London Transports Study Guide

London Transports by Maeve Binchy

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Shepherd's Bush

Shepherd's Bush Summary

May, an underpaid hotel manager in Dublin, Ireland, who finds herself pregnant by her boss, Andy, and flies to London for a secret abortion. She stays with Celia, a judgmental but reliable acquaintance, who puts her in touch with Dr. Harris, who refers her to a surgeon, Mr. White. Determining that May has thought through her decision, White schedules the procedure. May rooms with Helen (Hell) Adams, a return customer who calms her nerves and insists that she tell Andy the truth. May returns early to Dublin working on her alibi and knowing that she will not mention the abortion.

Shepherd's Bush Analysis

"Shepherd's Bush" deals in a frank manner with abortion. Placing it at the beginning of the collection of stories signals that the volume will not skirt controversy, and women in affairs with married men is a common theme. An Irish woman, May, is in an affair with her very married boss, neglects to take precautions because she has been lucky thus far and finds herself pregnant. Abortion is illegal in Ireland, so she flies to London. By all appearances, many Irish women do the same. May fears that her moralistic friend Celia will try to talk her out of it, but Celia says nothing. The two sides of the argument are dealt with in summary, not being allowed to overwhelm May's story.

May's roommate, an Australian nicknamed Hell, tells her from experience that there is nothing to the procedure but urges her to tell Andy about it. It will earn her points for bravery and put him in her debt. Hell's sister tries to be noble and it fails. The story also has May contemplating the emptiness of Celia's life and considering that Celia doubtless considers May's futile. May finds no answer for why life's sliding into futility seems to be the rule.

Holland Park

Holland Park Summary

An unnamed narrator asks Malcolm and Melissa if she may bring her friend Alice, with whom she regularly jokes about Malcolm and Melissa's excessive perfection in all they do, to a dinner party . Each is in an unsatisfying relationships with married men. At the party, Alice's popularity irrationally annoys the narrator. Shocked to realize that the hosts believe that they are lesbians and bend over backwards to show acceptance, the narrator worries about whether she and Alice will be able to laugh about this or if the possibility will destroy their friendship.

Holland Park Analysis

"Holland Park" deals with homosexuality. Set in a fashionable part of central London, it opens portraying a jet-setting couple who are so perfect that everyone hates them irrationally inviting the unnamed narrator to a dinner party, a kind of reunion of the crowd that had vacationed in Greece. The narrator has no appropriate significant other to invite and asks to bring her friend Alice. During the party they are mistakenly "outed" by their hosts, who speak with hesitant politically-correct phrases about their orientation. The narrator thinks about how they have lived up to all of the stereotypes and then wonders if their friendship will survive this. The question remains if they can they talk it out and laugh about it as they do most things, or will the fact that they are each other's only close friend make a difference. The narrator seems to waffle on whether they could be a couple, not wanting it but somehow intrigued. She sees being outed without knowing if she is a lesbian as particularly tragic.

Notting Hill Gate

Notting Hill Gate Summary

The first competent temporary worker hired by the newspaper in months, Rita is a big, tough, black woman from the West Indies. She rolls as she walks and dresses garishly. She looks slow, lazy, and preoccupied, but is efficient and competent, needs little supervision, and is quickly moved into a permanent position. Unlike other temps who cannot resist sharing in lurid detail, Rita says nothing about her life, which only increases coworkers' interest. She lets slip only that she has a husband, whom the unnamed narrator meets in a pub as he spills on her, ruining her skirt. Rita arrives sends him away and takes her to her upstairs for a change of clothes. The narrator surveys the flat carefully, in order to share details with her co-workers. The boyfriend turns out to be a popular television actor, Andy Sparks. When Rita returns the ruined skirt and a voucher to replace it, she explains too much about her life to be comfortable returning to her job. Rita is married to the murderer of her best friend, whose children she cares for. Andrew and Rita simply need one another and accept the situation.

Notting Hill Gate Analysis

This story deals with the plight of temporary workers and with racial perceptions. The unnamed narrator sees herself as sometimes "woolly right-minded" but "left-thinking" (pg. 44), upset that temps are exploited by their agencies, under-compensated and uninspired and sometimes "wrong-minded right-wing", wondering why one cannot get adequate help. She is pleasantly surprised when Rita appears. Rita is a black woman from the West Indies, physically large and slow-moving but a great worker who needs little supervision. One of the males in the office finds her sexy, but the women do not see this. Rita is unlike other temps in that she keeps her private life to herself. She lets slip only that she is married. The secrecy makes the others want to learn more.

Happenstance brings the narrator inside Rita's home, which is poorly furnished but bright and clean. The description alone suggests that the narrator expects otherwise. She then admits to being uncomfortable in a black household. Her sister, whom she meets for a drink, takes offense at the suggestion that Notting Hill is growing heavily non-white; she has just spent a lot of money buying a house in the neighborhood.

It turns out that Rita is married to a felon, the man who killed her best friend and is serving his sentence. Rita cares for their children. She is regularly seeing a white television actor, who would like to marry her. The actor has been the subject of articles in the newspaper for which she works, and a rival is taking up the story. Rita is determined not to become a source or subject. After telling about her situation, Rita does not return to work. She tells the narrator that she is culturally unable to understand the things that she tells her and charges that because she does not understand she creates mysteries to solve. She knows that everyone has been talking about her flat and have agreed not to tell her where they learn about it. Rita calms down when the narrator admits that it is none of her business. The story ends with Rita's replacement finding her not as pleasant and happy-looking as blacks are supposed to be.

Queensway

Queensway Summary

Pat has been three months in London after leaving Leicester when Aunt Delia goes to a nursing home with dementia. Pat needs to move into an affordable flat but is too concerned about undergoing interviews with prospective roommates to answer advertisements. When a tough friend, Terry, tells her to ask details about money, housework, and privacy, Pat gives it a try. She gets a bad impression from the first call but goes to see the place, primarily as practice for future interviews.

Pat is overwhelmed by the magnificence of the flat. Joy and Marigold play down the business aspects and Pat forgets her list of questions. She is wary of moving in immediately and dazed, but agrees to the somewhat dear rent and budget for food, flowers, and wine. She has few possessions to fill her enormous, barren bed-sitting room, but sends for select pieces of Aunt Delia's furnishings, which she is to inherit anyway. Pat finds reading, listening to music, and chatting with Joy and Marigold almost a rest cure and believes that she has found the ideal roommates. She overlooks signs that Marigold may be exempt from monetary expenses and leans on her and Joy for performing heavier physical tasks

Having learned precious little about the women's ex-roommate Nadia, said to have managed Solomon's antique shop until she moved to Washington, DC, Pat pays a visit and asks the value of Aunt Dalia's inlaid cabinet, which Marigold had fancied and valued at £50. The surprised proprietor says that it is worth at least £500, and Kevin, working in the back, warns Pat against moving in her furniture. He tells of how Nadia had left terrified of Marigold, who is not paralyzed and has virtually enslaved a series of roommates. Pat tries not to believe it, but recognizes details of objects that she has admired in the flat. In the end, however, the flat is so comfortable that Pat ignores Kevin.

Queensway Analysis

"Queensway" deals ultimately with mind-control, but this is revealed only in the final pages. It begins with a young woman, Pat, transplanted to London and needing affordable housing. Her active imagination makes answering advertisements for roommates impossible until someone advises her to construct a list of questions to ask them. Pat's first phone call seems quirky but she resolves to go through with the interview as practice for serious inquiries to come. She finds herself captivated by the flat and the inhabitants and cannot bring herself to talk about such basic matters as money, housework, and privacy, and does not even see her living space before agreeing to move in. Binchy delights in detailing the décor and ambiance that utterly take Pat in. Her first weekend is utterly delightful despite a few questionable signs. More oddities come up during the week, but nothing that makes Pat rethink her decision. When her aunt's good furniture is delivered, Marigold shows keen interest.

The change comes when Pat asks innocently about her predecessor in the flat, Nadia, who is said to have moved suddenly to Washington, DC. That fact had initially bothered Pat but been swept away. Marigold intimates that Nadia fled an entanglement with a restorer of paintings at the antique shop Nadia had been managing. She also claims that Nadia had given the retired owner sexual favors as part of her advancement from mere employee. She says in passing that this is preferable than random prostitution.

Pat visits Solomon's on her lunch hour and learns that Nadia is still in town, hiding from Marigold who is, in fact, a Svengali-like character. She has confiscated Nadia's belongings and forced her into prostitution to support her (hence the earlier then-surprising reference). Sweet Joy has been kept from marrying and is being forced to study to become a solicitor to bring in more money for Marigold. A third roommate flees to Africa to become a missionary, leaving behind items that Pat recalls having admired among Marigold's treasures. It even seems that Marigold's polio is feigned and she goes about London during the day. Despite the voluminous circumstantial evidence that has built up against Marigold, Pat finds life in the flat too comfortable and enjoyable to move out. She probably realizes that she will be fleeced but ignores the warnings. One cannot but be disappointed in Pat as the story closes, with her buying Marigold a potted plant whose flowers resemble Marigold's mesmerizing eyes.

Lancaster Gate

Lancaster Gate Summary

Lisa, aged thirty-five, has for seventeen months been the mistress of a wealthy forty-five-year-old married man whose name is never named in the story. Clearly, he has no intention of leaving his family as a third child is about to be born. Lisa regrets the huge scene that she has made when he announces a week-long business trip to London and neglects to invite her. Her hysteria shakes him and earns the invitation. She meets him at a service station on the London Road, fearing while she waits that he will stand her up. He is uncharacteristically confused while driving in the city.

They stay in a posh hotel as man and wife, but Lisa realizes that he is starting to lose interest because of her anxiety—which serves only to increase the anxiety. Lisa wonders how movie characters can be so calm in crisis but is quite good at such pretending while her heart races. She finds it easy to fool one with whom there is a love or almost-love relationship. Lisa has twice before visited London and has been disappointed, but now finds the unnamed hotel luxurious. Her lover books them a room with a double bed rather than the normal twin beds and the complimentary fruit and flowers sent up from the president of the company have a card reading Mr. and Mrs. It reminds her that she is a tramp.

Lisa worries as her lover dismisses every idea for spending the day and then announces that he has an appointment for an "executive health checkup" (p. 102) that will take at least all morning. He has arranged it while away from his gossipy office. She can stroll around until dinnertime. Lisa puts on her non-clinging act. Leaving the now ordinary-looking lobby, Lisa jaywalks to a red-haired white-faced vendor's stand. She is depressed that he takes her correctly for a provincial, but recalls her mother's old admonitions to remember that she comes from good stock and can always hold her head high. She is better than her lover—and certainly better than this offensive street merchant. The boy offers her a seat and coffee when she looks unwell, informs her that her "husband's" doctor's appointment on Harley Street is likely a rendezvous with some blonde, adds flirtatious pleasantries to cut the sting of his observation, and is relieved when she moves on.

As she walks through the park, Lisa reviews the evidence and concludes that her lover had intended to meet a woman—his pregnant wife or some young fool—at the hotel this weekend. She decides that it is not worth returning to the hotel to fetch her suitcase before boarding a train home. It is hardly the spectacular break-up that one sees in films. She wishes that she had someone to tell about it but realizes that she could not have mentioned an affair to her mother, her father would be pleased had it not involved his daughter, and, besides Maggie, who would take it lightly, and her brother, who would have a worried conversation with his wife, Lisa has few friends.

Lancaster Gate Analysis

This story deals with yet another professional woman having an affair with a slightly older professional man who has no intention of leaving his family. Much of it deals with the conflict she feels between her actions and the high standards her late mother has set for her: she is well-born and must always hold her head high. She also feels that her lover is losing interest in her and preparing to stray. She regrets emotionally blackmailing him into taking her on a business trip to London but is happy to go there as Mr. and Mrs. Her insecurities quickly strip the trip of pleasure, however.

Street vendors set up opposite the hotel and Lisa plunges into their line as she sets off for a day of solo site seeing as her lover goes to a prearranged doctor's appointment. He provides her an elaborate excuse for having set the appointment before agreeing to take her along. A street vendor convinces her that in all likelihood the man is meeting a lover. The encounter shows Lisa and the young vendor nervous in each other's company, with her considering herself his social superior and he considering her crazy. At any rate, Lisa heads home, wishing she had someone to tell about the break-up, of which she is proud. The beginning and the end of the story show Lisa wrapped up in films and judging real life utterly undramatic by comparison.

Marble Arch

Marble Arch Summary

After years of working at a cosmetics counter, Sophie is in business for herself, working long hours selling custom-made leather purses made by her old friend Peggy, whose life she has turned around. Peggy is Sophie's sole success in convincing anyone that hard work pays off. Long unable to land a job and having left home at odds with her parents, Peggy often turns to Sophie for money, to gripe about men, and to be bailed out when arrested or hospitalized. After three weeks in prison on prostitution charges, Peggy is confronted by her friend and told to straighten out or else. The rare display of anger reaches Peggy and she changes her ways. Cleaning herself up physically, Peggy asks to accompany Sophie on her rounds soliciting customers and asks how she might set herself up in business selling the leather work that she produces. Sophie sees that Peggy has a rare talent and is happy to market the exquisite patchwork purses to boutiques at a high price, and soon Peggy is in business.

When Sophie falls in love with a bitter, unemployed actor, Eddie, Peggy warns that he is taking advantage of her and will leave her, but Sophie loves and needs him. He can be quite romantic when not complaining about how agents and producers expect sexual favors to consider him for parts. He is unwilling to give up the trade for which he has trained. Sophie sees gainful employment of any sort as a positive thing. Counting her blessings, Sophie sees her life as full and stable. She criticizes Peggy for having sex with Mr. Shipton in exchange for free scraps of leather, but Peggy insists that it is preferable to random prostitution. From potential customers, Sophie learns that Eddie has lied about attending a lunchtime play with an agent and instead gone with Peggy. From the shoppers comments about God arranging for some people to have the leisure to spend time together, Sophie realizes bitterly that she is in fact supporting both Eddie and Peggy.

Marble Arch Analysis

This story depicts hard-working Sophie supporting her moody lover, Eddie, and helping to redeem her friend Peggy from a life of prostitution, theft, and alcohol. Sophie uses tough love on Peggy, refusing any longer to be an enabler of her problems and her rare display of anger strikes a chord. Peggy, fortunately, has a flair for making leather purses and Sophie in effect becomes her sales agent. Sales are so good that Sophie can afford a social life and, after several failures, finds Eddie, whom she takes into her life and her flat.

Eddie is angry at life. An aging actor, he resents having to do sexual favors for agents and directors in order to get parts. He is strongly homophobic. Sophie cannot understand why he would not leave show business and earn a living some other way, but Eddie claims to have invested too much in his art to abandon it. Peggy seems to dislike and disapprove of Eddie but is found by happenstance to have been seeing him during supposedly working hours. Would-be clients recognize Peggy's brand and remark that they have met her at the theater. Sophie draws out of them their impressions, which convinces Sophie that she is being duped. What Sophie will do about the situation is left hanging; she is last seen displaying her merchant's smile to the shoppers who do not buy an expensive bag. Sophie is the God who protects the two carefree lovers.

Bond Street

Bond Street Summary

Margaret has for nine years been a shoplifter, making monthly "shopping sprees" (p. 133) without being caught. She makes sure that she always carries enough cash to pay for the items on her list in case she is caught, and has a careful methodology to minimize her risk. She takes only one item per store, so it is time-consuming, checking bags of stolen merchandise into the luggage lockers of each new store she visits. She selects items to please her husband Harry, to give as gifts, and for her own enjoyment.

This begins years earlier, when Harry gets a coworker at the factory pregnant, Margaret cool-headedly sets out the options: Harry either recognizes paternity, marries the girl, and supports both families, or claims that someone else might be the father and pays the girl a small lump-sum to thank her for his pleasure. If Harry leaves he will never see Margaret or their son again but must fulfill his financial obligation; if he stays with her, everything will be as it has been and she will provide a fine home—even if she has to steal. Harry chooses the latter and nothing more is ever said about the incident. Margaret begins bringing Harry wonderful shoplifted gifts. He is convinced that he has married Wonderwoman and regrets how close he came to losing her through stupidity. This makes Margaret feel good.

Bond Street Analysis

This story features a strong woman who for nine years has been rewarding her once-unfaithful husband for choosing to stay with her and her son rather than marrying a co-worker whom he gets pregnant. Margaret alone stays clear-headed while the girl and her father argue about responsibility and finances, and she lays out the two distinct options. Binchy portrays Margaret's agony, sitting in the kitchen fearing the outcome of her ultimatum as Harry decides. He offers the girl a modest lump sum for his pleasure, and once a month Margaret forays out to fill the house with items they could not otherwise afford. She also procures gifts. Her grown son seems suspicious, but Harry has no clue. A non-smoker, Margaret delights in stealing a table lighter as a gift for her hated sister-in-law, who chain smokes. Why Margaret steals is explained only at the end of the story. The early part describes her successful methodology in great detail.

Oxford Circus

Oxford Circus Summary

A woman rarely out of trouble, Frankie often turns to the unnamed narrator, who relishes rescuing her from wrongful arrests. When Frankie gets a job with the BBC, the narrator worries that she will broadcast her troubles to all of England. Frankie is incapable of seeing cause and effect in her behavior. She has recently gotten out of an abusive relationship. On a rare evening when the narrator and husband Clive are home, sorting old pictures, Frankie drops in to borrow a sweater and skirt for her first day at work. While the narrator searches, Clive bristles at being left alone with Frankie, who coos over a baby picture that he has barely tolerated keeping. Frankie innocently embarrasses them both with stories from her and the narrator's romantic pasts.

The next day, Frankie phones the narrator at work to invite her to the BBC Club for drinks, shows up an hour late, and is dismayed to learn that one must be a member, not merely work for the BBC. She is wearing a wonderful bright outfit not at all suitable for work and probably out of place in this club. A couple of men vouch for them. Frankie hopes to run into her boss, Martin, and get to know him. She has heard that Martin's wife, a senior producer at the BBC, is a monster who keeps close tabs on him; her plan is to befriend the wife and convince her (despite her garish clothing) that she is no threat. The wife proves to be quite friendly. She lectures the narrator about remaining in teaching if she does not feel called to that vocation. She is reluctant to leave at 7 PM. As she does, the narrator realizes that she is her principal's sister.

Oxford Circus Analysis

This story features another rather hapless character who depends on a friend to bail her out. Frankie lands a job with the BBC as a researcher. She is determined to succeed in the job and wants to get to know her boss better, but has heard that his monstrous wife keeps close tabs on him. She invites her (nameless) friend, the narrator, to have drinks at the BBC Club to befriend the wife and convince her that she is no romantic threat but a dedicated hard worker. The narrator bends over backwards to paint this picture, and in the process wrongly picturing herself as the most undedicated of teachers. The woman is offended at her attitude towards the profession. She turns out to be the narrator's principal's sister, portending problems as the story ends.

As a sidelight, the narrator's husband (or perhaps lover) dislikes and distrusts Frankie, who drops in for a visit on one of the rare occasions when he and the narrator are not in evening classes. They are boringly but enjoyably sorting old pictures. Frankie's laughter over one of his baby pictures angers him and the evening ends badly. The narrator is so uncomfortable at the BBC Club that she would even prefer to be home with him, giving one another the cold shoulder.

Tottenham Court Road

Tottenham Court Road Summary

Worried about appearing naïve in anticipation of losing her virginity at age twenty-nine, Julia visits the largest pornography shop in Tottenham Court Road, where she wanders lost from one specialty aisle to another. Julia at age twenty, had refused to make love with her fiancé, Joe, believing her aunt's warning that men never trust a woman who gives in before marriage. Joe moves on to a more willing woman, and for the next few years Julia meets only drunkards and men on the rebound. She concentrates on building her business until she meets Michael at a foreign resort where she is gathering brochure ideas.

Julia likes Michael but is mortified at the thought of him discovering that she is an aged virgin. When he visits London to see her, she finds work-related excuses. Finally he asks gently why she shuts him out, seeing that they get along well. Julia decides to lose her virginity to someone else as a trial case, but fails with three men whom she lures to her flat. One falls asleep drunk, another blathers about his lost wife and impotency, and the third brags of his exploits so that she is certain that he will give her syphilis. At that point she decides to visit a bookshop.

Breaking down, Julia asks a clerk for a book to give to her niece, who is about to get married. The clerk suggests that she share her own experience with the girl and assures her that no man wants his wife to come to marriage too knowledgeable of techniques. When he insists that no book will suffice, Julia claims to be a nun and thus unable to give advice. He is stunned by her worldly attire. As she builds her story for him, Julia considers that catering travel for missionaries might be profitable. He is happy when she leaves the shop, defeated. On the way home she buys wine to get Michael drunk and figures they can laugh this off. She meets an Italian tourist and considers inviting him home but decides that she has coped enough for one day.

Tottenham Court Road Analysis

This story features a twenty-nine-year-old virgin who is desperate not to appear naïve when finally she allows her boyfriend Michael to "deflower" her. The story opens with Julia browsing nervously in a pornography shop that caters to people with far more advanced tastes than her own. It continues by sharing how she has spent years building her career after refusing to have sex with her only other boyfriend and losing him to someone who will. Various attempts at losing her virginity are told in a bittersweet way before she runs into Michael, a sweet, sensitive man. Julia cannot bear the thought of him finding out that she has never had sex. She hides it from coworkers who brag about their exploits. She tries three times to get someone to seduce her before her next date with Michael but each time fails, again told in a bittersweet way, before she turns to the pornography store.

The story develops a twist when Julia breaks down and asks a clerk's advice. He tries to convince her that her soon-to-be-married niece can profit more from a frank discussion of Julia's own (presumed) experiences. Julia declares that she has none, as she is a nun. A non-Catholic, she has little material to work with and her clothing is anything but demure. She is not a convincing liar. The exchanges with the clerk are warmhearted and humorous. One can feel the discomfort in each. Julia seems convinced in the end that she and Michael will be able to laugh about the whole scenario.

Holborn

Holborn Summary

Rita, a beautician, rises at 5:30 AM, and angrily makes a list of things she wants and wants not to do when newlyweds Ken and Daisy visit. Husband Jeffery is enthusiastic about showing them around London, even though Rita and Ken had lived together for a year in Cardiff, Wales. Rita had broken off the relationship and moved to London, where she meets and marries utterly predictable, cliché-spouting Jeffery a year ago. By contrast, Ken had always been unpredictable. They had enjoyed criticizing others' taste and, in particular, others' behavior in restaurants. Now Rita sits planning how to present herself to her ex during the dinner meeting and worrying about how Ken will mock the the kinds of things in her mundane flat. She wants Ken still to love her, although she does not love him. She allows Jeffery his freedom. He has two sons who visit weekends. Rita has several times talked to their odd mother, Heather.

Rita cannot prevent her friend and coworker Lilly from whom she borrows a cape for the occasion from going to the station to watch the drama unfold. Rita is shocked to see Lilly talking happily with an elderly, bedraggled old woman holding onto a cane. It is Daisy, whom Lilly had known as Peggy, her mother's nurse long ago. Rita thinks that she is losing her mind, imagining Ken in bed with an old cripple. Jeffery insists that Lilly join them for dinner, which Rita spends mulling over how this could have happened to carefree Ken. Daisy charms everyone in the restaurant and is the life of the party. When Ken fails to joke about fellow diners as he always had, Rita wonders if she has gotten everything wrong.

Holborn Analysis

This story examines the meeting of two former lovers a year after their breakup. Both Rita and Ken have married. Rita's husband Jeffery is the opposite of fun-loving Ken. Rita wants Ken still to love her, while insisting that she does not still love him. She has a make-over and spends way too much on an outfit to impress him. She brings along wedding pictures, which will show her at her starvation-diet best and borrows a nice cape from her friend Lilly. Lilly, of course, insists on coming along to watch the drama.

The drama is an unnerving surprise to Rita. Ken's bride Daisy is old, bedraggled, and crippled by arthritis, and is an old friend of Lilly's family, a nurse who had cared for Lilly's mother. Rita cannot comprehend how this could have happened to Ken or to see that Daisy is the life of the party. She cannot get Ken to respond to the old-style banter that they had enjoyed together and is left wondering if she has misunderstood everything in life.

Chancery Lane

Chancery Lane Summary

Wanting to sue rich banker Charles Benson for breach of contract and to generate a good deal of publicity for her fading dance career, twenty-six-year-old Jill Twilly, writes a barrister, John Lewis, whom she has just met at a party while in a drunken state, to seek his advice. She reminds him that she had been the woman dancing in blue with a tattered boa. She does not trust the Yellow Pages and dislikes the look of barristers' offices. She recalls where Lewis works and offers to barter her tap-dancing lessons for advice.

Overlooking Lewis' objections and advice as mere "stuffy phrases" (p. 200), Jilly describes her situation, assuming lawyer/client privilege: the villain Charlie has given her a ring but pulled out of the engagement after the party, claiming that she has humiliated him by her behavior. She is getting too old for non-nude dancing engagements and cannot afford to live by giving lessons. Jilly continues writing Lewis, sending further supposed documentation of an agreement and asking why he turns stiff, refusing to correspond further. Her career needs the boost of publicity.

After a non-professional dinner together, Lewis breaks up with his girlfriend, Monica, claiming that there has been no agreement to marry, takes Jilly to Paris for a weekend, and refuses to believe that she has settled seven breach of contract suits out of court.

Chancery Lane Analysis

This story is most remarkable for its literary form—a series of interconnected letters among the various characters—and the surprising ending. Jilly Twilly meets barrister John Lewis at a party and, because he makes the mistake of telling her where he works, writes to ask legal advise about suing her ex-fiancé, who claims that she has embarrassed him at the party by her behavior. Lewis tries to dissuade her from a breach of contract suit and her desire to generate career-saving publicity for herself. Jilly refuses to be put off. The correspondence turns nasty, but Lewis regrets hurting her feelings. She then reels him in, an action that he does not detect, as he breaks his own engagement, claiming it had never been formal, in order to marry Jilly. In the final letter, one written to the friend who had thrown the party, Lewis refuses to believe that Jilly has a history of breach of contract suits and is using him. Binchy skillfully assumes each of the characters' personality, building the tension to the final conclusion.

Seven Sisters

Seven Sisters Summary

A married couple who respond to an advertisement for a wife-swapping party, Stuart and Pat live an average life with their young children, Debbie and Danny, a life that largely centers on gardening. Their sex life is ordinary. Stuart is blasé about the evening as it nears, but Pat panics. It is the "Terrible Day" for which she has her hair styled and worries in the mirror about how deadly white her skin is. She sees herself being rejected by all of the swingers—equally with being ravished. Stuart assures her that because they are doing it together it is not infidelity but rather a generous sharing and exploration of new pleasures. Pat worries that it will become known and ruin Stuart's career at the bank and their children's reputations. She worries about Stuart's intentions when he wants to take the train rather than having to worry about being in condition to drive home.

Pat frets and finally breaks into tears as they near their destination. She is careful about how she phrases her refusal to go on: she is jealous of anyone seeing or touching her husband. She had earlier worried only about her part in it, not his. Stuart is amazed that Pat feels so strongly about their sex life but agrees to go home to a dinner of kebabs and wine with anticipation of great pleasure together. They joke about an older couple that asks directions to No. 17. Stuart and Pat's horizons have been broadened without going to the party.

Seven Sisters Analysis

This story explores another sexual taboo, so-called "wife-swapping," particularly prevalent in the 1970s, when the stories in London Transports are written. No moral or religious aspects are considered and the fears that build a decade later with the advent of HIV/AIDS are nowhere to be found. Having shown Julia afraid of syphilis in "Tottenham Court Road," Binchy surprisingly has her character Pat give it no mind. Instead, she looks at a male-oriented activity (the very name implies this) from the female perspective, while allowing for the husband's frustration living a going-nowhere life. Like Julia, Pat agonizes what others at the party will think of her appearance. She worries about meeting people they know but figures that will be covered by a conspiracy of silence. While she does not consider herself frigid as described in women's magazines, she finds sex has a certain sameness and does not understand the need for novelty.

Stuart's enthusiasm is troubling, but she tries to see his perspective, aging in a dead-end job and heading towards decrepitude and death. She does not stop to consider that she is on the same path without needing new excitement. Stuart lamely tries to convince her that it is a matter of being generous, that is, sharing themselves with others. Pat wins the day and avoids the orgy precisely by appealing to Stuart's male ego: he is a treasure that she cannot bear to share. She seems not to be conniving in taking this approach, but when it succeeds, she realizes that she has expanded their sexual horizons just between the two of them.

Finsbury Park

Finsbury Park Summary

Having grown up in poverty with a loud, drinking mother and older sister, Vera dislikes programs on television that remind her of her first fifteen years of life. At fifteen, while recovering from an attack of rheumatic fever, she is befriended by a gentle school teacher, Miss Andrews, who encourages her to improve her appearance and outlook on life and to stay in school even if it and her home life are pure hell. For two years Vera puts up with the filth and noise, frequently taking refuge in Andrew's lovely flat and learning how to smile and modulate her voice from her example. Having also learned typing, shorthand, and spelling, Vera moves out, promising to visit her mother often but never doing so. She also stops visiting Andrews and finally cuts her off as well.

Over the next five years she has five jobs and lives frugally in five homes. At age twenty-three she is well-spoken and informed and, within her means, enjoys the finer things in life. At work she refuses to join fellow workers in joking about her lowly background. She is working in a hotel gift shop when she meets Joseph, a lonely, forty-five-year-old widower, who asks her out and finds her naivete about men refreshing. Vera accepts Joseph's bumbling, apologetic proposal of marriage, and after a small wedding, moves into his dream house in Finsbury Park. Her apprenticeship ends and life begins.

Vera makes the small scullery her headquarters for the excruciatingly slow process of furnishing the barren fourteen-room house. She refuses designers and consultants, wanting to make it perfect entirely on their own. Two years later it still looks like they have just moved in. Joseph grows frustrated, particularly when he realizes that Vera does not want children. When the house is finished to perfection, Vera will allow nothing to be disturbed, including cooking in the well-appointed kitchen. Joseph hires a Filipino housekeeper, Anna, but Vera works tirelessly alongside of her, keeping the house shining. She refuses a cook. When Joseph hires Mrs. Murray to do the heavy housecleaning, her stories of life in a housing project like the one in which Vera grows up drives Vera crazy. Anna and Murray feel sorry for Joseph and pity obsessive Vera.

Finsbury Park Analysis

This is the story of a young woman who overcompensates for a wretched childhood. The obsession is pointed out when, liberated from her mother's home, she is unable to join fellow employees in joking about the backgrounds from which they have emerged unscathed. Vera's break comes at age fifteen, when she is hospitalized with rheumatic fever and befriended by a lonely, cultivated schoolteacher who takes her under her wing, encouraging her to remain in school and at home until she is prepared to go on her own without the risk of having to return to the depressing situation. When Vera leaves, she makes a clean break of her mother and her mentor. When she marries, she refuses to have them at her wedding.

Vera continues her studies while working and living frugally. She goes to stylish films and window shops. Her sense of style helps her find an outlet in working in a hotel gift shop, where she attracts the attention of a lonely rich widower. Her apprenticeship is said to end with their marriage, and her life begins then. She spends years fixing up the enormous house but then treats it like a museum, as something not to be used. She must do everything herself. Her husband grows frustrated, living out of a box and still eating at the hotel, but reminds himself not to be selfish. Hired help feel sorry for both spouses in different ways; he is neglected and she is crazy.

Highbury & Islington

Highbury & Islington Summary

Adam, a young banker living in Islington with his bohemian lover of eight months, Heather, has for the first time screwed up his courage and is taking her home to Sussex to meet his widowed mother and sardonic younger sister, Louise. He has already visited Heather's downtrodden family several times. Every other weekend he visits his wealthy, proper family and talks about his work but says little about his personal life, which differs so dramatically from their own. On the train, Adam worries about the impression that liberated Heather will make, reading sexy magazines and lounging with her feet in his lap. He has provided a potted plant for her to give Mother as a gift; Heather would not think it appropriate to give something to a stranger. When Adam warns that they must have separate bedrooms, Heather responds that she will find ways to get together when the others are asleep.

Adam has read a lot about love and understands unrequited love from having fallen for Jane Fonda and from having been chased by some stuck-up girl in school in whom he was uninterested. He realizes from Romeo and Juliet that families do not always go along willingly and knows that his family's ridicule will be subtle and after-the-fact. In asking to bring Heather for a visit, Adam had begged his mother to allow it to be a quiet, normal weekend, knowing that the even would turn extravagant. Adam contemplates how different his two lives are, panics, and while changing trains, phones home to say that Heather has caught the flu and then tells Heather about a fire in her room. Relieved not to have to go through with the visit, Adam realizes from his mother and Heather's tones that he is losing more than the cost of a ticket. He wonders if he will ever grow up.

Highbury & Islington Analysis

This story reverses the theme of "Finsbury Park," showing a rich young man who has adopted the bohemian life, living with his lover and keeping up his end of the bargain by cooking and going to noisy discos, but every other weekend visiting his very proper widowed Mother and sarcastic sister in Sussex. Adam's philosophical preparation for love includes a crush on actress Jane Fonda and the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. He has met Heather's downtrodden mother and father-in-law, but only this weekend found the courage to take Heather home for a visit. Adam's angst builds throughout the train ride as he foresees two days of misery. A fortuitous change of trains allows him to bail out. He looks forward to the rest of an enjoyable weekend in London, but realizes from his mother and Heather's voices that his alibis may have been too facile. He wonders enigmatically if he will ever grow up, a conclusion that does not necessarily follow from the factors that he has put forth.

King's Cross

King's Cross Summary

Eve, an extraordinary personal manager dedicated to gaining proper places and honor for the women she chooses to work for, accepts the offer of a secretarial job from Sara Gray, knowing that Gray needs a personal manager. Eve refuses to use Gray's first name because Gray is an executive and male executives are never addressed that way. She announces that Gray should be promotion manager rather than an assistant and sets out to effect the change within the year. Gray balks, not wanting to get into office wars, but is assured that working within the system will get her to where she should be.

Eve discovers unused budgeted funds to remodel Gray's dingy office into an attractive executive meeting room, to provide Gray a suitable executive wardrobe, and to effect a beauty make-over. From her own cubicle at the door, Eve enforces a policy of meetings by appointment only and screens phone calls. Her filing system allows Gray instantly to access vital data. Gradually higher-ups learn all that Gray has already done and begin valuing her ideas. She is sent to a conference in Paris, an action which rouses her boss, Garry Edward's jealousy, and she attends an executive dinner party where she impresses people. She suggests hiring one board member's son as her assistant, and Eve trains him carefully. Rumors spread that Edwards, whose sudden romantic interest in Gray is spurned, will be replaced. He makes a strategic mistake that helps seal this.

From the beginning, Eve makes clear that she stays in a given job only long enough to gain her female employer the status she deserves and then moves on. Gray is saddened when this time comes too quickly and wishes that Eve would broaden her base of operations to teach more women to assert themselves properly. Eve insists that one-on-one alone is workable. As a feminist it goes against Eve's grain to suggest superficial changes in wardrobe and appearance to get ahead, but these things work, and that is all that matters in an unjust business world. Eve claims not to be bitter, but constructive instead. It is slow but satisfying to help a handful of women advance. She moves on because there is much still to be done.

King's Cross Analysis

This story investigates job discrimination against women. Eve, an extraordinary personal manager, has already selected to work for a number of women executives in a crusade to remove the specific factors that hold them back. These are different for each woman and the solutions that Eve suggests and helps implement often go against her feminist inclinations. She uses them because they are effective and only the goal matters—the classic ends justifying the means approach. Miss Gray has concerns about hiring such a Women's Lib type and does not see that her talents and accomplishments have been exploited. She is loath to get into backstabbing and politics.

Eve encourages Gray to talk to a list of references, each of whom bear glowing testimony to Eve's unique ability to achieve justice. Convinced, Gray overcomes her qualms and does everything that Eve outlines. She finds her position at the travel agency transformed. Life becomes less stressful and more pleasant. She is able to cope with an erring boyfriend with covert help from Eve, who studiously avoids personal, non-business relations with her boss. Binchy describes Eve's program in minute but always entertaining detail.

Towards the end, normally reticent Eve opens up briefly to talk about the structure of male dominance and why she fights inequality one woman at a time. She prepares Gray to move upstairs to the executive suite, wit Gray now confident in her own abilities. Eve prepares to move on to her next challenge.

Euston

Euston Summary

An Irish woman living in London, Mary sees a television program about not holding grudges and decides to forgive her family after twenty years' separation and to fly home for Christmas. The decision makes her feel lighthearted for the first time in years. Rather than surprising them, showing up as the Prodigal, she writes first, picturing her seventy-five-year-old mother's joy at the good news. Her mother's last letter, begging her to return, had lacked the old sureness about everything. Mary has filed all of her mother's letters but answered none of them, having nothing to say.

The falling out had occurred when her parents rejected a suitor, Louis, who they believed was only after her £1,200 fortune. Mary had been twenty-nine and a plain-faced spinster, working in the post office, when she meets Louis. People in town, including her father, tell her that she is making a fool of herself. Three days before Christmas of 1963, Mary calmly withdraws her money, quits her job, and moves with Louis to England, where they marry in an Italian Catholic Church. They invest her money in a corner shop and work long hours to build up a good business. At Louis' insistence, Mary writes home just once, to describe how all is well. She ignores her mother and brothers' letters. When Louis dies, Mary sends a condolence card but ignores her parents for another ten years.

After selling the shop to a Pakistani with three nephews, Mary remembers that she has three nephews whom she has never seen. She is fifty and graying when she resolves to go home. As she makes arrangements, however, Mary worries about her reception as a stranger at Christmastime. They know nothing about her successful life. She decides to send only a seasonal greeting to pave the way for next year. At least they will know that she has forgiven them.

Euston Analysis

This story takes up the theme of intergenerational judgments about appropriate relationships discussed as a potential problem in "Highbury & Islington," and shows it developed into a twenty-year tragedy. Mary Brennan runs off to England from her home in Ireland when her father resolutely stands against her marrying a slightly younger newcomer. She sends home one letter to say that she is fine but then cuts her family off completely, having "cleaved" to Louis as the Bible commands (Gen. 2.24, Mt. 19.5, and Mk. 10.7). Louis tries to convince her that notwithstanding these verses, she would not be disloyalty to him in restoring relations with her family and tries to convince the parents to help her after he dies.

There is no progress for another ten years, when a television program about grudges opens Mary's eyes. She feels herself a prodigal, referring to Jesus' parable in Lk. 15, and pauses to consider how the brother who does not wander off must have felt seeing his brother inordinately showered with love. This is an odd but intriguing approach to the story. In the end, Mary decides not to rush things and interfere with Christmas plans. She recognizes that she is a stranger. She also recognizes that time may be running out for her aged parents. She decides simply to let them know that there are no longer any hard feelings, but sends a bland message that hardly makes this clear. Unlike Adam in the earlier story, however, Mary does not question whether her decision shows a lack of maturity. She has unquestionably had a hard life but has chosen to isolate herself radically. This reduces her appeal to the reader.

Warren Street

Warren Street Summary

After Nan, a seamstress with the talent to be a designer, has a fight with cheerful Shirley, a steady customer for two years, she feels fed up with people not wearing deodorant and nitpicking her work. Nan is busy when the obese woman first visits her shop but feels sorry for her having to wear the things that she does and makes her a beautiful, bright wardrobe. Nan appreciates that, unlike most of her customers, Shirley does not complain about her life. Nan allocates eight customers a day for one hour each and spends most of the time sewing. This keeps her work manageable and gives her time for her long-time lover, Colin.

When Colin jokes cruelly about Shirley's size, Nan reprimands him, saying that she feels protective of the sweet woman. Months later, as Nan is working on a wedding outfit for Shirley, she sees green eye shadow that matches the outfit and sends Colin to procure some. Nan cannot adequately explain why Colin labels the bag "Green eye shadow for burly Shirley" (p. 303). Shirley nearly accepts that Colin is simply given to insensitive rhymes based on names when Nan slips up and inadvertently equates fatness with ugliness. Shirley is offended and stomps out of the shop, never to return. Nan knows that she will miss Shirley badly. A year later, Nan learns that Shirley has married her boss and had not invited her to the wedding so as not to make her think she pities her for not getting to marry Colin.

Warren Street Analysis

This story examines how offhand remarks and attempts at mollifying offenses can destroy a friendship. Dressmaker Nan truly enjoys Shirley, who stands out among her customers by her even disposition and avoidance of complaining about every detail of her life. Nan joyfully outfits the obese lady in bright colors. Nan's lover picks up eye shadow to complement a dress and leaves it in a bag with an inscription that offends Shirley. Nan works hard to explain away his insensitivity but puts her foot in her mouth twice and loses her client and friend. It is a study in panicky reaction. In the end, Nan learns that Shirley, whom she has pitied, does not invite her to her wedding because she pities Nan's inability to get her lover to marry her. Surprisingly, Shirley is a sensitive type.

Green Park

Green Park Summary

Friends since nanny training school with newly rich Jane, Helen and Margaret agree not to dress fancily when going together to see Jane for the first time in years. Still, each does. They giggle nervously about seeing the Ritz Hotel. Helen and Margaret have both married and applied their training to raising their own children, but Jane has become rich and famous. Still, they are sure the old bonding survives. Margaret has married a vicar and lives a dull life. Helen has married Jeff, a man with a knack for losing money betting on the horses. Both are in their forties and envy Jane, who in photographs looks younger than she had as a student. They commiserate in lacking the time to pamper themselves.

As Jane meets them in the foyer, she dismisses their awe at how beautiful and youthful she looks, saying that it is all bought, and quickly takes them upstairs to the suite to present them to her aged husband, Charles. Helen's naïveté wins the charming old man over, and with his entourage, he heads to a meeting. With him gone, Jane explains the situation and why she has requested the reunion. Helen in particular is shocked by Jane's matter-of-fact attitude towards Charles' impending death from cancer, but admits to having lived a sheltered life. They are shocked to learn that they are expected to help Jane preserve her massive fortune against Charles' invalid wife in Georgia and her powerful lawyers, who want to dispossess her. Jane believes that as he visits their normal homes he will leave her well-off and will materially improve both women's lives as well. They then go downstairs for tea and chat about their lives.

On the train home, Helen and Margaret are less giggly than on the ride in—and uncharacteristically silent with one another. After discussing the truism that money cannot buy happiness, each thinks silently of how Charles' money could help them in their situations. They do not verbalize what each is thinking about: that men are notoriously difficult.

Green Park Analysis

This story examines a reunion among three alumnae of a nanny training program where the young women had developed a deep sense of solidarity. Two marry and raise families. A third has grown extraordinarily rich and famous as the mistress of an American tycoon, whose imminent death threatens to reduce her worth by ninety percent. Jane summons Helen and Margaret to enlist them in convincing Charles that since she has nice, normal friends, he can trust her with the estate. The premise seems a bit far-fetched but allows for interesting character sketches.

Heading by underground to the Ritz, Helen and Margaret know nothing of the plans and behave like giggly forty-year-old schoolgirls, knowing that they look foolish but being overcome by the glamor of it all. Jane is sophisticated and self-deprecating through the greeting and introduction to Charles. Margaret is a poor vicar's wife, and her reaction to the news that Charles and Jane are living together without being married is so delightfully naïve that she unknowingly makes Jane's point.

More shocks lie ahead: Charles is rapidly dying and, as an old Southern gentleman, refuses to divorce his invalid wife. The wife is trying to disinherit Jane. Jane is coldblooded in laying out the fact. She is also cagey, suggesting that as Charles visits their homes and gets to know them, he will doubtless help them financially. The seed is planted, for on the way home they silently mull over this possibility. They do not talk candidly as they normally do. Each recalls how Jane has helped them in the past—this is not even hinted earlier—and innocent Margaret is revealed to have dislodged a young seminarian's fiancée to get married. The old friends have simply not taken on a project of deception this large before.

Victoria

Victoria Summary

Watching a kind-looking woman dote over her father in a coffee bar at Victoria Station, Rose is glad not to see the usual disgruntled travelers and cannot help thinking about her own father. Rose fantasizes about the obviously well-organized daughter's life. They look like people with whom she might converse, but the place is too crowded. Rose is sorry when they head to their train.

Rose wishes that she could take her father, widowed seven years, on vacation in order to thank him for all that he has done for her. Although he is only sixty, he insists that he is a dog too old to learn new tricks. She counters his arguments and knows that he would love to see Paris again because he still pulls out prewar scrapbooks. He had enthusiastically given her advice before her first trip to Paris at twenty, but she had been too young and proud to take his advice. By age thirty, she has been back thirty times, has visited his old haunts and taken pictures to talk about. She wishes that her father were pushier; it might have spared her a brief, bad marriage to Gus. Father is undemanding to live with.

Rose is en route to Paris for a week's work, and earlier this morning she had tried to talk him into accompanying her. He shows interest for half an hour before timidly refusing. Rose thinks of that other daughter/father pair having fun in Amsterdam and blames herself for selfishly never before inviting her father. She catches a taxi ride home. Her father is alarmed to see her, wondering why she is changing her plans. He assumes that she is sick. She explains how she wants them both to go next day, but he feels frightened and trapped. She pleads loneliness. Father claims that he would love to go together another time, after proper planning. She pleads that now is the perfect time, but he insists that he cannot drop everything. Rose knows there is nothing to drop but will not suggest that after all that he has done for her, his life is meaningless. She gives in, accepting to put off trips until he retires. He feels reprieved. She wonders why love requires lying.

Victoria Analysis

This story takes yet another look at intergenerational conflicts. Rose sees a father/daughter pair traveling to Amsterdam and wishes that her own father would accompany her on her current trip to Paris, a city that he had greatly enjoyed in his youth and about which he continues to show enthusiasm every time she goes there. She accepts that she has been selfish in the past, neglecting to invite him, but puts the onus on his shyness. This opens him up to an analysis of their relationship, going back years. Rose appreciates the many ways in which he has helped her but also harbors a grudge over his not forcefully opposing her disastrous marriage to Gus. Given how she had turned down his advice about her first Paris trip, it is unlikely she would have listened about Gus. Still, Rose wants to think she would have. She seems prone to fantasizing happy outcomes. She also fails to see the degree of panic her suggestion of a trip together engenders in her set-in-his-ways father. Binchy builds the internal terror as Rose presses her argument. In the end, Rose backs down and agrees with her relieved father, but wonders why love requires lying. Her refusal to humiliate her father is noble.

Pimlico

Pimlico Summary

Twenty years in the hotel business, Olive easily balances her books and prepares notices for the bulletin board. She keeps a looseleaf file of notes on each of her twelve tenants, particulars that allow her to make each feel special. She sees nothing dishonest about using a memory aid, but has given orders to her executor to destroy the private records, unread, when she dies. People had thought Olive crazy when, at the age of thirty, she left Ireland to buy a seedy hotel to fulfill her lifelong dream. She had ten years' experience working in an Irish boardinghouse to guide her. Her parents had opposed her decision, her father claiming that life in London is lonely. Olive knows that people crave company. She has studied the Irish who returned from working in England, understanding what they would have liked to have found there, and set about providing it, thanks to an uncle's legacy. She aims to earn enough only to live comfortably, free from scrimping.

Olive works hard and loses money in the first few years, attracting the wrong clientèle, including short-timers and con men, before changing her approach and carefully selecting guests of good manners and standards and creating a family atmosphere. It takes a year to achieve the proper mix. For the first time in her life, Olive feels needed and fulfilled. She never thinks about marriage or children, having seen too many disasters. Olive had come close two years ago with a nice Scot hotelier, Alec, but the guests—her family—had opposed him and Olive sent him away.

Olive plants in Judy O'Connor's mind that her brother, a missionary visiting from Africa, should celebrate Christmas Mass for the guests (all Catholics) in the dining room. Olive always plants in guests' minds that she institutes their ideas: to strip their own beds, contribute to a Sunday dinner wine fund, or break off a bad engagement. Those who celebrate with relatives feel jealous of the celebration that they miss. Olive sends cards and money to her declining parents but has no intention of leaving her true family to be with them as they are nothing to her now.

Pimlico Analysis

Like "Euston," this story follows an Irish woman to London against her parents' wishes to build the life she wants. For Olive, the romantic aspect is missing until late in the story, and it is then the first step in showing the degree to which Olive has made the borders in her hotel into family. When they are upset at the prospect of her marrying, Olive breaks up with her boyfriend. Even more radical is her estrangement with her aging parents on the same grounds.

Olive has learned from her parents how not to run a boarding house—by laying down hard-nosed rules and showing no graciousness. She creates a home-like atmosphere for select tenants. She keeps tickler files on each in order to make each feel special when they talk. It seems rather odd that Olive is so secretive about this, secretive to the point of ordering the files destroyed at her death. This fits in, however, with her penchant for herding people in directions she wants, making them think that they have thought of the ideas themselves. She feels needed and wanted and seems to want always to do good, but her manipulations casts a shadow over her character.

Stockwell

Stockwell Summary

Mona Lewis vomits when she receives the diagnosis: inoperable cancer that will kill her before Christmas. Dr. Barton immediately regrets using the emotive word. Although she lives in Hampstead with her husband Jerry and twin sixteen-year-old daughters, Marigold and Annabelle, the handsome forty-six-year-old goes to be diagnosed in Stockwell, rather than letting friends who use the same doctor realize that she is having tests run. Mona brings Barton plant food and books to tend to his office plants. She hastens to help clean up the vomit and offers hints on how to treat the stain. Barton enjoys having her as a temporary patient. Settling up for the last time, he refuses her money and she assures him that she is not suicidal and will visit to trim his plants.

Walking away from the office, Mona thinks calmly about her plan to tell Jerry that she feel poorly and let Jake run the same full battery of tests and announce the same verdict. She will allow no one to panic but will assure them that it is to her advantage to know when she will die. She will not inflict on her family the six months of bewilderment that preceded her mother Clare's death. She will remain frank and authoritative. She will plan ahead for her husband's social life and daughters' careers and fortunes. She wants to help the pupils in the school where she teaches to cope well with her death. She knows that emotional Sally, her best friend, will be hardest to face. Visiting Vera North, Clare's friend, tells Mona learns that her plans to deal frankly with death match her mother's firm wishes, which she had abandoned only because everyone had preferred to harbor false hopes.

Stockwell Analysis

A final examination of intergenerational relations, "Stockwell" shows Mona Lewis learning that she has terminal cancer and determining to face it squarely. Mona recalls the agony of false hopes surrounding her mother's death when she had been sixteen and is determined not to repeat it. She makes plans for her widowed husband to remarry and her daughters to be prepared for life. When she informs her mother's friend Vera, however, Mona is surprised to learn that she has misunderstood the past. Her mother had had precisely the same intentions, but family and friends had begged her to let them hope against hope. Vera had been one of them but vows this time to support Mona, should Mona go ahead with her plan.

The story examines how cancer is a taboo word rather than just "cells going rogue" (p. 360) and pushes for better attitudes as those that have come about in dealing with mental illness. Kindly Dr. Barton beats himself up for an insensitive reference to Christmas. He realizes too late that this is too emotive a word to use in the context of stating how long a patient has to live. Braced for bad news, Mona cannot control her stomach muscles when she hears that word. It embodies the psychological problem that requires covering up the truth.

Brixton

Brixton Summary

Sandy Ring, a recently-graduated nurse, flees a failed romance in Wales to take a job in Brixton, a heavily Jamaican neighborhood. There she rooms with fellow nurse Wilma Ring, who jokes about being cousins with a white woman. Wilma is studying for a degree in open university while working odd hours in admissions to accommodate her studies and favorite television programs. Good-looking Nelson claims that Wilma is a communist, but Wilma says that she would scarcely be earning a degree if she wished to overthrow the system. She wishes that Nelson should attend to Margaret, the hard-working mother of his three children rather than flirting and gossiping.

Wilma wants both to teach and to nurse, in order to repay all her mother and aunts have done to get her where she is. She insists that each generation of daughters must exceed the previous to show that that generation's labor has meant something. Wilma talks about her mother working five to six jobs at a time to get to Britain and to live there in comparative luxury. Mother and sisters work so that Wilma can excel in school. They have a sense of solidarity. No men immigrate with them, which cuts down on problems. With families here and there, Nelson is Jamaica's shame. Wilma says that Sandy cannot understand because the good life has always been available to her. Wilma knows that the nicest roommate she has had will leave soon because life is short and she wants some fun.

Brixton Analysis

In the final story, location is critical. A young white nurse leaves Wales to live and work in what is jokingly called the "Brixton West Indies" (p. 367). It is predominantly Jamaican. In few words about food and music, Binchy paints Sandy Ring as out of place but determined to get along. Neighbors, it appears, are waiting for "young whitey" to move along—and good riddance. Turn-over is high. Much of the story consists of Jamaican Wilma Rings telling Welsh Sandy Rings about how hard her female relatives for generations have worked to give her an opportunity to excel and how she pushes herself to be worthy. Sandy is put off at the perceived implication that she has always had it easy. Wilma knows that when Sandy moves out it will not be anything racial but just Sandy's need to have fun, because life is short. While the other stories have shown generations in conflict, this one shows solidarity. Nelson, the token male, is shown as a disgrace to his gender and his nationality, the summing up of most of the men in this collection.

Characters

Mayappears in Shepherd's Bush

The protagonist and narrator of the first story, May is an underpaid hotel manager in Dublin, Ireland, who finds herself pregnant by her boss, Andy. Their affair is three years old but has no future, as he has a wife and four children to whom he is devoted. May flies from Dublin, where abortions are illegal, to London, without telling Andy. For lack of any other reliable friend or confident in London, May stays with Celia, a judgmental but reliable acquaintance, who puts her in touch with Dr. Harris. May will pay for the procedure on her own without assistance from the National Health or Andy, who can afford it better than she. May has a habit of daydreaming about the happy lives of strangers that she meets.

After obtaining from Dr. Harris an appointment with a surgeon, Mr. White, May window shops along Oxford Street to invent an excuse for coming home £200 poorer than she had left. She will tell Andy that purchases are lost or stolen, but make sure that he will not open an investigation. She laments having to spend her savings, £30 a month, on the abortion, but figures that Andy never notices her appearance anyway.

The elegant yet disdainful receptionist at White's office, May, is put off by Vanessa. White looks like a diplomat and speaks in clichés. Determining that May has thought her decision through, White sets the procedure for the next morning, and Vanessa collects £194 in advance. May has her hair done and takes in a movie before returning to Celia's and is relieved when Celia seems reluctant to visit her after the procedure.

On Wednesday, May takes a taxi to a big house, where she is put in a bright room with Helen (Hell) Adams, a return customer who tries to calm her nerves. Hell insists that May tell Andy about the abortion when she gets home in order to get credit for her great sacrifice. When May gets home from the nursing home, she finds a note from Celia that states that dinner will be at eight o'clock. May returns to Dublin, thanking her in a note for her hospitality. Waiting for the plane, May works on the story that she will tell Andy. She knows that she will not tell him about the abortion, since he is very moral in his own way.

Ritaappears in Notting Hill Gate

The first competent temporary worker hired by the newspaper in months, Rita is a big, tough, black woman from the West Indies. She rolls as she walks and dresses garishly. She looks slow, lazy, and preoccupied, but is efficient and competent when dealing with people who come with hopeless story ideas. She needs little supervision and is soon offered—and casually accepts—a permanent position. Rita says that she lives in Notting Hill but reveals none of the details of her life that other temps cannot resist sharing in lurid detail. Rita's lack of communication only increases office interest in her life. She lets slip that she has a husband.

Rita arrives in a pub just after a drunk spills a drink and then an ashtray on the unnamed narrator's skirt. Rita sends him away and offers to help her clean up and, when this fails, takes her to her upstairs flat to find a wrap-around to wear. The drunk is her handsome actor boyfriend, Andy Sparks. In the apartment are two polite, pigtailed children, Martie and Anna, preoccupied by television. The apartment is cheaply furnished but clean and bright. The narrator surveys the flat carefully in order to share details with her co-workers.

Rita returns the ruined skirt along with a gift token to replace it, courtesy of Andy. She is suspicious when the narrator breaks a lunch date to take her out to thank her and, after agreeing, remains so businesslike and uncommunicative that the narrator is relieved when a birdbrained writer from another newspaper invites herself to join them. Birdbrain tells all about her life before mentioning that she is interviewing Andy. Alone again with the narrator, Rita is skeptical about revealing anything about their relationship, knowing how journalists behave, no matter what they claim. Rita reveals that she is married to Nat, who is serving a four- to fifteen-year murder sentence. Nat is the father of Martie and Anna, whose murdered mother, Myrtle, had been Rita's best friend. Nat does not mind that Andrew and Rita need one another. Having told her story and knowing it will get around the office, Rita quits her job.

Mona Lewis appears in Stockwell

Mona vomits when she receives the diagnosis of inoperable cancer that will kill her before Christmas. Although she lives in Hampstead with her husband Jerry and twin sixteen-year-old daughters, the handsome forty-six-year-old sees Dr. Barton in Stockwell, not wanting all of her friends to know that she is having tests run. She brings him plant food and books to tend to his office plants. Mona hastens to clean up the vomit and then wants to settle up as always, in cash. She assures him that she is not suicidal and insists that she will return to trim his plants before walking away from the office.

Mona feels "dangerously calm" (p. 356) walking in the July sunshine, knowing that she will now tell Jerry that she feel poorly and let Jake run the same full battery of tests and announce the same verdict. She will allow no one to panic and will assure them that it is to her advantage to know when she will die. She will not inflict on her family the six months of bewilderment that preceded her own mother's death. She will remain frank and authoritative. She will plan ahead for her husband's social life and daughters' careers and fortunes. She wants to help the pupils in the school where she teaches to cope well with her death. She knows that telling emotional Sally, her best friend, will be the most difficult.

Vera North, Mona's late mother's friend, tells Mona that her plans to deal frankly with death match her mother's wishes thirty years earlier. Her mother, however, had abandoned the plan when everyone prefered to harbor false hopes. Vera is ready this time to support the noble plan if Mona follows through. That question is left to the reader's imagination.

Sophieappears in Marble Arch

Sophie runs a store-front selling leather goods. She rather resents being a minority speaker of English in the neighborhood but recognizes that wealthy foreigners, particularly Arabs, are her best customers. She wants not to be a racist, but to consider everyone walking on two feet human. Sophie has a good head for business, supporting herself and Eddie. Unlike her lover, Eddie, a frustrated actor who sees life as cruel, Sophie sees it as difficult and tiring but allows that one can enjoy both work and leisure.

Against her parents' wishes, she has given up the security of a life selling cosmetics for work for herself. Sophie has to deal with an old friend, Peggy, who cannot keep a job or a man, is regularly arrested for theft and prostitution and is nearly an alcoholic. Sophie angrily confronts her, saying that she has had enough and will no longer look after her. The rare display of anger reaches Peggy and she changes her ways by cleaning up her appearance and sobering up and asking for advice on selling the beautiful patchwork leather purses that she makes. Sophie is proud to market her creations to boutiques and seeing her earn a good living.

The sales also allow Sophie to relax and enjoy a social life. She has three dull suitors (George, Michael, and Fred) before Eddie meets her and moves in. People claim that Sophie becomes nicer and kinder since being with Eddie, but her parents regret that she has given up cosmetics and Peggy believes that Eddie is taking advantage of Sophie. Sophie, in turn, disapproves of Peggy's having sex with one of her leather providers, Mr. Shipton. Sophie is counting her blessings when a couple examine one of Peggy's bags and remark that they had met her earlier at the theater in the company of a good-looking actor. Sophie asks subtly if they seem involved and realizes that she is the God who makes their life carefree.

Oliveappears in Pemlico

After twenty years in the hotel business, Olive has few problems balancing her books and preparing notices of activities for the bulletin board. Finally, she takes out the looseleaf file in which she enters notes on each of her twelve tenants' histories and favorite things. She knows that being able to remember particulars about each is what makes her hotel special and sees nothing dishonest about having this memory aid. No one knows about Olive's filing system, but each considers him/herself lucky to live somewhere where they are so well understood. Olive has given orders to executor to destroy the private records, unread, when she dies.

People had thought her crazy when, at age thirty, she buys the seedy hotel to fulfill her lifelong dream. She had ten years of experience working in an Irish boardinghouse to guide her. Her parents had opposed her decision, with her father claiming that life in

London is lonely. She knows that people crave company. She had studied the Irish who returned from working in England, understood what they would have liked to find there and set about providing it, thanks to an uncle's legacy. She aims to earn enough only to live comfortably, free from scrimping. She works hard and loses money in the first years, attracting the wrong clientèle such as short-timers and con men before changing her approach and carefully selecting guests of good manners and high standards and creating a family atmosphere. It takes a year to create the proper mix. For the first time in her life, Olive feels needed and fulfilled.

Olive no longer thinks about marriage or children, having seen too many disasters. She had come close two years ago with a nice Scot hotelier, Alec, but the guests—her family—had opposed him and Olive sent him away. Olive plants in Judy O'Connor's mind that her brother, a missionary visiting from Africa, should celebrate Christmas Mass for the guests (all Catholics) in the dining room. Olive always plants in guests' minds that she institutes their ideas: to strip their own beds, contribute to a Sunday dinner wine fund, or break off a bad engagement. Those who celebrate with relatives feel jealous of the celebration that they miss. Olive sends cards and money to her declining parents but has no intention of leaving her true family to be with them as they are nothing to her now.

Celiaappears in Shepherd's Bush

A resident of Shepherd's Bush, Celia is the only person to whom the narrator can turn to put her up while undergoing an abortion. Normally brisk, moralistic, and judgmental, delivering lectures over tea, Celia surprises May by matter-of-factly arranging for her to see Dr. Harris. Celia looks thin and tired, having been on a diet, and loves dreary, boring Martin, who regularly goes home to visit his mother. She has a flat in a big Victorian house in a noisy neighborhood. The flat has no pictures, books, or souvenirs. It seems gloomy when empty. May finds Celia's life strange and empty. When May gets home from the nursing home she finds a note from Celia, which states that dinner will be at eight o'clock. May returns to Dublin thanking her in a note for her hospitality.

Dr. Harris, Mr. White, and Vanessa appears in Shepherd's Bush

The medical professionals in Shepherd's Bush who arrange for and perform May's abortion, Harris is a small, worried-looking, kindly Jew for whom abortions are no more upsetting than tonsillectomies. Celia arranges for May to see him soon after her arrival in Shepherd's Bush. His examination is painless and unembarrassing. He asks pro forma about why she is terminating the pregnancy and accepts the answer that neither she nor the married father want the baby. He refers her to Mr. White, a well-known surgeon at a posh address near Harley Street. White operates on a cash-only basis, up front, to prevent being cheated and for tax purposes.

Helen (Hell) Adams appears in Shepherd's Bush

A chubby, pretty, twenty-three-year-old Australian, Hell is May's roommate at the abortion clinic. She has been there before and has friends who have been up to five times. Hell explains what to expect. She cannot take birth control pills and finds other means of contraception too messy. Insisting that the rules are to inform the father and have him pay for the abortion, Hell calls May the noble Lady Galahad and strongly advises her to tell Andy when she gets home. Otherwise, Andy will not realize the sacrifice that she has made. Hell's lover Charlie visits, tells funny stories, arranges to see Hell next day, and goes home to a dinner party hosted by his wife.

Malcolm and Melissa appears in Holland Park

A married couple whom everyone on a cruise to Greece hates because they are too perfect—although they do nothing obnoxious—Malcolm and Melissa six months afterward the cruise invite the anonymous narrator to their big, charming home in Holland Park for a dinner party. Malcolm runs a left-wing bookshop that makes a lot of money, while Melissa raises money for good causes. They invite the unnamed narrator to an informal dinner party that she knows will be magnificent. Melissa is happy that she will bring her friend Alice along. The narrator is concerned that both sides take a liking to one another.

Malcolm welcomes them warmly to a house that looks like the set for a film about gracious living. Melissa wears a tapestry skirt like what the narrator had thought of wearing. Everything is perfect and under-stated. Malcolm and Melissa are considering a yachting holiday with Jeremy and Jacky and suggest that the narrator and Alice join them. The narrator realizes that Melissa thinks that they are lesbians.

Aliceappears in Holland Park

The anonymous narrator's best friend, Alice from nearby Fulham, shares an inside joke with her about things, sharing the annoying perfection of Malcolm and Melissa's life. At the risk of destroying the myth, the narrator asks to bring Alice to Malcolm and Melissa's dinner party and has to spend the time leading up to the affair talking Alice out of going in a wild costume. Alice is solicitor (lawyer) specializing in domestic situations and sex discrimination. She is having an unsatisfactory love affair with a partner whose wife is often in the hospital. The narrator works in theater publicity and is sort of in love with a hopeless writer who loves too many people. They refer to one another's lovers as their Things.

Alice arrives to pick up the narrator and finds her having an uncharacteristic fashion crisis. They swap stories over Scotch before setting out in Alice's 1969 VW, which is out of place among other guests' elegant cars. Alice gets on well with both Malcolm and Melissa and impresses them without trying. The narrator berates herself for being jealous and envious of Alice being accepted on her own terms rather than through her.

When the narrator chokes on something during dinner, Alice advises her to force her limbs to relax and her throat stops constricting. A doctor says this is very unscientific, but it works.

Andrew (Andy) Sparks appears in Notting Hill Gate

Handsome as a Greek god, Andy is West Indian Rita's white boyfriend, first met as a clumsy drunk ruining the unnamed narrator's skirt in a pub. Andy is a well-known actor, playing Henry in some television serial. His dizzying, boyishly eager good looks make the female audience contemplate a life with him. Andy had been interviewed by the narrator's newspaper weeks earlier. A birdbrained rival from another newspaper brags over lunch that she is interviewing Andy in a small club in order to learn about his private life. She believes him not to be as dumb as rumored, able to sound intelligent only when delivering lines. Birdbrain's story is tame, missing the angle of Andy's mystery woman.

Patappears in Queensway

Innocent Pat has left her banking job and home in Leicester, England, when generous, easy-going Aunt Delia is institutionalized with dementia. After three months in a costly hotel in London and working in a bank where everyone is married or involved, Pat wants to move into a flat with roommates but is too concerned about the interview process to answer advertisements. A tough friend, Terry, advises her to ask interviewers details about money, housework, and privacy.

Pat gets a bad impression from the first call she makes but goes to see the place, primarily as practice for future interviews. Pat is overwhelmed by the magnificence of the flat and its setting overlooking the park. Joy and Marigold play down the business aspects and Pat forgets her list of questions. She finds herself comfortable at a meal for the first time since leaving Aunt Delia. She is wary to move in immediately and dazed, but agrees to the somewhat dear £20 weekly rent plus £10 for food, flowers, and wine. Two students help Pat move in her few possessions on Saturday, and she sends for select pieces of Aunt Delia's furnishings, which she is scheduled to inherit at some point. Pat finds reading, listening to music, and chatting with Joy and Marigold almost a rest cure and believes that she has found the ideal roommates.

Rather quickly, however, Pat wonders if Marigold is exempt from monetary expenses and who leans on her and Joy for performing heavier physical tasks, but does not rock the boat. It also seems odd that Joy insists on Pat always phoning her rather than Marigold. Having learned about Solomon's antique shop, which Nadia had managed, Pat pays a visit and asks the value of Aunt Dalia's inlaid cabinet, which Marigold had fancied and said is worth £50. The proprietor says at least £500. Handsome Kevin, working in the back, warns Pat against moving in her furniture. Nadia had left terrified of Marigold, who is not paralyzed and has virtually enslaved a series of roommates. Pat tries not to believe this, but recognizes details of objects that she has admired in the flat.

In the end, however, the flat is so comfortable that Pat ignores Kevin and buys Marigold a nice potted plant.

Joy and Marigold appears in Queensway

Pat's roommates in a Queensway flat, Joy answers Pat's phone call of inquiry in a breathless state at work and uses words like "super" and engages in pleasantries that leave Pat wary. She mentions that a third roommate, Nadia, has suddenly left for Washington, DC, creating the vacancy. In person, Joy wears expensive perfume and is welcoming. She is a friendly, eager to please twenty-seven-year-old clerk in a solicitor's office and aspires to be a solicitor some day. Marigold is wheelchair-bound with polio. Unable to leave the flat, she does the housework and cooking. She has a most beautiful face and otherworldly blue eyes. She is serene, gentle, and calm.

Together, Joy and Marigold play down the business aspects, forget other supposed applicants, and assume that Pat will move in immediately. Marigold seems hurt when Pat wants time to think, but she recovers and is as bubbly as Joy when Pat moves in the following Saturday. Marigold defers to Joy on monetary matters. Joy shops on Fridays. Rather quickly, she wonders if Marigold is exempt from monetary expenses and why Marigold leans on her and Joy for performing heavier physical tasks, but she does not rock the boat. It also seems odd that Joy insists on Pat always phoning her rather than Marigold. When Aunt Delia's furniture arrives, Marigold is enthusiastic about its quality and insists that a curtain would be perfect for her balcony. When Pat asks about Nadia, Marigold refuses details beyond some sexual innuendo and mention of her having managed Solomon's antique shop.

Visiting the shop, Pat learns some troubling details about her roommates' treatment of Nadia and, despite Joy's protestations, that Marigold feigns polio. Kevin alleges that Marigold has prevented Joy from marrying and having children and forcing her to become a solicitor to earn her more.

Nadia and Kevin appears in Queensway

Pat's predecessor in the richly appointed flat with Joy and Marigold, Nadia is said to have become manager of Solomon's antique shop partly by talent and partly by sleeping with the boss. She is also said to have gone to manage a shop in the Georgetown section of Washington, DC, after fleeing some sort of entanglement with a restoration painter. Marigold refuses further details. Pat visits Solomon's and learns from Kevin, a handsome if seedy young man, that Marigold is not, in fact, crippled by polio and confined to a wheelchair and that Nadia is not in the U.S. but is instead hiding in his flat. She is terrified of Marigold, who has confiscated her lovely furniture and turned her into a prostitute to support her. Kevin claims that they are mad. Nadia longs for her idyllic home but cannot face the tyranny.

Lisa and her Married Lover appears in Lancaster Gate

The chief character in "Lancaster Gate," Lisa, a thirty-five-year-old teacher, is for seventeen months the mistress of a wealthy forty-five-year-old married man whose name is never mentioned in the story. He has no intention of leaving his family, as a third child is about to be born. Lisa regrets the huge scene that she makes when he announces a week-long business trip to London and neglects to invite her. Her hysteria shakes him and earns her the invitation. She meets him at a service station on the London Road, fearing that he will stand her up for the drive into the city.

There they stay in a posh hotel as man and wife, but Lisa realizes that he is starting to lose interest because of her anxiety—which serves only to increase the anxiety. Lisa wonders how movie characters can be so calm in crisis, but she is quite good at such pretending while her heart races. She finds it easy to fool one with whom there is a love or almost-love relationship. Lisa has twice before visited London and has been disappointed, but she finds the unnamed hotel luxurious. Her lover books them a room with a double bed rather than the usual twin beds, and complimentary fruit and flowers are sent up from the president of the company. The Mr. and Mrs. card reminds her that she is a tramp.

Lisa worries as he dismisses her ideas for spending the day and then announces that he has an appointment for an "executive health checkup" (p. 102) that will take all morning. He has arranged it while away from his gossipy office. She can stroll around until dinnertime. Lisa puts on her non-clinging act. Leaving the now ordinary-looking lobby, Lisa jaywalks to a red-haired white-faced vendor's stand. She is depressed that he takes her correctly for a provincial. She recalls her mother's old admonitions to remember that she comes from good stock and can always hold her head high. She is better than her love and certainly better than this offensive street merchant.

The boy offers Lisa a seat and coffee when she looks unwell. He tells her that her "husband's" doctor's appointment on Harley Street is likely a rendezvous with some blonde. He adds flirtatious pleasantries to cut the sting of his observation. He is relieved when she moves on. As she walks through the park, Lisa reviews the evidence and concludes that her lover had intended to meet a woman—his pregnant wife or some young fool—at the hotel this weekend. Lisa decides that it is not worth returning to the hotel to fetch her £12 suitcase before boarding a train home. It is not the spectacular break-ups one sees in films. She wishes that she had someone to tell about the break-up but realizes that she could not have mentioned an affair to her mother, her father would be pleased had it not involved his daughter, and, besides Maggie, who would take it lightly, and her brother, who would have a worried conversation with his wife, Lisa has few friends.

Eddieappears in Marble Arch

Sophie's thirty-seven-year-old live-in lover, Eddie is a handsome, moody actor past his prime, who constantly laments that producers and agents want sexual favors to advance his career. He sees life as a plot but has spent too long learning his craft to give up. Eddie first meets Sophie at a theater, where she is on a date with Fred. He asks if she is an actress. They become friends and then lovers and he moves in with her. Eddie tells Sophie that he is attending a play, The Table Lighter, with an agent, Garry, when in fact he attends with Peggy.

Peggy Anderson appears in Marble Arch

Sophie's sole success in convincing anyone that hard work can pay off, Peggy is a warm and friendly soul with red hair who, unlike Sophie, brushes off a course in Business Administration and is unable to land a job. Leaving home at odds with her parents, Peggy often turns to Sophie for money and to gripe about men. Whenever Peggy is arrested or hospitalized, she calls for Sophie. After three weeks in prison on prostitution charges, Peggy is confronted by her friend and told to straighten out or else. The rare display of anger reaches Peggy and she changes her ways.

Cleaning herself up physically, Peggy asks to accompany Sophie on her rounds soliciting customers and asks how she might set herself up in business selling the hand made leather work for which she has a rare talent. Sophie is elated to market the exquisite patchwork purses to boutiques at a high price, and soon Peggy is in business. When Sophie falls in love with unemployed actor Eddie, Peggy warns that he is taking advantage of her and will leave her. Peggy shops around for odd pieces of leather to use in her craft. She gets much of it from Mr. Shipton, for whom she does sexual favors, of which Sophie disapproves. Peggy says it is preferable to random prostitution. From potential customers, Sophie learns that Peggy and Eddie have attended a lunchtime play together and sees bitterly that she is supporting them both.

Margaretappears in Bond Street

Margaret is a shoplifter, who for nine years has been making monthly "shopping sprees" (p. 133) without being caught. She makes sure that she always carries enough cash to pay for the items on her list in case she is caught, and has a careful methodology to minimize her risk, including studying items carefully in various lights, dropping them surreptitiously without looking down, asking the "Pay Here" person where some other item is located. She supposes that she could most easily talk her way out of trouble if she were caught by stealing only one item per store, so she spends much time checking bags of stolen merchandise into the luggage lockers of each new store she visits.

Margaret is selective: red and white towels to match the new paint job in the bathroom; steak knives that she will suddenly "find" in the attic; fashionable tights as a treat for herself; remnants for dressmaking; a pendant as a birthday present for son Jerry in the North (although he complains about the price of gift items); a huge tea cup for Harry, like the one he admires on television; a table lighter for brother-in-law Martin, who has always disapproved of Margaret.

Years earlier, when Harry gets a coworker at the factory pregnant, Margaret cool-headedly sets out the options: Harry either recognizes paternity, marries the girl, and supports both families, or claims that someone else might be the father and pays the girl a small lump-sum to thank her for his pleasure. If Harry leaves he will never see Margaret or their son again but must fulfill his financial obligation; if he stays with her, everything will be as it has been and she will provide a fine home—even if she has to steal. Five minutes in the kitchen waiting for a decision seem like five hours. Harry gives her £50 and nothing more is ever said about the incident. Margaret begins bringing Harry wonderful gifts when she goes shoplifting. He is convinced that he has married Wonderwoman and regrets how close he came to losing her through stupidity. This makes her feel good.

Harryappears in Bond Street

Margaret's husband, Harry has a big, kind face. When he frowns, he looks old, so Margaret prevents his frowning. Harry is a marvelous gardener. Years earlier, Harry gets a coworker at the factory pregnant, and she and her father confront him about accepting responsibility and supporting her and the child. Harry and the father both shuffle about, yelling, until Margaret presents the options and nervously awaits his decision. Harry gives her £50 and nothing more is ever said about the incident. Margaret begins bringing Harry wonderful gifts when she goes shoplifting. He is convinced that he has married Wonderwoman and regrets how close he came to losing her through stupidity.

Martinappears in Bond Street

Margaret's brother-in-law, who has never approved of her and who is suspicious of how she and Harry can afford to decorate their home so beautifully, Martin is married to a loud, lazy, sluttish, chain-smoking (and unnamed) woman whom Margaret likes to avoid. Thankfully, they visit just twice a year. Years earlier, when Harry gets a coworker at the factory pregnant, Martin had not been helpful and still chides him about younger women.

Frankieappears in Oxford Circus

A woman rarely out of trouble, Frankie often turns to the unnamed narrator, who relishes rescuing her from wrongful arrests. When Frankie gets a job with the BBC, the narrator worries that she will broadcast her troubles to all of England. Frankie is incapable of seeing cause and effect in her behavior. She has recently gotten out of an abusive relationship. On a rare evening when the narrator and Clive are home, sorting pictures, Frankie drops in to borrow a sweater and skirt for her first day at work. While the narrator searches, Clive bristles at being left alone with Frankie, who coos over a baby picture that he has barely tolerated keeping. Frankie innocently embarrasses them both with stories from her and the narrator's romantic pasts.

The next day, Frankie phones the narrator at work to invite her to the BBC Club for drinks, shows up an hour late, and is dismayed to learn that one must be a member of the club, not merely work for the BBC. She is wearing a wonderful bright outfit not at all suitable for work and probably out of place in this club. A couple of men vouch for them. Frankie hopes to run into her boss, Martin, and get to know him. She has heard that Martin's wife, a senior producer at the BBC, is a monster who keeps close tabs on him; her plan is to befriend the wife and convince her (despite her garish clothing) that she is no threat. The wife proves to be quite friendly. She lectures the narrator about remaining in teaching if she does not feel called to that vocation, and is reluctant to leave at 7 PM. As she does, the narrator realizes that she is her principal's sister.

Clive and the Unnamed Narrator appears in Oxford Circus

The unnamed narrator's husband/lover, Clive likes everyone except Frankie, whom he finds brainless, prone to getting into trouble, and vain. Clive is silly once he "gets a bee in his bonnet" (p. 148) and foresees disaster when Frankie gets a job with the BBC. Clive teaches economics to "selfish self-advancing housewives" (p. 152) most evenings while the narrator, a teacher, takes classes, working towards a degree in Italian. When Frankie drops by to borrow a fitting wardrobe for her first day at work, she destroys a happy time of sorting through old photographs. Clive destroys a childhood picture that he detests but his wife loves and she retreats into ironing to hold in her temper.

The next day, Frankie phones the narrator at work to invite her to the BBC Club for drinks. She accepts in order to avoid sulking Clive but soon, in the noisy, crowded room, wishes she were home with everything forgiven and forgotten, or even at work teaching unruly children. Introduced to a senior producer, the narrator builds up Frankie's dedication to the job while demeaning her own work as a teacher. She is, in fact, an excellent teacher whose classes are exuberant, but paints herself as a slacker. When the producer leaves, the narrator realizes that she is her principal's sister.

Martin and His Unnamed Wife appears in Oxford Circus

Frankie's boss at the BBC, Martin encourages her to "live and breathe the programme constantly" (p. 153), thinking up new ideas to make it great. After her first day at work, Frankie invites her friend, the unnamed narrator, to the BBC Club for drinks in order herself to run into Martin and get to know him. Frankie has heard that Martin's wife, a senior producer at the BBC, is a monster who keeps close tabs on him; her plan is to befriend the wife and convince her (despite her clothing) that she is no threat. The wife proves to be quite friendly. She lectures the narrator about remaining in teaching if she does not feel called to that vocation, and is reluctant to leave at 7 PM. As she does, the narrator realizes that she is her principal's sister.

Juliaappears in Tottenham Court Road

The protagonist of a story about the search for sexual knowledge in anticipation of losing her virginity at age twenty-nine, Julia finds herself in a pornography store, unable to find anything that offers useful tips on how not to appear foolish. She first considers shopping in pricey Soho, but a knowing colleague in her travel agency suggests Tottenham Court Road. She chooses the largest pornography shop she sees, figuring that it will have the largest selection.

After conquering her fear of being raped by fellow browsers, Julia wanders lost from one specialty aisle to another. At age twenty she had refused to make love with her fiancé, Joe, believing her aunt's warning that men never trust a woman who gives in before marriage. Joe moves on to a more willing woman, and for the next few years, Julia meets only drunkards and men on the rebound. She concentrates on building her business until she meets Michael at a foreign resort, where she is gathering brochure ideas. She likes him but is mortified at the thought of him discovering that she is an aged virgin. When he visits London to see her, she finds work-related excuses. Finally he asks gently why she shuts him out, seeing that they get along well.

Julia decides to lose her virginity to someone else, but fails with three men whom she lures to her flat. One falls asleep drunk, another blathers about his lost wife and impotency, and the third brags of his exploits so that she is certain that he will give her syphilis. At that point she decides to visit a bookshop. Breaking down, she asks a clerk for a book to give to her niece, who is going to get married. The clerk suggests that she share her own experience with the girl and assures her that no man wants his wife to come to marriage too knowledgeable of techniques.

When he insists that no book will suffice, Julia claims to be a nun and thus unable to give advice. He is stunned by her worldly attire. As she builds her story for him, Julia considers that catering travel for missionaries might be profitable. He is happy when she leaves the shop, defeated. On the way home she buys wine to get Michael drunk and figures they can laugh this off. She meets an Italian tourist and considers inviting him home but decides that she has coped enough for one day.

Michaelappears in Tottenham Court Road

Julia's new boyfriend Michael works in publishing. They meet while she is touring foreign resorts, taking notes for brochure ideas. Michael steers her away from the club in which they meet. They visit several more clubs before he invites her to his room for a drink. He accepts her refusal on the grounds that she does not go in for "holiday things" (p. 169), assuming that she might enjoy a real-life thing. He begins visiting London to see her but she always has work-related excuses. He asks gently why she shuts him out, seeing that they get along well.

Milly and Paula appears in Tottenham Court Road

Julia's coworkers in a travel agency, Milly and Paula talk regularly about their sex lives. Embarrassed at being still a virgin at twenty-nine, Julia invents stories while wishing she could ask them candidly all about sex from start to finish.

Rita and Jefferyappears in Holborn

Rita, a beautician, rises at 5:30 AM and angrily makes a list of things she wants and wants not to do when newlyweds Ken and Daisy visit. Husband Jeffery is enthusiastic about showing them about, even though Rita and Ken had lived together for a year in Cardiff, Wales. Rita remembers Ken's penchant for exhausting hikes and climbs and wanting to get into bed early. Rita breaks it off and moves to London. She and utterly predictable, cliché-spouting Jeffery have been married a year. Rita sits, planning how to present herself to her ex during the dinner meeting and worrying about how Ken will mock the kinds of things in their flat that they together had always laughed over in others' homes. She wants Ken to still love her, although she does not love him.

Rita allows Jeffery his freedom. He has two sons who visit weekends. Rita has several times talked to their odd mother, Heather. Rita cannot prevent her friend Lilly from going to the station to watch the drama and is shocked to see Lilly talking happily with an elderly, bedraggled old woman holding onto a cane. It is Daisy, whom Lilly had known as Peggy. Rita thinks that she is losing her mind, imagining Ken in bed with an old cripple. Jeffery insists that Lilly join them for dinner, which Rita spends mulling over how this could have happened to carefree Ken. When Ken fails to joke about fellow diners as he always had, Rita wonders if she has gotten everything wrong.

Ken and Daisy/Peggy appears in Holborn

Newlyweds, Ken and Daisy come to London for the first time to visit Rita and Jeffery. Ken describes Daisy over the phone as "frail"; she turns out to be aged at forty, straggly-haired and walking with a cane. Rita's friends in Wales have told her only that Daisy is a nurse, very sensible and very good for Ken, whom she meets in the hospital after one of his climbing accidents. Daisy turns out to be Lilly's mother's nurse long before, when she is known as Peggy. She'd felt the name Daisy to be undignified for a professional. She reverts to Daisy when she matures and wants not to insult her parents' name choice. At the restaurant, Daisy charms everyone.

Lillyappears in Holborn

Rita's friend and co-worker, from whom Rita borrows a black wool cape to wear to her and husband Jeffery's dinner meeting with Ken and Daisy, Lilly is excited by the prospects of drama. She insists on coming along to the station to watch the meeting, promising to pretend not to know Rita. It turns out that Lilly knows Daisy, but as Peggy, an old family friend.

Jilly Twilly appears in Chancery Lane

Wanting to sue rich banker Charles Benson for breach of contract and to generate a good deal of publicity, twenty-six-year-old Jill Twilly, a fading dancer, writes a barrister, John Lewis, whom she in a drunken state has met at a party, to seek his advice. She reminds him that she had been the woman dancing in blue with a tattered boa. She does not trust the Yellow Pages and dislikes the look of barristers' offices. She recalls where Lewis works and offers to barter her tap-dancing lessons for advice.

Overlooking Lewis's objections and advice as mere "stuffy phrases" (p. 200), Jilly describes her situation, assuming lawyer/client privilege: the villain Charlie, a rich banker, has given her a ring but is pulling out of the engagement. She is getting too old for dancing engagements and cannot afford to live by giving lessons. He walks out on Rita after Tom Barry's party, leaving a note claiming that her behavior at the party had humiliated him, and reclaims his ring. Jilly continues writing Lewis, sending documentation and asking why he turns stiff, refusing to correspond further. Her career needs the boost of publicity. After a non-professional dinner together, Lewis breaks up with his girlfriend, takes Jilly to Paris, and refuses to believe that she has settled seven breach of contract suits out of court.

John Lewis appears in Chancery Lane

A barrister who meets Jilly Twilly at a party, Lewis insists repeatedly that he cannot help her sue someone for breach of contract. He advises her to approach her family solicitor, as his firm does not handle this sort of litigation. He cautions that breach of contract suits are rarely successful and cautions against seeking publicity. When Jilly disregards his objections and sends particulars of her grievances, Lewis writes to reiterate his position. When she responds by saying that she will sue him for malpractice unless he represents her, Lewis writes stiffly, refusing further correspondence.

A sorrowful letter about Jilly's fading career touches Lewis, who apologizes for his previous tone and suggests meeting for dinner as friends. John then writes Monica to break a date, claiming that he must attend to matters to advance his career. Monica understands. Jilly writes to thank Lewis for an uplifting weekend in Paris. John responds to Monica's hysterical phone calls to the office by denying they have any agreement to marry. Finally, he writes Tom Barry to ask him not to interfere in his planned marriage to Jilly.

Tom Barry appears in Chancery Lane

A mutual friend of Jilly Twilly and John Lewis, Tom throws a party at which they meet. Lewis writes him to thank him for the enjoyable time and asks how to contact Jilly to return her cigarette lighter. Tom agrees that Jilly is a lively character and refers Lewis to the banker with whom she had come to the party. When Lewis becomes engaged to Jilly, Tom writes to warn him that she has had seven breach of contract suits settled out of court, Lewis rejects the idea and uninvites Tom from the wedding.

Stuart and Pat appears in Seven Sisters

A married couple who respond to an advertisement for a wife-swapping party, Stuart and Pat live an average life with their young children, Debbie and Danny, a life largely centered on gardening. Their sex life is ordinary. Stuart is blasé about the evening as it nears, but Pat panics. It is the "Terrible Day" for which she has her hair styled and worries in the mirror about how deadly white her skin is. She sees herself being rejected by all of the swingers—equally worrying about being ravished. Stuart assures her that because they are doing it together it is not infidelity but rather a generous sharing and exploration of new pleasures. Pat worries that their escapade will become known and ruin Stuart's career at the bank and their children's reputations. She worries about Stuart's intentions when he wants to take the train rather than having to worry about being in condition to drive home.

Pat frets and finally breaks into tears as they near their destination. She is careful about how she phrases her refusal to go on: she is jealous of anyone seeing or touching her husband. She had earlier worried only about her part in it, not his. Stuart is amazed that Pat feels so strongly about their sex life but agrees to go home to a dinner of kebabs and wine with anticipation of great pleasure together. They joke about an older couple that asks directions to No. 17. Stuart and Pat's horizons have been broadened without going to the party.

Veraappears in Finsbury Park

Having grown up in poverty with a loud, cackling, and drinking mother and older sister, Vera dislikes programs on television that remind her of her first fifteen years of life. At fifteen, she suffers an attack of rheumatic fever and recuperates for long weeks in a hospital beside a gentle schoolteacher, Miss Andrews, who encourages her to make changes to improve her appearance and outlook on life and to stay in school even if it and her home life are pure hell. Vera puts up with the filth and noise for two years, frequently visiting Andrew's lovely flat and telephoning. From Andrew's example, Vera learns how to smile and modulate her voice. In school she learns typing, shorthand, and spelling, skills that will allow her to leave her mother's horrible flat and support herself without her having fear of returning to depression. Vera promises to visit her mother often when she moves out but never does. She sends her cards at Christmas, Mother's Day, and her birthday, with £1 enclosed, but no details about her own life or inquiries about the family. Vera stops visiting Andrews, sends occasional notes and small gifts, but then abruptly says goodbye.

In the next five years she has five jobs and lives in five homes, frugally, allowing herself the luxury only of seeing stylish films, window shopping, and attending diverse evening courses. At age twenty-three, she is well-spoken and informed and has, within her means, collected ornaments, which she displays as Andrews has. At work she refuses to join fellow workers in joking about her lowly background. She works in a hotel gift shop where she meets Joseph, a lonely, forty-five-year-old widower, who is attracted to her and asks her out. Vera knows little about men and is shy. Vera accepts Joseph's bumbling, apologetic proposal of marriage, and after a small wedding to which she does not invite her family, she moves to his dream house in Finsbury Park. Her apprenticeship ends and life begins.

Vera makes the small scullery her headquarters for the excruciatingly slow process of furnishing the barren fourteen-room house. She refuses designers and consultants, wanting to make it perfect entirely on her own. Two years later the house still looks like they have just moved in. Joseph grows frustrated at living out of a box, enjoys no home-cooked meals, and realizes that because Vera is taking the pill, he will never become a father. When the house is finished to perfection, Joseph is frustrated that Vera will allow nothing to be disturbed, for instance, cooking in the well-appointed kitchen. Life does not improve. Joseph hires a Filipino housekeeper, Anna, but Vera works alongside of her, keeping the house shining. She refuses a cook. When Joseph hires Mrs. Murray to do the heavy housecleaning, her stories of life in a housing project like the one in which Vera grows up drives Vera crazy. Anna and Murray feel sorry for Joseph and pity obsessive Vera.

Miss Andrews appears in Finsbury Park

A gentle, genteel, and lonely school teacher hospitalized in the bed next to Vera while Vera is recovering from rheumatic fever, Andrews becomes her mentor, emphasizing that even bad things can bring about good. For two years after leaving the hospital, Vera frequently visits Andrew's quiet, nicely-appointed flat as a refuge and learns from Andrew's example how to smile and modulate her voice. Andrews emphasizes that Vera must not leave her mother's flat until she is able to support herself, because having to return would be devastatingly depressing. When Vera leaves home, cutting herself off completely from her mother, she stops visiting Andrews and eventually cuts her off as well.

Josephappears in Finsbury Park

A sad-faced lonely, wealthy widower, a childless corporate lawyer, and, at age forty-five, twenty years Vera's senior, Joseph is deemed by giggling workers in the hotel gift shop to be an ideal catch. He has lived in the hotel for three years, wants to remarry, and is attracted to shy, innocent Vera. He finds this attractive and begins painting word pictures of life together, fixing up a dream house. They are married in a smaller service to which she does not invite her family. Joseph is frustrated by the slow progress in furnishing the fourteen-room house, but Vera refuses consultants and designers. Two years later it still looks like they have just moved in. Joseph is frustrated. He recalls wistfully the comfort and fine food in the hotel. He wonders if Vera has some nervous trouble but then admonishes himself for being selfish and makes do.

Because Vera is taking the pill, Joseph realizes that he will never become a father. When the house is finished to perfection, Joseph is frustrated that Vera will allow nothing to be disturbed. Life does not improve. Joseph hires a Filipino housekeeper, Anna, but Vera works alongside of her, keeping the house shining. She refuses a cook. When Joseph hires Mrs. Murray to do the heavy housecleaning, her stories of life in a housing project like the one in which Vera grows up drives Vera crazy. Anna and Murray feel sorry for Joseph and pity obsessive Vera.

Heather and Adam appears in Highbury & Islington

Adam is a young banker living in Islington, preparing himself for big opportunities in the EEC (European Economic Community). He plays squash and walks for exercise, goes to dinner theaters and discos with Heather, whom he has known for a year and loved for eight months. Heather works in a department store. Every other weekend he visits his wealthy, proper family in Sussex and says little about his life—and nothing about Heather, until he asks to bring her for a visit. On the train, Adam worries about the impression that liberated Heather will make, reading sexy magazines and lounging with her feet in his lap. He warns her that they must have separate bedrooms. She responds that they will find ways to get together.

Adam has read a lot about love and understands unrequited love from having fallen for Jane Fonda and from having been chased by some stuck-up girl in school in whom he was uninterested. Heather is Adam's first true love, but he realizes from Romeo and Juliet that families do not always go along willingly. He knows that the ridicule will be subtle and after-the-fact. In asking to bring Heather for a visit, Adam had begged his mother to allow it to be a quiet, normal weekend, knowing that it would turn extravagant. He contemplates how different his two lives are. Adam has visited Heather's home several times. Her mother, an embittered, hard-working Scot, hopes that Adam can hold down a job; her stepfather tries to borrow money.

Changing trains, Adam wishes that they had stayed in London. He phones home to say that Heather has caught the flu and then tells Heather about a fire in her room. Relieved not to have to go through with the visit, Adam realizes from his mother and Heather's tones that he is losing more than the cost of a ticket. He wonders if he will ever grow up.

Mother, Louise, and Old Elsie appears in Highbury & Islington

Adam's widowed mother assumes that she knows everyone of substance among London's twelve million inhabitants, including any friends that Adam might invite for a weekend visit. She and her sarcastic, sardonic, bookish, nineteen-year-old daughter

Louise, Adam's younger sister, are surprised when Adam asks to bring a female. Louise works in a library and shows no interest in men. Adam knows that Louise will find plenty of ammunition in Adam's lover, Heather, the first person ever to be invited to spend the night at the ancestral home in Sussex, which he visits every other weekend. When Adam backs out of the visit, talking first to Elsie, the retainer who has been laboring hard to put the guest room in shape, and then to his mother, he believes his mother may suspect that he is doing something he would prefer, but says nothing.

Eveappears in King's Cross

An extraordinary personal manager dedicated to gaining proper places and honor for the women she chooses to work for, Eve accepts the offer of a secretary's job from Sara Gray, knowing that Gray needs a personal manager. Eve refuses to use Gray's first name because she is an executive and male executives are never addressed by first name. She announces that Gray should be promotion manager rather than an assistant and sets out to effect the change within the year. She discovers unused budgeted funds to remodel the dingy office into an attractive executive meeting room, to provide Gray a suitable executive wardrobe, and to arrange a make-over. From her own cubicle at the door Eve enforces a policy of meetings by appointment only and screens phone calls. Her filing system allows Gray instantly to access data.

From the beginning, Eve makes clear that she stays in a given job only long enough to gain her female employer the status she deserves, and then she moves on. Gray is saddened when this time comes too quickly and wishes that Eve would broaden her base of operations to teach more women to assert themselves properly. Eve insists that one-on-one alone is workable. As a feminist, it goes against Eve's grain to suggest superficial changes in wardrobe and appearance to get ahead, but these work, and that is all that matters in an unjust business world. The fight must take place from within the system. She is bitter than men have all the natural advantages, including supportive wives and lovers to help them with trivialities and secretaries to keep them organized. Eve claims not to be bitter but constructive. It is slow but satisfying to help a handful of women advance. She moves on because there is much to be done.

Sara Gray appears in King's Cross

An assistant promotions manager for a huge travel agency, Gray has all of her ideas stolen by her boss, Mr. Garry Edwards. She hires Eve, worrying that she is a bit women's lib, as her secretary, insisting that she is not downtrodden, but has achieved quite a bit as a woman. Eve, a personal manager, accepts Gray as her greatest challenge yet. Gray has big, trusting brown eyes and insists on being called Sara; Eve convinces her that this is improper, since none of the males at her level are called by their first name. She goes on to promise Gray Edward's position within the year. This is both possible and fair. Gray objects that she wants no Mafia-style back-stabbings, power struggles, or office war.

Acting on Eve's suggestion, Gray phones a few of her references and learns how Eve has transformed careers. They convince Gray that Eve has an uncanny knack for recognizing how women hold themselves back and how to use the system to get them where they deserve to be. Her eyes opened to how she has been held back, Gray agrees to follow Eve's directions. Many of the steps are uncomfortable for Gray, but they all bear fruit. Eve continually reinforces Gray's confidence by pointing to her brilliant idea for which she has gotten no credit. Work is restructured so this never happens again. Within two weeks, Gray's office is stylish, an extension of her corporate personality. Gray learns to relax to the point that she does not even worry about when her errant boyfriend Geoff might return. When he does, she is no push-over.

Gray is dismayed when Eve suggests that she hire a harmless, efficient, young male assistant to handle operations when Gray begins traveling on business. Eve rejects the idea of remaining and helping Gray to the top of the business. That is unnecessary and probably impossible. Eve arranges for Gray to attend an executive supper party, where she charms the chairman and a cantankerous board member's lonely wife. Gray arranges to interview their son Simon, just graduated from Cambridge but drifting and without plans. She dodges Edward's newly-aroused romantic interest. Higher-ups begin attending her supposedly impromptu conferences and all approve of hiring Simon, who quickly becomes devoted to Eve, his trainer.

When Gray goes to Paris to handle a presentation, Edwards is green with envy and hurt when she continues avoiding his passes. Rumors circulate that Gray will soon take over Edward's job, and he makes a strategic mistake than ensures this. Gray asks Eve to accompany her upstairs to the executive suite, but Eve assures her that she is ready to excel there on her own.

Mary Brennan appears in Euston

An Irish woman living in London, Mary sees a television program about not holding grudges and decides to go forgive her family and fly home for Christmas. The decision makes her feel lighthearted for the first time in years. Rather than surprise them by showing up as the Prodigal, she writes first, picturing her seventy-five-year-old mother's joy at the good news. Her mother's last letter, begging her to return, had lacked the old sureness about everything. Mary has filed all of her mother's letters but answered none of them, having nothing to say.

The falling out had occurred when her parents rejected a suitor, Louis, who they believe is only after her £1,200 fortune. Mary had been twenty-nine and a plain-faced spinster, working in the post office, when she meets Louis. People in town, including her father, tell her that she is making a fool of herself. Three days before Christmas of 1963, Mary calmly withdraws her £1,200 fortune, quits her job, and moves with Louis to England, where they marry in an Italian Catholic Church. They invest her money in a corner shop and work long hours to build up a good business. At Louis' insistence, Mary writes home just once, to describe how all is well. She ignores her mother and brothers' letters.

When Louis dies, Mary sends a condolence card but ignores her parents for another ten years. Selling the shop to a Pakistani with three nephews, Mary remembers that she has three nephews whom she has never seen. She is fifty when she resolves to go home. As she makes arrangements, however, Mary worries about her reception as a stranger at Christmastime. They know nothing about her successful life. She decides to send only seasonal greeting to pave the way for next year. At least they will know that she has forgiven them.

Louisappears in Euston

A stranger who comes to Mary Brennan's unnamed Irish village one summer and works cutting ice creams in Lynch's grocery store. He is happy to accommodate the Lynches in any way and profits are greater than ever. They keep him on after the tourists leave and he begins spending time with Mary, a twenty-nine-year-old spinster. Louis is six years younger. Faced with her parents' opposition, Louis laments causing her more grief than happiness and wants to go away, but Mary withdraws her £1,200 fortune, quits her job, and moves with him to England, where they marry in an Italian Catholic Church. Louis convinces Mary to write only one letter home. He writes the Brennans after being diagnosed with terminal cancer, explaining that Mary is very stubborn but will need their support. He dies before an answer comes.

The Brennansappears in Euston

Mary Brennan's unnamed parents and siblings Nessa and Seamus, the Brennans are divided over Mary's romance with newcomer Louis. The siblings try to stop their father from telling her to look in a mirror and quit making a fool of herself. They fight every night and will not allow Louis in the house, even in the dead of winter. When they meet in the church, Fr. O'Connor throws them out. The parents are irate when three days before Christmas Mary withdraws her money, quits her job, and moves with Louis to London. Mary writes home just once to explain how all is well and then ignores all letters from home. Nessa writes about Pres. John F. Kennedy's visit to Ireland and Seamus writes that things are dead at home. He is sorry for their old father. When Louis dies, Mary sends a condolence card but ignores her parents for another ten years. Letters from home say that her father is now nearly blind and her mother is attending church more than ever. Nessa has married the pub owner's son and has six children. Seamus appears to have become a money-hungry black sheep.

Nanappears in Warren Street

After having a fight with cheerful Shirley, a steady customer for two years, Nan, a seamstress with the talent to be a designer, is fed up with people not wearing deodorant and nitpicking her work. Nan is busy when the obese woman first visits her shop but feels sorry for her having to wear the things that she does and makes her a beautiful, bright wardrobe. Nan appreciates that, unlike most of her customers, Shirley does not complain about her life. Nan allocates eight customers a day for one hour each and spends most of the time sewing. This keeps her work manageable and gives her time for her long-time lover, Colin.

When Colin jokes cruelly about Shirley's size, Nan reprimands him, saying that she feels protective of the sweet woman. Months later, as Nan is working on a wedding outfit for Shirley, she suggests green eye shadow to match and cannot adequately explain why Colin has labeled the bag "Green eye shadow for burly Shirley" (p. 303). Shirley nearly accepts that Colin is simply given to insensitive rhymes based on names when Nan slips up and inadvertently equates fatness with ugliness. Shirley is offended and stomps out of the shop, never to return. Nan knows that she will miss Shirley badly. A year later, Nan learns that Shirley has married her boss and had not invited her to the wedding so as not to make her think she pities her for not getting to marry Colin.

Shirley Green Kent appears in Warren Street

Shirley has a face like the rising sun in a child's drawing and a personality to match. She also has a great, bulging body that is at odds with her fashion sense. A friend, Nola, who is eight months pregnant, suggests that Shirley visit Nan's shop. Shirley begs Nan to custom sew her a frock and becomes a steady customer, buying five frocks a year for two years. She is always delighted and grateful when a new one is finished. Shirley is the rare customer who does not complain about her life and, in fact, reveals little. She works for an advertising agency and jokes about fancying her boss. Nan gives Shirley the confidence to wear bold, bright colors.

During a final fitting for an outfit to wear to a friend's wedding, Shirley discovers that Nan's lover Colin has been joking about her size. Nan scrambles to explain it away but inadvertently equates fatness with ugliness and appears to pity Shirley. Shirley had always thought herself to have a pretty face and had never thought being heavy is ugly. She leaves Nan's, never to return. Nan learns a year later from Nola that that had been Shirley's own wedding dress, when she married her boss, Alan Green. Nola supposes that Shirley had not invited Nan because she did not want to upset her, since Colin and she were not going to wed.

Collinappears in Warren Street

Nan's long-time lover who shares her flat and its expenses but has no intention of marrying, despite what Nan hopes and believes, Colin often makes cruel remarks about Nan's clients. Particularly hurtful is his calling Shirley a beach ball and a "technicoloured Moby Dick" (p. 301). Nan reprimands him, explaining that she feels protective about Shirley. Nan asks Colin to pick up some green eye shadow for Nan, since he is in the trade, and he labels the bag "Green eye shadow for burly Shirley" (p. 303).

Helen and Margaret appears in Green Park

Friends since nanny training school with rich Jane, Helen and Margaret agree not to dress fancily when going together to see her for the first time in years. Still, each does. They are giggle nervously about seeing the Ritz Hotel. Helen and Margaret have both married and applied their training to raising their own children, but Jane has become rich and famous. Still, they are sure the old bonding survives. Margaret marries a vicar and lives a dull life. Helen marries Jeff, a man with a knack for losing money betting on the horses. Both are in their forties and envy Jane, who in photographs looks younger than she had as a student. They commiserate in lacking the time to pamper themselves.

Jane takes them quickly upstairs to present to her aged and dying husband, Charles, to prove to him that she is spending time with authentic, normal friends. Helen's naïveté wins Charles over and she is truly shocked by Jane's matter-of-fact attitude towards Charles' impending death. She admits to having lived a sheltered life. They are shocked to learn that they are to help her preserve her fortune, against Charles's invalid wife in Georgia and her lawyers, who want to dispossess her. On the train home, they are less giggly than on the ride in. They talk about the truism that money cannot buy happiness. Both thinks silently of how Jane's money could help them in their situations. They do not share the common thought that men are notoriously difficult.

Jane and Charles appears in Green Park

Friends in nanny training school with Helen and Margaret, Jane has for ten years been the mistress of a fabulously wealthy and generous American industrialist, Charles, with whom she lives in the Ritz Hotel, surrounded by bodyguards. Greeting her friends in the foyer, Jane laughs at their exclamations of how young and beautiful she is; it is all purchased, she says. Jane takes them upstairs to meet Charles in order to convince him that they are truly old chums. Charles is a worried-looking, little old man, but his smile puts them at ease. In a Southern drawl, he talks of being "nervous" about Jane's acquaintances, since they are not tied together by marriage. Pleased by Helen's naïve Christian answer, Charles leaves with his retinue for a meeting. Jane explains that Charles is neither jealous nor paranoid, but rather terminally ill with cancer. He is brave but frightened and has two months to live. Jane confesses that he is hardly the love of her life and believes that he will be better off out of pain, dead. Jane wants to convince Charles that she has good, solid friends. She supposes that he will buy them new houses and set Jeff up in business. She has worked too hard to be dispossessed of ninety percent of her worth as Charles' invalid wife and her lawyers want. Jane reminds Helen and Margaret that they have done many dishonest things together in their younger days, simply on a smaller scale. With that, Jane ushers them downstairs for tea and chat about their lives.

Rose and Her Father appears in Victoria

Watching a kind-looking woman dote over her father in a coffee bar at Victoria Station, Rose cannot help thinking about her own father. Rose fantasizes about the obviously well-organized daughter's life and is sorry when they head to their train. Rose wishes that she could take her father, widowed seven years, on vacation to thank him for all he has done for her. Although he is only sixty, he insists that he is a dog too old to learn new tricks. She counters his arguments and knows that he would love to see Paris again, because he still pulls out prewar scrapbooks. He had enthusiastically given her advice before her first trip to Paris at twenty, but she had been too young and proud to take his advice. By age thirty she has been back thirty times, visited his old haunts, and taken pictures to talk about. She wishes that her father were pushier; it might have spared her a brief, bad marriage to Gus.

Rose is en route to Paris for a week's work and this morning had tried to talk him into accompanying her. He shows interest for half an hour before timidly refusing. Rose thinks of that other daughter/father pair having fun in Amsterdam and blames herself for selfishly never before inviting her father. She catches a taxi ride home. Her father is alarmed to see her, wondering why she is changing her plans. He assumes that she is sick. She explains how she wants them both to go the next day, but he feels frightened and trapped. She pleads loneliness. Father claims that he would love to go together another time, after proper planning. She pleads that now is the perfect time, but he insists that he cannot drop everything. Rose knows there is nothing to drop but will not suggest that after all he has done for her his life is meaningless. She gives in, accepting to put off trips until he retires. He feels reprieved. She wonders why love requires lying.

Dr. Barton appears in Stockwell

Mona Lewis's physician, who gives her the fatal diagnosis of cancer, Barton apologizes for his lack of tact, after mentioning that she will not live to Christmas. Barton deals mostly with immigrants. He enjoys Mona's matter-of-factness. He goes along with her plan to be diagnosed away from her own neighborhood. He is uncomfortable letting her pay in cash rather than through insurance, especially for a hopeless diagnosis. He is sad, realizing that this is her last visit, as any follow-up will be done by her normal doctor in Hampstead. He snaps at the next patient.

Vera North appears in Stockwell

Mona Lewis's late mother's friend, Vera is wheelchair-bound. Because of her own medical tests, Mona has failed to see Vera in months. After getting her terminal diagnosis, Mona goes for a visit. Guessing that something has been wrong with Mona, Vera challenges her assumption that dealing frankly with cancer will make it easier on those around her. They would rather that Mona pretend that there is hope. Vera assures Mona that her mother Clare had known that she was dying and had wanted to face it squarely but had stopped when others preferred to pretend. Attitudes have not changed in thirty years. Vera promises to support Mona. Vera says that Clare had wanted her to marry her husband when she is gone; Vera laughs that she may now marry Mona's.

Sandy Ring appears in Brixton

A newly-graduated nurse, Sandy seeks living quarters that she can share for economy. She agrees to move in with Wilma Ring, a Jamaica native, having fled a boyfriend in Wales. Sandy works day shift in neurosurgical, which is depressing, and wishes that Wilma's schedule overlapped so that they could chat. She gets used to her surroundings and vendors joke with her about food. Sandy deduces from the number of Jamaicans who live in near-poverty in London that the homeland must be far worse.

Sandy asks Wilma about rumors that she is a communist and admits that she is no longer ambitious enough to work long hours like Wilma. She insists that Wilma should send her mother a little money to make her life easier, rather than seeking to impress her with degrees. Sandy wonders why fellow Jamaicans lack Wilma's dedication. Sandy thinks that Wilma's stories about self-sacrificing fore-bearers sounds preachy.

Wilma Ring appears in Brixton

A native of the British West Indies, Wilma laughingly calls her white roommate Sandy Ring a cousin. Wilma is studying for a university degree while working odd hours in admissions. Good-looking Nelson says that Wilma is a communist; Wilma claims that she would scarcely be earning a degree if she wished to overthrow the system and says that Nelson should attend to Margaret, the hard-working mother of his three children, rather than flirting and gossiping.

Wilma wants both to teach and nurse, to repay all her mother and aunts have done to get her where she is. Wilma insists that each generation of daughters must exceed the previous to show that that generation's labor has meant something. Her mother has worked five to six jobs at a time to get to Britain and bring her children over to live in comparative luxury. The women of the family have a sense of solidarity and are happy that no men migrate with them. Wilma believes that Sandy cannot understand her efforts because the good life has always been available to her. Wilma knows that the nicest roommate she has had will leave soon because life is short and she wants some fun.

Objects/Places

Shepherd's Bush appears in Shepherd's Bush

The setting of the first story in London Transports, Shepherd's Bush is a residential and shopping area to the west of central London. The story's chief character, May, finds it reminiscent of postwar London, certainly not as glittering as Regent Street or the West End, where tourists get their impressions of the city. Many blue-collar Irish have settled there. A magazine has suggested that Shepherd's Bush is a center for abortions, which is what draws the Irish narrator there. Her judgmental friend Celia lives there. Besides Celia's flat in a large Victorian house, May is shown window shopping along Oxford Street and visiting two medical offices and a clinic.

Holland Park appears in Holland Park

The setting of the second story in London Transports, Holland Park is an affluent residential neighborhood in west central London. Too-perfect Malcolm and Melissa live there and host a dinner party at which the unnamed narrator and her friend Alice are presumed to be lesbians.

Notting Hill Gate appears in Notting Hill Gate

The setting of the third story in London Transports, Notting Hill Gate is home to Rita, the temporary worker who accepts a full-time position. When the unnamed narrator describes Notting Hill as a very black area, her sister Trudy reacts sharply, having spent a large amount of money buying a small house in the area.

Queensway appears in Queensway

The setting of the fourth story in London Transports, Queensway is located in West London. Protagonist Pat interviews for a flat in an old building that has no elevator. It is an eighty-six-step climb to the door. The flat is so beautifully appointed and the view from Merigold's balcony of the park is so grand that Pat forgets her list of questions to ask about money, housework, and privacy. Her room is stripped of non-essentials to allow her to personalize it herself. Pat is amazed that the public park is not vandalized. She visits a nondescript antique shop nearby named Solomon's.

Lancaster Gate appears in Lancaster Gate

The setting of the fifth story in London Transports, Lancaster Gate is an affluent section of West Central London. Strolling around, the central character, Lisa, is surrounded by the Towers of London, Trafalgar Squares, and Beefeaters, but oblivious to them because she is thinking about her status as a mistress. Lisa has twice before visited London and been disappointed, but at first finds the unnamed hotel luxurious. Her unnamed lover books them a room with a double bed rather than the usual twin beds. When he goes off to an all-day doctor's appointment on Harley Street, however, her mood drops. She meets a philosophical street vendor and decides to leave the hopeless relationship.

Marble Arch appears in Marble Arch

The setting of the sixth story in London Transports, Marble Arch is a section of London pictured as dominated by garlic-smelling, veiled immigrants. The protagonist, Sophie, has a street-front shop on Oxford Street, where she sells leather goods. Wealthy foreigners are her best customers.

Bond Street appears in Bond Street

The setting of the seventh story in London Transports, Bond Street is pictured as too bright, too crowded, too dazzling for Margaret as she goes about her monthly shoplifting.

Oxford Circus appears in Oxford Circus

The setting of the eighth story in London Transports, Oxford Circus is the location of the BBC Club, where Frankie takes the unnamed narrator to celebrate her first day working for the network. Frankie does not realize that it is a private club, but it rescued from embarrassment when members vouch for them.

Tottenham Court Road appears in Tottenham Court Road

The setting of the ninth story in London Transports, Tottenham Court Road is in Central London. Protagonist Julia, a twenty-nine-year-old virgin is determined to find a sex guide in case she manages to find a partner. She first considers shopping in pricey Soho but a colleague in her travel agency suggests Tottenham Court Road. She chooses the largest pornography shop she sees, figuring that it will have the largest selection.

Holborn appears in Holborn

The setting of the tenth story in London Transports, Holborn is located in Central London. It is easily found by Ken, who does not know London at all, and is near Jeffery's work, so they and spouses Rita and Daisy agree to meet there for dinner. They are surprised that Rita knows Daisy from long ago. The reunion is show occurring in the station and continuing in taxi and restaurant.

Chancery Lane appears in Chancery Lane

The setting of the eleventh story in London Transports, Chancery Lane is located on the western border of London. The story consists of letters among characters who meet at a party.

Seven Sisters appears in Seven Sisters

The setting of the twelfth story in London Transports, Seven Sisters Station is locate in North London in an area also referred to as Hornsey. Pat and Stuart are invited to a wife-swapping party at No. 17 Seven Sisters Road. She remarks that the name Seven Sisters seems oddly inappropriate for the event, but he retorts that Hornsey is even more suggestive.

Finsbury Park appears in Finsbury Park

The setting of the thirteenth story in London Transports, Finsbury Park is located in central North London. Vera flees her impoverished upbringing elsewhere and marries rich widower Joseph, who owns an unfurnished fourteen-room dream house in Finsbury Park, which takes years for her to bring to perfection and then she cannot bear to let it be lived in properly.

Highbury & Islington appears in Highbury & Islington

The setting of the fourteenth story in London Transports, Highbury & Islington is a stop on the London Underground in North London. Adam and Heather have bed-sitting rooms in a house in Islington but have moved in together to save on expenses. The story unfolds on a train from this station to Sussex.

King's Cross appears in King's Cross

The setting of the fifteenth story in London Transports, King's Cross is located in the heart of London. The action takes place inside an unnamed travel agency, England's largest, as Eve helps assistant promotions manager Sara Gray transform her office and herself to receive the recognition that she deserves.

Euston appears in Euston

The setting of the sixteenth story in London Transports, Euston Station is major stop on the London Underground linking to transport to and from Ireland. It merely symbolizes this link, for most of the story takes place in flashbacks to an unnamed village near Dublin and in an undisclosed part of London where the protagonist and her husband settle after fleeing Ireland.

Warren Street appears in Warren Street

The setting of the seventeenth story in London Transports, Warren Street is a station on the Northern Line of the London Underground. The action takes place in an unnamed dressmaker's shop.

Green Park appears in Green Park

The setting of the eighteenth story in London Transports, Green Park Station is located in expensive Central London. Most of the story takes place in the Ritz Hotel, in Jane's suite and in the public tea lounge, where Helen and Margaret enjoy being observed.

Victoria appears in Victoria

The setting of the nineteenth story in London Transports, Victoria is one of the largest train stations in England. The story is largely set in a station coffee bar as Rose wonders why she cannot get her father to visit Paris with her.

Pimlico appears in Pimlico

The setting of the twentieth story in London Transports, Pimlico is Station is located in residential Central London. The action centers on Olive's small boarding hotel primarily for genteel Irish emigrants. Olive transforms it into a homelike atmosphere for which she charges premium prices.

Stockwell appears in Stockwell

The setting of the twenty-first story in London Transports, Stockwell is located in Central London, within walking distance of Mona Lewis' home in Hampstead. She sees a doctor in Stockwell to obtain a diagnosis rather than go to her local physician, where her family and friends will know something is amiss. Mona finds Stockwell less well cared for than Hampstead but rather likes it.

Brixtonappears in Brixton

The setting of the twenty-second story in London Transports, Brixton is located in South London and is known for housing a large population from the British West Indies. The apartment shared by nurses Sandy and Wilma Ring (not related) is rundown and loud, as is the whole neighborhood. The residents will say good riddance to whitey when Sandy leaves.

Themes

Sexual Revolution

By opening this collection of stories with a frank depiction of the quest for an abortion, Maeve Binchy signals that the volume will not skirt controversy. Only a handful of the stories lacks at least a sexual sub theme. "Shepherd's Bush" shows an Irish woman, May, pregnant by her very-married boss and having to leave Ireland for a legal abortion. This appears to be common practice among Irish women. Women having affairs with hopelessly married men who will not leave their wives and children is a common theme throughout the volume. Moralism is avoided, but the question of the father's rights is discussed—and dismissed by May.

"Holland Park" follows. It deals with stereotypes of homosexuality that lead upper class people to assume that the narrator and friend Alice are gay. The friends try to be sophisticated and supportive, while the narrator, at first repulsed by the idea, wonders if it is true and what it would be like. She fears that mentioning it will destroy her friendship with Alice. Homosexuality is mentioned incidentally when an actor complains about being propositioned every time he tries out for a role.

"Lancaster Gate" shows Lisa, involved in a hopeless affair, pressuring her lover to take her on a business trip to London, worrying that he will dump her, exalting at being a "Mr. and Mrs," doubting a phony story that will get him free for a whole day, wrestling with her mother's old admonitions to be better than others, and deciding to leave the relationship.

Prostitution figures in both "Marble Arch" and "Oxford Circus." In the first, Sophie has a friend whom she redeems from a life of prostitution only to discover that she is cheating with her own shiftless lover. In the second story, a woman rescues a friend from prostitution only to learn that she is exchanging her charms for pieces of leather for her craft. The same barter prostitution incidentally befalls Julia in "Queensway," and she offers the same rationalization: it is better than working the streets.

While "Bond Street" chiefly watches how Margaret goes about her monthly shoplifting expeditions without being caught, it also examines how the crimes begin. Her husband gets a co-worker pregnant and Margaret alone stays level-headed and demands that he make a choice: marry the girl and claim the child, or deny that paternity can be established concretely (pre-DNA testing) and offer her a lump sum for the pleasure he has given her. When the husband makes the right decision, Margaret begins rewarding him with luxury gifts. "Holborn" describes the the meeting of two former lovers a year after their breakup, each remarried to someone the opposite of themselves. Rita continues to obsess about Ken and needing him to to love her still, while denying that she does still loves him in return.

"Highbury & Islington" sees Adam, a rich young man adopting the bohemian life to live with liberated Heather. Adam finally works up the courage to take her to meet his stodgy mother, but en route he backs out. The story opens with Heather reading lewd magazines that will not go over. When he warns that they will have to sleep in separate rooms, Heather promises to find her way to him once his mother is asleep."Chancery Lane" adds a twist to the mistress left by a married man theme as Jilly Twilly, a dancer, wants to sue her ex for breach-of-promise. The lawyer that she approaches, John Lewis, advises against it, but she persists, and they end up engaged. In the end, Lewis jilts his girlfriend much as the lover does Jilly. He rebukes a friend for suggesting that Jilly has used this ploy successfully numerous times. Lewis is too love-struck to see reality.

"Tottenham Court Road" is the most explicitly sexual story in the volume, showing Julia, a twenty-nine-year-old virgin seeking frantically to learn all there is to know about sex in order not to appear naïve when finally she will allow her boyfriend Michael to "deflower" her. The story opens with Julia browsing nervously in a pornography shop that caters to people with far more advanced tastes than her own. When she finally works up the courage to ask a clerk for advice on a book for a prospective bride, her niece, she is told to share her own experience with her. Panicking, Julia declares that she is a nun as the story turns briefly to farce. She has tried unsuccessfully to seduce three men in a week, in order to make her mistakes on someone besides Michael.

"Seven Sisters" is the next most explicit sexual theme, exploring taboo "wife-swapping." As the time for the party nears, Julia has second thoughts about her appearance and role. No moral or religious aspects are considered and the fears that build a decade later with the advent of HIV/AIDS are nowhere to be found. She tries to understand her husband's frustration in living a going-nowhere life, but in the end she is delivered from participating by declaring herself jealous of any woman who would look at or touch him. The implication is that their relationship will now be enhanced, their sexual horizons having been expanded just by discussing it.

"King's Cross" examines not sexual practices but job discrimination against women. Eve, an extraordinary personal manager, has already selected to work for a number of women executives in a crusade to remove the specific factors that hold them back before working her wonders on Miss Gray, who only incidentally is involved with a man who cheats on her openly. "Green Park" depicts a reunion among three school friends, two middle-class and one rich extraordinarily rich and famous as the mistress of an American tycoon. Jane needs them to convince Charles before his imminent death not to allow his invalid wife to disinherit her. Margaret, a vicar's wife, helps convince Charles that Jane's friends are normal by being amazed to hear that there are couples who live together without benefit of matrimony.

Generation Gap

Several stories in Maeve Binchy's London Transport deal with conflict between the generations. Two deal with young Irish women fleeing authoritarian parents to London.

"Euston" first takes up the theme, showing a twenty-year tragedy. Mary Brennan runs off when her father stands resolutely against her marrying a slightly younger newcomer to town. Mary sends home one letter to say that she is fine before cutting her family off completely. Husband Louis tries to convince her to restore relations with her family and begs the parents to do likewise but dies before anything can happen.

There is no progress for another ten years, when a television program about grudges opens Mary's eyes. She feels herself a prodigal, referring to Jesus' parable in Lk. 15, and pauses to consider how the brother in that story must feel, seeing his brother inordinately showered with love when he comes home. In the end, Mary decides not to rush things and interfere with Christmas plans. She decides simply to let them know that there are no longer any hard feelings, but sends a bland message that hardly makes this clear.

"Pimlico" follows another Irish woman, Olive, to London against her parents' wishes to build the life she wants, running a boarding house for fellow Irish expatriates. For Olive the romantic aspect is missing until late in the story and is then the first step in showing the degree to which Olive has made the boarders in her hotel into family. When they are upset at the prospect of her marrying, Oliver breaks up with her boyfriend. Even more radical is her estrangement with her aging parents on the same grounds. Olive feels needed and wanted for the first time in her life and has no desire to leave this "real" family for the one she has left in Ireland.

The escape from Ireland aspect is lacking in "Victoria," where Rose sees a father/daughter pair traveling to Amsterdam and wishes that her own father would accompany her on her current trip to Paris, a city that he had greatly enjoyed in his youth and about which he continues to show enthusiasm every time she goes there. She accepts that she has been selfish in the past, neglecting to invite him, but puts the onus on his shyness. This opens him up to an analysis of their relationship, going back years. Rose appreciates the many ways in which he has helped her but also harbors a grudge over his not forcefully opposing her disastrous marriage to Gus. Given how she had turned down his advice about her first Paris trip, it is unlikely she would have listened about Gus. Still, Rose wants to think she would have. She seems prone to fantasizing happy outcomes. She also fails to see the degree of panic her suggestion of a trip together engenders in her set-in-his-ways father. Binchy builds the internal terror as Rose presses her argument. In the end, Rose backs down and agrees with her relieved father, but wonders why love requires lying. Her refusal to humiliate her father is noble.

Finally, "Stockwell" shows Mona Lewis learning that she has terminal cancer and determining to face it squarely. Mona recalls the agony of false hopes surrounding her mother's death when she had been sixteen and is determined not to repeat it. She makes plans for her widowed husband to remarry and her daughters to be prepared for life. When she informs her mother's friend Vera, however, Mona is surprised to learn that she has misunderstood the past. Her mother had had precisely the same intentions, but family and friends had begged her to let them hope against hope. Vera had been one of them but vows this time to support Mona, should Mona go ahead with her plan.

Race

Race and racial stereotyping is found in several stories in Maeve Binchy's London Transport. By the 1970s, parts of London have attracted substantial immigrant and tourist populations. Sophie in "Marble Arch" runs a store-front, selling leather goods. She rather resents being a minority speaker of English in her own neighborhood but recognizes that wealthy foreigners, particularly rich Arabs, are her best customers. She wants not to be a racist but to consider everyone walking on two feet human.

"Notting Hill Gate" introduces Rita, a big, tough, black woman from the West Indies. She rolls as she walks and dresses garishly. She looks slow, lazy, and preoccupied, but is efficient and competent, needs little supervision, and is quickly moved into a permanent position. Unlike a string of other temps, presumably whites who cannot resist sharing their life stories in lurid detail, Rita says nothing about herself, which only increases coworkers' interest. She lets slip only that she has a husband, whom the unnamed narrator meets in a pub as he spills on her, ruining her skirt. Rita arrives, sends him away and takes her to her upstairs place for a change of clothes. The narrator surveys the flat carefully in order to share details with her co-workers. The boyfriend turns out to be a popular white television actor, Andy Sparks. When Rita returns the ruined skirt and a voucher to replace it, she explains too much about her life to be comfortable returning to her job. Rita is married to the murderer of her best friend, for whose children she cares. Andrew and Rita simply need one another and accept the situation. She knows that a successful white woman cannot understand any of this. Rita briefly meets her white replacement, who is surprised that Rita does not fit the stereotype of the jolly black woman.

The reverse situation occurs in "Brixton," when a white graduate of nursing school, Sandy Ring, flees a failed romance in Wales to take a job in Brixton, a heavily Jamaican neighborhood. There she rooms with fellow nurse Wilma Ring, who jokes about being cousins with a white woman. Wilma is studying for a degree in open university while working odd hours in admissions. Wilma wants both to teach and to nurse, in order to repay all of her mother's and aunts' sacrifices to put her where she is. Wilma insists that each generation of daughters must exceed the previous to show that that generation's labor has meant something. Sandy can no longer make such efforts and considers those who do to be foolish. She thinks that conditions in Jamaica must be bleak for so many inhabitants to migrate and live in squalor in London. She does not understand squalor.

Wilma talks about her mother working five to six jobs at a time to get to Britain and to live there in comparative luxury. Her mother and sisters work so that Wilma can excel in school. They have a sense of solidarity. Wilma observes that no males immigrate with them, which cuts down on problems. She uses handsome Nelson as a case in point. With families here and there, Nelson is Jamaica's shame. Wilma maintains that Sandy cannot understand because the good life has always been available to her. Wilma knows that the nicest roommate she has had will leave soon because life is short and she wants some fun. Men in the neighborhood simply say good riddance to "whitey," proving that racism is a two-way street.

Style

Point of View

Most of the twenty-two stories in Maeve Binchy's London Transports are told by impersonal third person narrators, all obviously female, and most omniscient. None seems inordinately prejudiced for or against their main characters, but in a few cases they describe events tongue-in-cheek. They deal with situations ranging from flaunting activities that are still considered taboo (e.g., abortion and wife-swapping), against a backdrop of a rather far-advanced sexual revolution. Most of the couples depicted are not married. Men and women seem equally likely to take lovers, although women generally get the worst of situations. Only in "King's Cross" is job discrimination against women systematically and somewhat stridently addressed. The phenomenon underlies many other stories, however.

Only three stories feature first-person narrators who are heavily involved in the action: "Holland Park," "Notting Hill Gate," and "Oxford Circus." For no clear reason, these narrators seem to take pains to preserve their anonymity. The first deals obliquely with homosexuality while the others deal with nothing controversial. They could as easily—if not more easily—have been written in the third person with no loss of emotional power.

One story, "Chancery Lane," consists of correspondence among the major characters: an aging woman dancer who wants to sue her departed lover, a lawyer she happens to meet and who tries to talk her out of it, and several supporting characters. Dancer and lawyer predictably become involved romantically, he doing to his girlfriend what the dancer claims has been done to her. The last letter has the lawyer angrily denying that his now-fiancée has pulled such a scam many times. The drama could not have been built without the correspondence device.

Setting

London Transports by Maeve Binchy is set in the vicinity of various stations along the London Underground system. By looking at a map of the system one can appreciate the order of the stories, but only a few incorporate enough local color to affect the story. Native Londoners might perceive greater subtleties, but the clear progression is station-to-station first from Shepherd's Bush to Chancery Lane along a west-to-east axis along the Central Underground Line (color coded red) into Central London. Seven Sisters is a stop on the above-ground portion of the north-south running Victoria Line coded light blue). The remaining stories then proceed station-by-station from King's Cross south to Brixton.

Mention is made of life in never-named villages in Ireland and Wales and of an old man's fond memories of the sites of Paris, France, before they are destroyed in World War II. Fleeting glimpses of a summer cruise to the Greek islands are evoked in the story of a dinner party reuniting participants. The utter poverty of life in Jamaica is suggested by the willingness of Jamaicans to move to the slums of Brixton and consider them luxurious. Several stories involve such upward mobility that depends on one's perspective to perceive or be struck with wonder.

More important than the actual places within London where individual stories are set (generally close together) is the time. Only one story provides a specific date to set it, but all are copyrighted 1978-82 and deal with the culture of the 1960-70s, most particularly changing sexual mores and incidentally (except in "Brixton," where it is an integral theme) with immigration and tourism. English is rarely heard on some British streets. There is a certain disaffection among some Britons, but characters involved in sales appreciate the business.

Language and Meaning

London Transports by Maeve Binchy consists of twenty-two independent short stories peopled by over fifty major characters. All are set in London in the 1960-70s. Only three stories are told in the first-person by someone involved in the action: "Holland Park," "Notting Hill Gate," and "Oxford Circus." In each case, the obviously female narrator keeps herself carefully anonymous. "Chancery Lane" consists of correspondence among the characters, allowing a variety of viewpoints. Binchy uses dialog appropriate to her diverse characters, working in the current slang and often the conflicting values of generations and social classes and/or races. She avoids strong dialect and writes in a fairly neutral style easily appreciated on both sides of the Atlantic. Her Irish heritage is brought out in a few stories, usually showing the characters' need to escape a beloved but oppressive situation.

"Shepherd's Bush" deals frankly with abortion, but avoids the expected moralizing. "Holland Park" deals obliquely with homosexuality, picturing liberals trying to appear accepting. "Notting Hill Gate" deals with the plight of temporary workers and with racial perceptions. "Queensway" deals with mind-control in a beautiful Victorian setting. "Lancaster Gate" shows a professional woman caught in an affair that is beneath the standards to which she has been bred. "Marble Arch" deals with codependency. "Bond Street " shows a shoplifter rewarding her husband for years for having chosen her over a young woman whom he has gotten pregnant. "Oxford Circus" shows more codependency. "Tottenham Court Road" watches a twenty-nine-year virgin trying not to look inexperienced when the time comes for sex. "Holborn" reunites two former lovers. "Chancery Lane" consists of a series of about suing for contract infringement and includes the book's most surprising ending.

"Seven Sisters" explores "wife-swapping"; "Finsbury Park" overcompensating for a wretched childhood by becoming obsessional. "Highbury & Islington" reverses the theme of "Finsbury Park" by showing a rich young man bringing his bohemian lover home to meet Mother. "Euston" takes another look at intergenerational conflict in the context of a twenty-year tragedy. "Warren Street" examines how offhand remarks can destroy a friendship. "Green Park" examines a reunion among three old friends, the rich one among them needing the other two to preserve her fortune. "Victoria" takes yet another look at intergenerational conflicts. "Pimlico" like "Euston" follows an Irish woman to London against her parents' wishes to build the life she wants. "Stockwell" examines how mother and daughter thirty years apart face terminal cancer. Finally, "Brixton" looks at how people differ in how they perceive priorities in life.

Structure

London Transports by Maeve Binchy consists of twenty-two independent short stories sharing no common characters or references: "Shepherd's Bush," "Holland Park," "Notting Hill Gate.," "Queensway," "Lancaster Gate," "Marble Arch," "Bond Street," "Oxford Circus," "Tottenham Court Road," "Holborn," "Chancery Lane," "Seven Sisters," "Finsbury Park," "Highbury & Islington," "King's Cross," "Euston," "Warren Street," "Green Park," "Victoria," "Pimlico," "Stockwell," and "Brixton."

There is no immediately apparent organizational principle, until and unless one studies a map of the London transportation system. Then it becomes obviously a matter of geography. From Shepherd's Bush to Chancery Lane each story progresses eastward one station along the east-west Central Underground Line (color coded red) into Central London. Seven Sisters is a stop on the above-ground portion of the north-south running Victoria Line coded light blue). The remaining stories then proceed station-by-station from King's Cross south to Brixton.

According to the collection's copyright page, four of the stories are previously published with subject-appropriate rather than geographical titles. Local color seems underplayed throughout except in "Brixton," where the fact of a heavily Jamaican immigrant population is central to the plot. Non-Londoners are unlikely to perceive significance in where the stories are set and there is no progression evident in the generally feminist themes of the stories. There seems to be an effort made to touch on all of the major sexual taboos of the 1970s and intergenerational conflict, but with no clear pattern. There are, of course several Irish-abroad tales, which are Binchy's forte.

Quotes

"Where was the slight moralistic bit, the heavy wondering whether or not it might be murder? For the first time in the eleven days since she had confirmed she was pregnant, May began to hope that there would be some normality in the world again." Holland Park, p. 7

"She made a list of questions, and she promised herself that she would take everything in, so that she would go better equipped to the next and more serious interview." Queensway, p. 67

"She felt that the day was a bit less glorious and immediately felt very angry with herself for feeling that way. What had happened? Nothing. She was a cheat and a tramp, and a mistress, and illegally registered in the hotel as the 'Mrs.' she wasn't. But that was all rubbish." Lancaster Gate, p. 100

"But then Margaret did shopping slightly differently from most people. She didn't actually pay for the goods she brought home. Her tensions and frustrations came not from trying to catch the eye of a shop assistant, but from avoiding it." Bond Street, pp. 133-134

"'You shouldn't stay in teaching, if you don't like it, it's bad for you and the children. I really do think it's a vocation, half my family are teachers, and the other half used to be. Those of us that didn't do it well got out,' she said." Oxford Circus, p. 160

"Twilly and I are to be married shortly, and I regard your information that she has had seven breach-of-promise actions settled out of court as utterly preposterous." Chancery Lane, p. 208.

"Love was meant to be straightforward. If things got in the way of love, then the Lover had to remove them, honestly and with integrity and dignity. The Lover wasn't meant to sit gnawing his fingers about the confrontation of those that he loved." Highbury & Islington, p. 240

"No, no triumphant tales of how well it had all gone, what a good man Louis had turned out to be, how wrong, how very wrong they had been to say that he had been anything less. No, if you forgive, you must forget a lot too." Euston, p. 292

"Nan retorted, 'It's cruel—to laugh at somebody's shape!'
"'Aw, come on, come on,' said Colin reasonably. 'You're always saying someone's like a car aerial or the Michelin Man or whatever. It was just a remark, just a joke.'" Warren Street, p. 301

"'Well, your wealth, your life-style, the fact that your husband, your common-law husband, is dying of cancer and you say awful words and ...' Margaret looked genuinely distressed." Green Park, p. 317

"'Do you really mean that, Rose? I certainly think it's a good idea,' he said, anxiously raking her face for approval.
"'Oh, honestly, Daddy. I think it makes much more sense,' she said, wondering why so many loving things had to be lies." Victoria, p. 339

"She sent them regular small contributions with pleasant cheering letters. She had no intention of returning home. They were nothing to her now. She had a real family that needed her." Pimlico, p. 350

"'Oh she knew,' said Vera. 'She knew very well.'
"'Did she talk to you about it?' Mona was startled.
"'She began by wanting to talk to everyone, you are so like her it's uncanny. She wanted to face it ... do all the things you want to do.'" Stockwell, p. 362

Topics for Discussion

Which character do you consider the most courageous? What sets her or him ahead of the rest?

Which character do you find the most odious? What about her or him makes you react that way?

With which character's predicament do you most identify? Are you satisfied with the outcome that Maeve Binchy provides or would you prefer an alternate? Either way, explain the factors involved in your decision.

What impressions of her native Ireland does Maeve Binchy give in these stories?

What impressions of racial relations does Maeve Binchy give in these stories?

What attitudes towards the sexual revolution of the 1960-70s are revealed in the stories?

How is wealth dealt with in these stories? Has it moral value? Give examples.