's combat death in Italy she cries like a baby, thinking about all the things that he will never do. Maureen begins dating Brendan Daly, whom she meets at a dance. Their



engagement is long even by Kilgarret standards, but a wedding is finally planned. Maureen is obsessed with details of clothing. Her mother hopes that she will settle down after marriage.

The Dalys are very possessive when Maureen gives birth to a baby boy, Brendan Og, followed by twins, Patrick and Peggy, and a fourth child. Motherhood turns Maureen bitter and she resents the attention that Aisling receives as her wedding nears. Aisling tries to encourage her older sister, visiting and helping her garden, which the Dalys mock. When Aisling seeks Maureen's advice as her marriage falls apart, Maureen insists that she stick it out. On her deathbed Eileen believes that Maureen is finally taking joy in her children and will be alright.

Mrs. Ellis

To Elizabeth White's view, Mrs. Ellis is a dreadful woman, a widow, who is pursuing her fifty-year-old father, George, who does not reciprocate her feelings. They meet in his bridge circle, from which he cannot get her to resign. George insists to Elizabeth that one must do things in life that one does not wish — all of the time.

Harry Elton

Violet White's friend during World War II, Harry is marvelous at finding silly little things to pamper her in exchange for seeing her smile. He encourages her after VE Day to pamper herself. He is ever cheery, taking everything that Violet says as important and seems incapable of grunting like her depressed husband George. Harry urges Violet to come clean about their affair. His wife has long ago remarried and they have no children. He would be happy to have Elizabeth live with them in Preston, if she wishes, but Violet prefers that they have alone time together for a while.

When they learn two years later that Elizabeth will visit, Harry spends two weeks getting everything just right for her and beams with pride when she sees the ghastly results. Harry still worries about Elizabeth living with as odd and cold a person as her father and suggests that she transfer to the art college in Preston. She will be free to do as she likes, living with them. After Aisling's visit, Violet is hospitalized for schizophrenia, for which Harry blames himself, although he claims always to have been good to her. Business has not been good and there have been economic troubles. After Violet stabs Harry and tries to kill herself, she is permanently sedated. Harry visits London, where he hits it off with Elizabeth's friends, and moves in with the Hardcastles.

To the end Harry hopes that Violet will recover, but she dies. Harry and Elizabeth grow unexpected close and he is included in all family celebrations, including Elizabeth's marriage to Henry Mason. When Henry grows as depressed over his work as George and gets violently drunk, Henry steps in to defend Elizabeth. He lies to the coroner to keep her pushing him to his death from becoming known.



Shay Ferguson

Tony Murray's best friend, Shay is older than Tony and a confirmed bachelor. He lives with his father, aunt, and uncle in a large, untidy house, and with his brothers sells agricultural equipment. Shay winks at Elizabeth White in church before the wedding, but throughout the stormy marriage backs Tony's right to enjoy himself when confronted by Aisling. She finally warns that Shay is helping Tony drink himself to death after he had dried out for eight months. They are not truly friends if they cannot do things other than drink. Shay denies that Tony is an alcoholic and will not make him appear foolish before the other lads. He is sure that Tony will cut back after New Year.

Monica Hart Furlong

Elizabeth White's school mate in London, England, Monica had pinched her and been bossy before Elizabeth's five-year sojourn in Kilgarret, Ireland, so Elizabeth is cool towards being friends with her when she returns home. Monica proves polite and silent and is interested only in glamorous movie stars and plentiful Irish food and cannot comprehend the prayer life in the convent school. She is annoyed at how well Elizabeth does in school and resents her mother's pushing her to improve, considering that she already knows more than her. She resents Elizabeth's advice to be seen with textbooks more often than movie magazines. After the Whites separate, Elizabeth spends a week at Monica's, to let them to talk in private. Monica involves Elizabeth in making excuses for her to meet her awful boyfriend. She is eventually engaged to Andrew Furlong, a Scotsman, and elopes to Gretna Green, because the two mothers are ridiculous about planning.

David Gray

The son of a Rockefeller-rich family, Gray is good-looking but Protestant who dates Joannie Murray. He claims to have had sex once in South Gloucestershire, while on holidays, and recommends it as perfect pleasure. In the fall, having nothing to do, Gray presses Joannie to skip school for picnics in the mountains or at the sea and she risks it. Aisling O'Connor reluctantly covers for her. Everyone is supposed to be away from the Murray home on the day that Joannie fakes illness and goes home; Tony Murray catches them in their mother's bedroom, bans David from the house, and suggests that his parents will not react well if they learn of the circumstances.

Miss James

Elizabeth White's teacher in London, Miss James refuses to relocate her entire class to a rural setting safe from German bombs and tells the children that there is nothing about which to worry. Sent to Kilgarret, Ireland, Elizabeth misses Miss James the most. She is "more a real person" than the holy sisters in the convent school. Miss James would never comment on a pupil's appearance as Sister Mary does. During the war, Miss



James suffers "war nerves" and is hospitalized, where she begins to smoke and does not want to talk to Violet White, her one-time nemesis, when she visits.

The Lynches

Dr. Matthew Lynch is a doctor in Kilgarret, Ireland, where his daughter, Berna, is Maureen O'Connor's best friend. He periodically goes into a nursing home in Dublin for treatment of his alcoholism, which is a well-known secret that keeps Berna from enjoying a high social standing. The two friends are bored in the convent school and find the other girls "silly and parochial." Berna wants to go to secretarial college in Dublin. Their shoplifting of expensive Christmas gifts is discovered and the victims blame Berna. When Maureen's father forbids her to see Berna, Berna goes on to make new friends and does not reply to written news of Maureen's hospital appointment.

Dr. Lynch goes on a drinking binge in Cork the day the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbor (unrelated to the event) and is brought home rather roughly by the Garda. He is abusive and afterwards badly needs a drink. Resenting Sean's separating their daughters, Lynch goes to the O'Connor home and starts a row with Aisling over treatment of Donal's asthma. The girl stands up to him, saying that he is no proper doctor, which is why the family sees Dr. MacMahon. Eileen arrives and gently asks him to go home, but he continues lashing out. She laughs at how drunks weave fairy tales and warns that Sean will kick him out. Deflated and angry at the laughter, Lynch leaves to have a few drinks before having to face his wife. Lynch sits, waving a newspaper, predicting that the O'Connors will lose two sons in the war. Years later, at Aisling's wedding reception, Mrs. Lynch talks about her husband's dreadful death five years before. Berna is in Limerick and has a boyfriend.

The Moriartys

The first Mrs. Moriarty introduced in the novel is a nice older woman who supervises young Elizabeth White on her trip from London to Ireland. She is going to live with her son and her detestable daughter-in-law in County Limerick. She has enjoyed living in London since becoming a widow but her family insists that she come because of the blitz and her arthritis. She plans on running away when the war is over. Mrs. Moriarty cautions against broadcasting Violet White's views about Kilgarret and comforts Elizabeth that people speak English in Ireland, having thrown away everything good, like their language.

The Moriartys of Kilgarret claim not to be related to her. These consist of a husband, who is the village chemist (pharmacist), his wife, and two daughters. The Moriartys, who have a rare ability to keep secrets, have relations in Blackrock. They give the O'Connors a ride to Dublin, where Maureen and the Moriarty daughters, Norah and Una, begin studying nursing. Norah, eleven months younger than Una, is homesick and silly. Son Eddie is one of the boys that bully fragile brother Donal O'Connor. Later, Sheila Moriarty



becomes Niamh O'Connor's good friend. Donal learns to be a chemist in the Moriarty shop.

The Murrays

A rich family dwelling at Riverside House in Kilgarret, Ireland, the Murrays become in-laws with the O'Connors after a long history of contacts between the families. The Murrays include a married daughter, Kate, a twenty-eight-year-old son, Anthony James Finbarr Murray (Tony), in Limerick learning the wine trade in order to manage the family business, a teenage daughter Joannie, and another son, John, studying to be a priest. They enjoy having bright, funny Aisling around the house and she enjoys being a treat to someone, at a time when everything at home is depressing. Only after Aisling and Tony become engaged does she see his mother, Ethel Mary, as a battle ax.

First encountered in the novel is Joannie, one of Aisling and Elizabeth White's schoolmates. Joannie pushes to hear about Elizabeth's Protestant faith and suggests that the girls baptize her themselves. After Elizabeth returns to London, Joannie's sense of humor improves and she secretly takes as her boyfriend the super-looking but Protestant David Gray, who argues that sex is perfect pleasure. Joannie backs down from being a sexual trail-blazer, fearing pregnancy and supposing that no woman with sense would say yes to sex. It would create trust issues afterwards.

Aisling covers for Joannie when boyfriend David Gray begs her to skip school to spend time together. Good-looking but bad-tempered Tony catches them on their mother's bed and bans David, threatening to tell his parents. Tony moves back to Kilgarret and keeps his morally-doubtful sister nearly under lock and key. In lieu of her sixth year at the convent school, Joannie goes to a French convent school in French to learn the language, sewing, and cooking. Her mother hopes that it will make a lady of her. When Tony subsequently catches Aisling practicing making out with Ned Barrett, he refuses her the office job with Murray's Provisions and Vintners. Joannie returns from France, moves to Dublin, and is purposefully vague about her activities. She constantly needs money and causes scenes if she is criticized. She shows no inclination to run the family business.

Given the earlier encounter, it is odd that Tony falls for Aisling, who describes him to Elizabeth as very old, university-trained without earning a diploma, square-built, not bad-looking, but no Clark Gable. He has florid charm, is always in a sweat, and looks ten years older than he is. He acts like a squire, a cock-of-the-walk, and almost as high and mighty as the Grays. He owns a Packard and drinks in the hotel bar, being too good for Maher's. Aisling fights off his sexual advances and her mother chides her for playing with his affections. Tony claims to respect her resistance and never to have been so attracted to anyone. She believes that she hears a near-proposal from him but refuses to be hurried. She needs to grow out of being a silly provincial girl or he will grow tired of her. Tony claims not to want her sophisticated. Tony is outraged when she leaves for England, demanding to know when she will make up her mind. Aisling does not know how she feels about Tony, beyond being flattered by him.



Aisling talks Tony into giving up drinking for a month to fit his wedding jacket better and they build a new bungalow, a ten-minute walk from the O'Connor home. He is uneasy with Elizabeth on the three times they meet before the wedding and nervous on the big day. At the wedding Ethel looks harsh even when she smiles, Tony is edgy, John is wishy-washy, and Joannie is bad-mannered. On John's recommendation, they honeymoon in Rome and receive the Pope's blessing. He drinks himself to oblivion on their one night in Dublin before the flight and consistently while in Rome. He agrees that theirs will be a marriage of equals and looks forward to living in their own bungalow. On the first night back in Ireland, Aisling confronts Tony with his drinking and failure to consummate the marriage. He turns defensive and begins neglecting her and work.

During another confrontation years later, Tony hits Aisling twice. He apologizes abjectly, but she flees to London, refusing to be a battered woman. Ethel is hospitalized for high blood pressure and nerves. Tony stays dry for three and a half weeks before resuming drinking. Aisling returns his letters unopened and her advocate approaches him about a monetary settlement. Ethel is not told about Tony's backslide until she is stronger. Tony is sent to England for treatment, but ostensibly to learn about business diversification. Both mothers beg Aisling to meet him, but she refuses. She feels sorry, learning that he has become a shrunken shell and is not expected ever to be released from hospital. Ethel tries to write Aisling about Tony's death but settles for a cold telegram. She then tries to exclude Aisling from inheriting her part of Tony's estate, but when Aisling provides willing to make public how she has been mistreated, buys her out of the business.

Mrs. Norris and Maureen

Mrs. Norris is the nurse/midwife in England who aborts Elizabeth White's fetus. Maureen runs the pleasant guest house in which Elizabeth and Aisling O'Connor stay during the ordeal. Maureen has several times used Norris' services and advises the young women not to brood or talk about something that has been the lot of women since Egyptian times because nature is fickle. She talks to Aisling as though Elizabeth were not present. Norris claims that Aisling prays through the procedure but, being a non-Catholic would not have known what prayers to expect. Norris says that there are to be no sexual relations for two weeks, after which things can proceed normally.

Sean O'Connor, Sr.

The hard-working owner of O'Connor's Hardware Store, a builder's yard and shop, Sean is relaxed only on Thursdays—market days—when the order book is full and the cash box bursting. He and wife Eileen then take their brood of children to Maher's for red fizzy lemonade. Sean deeply resents resents eight hundred years of English enslavement and wants signs of repentance before allowing a drop of Irish blood to be shed in World War II. In particular he resents the British commissioning officers and daring to evacuate children and old people from London to Ireland to escape the bombing. Nevertheless, he agrees when Eileen accepts Elizabeth White, daughter of



her long-lost school friend, and even agrees to keep his political views to himself. Sean also considers the English pagans or atheists, without himself being particularly observant of Roman Catholic practices. Eileen disapproves of his disrespect for the church.

Sean fights constantly with his first-born son and namesake about enlisting in the British army until eventually Sean Jr., disappears and writes long afterwards from boot camp in Liverpool, England. During the war Sean works harder than ever, substituting bulky turf for unavailable coal. He grows silent and ages badly, losing his heir to a land mine. He acts the impatient sultan after work, demanding to be waited on by his daughters — but never his wife. Sean is angry when the nuns declare Aisling not academic; he is disappointed that none of the children will not succeed, despite all the parent's work. At Aisling's wedding Sean gets a haircut that makes him look like a convict, and walking her down the aisle, he looks as though he is going to be executed. When his wife dies, Sean sees no reason to go on, but Aisling reminds him of the good years they have together and Eileen on her death bed had ordered him not to beg Aisling to stay and care for him and the shop. Sean bravely tells Aisling to live her own life in London.

Sean O'Connor, Jr.

Sean and Eileen O'Connor's eldest child, Sean Jr., is as enthusiastic about joining the British army as his father is dead-set against him doing so. All of his friends are volunteering. He tries to leave school at fifteen, after earning his Intermediate Certificate, but his parents insist that he stay on for the Leaving Certificate. He works in O'Connor's Hardware Store, where tensions with his father mount. As he never notices what goes on around the house, Elizabeth White's arrival as a war refugee does not affect him. When he picks Elizabeth up at Dunlaoghaire/Kingstown, he is amazed at her ignorance of simple things. His mother upbraids him for failing to carry Elizabeth's suitcase or get her successfully to a lavatory. Suspecting that Elizabeth will be trouble, Sean, Jr., often sits at the window, looking for a different life. Eileen ruefully recalls Sean's birth during the Civil War and her hopes that he would grow up in a land not at war.

News comes that Sean fails his examination. His father gives him a man-to-man lecture on failure and puts him in a respectable job in the store, but Sean looks to the military for training for a career or trade after the war. It is an opportunity that many are taking. When Sean, Jr., disappears, evidently enlisting, his father mocks him and his mother is slow in removing his place at table and using his room for storage. When Sean does finally write from Liverpool, ten months after leaving home, he has only begun basic training. He spends free time with Gerry Sparks and Gerry's mam. The letter is illiterate and unemotional. He is excited, however, about being sent to fight in North Africa and then Italy. He is ready for the fighting to end and is excited about visiting Rome. A land mine kills him outright, while claiming both of Gerry Sparks' legs. Sean is four months shy of twenty-one.



Eamonn O'Connor

Sean and Eileen O'Connor's big, strong, truculent eleven-year-old son as the novel opens, Eamonn insists that he will not wash up to meet an awful girl, Elizabeth White, who comes to live with the family. At school, the Brothers chide him about his big brother Sean's failure on his exam and his need to look after his sickly little brother, Donal. Eamonn finds the baby revolting and hates that Aisling has dropped him to play with Elizabeth and the cat Monica. When Donal finally moves up at age nine to Brothers' School, Eamonn at fourteen wears himself out defending him against eight-year-old bullies.

As the eldest boy (after Sean, Jr.'s death), Eamonn goes to work for his father at age seventeen, after Elizabeth's return to London. He develops what his mother considers heathen beliefs and, when Elizabeth turns nineteen, rebels against sending her a silly card; he can barely remember her. His mother says that he will do as he is told. Eamonn refuses to be an usher at Aisling's wedding rather than be made a laughing stock at Hanrahan's pub. Aisling is able to guilt him into serving, showing her readiness to handle a husband.

Donal O'Connor

Sean and Eileen O'Connor's delicate youngest son, Donal is sensitive to his mother's moods. He has an asthmatic cough, but Dr. MacMahon is unworried. Among the O'Connor children, Donal is most excited about Elizabeth White coming to live with them from war-torn London but cannot understand how anyone could be an only child. He has a very literal mind. Donal is often hospitalized in the winter. To retaliate against the O'Connors for a supposed affront, a drunken Dr. Lynch scares Donal about his condition, which all have assured him is minor and from which he will outgrow. His mother laughs Lynch to scorn. Donal after an extra year at the convent school moves up at age nine to the Brothers' School and is picked on for his physical weakness. Aisling helps him recover from a seizure and threatens his attackers. When he learns of his brother Sean's combat death in Italy, Donal declares that Sean cannot be happy in heaven among "bloody" Germans and Italians; he has never sworn like this before.

After Elizabeth returns to England, Donal's asthma worsens until Fr. Kearney comes to administer extreme unction. The priest explains that the sacrament can either restore health or facilitate a happy death. Donal recovers and is warned to avoid catching pneumonia again. When Elizabeth turns nineteen, Donal writes a long letter to thank her for a watercolor book. His chest is still weak, but he is careful about his health and turns into a tall, handsome fifteen-year-old. When Elizabeth visits for Aisling's wedding, Donal knows that he looks gaunt and worried about his health but, fighting back tears, she tells him that he looks like a poet or artist, Rupert Brooke or Byron. He smiles happily. Towards the end of the novel, Donal is engaged, but the wedding is postponed in deference to his mother's period of mourning. Donal works as a chemist in the Moriarty shop.



Niamh O'Connor

Sean and Eileen O'Connor's baby daughter, Niamh cuts a tooth and is cranky as Elizabeth White arrives from London. Her face looks boiled red and her mouth is always open and dribbling. Brother Eamonn finds her revolting and is jealous of her being constantly picked up and coddled. As she grows up, Niamh makes friends with Sheila Moriarty and drives sister Aisling crazy with her laughter over nothing. Niamh's gossiping about a possible rival for Tony Murray's affections helps Aisling agree to marry him. Eileen finds Niamh as a teenager altogether too pert for her own good. Niamh rejoices in the strapless bra that Elizabeth buys and sends from London. She intends to wear it to a party, where she expects everyone to proclaim her beautiful. Having taken her exams, she hopes to become the first O'Connor to go to college rather than work in the shop. She finds Aisling as mournful as Maureen and as intrusive.

Peggy

Hired by Eileen O'Connor to watch her middle children, Aisling and Eamonn, Peggy chases them through the market place in Kilgarret, Ireland, while giving come-hither looks to the farmers. Peggy loses her bounce when The Mistress confronts her over her behavior. She fears that life will change once Elizabeth White arrives. After Eileen catches Peggy fighting off the gropings of Johnny O'Hara, the postman, and — worse, feeding him rationed bacon — Peggy is no longer fun, always cleaning and looking over her shoulder nervously. Eileen worries about Peggy pulling half of Kilgarret into her bed and producing a baby when the family takes Maureen to Dublin. Eileen organizes spies and puts the fear of God in Peggy. Later in the novel, Peggy is replaced in the O'Connor household. She dates Christy O'Brien, a nice man who works on a farm near the Dalys'. As Peggy is in her thirties, she must marry soon if at all. When Eileen dies, Peggy insists on organizing the household for the wake, since she knows the Mistress' tastes.

Amy and Gerry Sparks

Liverpudlians, Amy is a worried widow who takes to writing letters to the mother of her son Gerry's army buddy, Eileen O'Connor. When he enlists, Sean O'Connor, Jr., uses the Spark's address, so Amy receives news of his death in Italy, Gerry loses both legs. Amy phones the bad news to Eileen with sobbing and invites her to visit. Eileen comes as soon as Gerry reaches Liverpool. It is a pilgrimage that includes a mass for Sean.

Five years later, Elizabeth White visits while in Liverpool. Gerry has learned to be a watchmaker but has not mastered prosthetic legs. Amy has sensibly married Mr. Benson. They talk about Sean as a great mate. Elizabeth's colleague in antique collecting, Johnny Stone brightens Gerry up by asking his advice on an old clock. Stone promises to contact Gerry whenever such craftsmanship is needed.



George White

A morose, frustrated London banker, George is the father of heroine Elizabeth White. He is introduced as disgusted at being rejected for military service during World War II in favor of younger, brainless men, on the grounds that banking is also an essential service. He has minor physical defects (flat feet and varicose veins) that prevent his laying down his life for his country. He takes great pride in patrolling nights with the civilian defense corps. George has relations to whom wife Violet could send their ten-year-old daughter Elizabeth, but she elects to contact Eileen O'Connor in Ireland.

By mid-1941, George looks fifteen years older than his forty-two years. After the Allied victory, George grows moodier than ever, muttering about the decorated veterans coming home in glory. He is among the ARP men who opposes closing down precautions, making Violet wonder if he is in his right mind. George looks at fifteen-year-old girls for three months before Elizabeth comes home, wondering what she might look like. He hopes that she will not have picked up irresponsible, devious, and knavish Irish ways and wishes that she had never gone over. He feels cheated of Elizabeth's youth, just as he has been of his wife's affections during the war. He behaves like a fussy old woman, over-polite, restrained, and anxious to please. He enjoys talking about wartime deprivations and strolling through bombed out neighborhoods, dwelling on lost opportunities and misunderstood good deeds. Mention of "Mother" makes him gloomy. George does not play "intellectual" games like chess or bridge, preferring checkers, which bore Elizabeth, but she plays to be kind.

George is surprised when Elizabeth asks if he minds her mother spending time with Harry Elton and fellow workers, rather than staying home with them. He insists that she has a right to go out after working so hard through the war. He admits to never having been exciting enough and finds nothing good in life. Elizabeth sees her father in denial over the likelihood that her mother will run off with Harry. When Violet makes the announcement, George accepts it stoically and refuses to talk about arrangements until Elizabeth demands that the three grown-ups decide how to give her a proper environment. She agrees to live with her father and cook meals, but demands that cleaning and laundry be otherwise handled.

When Elizabeth signs them up for bridge classes, George becomes addicted and almost animated. Elizabeth refrains from excessive kindness. She handles the household efficiently and hosts bridge parties. She talks him into growing vegetables in his copious spare time, but he never does well gardening. He cares little about Elizabeth's work and rejects pleas that he re-marry. He is being pursued by an awful woman in the bridge circle. He also rejects a party for his fiftieth birthday. He looks seventy, beaten down, dull, and already dead. He insists that one must do things in life that one does not wish — all of the time. George refuses to remember the extravagant fun of the 1920s, and any details about Elizabeth's birth.

Elizabeth pays for Aisling to visit. Aisling is typically over-familiar, which George takes well. Aisling finds him different from what Elizabeth's letters claim and suggests jokingly



that she marry George and become Elizabeth's stepmother. At the birthday party, George is in an exceptionally good mood but when he hears of Violet's schizophrenia, he declares it her just desserts but will not exploit it among his acquaintances to justify himself. Elizabeth is disgusted.

George lives on his own after Elizabeth marries, but is a frequent if not gracious guest in their home. He is happy when she gives birth but still refuses to remember details of her own birth. Looking forward to retirement, George searches for a house to share with Elizabeth and Henry, but Henry, as frustrated in his job as George, dies before this can come about. George's fate is left hanging as the novel ends.

Violet White / Elton

A self-sufficient young woman addicted to reading romance novels that always frustrate, Violet sends her only daughter, Elizabeth to Kilgarret, Ireland, to escape the German bombing. She selects her old schoolmate, Eileen O'Connor, to care for Elizabeth. Violet had been sent to convent school to gain polish, while Eileen had been sent for the superior education. She visits Kilgarret once before the war, when Eileen is a new mother and Violet a young flapper. Her recollections cause Elizabeth trepidation about going there and her hatred of dirt and disorder make Elizabeth worry about a possible return visit.

Instead, Violet volunteers for but is turned down by the WAAFS (Women's Auxiliary Air Force), continues doing her harrowing service with the WVS (Women's Voluntary Services), and works as a bookkeeper in a munitions factory. She grows depressed but after meeting Harry Elton cheers, changes her hair to a "victory roll" and often stays overnight with Lily to avoid the commute. She says so little about her husband in her letters that Elizabeth fears that he is dead. Violet is depressed on VE Day because Elizabeth stays in Ireland to complete the summer term and George is moodier than ever. When work ends in the munitions factory, Violet chooses not to move to a tobacco factory, believing that she deserves a rest.

Picking Elizabeth up at the station, Violet is younger and more elegantly dressed and made up than her daughter remembers. They hug awkwardly. Violet is so taken by Elizabeth's complements that she fails to comment on how grown-up she looks. Violet no longer pays attention to George or her house; she reads novels, visits friends, and grows thinner.

When Elizabeth asks her mother if she were unable to have more children after her, if perhaps she had stopped sleeping with Father, Violet is taken aback, disliking such frankness. Elizabeth is stricken. Just before Christmas Violet gets a bad case of flu but does not complain or allow assistance. Elizabeth fears that she is about to run off with Harry. Violet makes her announcement on the eve of Elizabeth's sixteenth birthday. George wants not to talk about it, even the necessary arrangements. Elizabeth declares divorce terrible but urges her mother to cheer up and enjoy the new life that she is entering. Denying that the estrangement has anything to do with Elizabeth's absence in



Ireland, Violet talks of years of pretense and "wrong turnings." Many Britons are making fresh starts after the war.

Violet leaves immediately, moving to a boarding house where she does laundry in exchange for reduced rent. Elizabeth thinks that she has lost her mind. Violet wants time alone with Harry to start anew but promises to write Elizabeth often. Letters are rare, rushed, and nostalgic about her early life. She responds well to Elizabeth's requests for practical advice. Learning that Elizabeth plans a visit, Violet writes a rambling note that she signs with her given name; Elizabeth interprets this as an admission that she is not properly parental, but still thinks of her as Mother. When Elizabeth arrives in Preston, she finds her mother thinner, jumpy, and smoking heavily. Violet is amazed to learn that George plays bridge and has friends and is relieved that Elizabeth has a boyfriend, even if Elizabeth will not admit that he is a boyfriend.

Violet imagines from romances that she has lived in a beautiful world. Elizabeth again fears that her mind is going. Violet is hospitalized with nerves and diagnosed as a latent schizophrenic, for which there is no cure. She is happy forgetting. They begin sedating Violet with experimental drugs including Largatyl, and isolate her after she attacks Harry with a penknife and attempts suicide. Violet dies of a massive heart attack, which the hospital staff describes it as a merciful relief.

Stefan Worsky and Anna Stepovsky

A Polish refugee and his long-time lover, Stefan and Anna own and run the an antique shop located on Elizabeth White's way home from Weston High School in London, Stefan gladly explains the processing of lacquering, as Mr. Clarke the librarian had assured her he would. The things that Stefan tells her are more interesting than anything that Elizabeth has heard in school and he encourages her to read and ask questions of Mr. Brace, the art master, after classes. Once she enrolls on scholarship in the art college, Stefan hires her part-time and warns her about his assistant (and future partner), the handsome playboy Johnny Stone. Stefan is delighted with Elizabeth, who is everything that his two estranged sons are not: solemn, alert, polite, and attentive. She takes notes on everything that Stefan says and declares that she should be paying him for training her rather than he paying her as an employee. Stefan considers himself luckier than most Poles and predicts good things for Elizabeth. Stefan is a diplomat who always wants people to have their dignity. As Stefan and Anna prepare to retire, they try to sell the business to Elizabeth, knowing that Johnny is unreliable. Elizabeth begs them to wait until her finances improve, but tragedy overtakes her family and her old friends and benefactors' fate is left hanging as the novel ends.



Objects/Places

Clarence Gardens

The Whites' home in London, England, 29 Clarence Gardens seems smaller but familiar when Elizabeth returns home from five years in Ireland. She remembers the blue and beige carpet, hall stand, and front room where her mother reads or writes and others use only on occasions. When her parents divorce, Elizabeth remains with her father until she marries, managing the household but not doing the drudge work.

Dublin, Ireland

The site of Maureen O'Connor's nursing school, Dublin is up the road from Wicklow and Kilgarret. Rationing is not as bad there during World War II as in London, but eggs and milk are controlled. The hospital looks forbidding. The students' home is run by nuns. Staff Sister Margaret is like a devil but Sister Tutor is beautiful and walks with a glide. Much ado is made about making beds with proper corners, which afterwards is of no practical use. When Joannie Murray gets a job in Dublin, she brags to Aisling O'Connor about all the available young men with cars and suits who spend their time in coffee houses. Aisling books the best double rooms in the Shelbourne Hotel for her wedding night, but her husband insists on visiting the pubs. He is too drunk to function sexually. Later in the novel, Eileen O'Connor goes to the Dublin hospital secretly for biopsies and claims all is well. Years later, she undergoes exploratory surgery that reveals cancer everywhere and is sent home to die.

Dunlaoghaire, Ireland

The Irish port known by the British as Kingstown, Dunlaoghaire is a tram-ride away from Dublin. Elizabeth White arrives there by boat from London and is picked up by Sean O'Connor, Jr. Eileen O'Connor's cousin Gretta runs a small boarding house in Dunlaoghaire. She suggests to Eileen black marketing country foodstuffs to England during World War II. Years later, Elizabeth in London finds a picture book about Dunlaoghaire and sends it to Aisling O'Connor for her nineteenth birthday. Returning from a frustrating honeymoon in Rome, Aisling books a room with Gretta to discuss the need for professional help for her alcoholic husband, Tony. She breaks off talk rather than let him cause a scene.

Euston Station

Euston is a major railroad station in London, England, famed for its arch. Elizabeth White catches a train to the coast for the voyage to Dunlaoghaire, Ireland, in 1940, assigned by her mother to the care of the talkative Mrs. Moriarty. When Elizabeth returns home in 1945, she finds the station unusually busy, never having experienced it



outside of wartime. A bridal couple is seen off to its honeymoon. She is worried about finding her mother. When Aisling O'Connor visits five years later, Elizabeth advises her to stand under the arch and wait. Scanning the crowd for the face that she recalls, Aisling does not recognize the matured Elizabeth. When Aisling returns to London, they both associate Euston with sorrowful events and much prefer taking the airlines.

Kilgarret, Ireland

The small Irish town in which the O'Connors live and to which Violet White sends her daughter Elizabeth to escape the World War II bombing of London, Kilgarret is in Elizabeth's mind from stories told by her mother a dump full of children, animal droppings, and drunks. Elizabeth reminds herself that Violet has not been there for a long time, has vowed never to return, and cannot understand how Eileen O'Connor can stand it. Kilgarret is located in farm country. Only a few small businesses exist in town, including a bank and a chemist (pharmacy), O'Connor's Hardware Store, and Murray's Provisions and Vintners. No one commutes to work.

Also mentioned are the unnamed Catholic church in which Aisling is married and from which Eileen is buried, the Convent and Brothers' schools; Hanrahan's, a seedy working-class bar compared with the bar at Donnelly's Hotel; and Maher's, a combination drapery and pub, serving fizzy red lemonade with iced biscuits. The O'Connors visit Thursday evenings after market day. They live at 14 The Square.

Young people watch the bus that pulls up outside Donnelly's for new faces but are rarely rewarded. Kilgarret treats young people 16-20 as though they are on probation until they settle into a suitable marriage. The social classes are sharply distinguished. Thus the O'Connor's maid, Peggy, attends Saturday night dances with messenger boys and maids while Maureen O'Connor and her friend Berna Lynch, a doctor's daughter, are too high for these but not well-born enough to attend parties and suppers in the big houses, whose children attend boarding schools in Dublin.

Liverpool, England

Home to Amy Sparks and her son Gerry, who loses both legs to a land mine in Italy during World War II, Liverpool is a place of "pilgrimage" for Eileen O'Connor, whose son Sean is killed instantly in the same accident. The boys had completed basic training in Liverpool. Eileen goes there to see Gerry in the hospital and to hear mass said for Sean. The city is blacked out and queues form outside every shop.

Liverpool is also home to St. Mark's Convent School, which Eileen O'Connor and Violet attend as girls, Eileen because her parents want her to obtain a better Catholic education than is available in Ireland and Violet in order to obtain some polish. When Violet, after failing to communicate for decades, invokes the "bloodbrotherhood of St. Mark's and all we went through," Eileen is fairly disgusted (Part 1, 1940-1945, Chap. 4, p. 70).



London, England

As the novel opens, the city of London is being bombed nightly by the Germans. People unable to evacuate to the countryside fill the underground stations. George and Violet White move their beds into the cellar, whose walls they line with mattresses. They send their daughter Elizabeth to safety in Kilgarret, Ireland. News reaches Ireland daily by wireless, frightening Eileen O'Connor, who cares for Elizabeth. By Christmas of 1940, The Emergency (a euphemism) involves some two hundred tons of bombs falling per hour. Normal life is nearly squeeze out in October. By 1941, London is in chaos. There is a general industrial mobilization for women and cheese rations are cut. There are no new clothes.

VE Day in 1945 is depicted as a time of "wild excitement," as lights are turned on, blackout curtains are torn down, and people celebrate the returning veterans. Violet feels alone in the midst of the partying, with Elizabeth still in Ireland and husband George moodier than ever. When Elizabeth returns via Euston Station, she finds a world more terribly destroyed than the newsreels had depicted, but yet free. Rationing continues for years. Much of the action of the novel takes place in the Whites' flat, Elizabeth's school, the unnamed library, and the antique store, followed by classes at an unnamed art school. Elizabeth's wedding takes place at the civil registry in Paxton Hall. She and her husband Henry Mason move into a flat in Battersea in the center of London. After Aisling flees Ireland, she calls Elizabeth from the Brompton Rd. station and, after recuperating with them from her battering, rents a flat on Manchester St. and gets a job as a doctors' receptionist on Harley St. Both are also located in central London.

Murray's Provisions and Vintners

An established firm in Kilgarret, Ireland, with dealings in Europe, Murray's since the death of Joannie and Tony Murray's father has been managed by Mr. Meade. Tony, who considers Aisling O'Connor and his sister Joannie sex maniacs, takes over running the business and Meade is afraid of him. When Aisling applies for an office job after a year's study in business school and certificates in hand for typing, shorthand, and bookkeeping, she finds that the office is untidy and dusty, quite unlike what she has been taught to expect in the business world. It smells of the spices, teas, coffees, and alcohol in which the company trades. Aisling speaks eagerly of wanting to work on her own, to be appreciated for her own efforts. Meade finds them in order, but Tony overrides him, summarily rejecting her. Meade does not know the real reason for Tony's behavior, but is relieved, having feared that the red-headed girl could prove disruptive. As Tony becomes a dysfunctional alcoholic, Meade increasingly runs the operation. When Tony dies, his estranged wife Aisling inherits a one-third share, together with Joannie and Ethel Murray, who had wanted her disinherited.



Preston, England

Preston is the town in Lancashire County, northwest England, to which Violet White and Harry Elton relocate after she leaves her marriage to George White. Elizabeth White's first visit is coordinated with a buying tour for Worsky's antique shop, London, led by Johnny Stone. Harry has filled her bedroom with hideous but expensive ornaments and a flouncy blue-and-white bed. Every surface has received three cheery coats of paint. Elizabeth knows that she is right in opting not to live with them. Violet is eventually hospitalized in the mental ward of an unnamed hospital in Preston, suffering from schizophrenia. Harry talks of her getting better and him taking better care of her, as though he had been at fault. Tony Murray also dies in a hospital in Lancashire, undergoing treatment for alcoholism. It is not specified whether it is the same hospital as Violet's.

Rome, Italy / The Vatican

The Eternal or Holy City of Roman Catholicism, Rome is Tony and Aisling Murray's honeymoon destination for two weeks after a frustrating first night in Dublin. Tony's brother John, a seminarian, had suggested the trip to Rome. Aisling writes a series of postcards describing their typical tourist activities, visiting sites, eating in outdoor cafés, and enduring the terrible traffic. The high point of their two weeks is meeting the Pope and receiving his blessing. Later in the novel, the Murrays all pilgrimage to Rome for the Holy Year during which John is ordained to the priesthood.

Romford, England

The suburb northeast of London to which Elizabeth White and Aisling O'Connor go for Elizabeth's abortion and brief recovery, Romford is little seen, except for Moreen's pleasant guest house where surnames are not used and the beds have rubber sheets, and Mrs. Norris' house when the procedure takes place without description. When Elizabeth is sufficiently recovered, the friends take in a tear-jerking movie, *The Old Maid*, in which Bette Davis agonizes over watching a daughter grow up without being able to say that she is her mother.

Weston High School

Elizabeth White's school in London, England, after returning from Ireland, Weston smells hospital-like of disinfectants rather than sweet with incense as in the convent school. Elizabeth embarrasses herself standing for prayers before class. Her preparation in Ireland puts her near the top of her class, however, and people consider her exceptional to thrive after the supposedly inferior Irish-Catholic experience. In time her grades slip and only the art master, Mr. Brace, takes an interest in her future, steering her towards art college.



Themes

Religion

Religion pervades Maeve Binchy's novel, *Light a Penny Candle*, particularly the parts set in Catholic Ireland (Free State/Republic). The fictional town of Kilgarret near Dublin is nearly entirely Catholic, the few exceptions being rich and prominent Protestants. The schools are run by the religious, catechism is part of the curriculum, and prayer before classes is normal. The O'Connor family primps Saturday nights for Sunday Mass and even irreligious Sean takes pride in their filing into a pew together.

Into this milieu comes a ten-year-old Protestant from London, a refugee from the bombing during World War II. Elizabeth's schoolmates are curious about her religion, but she knows little more than she had been christened as a baby. Most of the religious debate takes place at the juvenile level, as the girls sort out limbo, purgatory, original sin, and other complex matters. Elizabeth allows them to baptize her four times and looks forward to being confirmed and communed officially, but leaves Ireland before this can be arranged. The nuns notice that she begins attending Mass and the catechism classes from which she is exempt, but never intuit a change or push her to convert. The same had been her mother Violet's experience at a convent school in Liverpool decades earlier. Only later does Elizabeth encounter a priest who insists that she cannot merely appreciate Catholicism; she must join whole-heartedly. Binchy has him then grab a waiter and demand good whiskey.

The clergy generally fare badly in the novel. A priest who is called in to help Tony Murray overcome alcoholism is himself an alcoholic who frequently relapses. Tony's long-suffering wife believes that Tony should have become a priest like his brother because he is not cut out to be a husband, and alcoholic clergy have support facilities that keep them from being a threat to society. The young Fr. John is not impressive as a student and is cold-hearted towards his mother his first Christmas as a priest. The nuns who run the school are a mixed collection, some caring but others foreboding.

The novel deals with theodicy, the question of how a just God can allow evil. It deals most directly and delightfully through the children's discussions of limbo, where in unbaptized souls are held until the final judgment and then enter heaven, versus purgatory, where release is not unconditional. Elizabeth considers that her chances are better in limbo, since she does not know the rules. It deals also when young Sean O'Connor is killed by a land mine in Italy, cutting off his whole future, and Eileen O'Connor dying of cancer before she reaches sixty. The book asks—but does not answer—how such unfairness can be.

Finally, the novel also deals with abortion and divorce, both illegal in Ireland at the time the story is set and against church practice. Eileen, finding herself perhaps pregnant at age forty, uses folk remedies to resume her menstrual flow and sees no reason to mention this in confession. Elizabeth goes to an illegal abortionist in London, where it is



made clear the practice is quite common — as it has been since Egyptian times. Aisling O'Connor accompanies Elizabeth, fighting with her Catholic conscience. She describes the Irish practice of visiting "auntie," being cloistered with nuns until the birth and putting the baby up for adoption. This is a means of enforcing sexual abstinence and of recruiting nuns.

Aisling is then caught in a horrible marriage with Tony Murray, whose drinking may or may not contribute to his sexual dysfunction. When he grows abusive, Aisling wants an annulment, but everyone insists that the sacrament cannot be broken. In fact, she has grounds even in 1960, but simply leaves Ireland to escape the problem. Only on her deathbed does Eileen accept that Aisling has the right. Aisling observes that the new Pope (John XXIII) is an old man and unlikely to grant an annulment. This is the only indication of the vast changes that await the Catholic Church a few years after the novel ends.

Sex

Maeve Binchy deals with sex in *Light a Penny Candle* largely through two young women, Elizabeth White and Aisling O'Connor, who discover that the myths taught them in Convent School are wrong. The nuns emphasize the pain of initial penetration and the fear of pregnancy. Girls who allow boys to go all the way are considered likely to fall with others and are undesirable as wives. Boys, of course, cannot control their God-given urges, which serve the good of humankind, and are expected to try to have as much sex as possible. Set in 1945-1960, the novel shows the Double Standard at its worst.

In Elizabeth's case, sex does lead to pregnancy because Johnny Stone does not like condoms and birth control methods for women are unpleasant. He is a gentle lover the first time, causing only mild discomfort. Elizabeth never tells him of the pregnancy nor consults him about the abortion. Foreshadowing the views of the next generation of women, she insists that the decision is hers alone to make. Her reasoning is that because Johnny dislikes any unpleasantness or pressure, telling him would run the risk of losing him. The lady who lodges Elizabeth and Aisling during the procedure points out that the problem is as old as humankind, since nature often makes mistakes.

Aisling practices kissing and necking with boys in whom she has no interest, in preparation for finding the man she wants. She fights off Tony Murray's attempts to tongue kiss and unhook her bra while they are dating, only to discover after they are married that he is impotent. They never consummate the marriage, which would allow her to have it absolved by the Catholic Church. Instead, she leaves Ireland for London, where she falls in love with Johnny Stone, Elizabeth's ex-lover. He is gentle with her too, but as rigid as ever about doing only what pleases him. This includes having many lovers on the side.

Elizabeth, as she tires of Johnny's rigidity, falls in love with Henry Mason. They confess to one another their sexual pasts, although Elizabeth omits the abortion. Aisling, tired of



Johnny, allows Henry's law partner, Simon Burke, to make love to her while his wife is unavailable through pregnancy and early motherhood; he lies that it is a tradition from Roman times and Aisling can see no harm in it. Henry has job-related obsessions similar to Elizabeth's parents, who refuse to discuss their married life when she asks pointed questions in the Irish fashion. They divorce after the war, like many Britons, and Violet starts a new life with her lover Harry. The Catholics in Ireland consider this just another sign of the atheistic English lifestyle.

Addiction

Tony Murray's addiction to alcohol is the great tragedy in Maeve Binchy's *Light a Penny Candle*. It brings out the fierce temper that is seen flashing earlier in the story and fills him with the defensiveness and denial characteristic of those addicted. It appears that he is rendered impotent by alcohol, but he refuses to see a specialist to confirm this. At any rate, over several years he fails to consummate his marriage to beautiful Aisling O'Connor, with whom he had been sexually aggressive while dating—and while his consumption of liquor had been limited.

Tony is surrounded by psychological enablers, people who claim to have his good in mind when not confronting him with the truth. His best friend repeatedly tangles with hot-headed Aisling about letting Tony have his fun and not embarrassing him in front of his mates. Even when Tony in a drunken state hits a young boy on his bicycle, the two cannot see that he is out of control. Since the child's father works for Tony, there is no question of involving the authorities. Tony's mother denies that he has a problem, insisting that he can stop at any time — as he in fact does before the wedding. Tony drinks heavily at the reception and insists on bar-hopping in Dublin their first night. Aisling is mortified to find him asleep when she appears in her negligee. He then drinks in Rome on the honeymoon, arguing that everyone drinks there at every meal. The pattern never ends and Tony is soon coming home only to fetch fresh clothing.

Tony makes a fool of himself at Elizabeth's wedding in London, beginning his drinking on the airplane when it hits light turbulence. The flight attendant ignores Aisling's pleas not to serve him. The morning of the wedding, Aisling cleans him up and locks him in the bathroom so he cannot start drinking again. By the time the reception begins, she gives up on him. He refuses repeatedly to seek professional help and his mother's attempts to get an alcoholic priest to counsel him lead nowhere. In the end, Tony dies in an English hospital to which he is sent when all hope of reform is gone.

Ironically, Elizabeth is also widowed by alcohol. Early on in her relationship with Henry Mason, she tells him about Tony and makes clear that if he ever becomes an alcoholic she will leave him. That option is open in England. Henry is a depressive lawyer who drinks no more than socially until he is passed over a second time for a promotion. His friend takes him to a pub to talk it over but Henry drinks until they are cut off. When Henry storms over to Aisling's flat to accuse her of being a whore, she innocently lets out that Elizabeth has an abortion ten years earlier, which Henry happily leaks to many people in their circle. He then confronts Elizabeth, declaring that she is an unfit mother

and claiming the baby. Elizabeth pushes him away and he lacks the coordination to stay on his feet. Henry falls down the stairs to his death.



Style

Point of View

Maeve Binchy narrates *Light a Penny* consistently in third person omniscient, while making frequent use of dialog and letter-writing to establish characters' unique styles and points of view. The novel proceeds in chronological order from 1940 through 1960 following in the main characters Elizabeth Mason (née White) and Aisling O'Connor (briefly Murray). Elizabeth is an English child, sent during the German bombing of London to Kilgarret, Ireland, to live with Aisling and her family. The girls' birthdays are within weeks of one another; they are ten years old when the story begins. Their mothers had attended convent school in Liverpool decades earlier but had lost contact over the years, thanks to Violet White's unresponsiveness.

The early part of the novel deals in how a Protestant British city girl gets accustomed to village life in Catholic Ireland as part of a large family. Sean O'Connor voices the age-old anger of the Irish over British domination and a bit of hostility towards the Catholic Church, but reins it in at his wife's insistence. The school girls talk a good deal about religion, dealing with mysteries they hardly grasp. They also begin wondering about sex and love.

In the middle of the novel, the two heroines are parted as the war ends, and they prove poor correspondents. Eileen O'Connor does a better job of keeping Elizabeth up to date on family and village news. This is the main way in which the secondary characters' stories are shown to move forward, including the O'Connor brood's growing up and Elizabeth's parents divorcing. Elizabeth wants badly to understand her parents and how they had felt anticipating and being new parents. She is regularly frustrated. One does not discuss such intimacies in England.

The most important intimacy in the novel, Elizabeth's pregnancy and abortion, is kept a deep secret for ten years before it is leaked to Elizabeth's depressed and drunken husband at the most inopportune time, leading to his violent accidental death. Aisling falls in love with the playboy who had impregnated Elizabeth at a time when all are living in London, allowing the correspondence to be replaced by narrative. The climax is told in staccato, jumping from character to character as the tragedy is set up and portrayed. After this comes a plodding description of the inquest and Elizabeth and Aisling's decision to begin life afresh together.

Setting

Light a Penny takes place in England and Ireland during the years of World War II (1940-1945) and the immediate post-war era (1945-1960). The novel begins in London, which is being bombed by the Germans nightly. Violet White makes arrangements with a long-lost childhood friend, Eileen O'Connor, to care for her only



child, ten-year-old Elizabeth, during the Emergency (a euphemism). Many English children have been moved to villages in northern England, but sending Elizabeth to Ireland sets up colorful contrasts between the two societies. The horrors in London are described from news reports and Elizabeth is amazed to see the destruction when she eventually returns home. Ireland is not in the war and its economy is not as badly affected as England's. Kilgarret, where the O'Connors live, is a small town set amidst fields. Businesses are few and people—particularly young people—look to nearby Dublin for excitement. The port of Dunlaoghaire near Dublin where boats to and from England land is described in greater detail than most places in the book.

After the war, Elizabeth returns to London, to her parents' comfortable home, in Clarence Gardens near Regent Park. Wartime rationing is only gradually eased. The Whites' marriage soon breaks up, however, and father and daughter remain in the house while mother and her lover move northwest to Preston in Lancashire County. Elizabeth eventually visits there in conjunction with a buying trip for antiques that also takes her to Liverpool. Liverpool is where her and Aisling's mothers went to school together and where Eileen goes to meet her dead son's army buddy. Elizabeth and Aisling also visit Romford, a northeastern suburb of London when Elizabeth obtains an abortion. Binchy indulges in little detail about any of these places.

Rome is characterized in a series of postcards penned by Aisling during her ill-fated honeymoon. She describes the outdoor restaurants, friendly natives, and ferocious traffic. The high-point of the trip is an audience with the Pope in the Vatican. The Murray family returns to Rome for John's ordination to the priesthood during the Holy Year of 1960.

Language and Meaning

Irish novelist Maeve Binchy is the same age as the youngest of the O'Connor children, Niamh, in *Light a Penny Candle*, but deals primarily with the lives of the older siblings over the twenty years 1940-1960. Only in the final chapters does Niamh find an authentic voice. The novel follows the children's coming of age and finding their ways in the world. It involves both tragedies and joys. Binchy narrates in standard English but puts a bit of the brogue into dialog, refraining from dialect that might throw non-Irish readers, however. Early in the novel she shows Elizabeth White, newly arrived from London, being unable to read the Irish signs on bathrooms and entering the mens' room, where she innocently wonders if they are painting the wall. The novel is filled with such gentle humor.

Elizabeth arrives as a refugee from the German bombing of London. Much of the early part of the novel deals with her assimilation into Irish society. Elizabeth is the only child of a meticulous mother. All worry how she will fit into the chaos and dirt of a large Irish family, but she does so brilliantly, to the point that she worries about a visit from her mother, lest she be removed from the house. Elizabeth also loses the English reticence to discuss delicate matters and shocks her parents at home by inquiring into their sex



lives. Elizabeth, of course, speaks with an English accent, sometimes exaggerated for contrast.

The book does not stray from controversial matters, including infidelity, abortion, divorce, and alcoholism, but the early chapters in which school girls wonder innocently about the mysteries of life, including religion and sex, and later laugh to discover that the nuns have been conning them. This, and the great affection that the two main characters have for one another, takes the sting out of the topics. The Irish consider the English warmongering imperialists and either atheists or pagans, while the English view the Irish drunken, ignorant idolaters. Neither bothers to investigate the validity of their prejudices or realize how the others see them.

Structure

Maeve Binchy's novel *Light a Penny Candle* consists of twenty numbered but untitled chapters divided into four parts of unequal lengths. Preceding Part 1 is an enigmatic sketch of two women in black talking after emerging from coroner's court and looking at one another for a long second. It makes sense only as one finishes reading the novel.

Part 1, entitled "1940-1945," consisting of chapters 1-5. It examines how a family in war-torn London sends its sheltered ten-year-old daughter to safety in Ireland with the family of the mother's school mate from whom she has long been estranged. Elizabeth White gradually grows to be an integral part of the large, boisterous O'Connor clan. Much of Part 1 shows both families' concerns about how Elizabeth will adjust and the mood is consistently upbeat at her success, except when the possibility of her being taken away by her mother is mentioned. There is a great deal of warm humor used as two societies are contrasted. Irish resistance to eight hundred years of English rule is brought up regularly, and young Sean O'Connor dies fighting in the British Army. Letters from Violet White regularly remind Eileen O'Connor and Elizabeth of the horrors in London.

Part 2, "1945-1954," consisting of eight chapters (6-13) covering the immediate postwar years. Elizabeth returns home to see the ravages of war, tries to explain her experiences and cope with being parted from her Irish family. Violet divorces her husband, from whom she has long been emotionally estranged and Elizabeth is thrust into the midst of the conflict as she strives to complete her studies and move into adult life. She tries to help her father through the trauma but comes to realize that he cares for no one but himself. Violet becomes schizophrenic and ultimately homicidal, which draws Elizabeth surprisingly to her resented stepfather's side. Elizabeth is drawn into art and unexpectedly finds a lover with a difficult personality. She aborts his baby without telling him, so as not to risk losing him. She makes a triumphal return to Kilgarret for Aisling's wedding.

Part 3, "1954-1956," in four chapters (14-17) covers Aisling's marriage, which from the wedding reception onward is a disaster because of Tony's heavy drinking. Meanwhile, Elizabeth tires of Johnny Stone's narcissism and marries lawyer Henry Mason. The initially enjoy wedded bliss and look forward to parenthood. They begin quarreling over



her continuing to work. Elizabeth and Aisling are reunited in London when Aisling flees a beating by her husband.

Part 4, "1956-1960," in three chapters (18-20) ties up loose ends. Elizabeth and her baby accompany Aisling to Kilgarret to say goodbye to cancer-ravaged Eileen. Aisling refuses to return to Tony, who dies in a sanitarium, and fights to obtain her portion of his estate. She becomes Johnny's desperate lover but gradually sees that there is no point in it and becomes involved with Henry's law partner, Simon Burke. Elizabeth's keeping secret her abortion ten years earlier leads to a confrontation in which Henry, bitter over his job, dies accidentally under the influence of alcohol. Elizabeth and Aisling vow to start life over together.



Quotes

"A passionate wife—he had always been amazed that she should respond to him as eagerly as he turned to her—and a loving mother too. He looked at her warmly. She had such a heart it could include more children than she had herself." Part 1, 1940-1945, Chap. 1, p. 21

"She hoped the child wouldn't be a frightened pickaheen of a thing, afraid to open her mouth. Then it would really be out of the frying pan and into the fire for the girl...the blitz of London or the noisy O'Connors in full cry. It would be hard to know which was worse." Part 1, 1940-1945, Chap. 2, pp. 28-29

"Then she heard on the wireless that an almighty blitz had begun on London, and that people were huddling down in the Underground to avoid the bombs and the falling buildings.

"Then a message was sent from the school to say that Elizabeth had been sick and that Aisling was being sent home with her.]

"And as she sat down to try to cope with all the day had brought, she realized that she had not had her period since the middle of July and that she was probably pregnant. Pregnant at the age of forty." Part 1, 1940-1945, Chap. 3, pp. 47-48

"Mother would be appalled at Niamh's nappies trailing as she toddled around, and at Donal's stained dressing-gown, which he wore as much around the house as he did in his bedroom. Elizabeth couldn't even bear to think of what Mother would make of Peggy and whether she would ever bring herself to eat anything that Peggy had touched...." Part 1, 1940-1945, Chap. 5, p. 78

"Violet decided to tell them the day before Elizabeth's sixteenth birthday. But she knew that they both had seen it coming. The May sunshine fell on the table and on Violet's restless thin hands, which twisted and turned as she spoke." Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 6, p. 128

"With a mixture of relief and disappointment she realized that Johnny couldn't possibly have had any designs on her. Thank heavens she hadn't made a silly fuss." Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 8, p. 195

"Aunt Eileen never said these words, but they were as clear to Elizabeth as if she had. They were an amalgam of attitudes and other warnings and chastisements and all that had gone before." Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 9, p. 209

"I hope so. There's three things I wish were over...this reception, all this awful losing virginity thing and bleeding and screaming...and I want to have got myself in the position where old bag Mrs. Murray is afraid of me rather than the other way round...." Part 2, 1945-1954, Chap. 13, p. 316



"Oh God, may he not be too drunk. Please, God, may he not hurt her. Please. After all, God, I did wait until I got married, a lot of people don't, a great many people don't. I kept my part of the bargain, God, please let him not be too rough with me. She went into the room and twirled around so that he would get the full view of the negligee." Part 3, 1954-1956, Chap. 14, p. 341

"No wedding presents and honeymoons on the continent. Johnny is the new generation. Or so I have decided to believe. The generation that wants no commitments, no ties, no promises. It won't tell any lies because there will be no need to lie." Part 3, 1954-1956, Chap. 14, pp. 352-353

"Aisling said, 'I was just thinking of all those years when Joannie and I were inseparable...and I thought you were remote and sort of untouchable... and here we are, neither of us with a word left to say to Joannie but thrown together for Christmas.'" Part 3, 1954-1956, Chap. 17, p. 466

"Sweetheart, they are tearing each other to bits—if you haven't noticed that you are blind. Now, stop all this women's magazine stuff, clean up your face, get your butt into some nice clothes and I'll take you out for a drink.
'Go to hell.'" Part 4, 1956-1960, Chap. 20, pp. 567-568



Topics for Discussion

What functions does the kitten Monica play in the novel?

Why do you think that Sean O'Connor has such difficulty coexisting with his sons as they reach maturity? Pick one of the relationships and discuss it.

What function does Donal's asthma play in the novel? How does he unify and divide the O'Connor family?

How does Elizabeth's curiosity about her parents' early relationship demonstrate the freedom of expression that she learns in Ireland? Could George and Violet have helped her cope with life by sharing their repressed feelings?

Do you find it realistic that Aisling O'Connor would fall for Johnny Stone, knowing from Elizabeth White's experience how intractable he is? Is the relationship with Johnny in any sense good for either young woman?

Why do Elizabeth White's friends in Kilgarret try to make her Catholic without involving the nuns and priests? What do they reveal about their own faith by what they tell Aisling? Does Elizabeth truly convert?

Outline Aisling's relationship with Ethel Murray. Does the final confrontation over Tony's estate ring true with all that goes before?

Discuss whether Aisling's fling with married Simon Burke at the end of the novel is consistent or not with her character to that point.