

# **Mothering Sunday Study Guide**

## **Mothering Sunday by Graham Swift**

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# Plot Summary

• Citations in this study guide refer to the *Borzoi Book* by Alfred A Knopf, hardback, 2016 edition. ISBN: 978-1-101-94752-4.

*Mothering Sunday* is the story of Jane Fairchild, an orphan who started working for the Niven family as a maid. As the novel opens, Jane and Paul Sheringham, the remaining son of three boys, talked about how the family once had a thoroughbred. Jane and Paul had been involved in a sexual relationship since they were teenagers. Now in their early twenties, Paul has arranged for Jane to meet him at Upleigh and for the first time they had sex in his bedroom. It was Mothering Sunday and Jane had the day off. Paul was supposed to go to a luncheon with his fiancée's family, the Nivens, and his own parents. As they lounged naked together, Paul did not seem to be in a hurry to get to the luncheon.

Before she left for her day off, Jane got a phone call from Paul, which she attributed to a wrong number. She rode her bike to Upleigh and met Paul at the front door. This was the first time she had entered the front door at Upleigh, instead of the through the back servant's entrance and they made their way upstairs to the bedroom. Afterwards, Jane watched Paul as he idled instead of getting dressed. She thought about how different it would have been if Paul had snuck away with Emma, his fiancée.

Jane wanted Paul to notice her as she remained on the bed. When he finally dressed to go, she told him that he looked handsome, despite the fact that he had never once called her beautiful--instead telling her that she was his friend. Paul left the house, permitting Jane to linger in the house, eat the leftovers in the kitchen, and see herself out using the spare key hidden under a rock out front.

Jane wandered the house in the nude, inspecting parts of the library and kitchen. She saw a picture of the two brothers Paul lost during World War I; the Niven family also lost two sons in the war. After she ate the leftovers in the kitchen, she heard the phone ring. It startled her and she returned upstairs to dress and leave. Before she left, she did not close the bedroom window.

After an exuberating bicycle ride home, Jane arrived to find Mr. Niven catching her in the driveway. He told her that earlier in the afternoon, Paul had been killed in a car accident. While the rest of the family went to be with Emma, Mr. Niven thought it best that he go to Upleigh to inform the staff and to check the status of the house. Visibly shocked at the news, Jane agreed to go with Mr. Niven to Upleigh. Upon their arrival, Ethel, the Upleigh maid, greeted them at the door. On her way up to the door, Jane noticed that the bedroom window had been closed.

With a recommendation from Mr. Niven, Jane ended up working at a bookshop at Oxford where she met her husband. Jane married Donald Campion, but their marriage was cut short when Donald died of a brain tumor.



Jane became a famous author at the age of forty-eight. During interviews, she would often think of how her affair with Paul would influence her answers to the questions. Jane never told anyone about her relationship with Paul, keeping her secret until her death at aged ninety-eight.



# Sections 1-13

## Summary

Section 1 gives background information on the Sheringhams before two of their sons were killed in World War I and they owned a thoroughbred horse named Fandango. The mother and father owned the “head and body” (3), and Paul, Dick, and Freddy each owned a leg, leaving the question of who owned the fourth leg. The horse was sold in 1915. Paul put his hand on Jane’s leg, offered her a drink from a flask, and squeezed her behind. In Section 2, Jane watched Paul from the bed, both nude, as he walked across the room. It was an unseasonably warm March day in 1924, on Mothering Sunday. They were both in their early twenties and had been engaging in a sexual relationship for nearly seven years, but this was the first time they had sex in his bed at Upleigh. He sat on the edge of the bed and they both smoked a cigarette. Section 3 takes place earlier on the same day. Because it was Mothering Sunday, Jane was given the day off by her employer Mr. Niven. Mr. Niven commented to Mrs. Niven on the weather and how they should have packed “hampers” (8) for a picnic. Jane worried that she and Milly would have their day off taken from them to pack the picnic hampers for the Nivens, but Mrs. Niven dismissed the idea, not thinking the weather would stay nice although it did. The Nivens were supposed to join the Hobdays and the Sheringhams, since none of them would have servants for the day. Mr. Niven referred to it as “a meeting of the tribes” (11). It was two weeks before Paul was to marry Emma Hobday and Paul was marrying into money.

In Section 4, Jane wanted to ask Mr. Niven about whether Emma and Paul were going to be at the meeting of the tribes, but as the maid, could not. She thought about telling Mr. Niven that if he “didn’t mind, she might not “go” anywhere” (13) and read a book in the garden. The telephone rang and Jane answered, ending the call with ““Yes, madam”” (15) to deflect attention. Section 5 returns to Jane and Paul in the bedroom at Upleigh. She thought about whether she was a “beauty” (16) and remembered calling Paul “Madam” on the phone earlier. Jane had ridden her bike to Upleigh to meet Paul and he told her she was “clever” (17) for calling him madam. She remembered, even at ninety, that Paul wanted “to be out-clevered” (17) by her. Standing near bright white flowers, Paul and Jane were alone at Upleigh on a Sunday morning for the first time.

In Section Six Mr. Niven asked who was on the phone and Jane told him it was a wrong number. He told her that she and Milly could go after they finished their breakfast duties. He stopped her and gave her a half-crown. The narrator reflects on the concept of Mothering Sunday as a “fading” (19) ritual. Back to the story, Milly was given the “First Bicycle” (19) and Jane the second. Milly got the First Bicycle because of her seniority. Milly once told Jane that the Nivens had two sons – Philip and James – who died. They had bicycles that were also referred to as First Bicycle and Second Bicycle. Milly once had a boyfriend named Billy who died in the war like Philip and James. Section Seven begins with “Once upon a time” (21) repeated twice. Jane was the new maid at Beechwood, following the dismissal of most of the servants and a reduction in the



household budget. “Only and cook and a maid” (21) remained: Milly and Jane, respectively. In Section Eight, Mr. Niven told Jane to enjoy her free time.

In Section 9, Milly went to visit her mother and the phone rang. Jane wondered about Paul and Emma. She knew they both had cars. Then Jane met Paul at Upleigh house. She was curious about how Paul behaved around Emma. He did not mention her much and he and Emma were spending less time together the closer it got to the wedding. Jane felt that she was going to lose him and wondered if he felt similarly about her. When she was asked at the ages of eighty and ninety to reflect on her youth, she thought she could “fairly claim” that she was an “orphan, maid, prostitute” (28), but never outwardly made the claim.

Section 10 is comprised of one sentence about Paul tapping ash into an ashtray sitting on Jane’s stomach. Section 11 reveals that Paul referred to Jane – whom he called “Jay” – as his “friend” (28) when she was seventeen. When at Oxford, Jane had many lovers, but wondered about how many were friends. She also wondered if Emma was Paul’s friend. The section concludes with the revelation that this “was their last day” (50).

In Section 12, Jane rode her bike from Beechwood to Upleigh, but did not go the back way for the first time. Paul told her to use the front door. Once inside, Paul indicated his “mother’s precious orchids” (32) in the vestibule and then led Jane upstairs. In the bedroom, he undressed her and looked at her nude body. He found the half-crown piece in her clothing. In Section 13, Jane wondered if Mrs. Niven would have Mr. Niven undo her. She thought about what Mothering Sunday meant to Mrs. Niven since she lost both her sons.

## Analysis

The novella opens with “Once upon a time” (3), a phrase which is repeated through the early sections. The phrasing evokes a fairy tale and perhaps sets the stage for an idyllic love story. Like many fairy tales, the opening involves loss; in this case, Paul has lost his two brothers in the war. The opening also gives background about a horse the family owned. This evokes the theme of memory and loss, allowing the reader a glimpse into Paul’s world.

Instead of moving through the tropes one might expect when reading a fairy tale, Section 2 finds Paul and Jane in bed together after they have had sex. This introduces the theme of nudity. Both remain nude for a large portion of the first half of the novella. The brief sections are like vignettes, giving the reader pieces of a complete picture without revealing the whole. This may be disorienting because of the way the narrative shifts back on itself. After the couple is revealed in bed together, it jumps to earlier in the day and details the phone call from Paul to Jane arranging their meeting. The narrative focuses on Jane’s perspective. The jump in the timeline reflects what it may be like for Jane to remember the day. One of the most significant aspects of the memory is the two of them making love in Paul’s bedroom for the first time. The author does not show the



characters having sex. By keeping this from the reader, it mirrors Jane's decision to never speak of her affair with Paul.

This further develops the theme of memory. The author picks up afterwards when they are in lying in bed together. It is then that Jane steps back and gives background information on how they got to this place. It also informs the reader of Jane's position in the Niven household, introducing the theme of class and social identity. It is clear that Paul's family has money and that Jane works for the Nivens. Their relationship is not one that would be looked favorably on, so they must keep it secret, introducing the theme of secrecy. Beyond the scandalous relationship between a member of society and a servant, the reader soon learns that Paul is engaged to be married.

Paul does not have much to say while they are in the bedroom together. He gets up and moves around in no hurry to dress. He needs to meet Emma and her family, his family, and the Nivens, but shows no urgency. Jane is left nude on the bed, thinking about Emma. While she does not have anything to compare it to, Paul does not often speak of Emma, which may be reasonable given his relationship with Jane. Paul may not want to speak about Emma because of guilt, or he may not speak of Emma because he may think it would bother Jane. However, Jane has not only noticed that Paul does not speak often of Emma, but that they appear to be spending less time together. Is this an accurate assessment? It is possible that Jane would prefer that they not be spending much time together or is interpreting Paul's reluctance to speak of Emma as a sign that he is not interested in the marriage. This opens the possibility that Jane's perspective indicates what she would prefer.

It is after Jane's observations about Paul and Emma that it is revealed that Paul used to pay Jane for sex. Jane is candid in her interviews about her life as an orphan and as a maid, but she does not reveal anything about Paul or when he paid her. She does admit to the reader that she considered her past self to have been an "orphan, maid, prostitute" (28). There is no indication that Paul continued to pay her, but he does appear to be detached from her while they are in the bedroom together. This detachment is reinforced by the way Paul refers to Jane as "friend" (28). As she remembers this, it prompts her to think about the many lovers she had when she worked at a bookshop at Oxford and questions whether they were friends as well. She does not answer the question and her lack of commentary hints that those other men were not friends. Paul and Jane could not be a couple because of their social standings, yet they carried on a long term sexual affair. While it still is unlikely that Paul and Jane could be friends for the same reason, he called her friend when they were younger. The use of the word friend intimates Jane to Paul. It brings her closer to him, effectively including her in his inner circle. Shortly thereafter, it is revealed that this "was their last day" (50). This foreshadows that something will soon separate them with finality, reinforcing the theme of loss. It also casts a shadow over the narrative as it backs up to Jane arriving at Upleigh. She is allowed to use the front entrance and Paul leads her to the bedroom and begins to undress her. He finds the half-crown piece that Mr. Niven gave to Jane earlier in the day. It is symbolic of the start of their relationship when Paul paid her for sex. In finding the coin, it likely reminds Jane of how they began, bookending their relationship. It also allows the reader to experience her vulnerability of



being undressed, finding the coin, and having the memory overshadowed by the knowledge that this would be their last time together. This act demonstrates the themes of nudity, class and social identity, and death and loss.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Mr. Niven refer to the families as "tribes" (11)?

## Discussion Question 2

What is symbolic about Jane receiving the Second Bicycle?

## Discussion Question 3

How does learning that Paul once paid Jane for sex change the impression of their relationship?

## Vocabulary

thoroughbred, indulgence, signet, unclad, latticework, foliage, appendages, girded, aptitude, proffered, hampers (British meaning), predicament, jamboree, zest, intonations, lament, gales, betrothed, hastened, imperious, immodesty, terse, vestibule, furling, decimated, elicited, scrupulously, befitted, obligatory, whittled, scatty, inclination, assignations, curt, garrulous, bidden, attested, feasible, intuition, telepathy, levity, suave, cacophonous, reverence, obligingly, reciprocal, deferring, forecourt





# Sections 14-24

## Summary

In Section 14, Paul told Jane that he drove Iris and Ethel, the maid and cook at Upleigh, to the Titherton Station. He said he “wanted to give them a proper goodbye” (37). Jane pictured Paul driving the women through her whole life. Section 15 reveals that Jane knew Ethel, the maid at Upleigh. Ethel was a good maid who “turned a blind eye and a deaf ear and, above all, kept a closed mouth” (39). Even so, Jane never told Ethel about her relationship with Paul. In Section 16, Paul undressed Jane and told her that he was “mugging up” (40) his law books, which was his excuse for getting out of meeting the families. He was studying to become a lawyer, even if they both knew that he had “as much intention of becoming a lawyer as becoming a lettuce” (41).

Section 17 finds Jane and Paul in bed together. They listened to the birds and lay together and enjoyed the “perfect politics of nakedness” (43). She touched his penis and remembered grabbing the bedstead while they had sex. She remembered that he “commanded her” (43) at the front door and now they were in a state of “mutual nakedness” (44). At the start of Section 18, Jane moved the ashtray Paul put on her stomach. Paul told her that he needed to meet Emma at the Swan Hotel at Bollingford at 1:30, but he did not move from the bed. Jane thought about how she and Emma were technically “equals” (46) because he was not married to either of them. She knew he would have to go and meet Emma, however. She wondered how they communicated with each other and whether she would meet him later at Upleigh. She dismissed the thought because Emma “must be a flawless, untouched virgin, as if he were marrying a vase” (49). In Section 19, Paul moved from the bed and Jane moved her leg and felt a “trickle from between her legs” (50). She knew she could not ask him not to go because of her station. She watched him walk across the room and observed that he “had a different walk” (51) while naked. He commented that if he hurried, he could meet Emma on time. She wondered if he noticed the “little patch between her legs” (52) and thought about how she would tell him that “slower is better” (52). Watching him ready to leave, she fought tears. She thought about what it would be like if Emma were to pick him up and she had to wait while he grabbed a shirt and been discovered. She also wondered how the Nivens would have handled her afterwards, thinking that she could leave in a hurry with all of her belongings in one box. Paul had a Signet ring, pocket watch, and cuff links. She saw the picture of Freddie and Dick on the dresser and wondered if they used to have similar things.

In Section 20, Paul came out of the bathroom, still undressed, while Jane stayed on the bed nude like an “inanimate object” (56). He brought in his clothes, but appeared to not be in a hurry. Again she wondered if he had noticed the trickle, thinking that he must have. Her thoughts turned to why he was moving so slow. In Section 21, Jane realized that Ethel would be the one to clean up after them. Ethel would know what the stain was, which the help sometimes referred to as “come-upons” (61). She wondered if Ethel would suspect that Paul and Emma had had a tryst or if he met someone else.



The narrator explains that the house would soon have “different” (63) needs and Ethel would have already changed the bedclothes.

In Section 22, Jane watched Paul dress, thinking about how she had never watched a man dress before. Paul began with his shirt and it caught her off guard because the look gave “an immediate loss of dignity” (65). She remembered Paul telling her about Nanny Becky and she thought that a nanny was a peculiar “substitute mother” (66). In Section 23 Jane resisted giggling at Paul in his shirt. Neither has said anything in contrast to the “animal noises” (67) they made previously. Even though he was only going to lunch, Paul looked as though he was dressing for his wedding. Jane commented on how it took him so long to put on his trousers and he agreed with her.

In Section 24, Paul has dressed and in his clothes and with the orchids downstairs; it was like his wedding day. Jane felt jealous of Emma until she wondered if he had been dressing for her to give her a “last look” (70). She told him he looked handsome, even though he never told her that she was beautiful. He explained about the spare the key under the rock and to “leave everything” (71); she thought about whether he meant the sheets and if “he was telling her not to be a bloody maid” (71). He told her to help herself to veal-and-ham pie in the kitchen. When Jane was older, she would sometimes think that she had made up the conversation with Paul and wonder if he had really told her to make herself “scarce” (72). Then Paul left.

## Analysis

In Section 14, Paul takes Iris and Ethel to the train station for a “proper goodbye” (37). This is the first indication that Paul may be preparing for something. The reader knows that this is the last day that he is with Jane, so it may indicate that he is running off or that he may be suicidal. While the reader is not exposed to Paul’s behavior on any other day, Jane does indicate that his silence is different and he has taken her to his bedroom in addition to driving Iris and Ethel. These acts begin to foreshadow Paul’s fate.

More is learned about Ethel, but not much is known about Iris. Ethel and Jane knew each other and Jane knows Ethel well enough to understand that she is very discreet. If Jane were to have ever told anyone about her relationship with Paul, it may have been Ethel. Similarly, this may suggest that Ethel is the type of person who might know a lot more than she would ever let on. This addresses the theme of secrecy, while also foreshadowing that Ethel’s discretion will be required in the pages to come.

At this point in the novel, Jane remains unabashedly nude. She occasionally considers the boldness of her nudity or thinks about what Paul must think of her nudity. But in her state of undress, it is as if her status is elevated. Because she is naked in the presences of Paul’s nakedness, they become equals, sharing “mutual nakedness” (44). Jane takes her perceived equality further when she begins to compare herself to Emma. Jane owns her sexuality and makes no apologies for having sex with Paul. She considers what it would be like if Paul were to sneak away with Emma for a rendezvous. She is unable to imagine that Emma would be anything other than virginal when she is married, so she



dismisses the notion that they would meet up for a tryst. While Jane acknowledges the differences in sexual experience between her and Emma, she does not let that difference last long. Jane views herself as Emma's equal because neither of the women are married to Paul.

Jane is also self-conscious about whether or not Paul has noticed the "little patch between her legs" (52). This ejaculate is evidence of what they have done and she wants him to notice her and acknowledge. Jane knows that someone will have to clean the bed linens. If it is not Jane, then who would it be? Ethel. If someone else were to clean up after them, they would know, at the very least, what Paul had done, and would begin to speculate about who with. If Paul were to ask her to clean up, it relegates her back to maid status. She compares Paul to an animal marking his "territory" (50) with his "seed" (50). Jane knows that she cannot ask Paul to stay with her, but she wants to remind him that he has been with her with her "theoretically coaxing knee, only her own unhiding nakedness to make him think again" (51). Once Jane is clothed, she ceases to be an equal to Paul or Emma, instead risking being equal only to Ethel, reinforcing the theme of class and social identity.

After the ejaculate leaves her body, she feels a sense of loss and begins to wonder about how they could have been caught. Emma might have arrived unexpectedly, which makes her wonder how the Nivens would react. Her first inclination is to run, thinking that her tryst with Paul would put her livelihood at risk, not Paul's. She does not question whether it would result in the engagement being called off, but rather that she would have to run. It is also at this time that she notices the Signet ring, pocket watch, and cufflinks of Paul's dressing table with the photo of his brothers Freddie and Dick. Jane never met Paul's brothers and only knew of them from what he had sparingly told her. Seeing these items makes her wonder about the brothers' possessions. The possessions indicate both the themes of class and social identity and loss.

The theme of class and social identity is also explored when Paul tells Jane to "leave everything" (71). While Jane seems confident in the details offered about the afternoon with Paul, this is the one moment where she doubts her memory or defers to her imagination. Given the difference in their social standings, anything other than telling her to leave the sheets diminishes Jane. While any couple would have to address the situation, because of her job, it cheapens the experience and may remind her of when he used to pay her for sex. For Jane it would feel like she was working for him.

Jane's memory shapes all of Paul's actions. She feels as though he was deliberately dressing for her to give her a "last look" (70), but if Paul's behaviors were deliberate, he may have had other things in mind. He could leave the sheets for someone else to find and risk the relationship being discovered, and by offering Jane the leftover pie, knowing she would eat it, it would offer further evidence of his presence in the house. The eaten food could also be seen as disrespectful to the families and to Emma since he was expected to meet them for a luncheon. Paul's deliberate actions may further foreshadow the questions surrounding his death.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jane contrast Paul having “commanded her” (43) and their “mutual nakedness” (44)?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Jane keep questioning whether or not Paul notices the stain?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jane fear that she has created the memory of her conversation with Paul before he left?

## Vocabulary

gawped, ruse, trite, prerogative, fastidious, presumptuous, dispensation, seethe, brazenly, compliance, connivance, inertia, riposte, agitation, accoutrements, preponderance, paraphernalia, insignia, inanimate, tenaciously, aloofness, disdain, incriminating, squalid, fathom, parlance, deduction, permutations, vantage, nullify, folly, conundrum, banalities, farcical, elucidate, preposterous, affrontedness



## Sections 25-35

### Summary

In Section 25, Jane listened as Paul left and the door opening and closing downstairs. She heard Paul giggle and his shoes on the gravel walking toward the garage. She had left her bicycle by the garage and thought about how Emma would have seen if it she had shown up unannounced. She stayed in the bed, not moving for an indeterminable time. She finally got up and went to the window and then looked back at the sheets and the stain and how it trickled out of her, “a maid” (77). In Section 26, Jane went into the bathroom and removed the Dutch cap for birth control that Paul helped her get. In the future, she would think about how different it might have been if she had gotten pregnant. And how it was strange that he referred to his emission as his “seed” (79).

In Section 27, Jane moved from the dressing room and back to the bedroom, contemplating getting her clothes. Instead, she went into the hall and down the stairs completely nude. She thought about the absurdity of a nude woman descending the stairs. She noted the white orchids that looked like “a frozen butterfly” (82) and looked at the dark pictures of men on the walls. In Section 28, Jane found the key on the table, but did not want to take it. She went into the hall and went from room to room in the nude as though her nudity offered her “invisibility” (85). She went through the drawing room and looked at herself in the mirror. She thought again of Emma and then returned to the hallway. Seeing her reflection in a large mirror, she admired herself thinking “This is Jane Fairchild!” (87). Paul had “possessed her body” (87) and that was all she had. Thinking of Emma, she tried to picture Emma naked and how her body would differ from her own. The clock chimed and Jane did not know that Paul “was already dead” (88).

In Section 29, Jane went into the library, which she considered to be a “sanctuary” (89). The library was Jane’s favorite room to clean. A maid would know which books were read and which were not.

In Section 30, Jane remembered asking Mr. Niven to borrow a book from the library, to which he agreed. She borrowed books from the Beechwood library often. One day, Mr. Niven asked why she read *Treasure Island*, as it was considered a boy’s book. She said she liked the adventure and it was not like there were books in the library for girls. In Section 31, Jane, as an adult, reflects on being asked in interviews about what books she read when she was younger. She told the interviewers that she read boys’ books because “who would want to read sloppy girls’ stuff” (93).

Section 32 returns to the Upleigh library. Jane found Paul’s law books, but she did not know if he ever used them. She remembered regretting when she told Paul about her own reading habits and he mocked her. Their relationship was physical, not “for droning on about books” (95). She took a copy of *Kidnapped* from the shelf and pressed it against her naked body and put the book back. In Section 33, Jane left the library and went to the stairs to the kitchen. She ate the leftover ham-and-veal pie ravenously. She



thought that Paul must be eating at the restaurant with Emma. She then became aware that she was naked, eating someone else's leftovers and felt like a "miserable and desperate" (99) person. Leaving the kitchen, she thought about Ethel cleaning up after her and how Ethel might assume that Paul and Emma had eaten the pie and gone up to the bedroom. She also wondered if Iris would assume that Paul's last meal was the pie she made.

In Section 34, Jane went upstairs and as she passed through the hall she decided to leave. She heard the phone ringing. In the bedroom, she saw her naked body in the three-way mirror and then got dressed. She looked at the picture of Paul's brothers on the dressing table. She left the bedroom window open and took a "mental photograph" (104) of the room and left. She would be the only one who would know that she had been there. Section 35 returns to Jane thinking about giving interviews when she was eighty about adventure stories. Writers were not adventurous "sitting all day at their desks" (36).

## Analysis

At the start of Section 25, Jane remains in the bed, continuing to focus on the stain between her legs and how it was deposited inside of her, "a maid" (77). Paul may have told her to leave everything behind, but Jane remains fully aware of her status and the contradiction between the two of them. While Paul is largely quiet while he is dressing, she believes that she hears "his sudden giggle. If giggle it was" (73). This giggle may be a created memory for Jane. If she is remembering Paul giggling outside, it calls into question his state of mind. A giggle is in sharp contrast to the silence he lingered in upstairs. If the giggle occurred, it prompts questions as to its meaning. He may have had a moment of happiness or felt as though he had just gotten away with something. It may foreshadow the accidental nature of the fate of the fate that awaits him, or perhaps suggests that he was at peace with his decision if not. There is no way to truly ascertain Paul's character. He is presented as a memory through Jane's perspective. Jane would not have been able to read his mind (his body language, yes), but the limited narrative perspective constrains what the reader can know about any of the other characters. Further, if Jane remains unsure of the giggle, it dampens her ability to convey whatever intent she might have picked up on.

This ambiguity speaks further to the theme of loss. While it is known that the Sheringhams and the Nivens each lost two sons during World War I, the reader learns very little about any of the boys. Their deaths hover over the novel. There is no way that a sense of loss cannot permeate every character and each action. While it is not directly expressed, this is a time of mourning and there is a sense that more loss is coming.

Jane is left alone in the house and wanders around in the nude. She is daring and free. If Paul had not giggled, perhaps it was her own. The time that Jane is alone in the house is almost as if time stands still. Other than Paul, no one knows she is there. If anyone did, they would never imagine that she would be wandering the house completely nude. Jane is able to feel "invisible now" (84). If she were dressed, she





would feel out of place, so the lack of clothing continues the feel of being an equal that she had with Paul earlier, reinforcing the themes of nudity and class and social identity. When she is in the library, she even goes so far as to put a book against her bare body. This symbolic action foreshadows her intimate relationship with books, indicating her future self as a writer.

Being in the library, she remembers telling Paul about her reading habits. The conversation prompted Paul to put their relationship into simple terms. It was not “for droning on about books” (95). This seems in contrast to his calling her a “friend” (28). She regretted telling Paul about her reading. Remembering this in conjunction with her nudity in the library allows her to acknowledge her intimacy with books. Perhaps she would have liked to have shared that part of herself with Paul, and in this moment she is able to symbolically.

Jane also compares her body to what Emma’s nude body might look like. Enhancing the theme of class and social identity, Jane is able to see herself in comparison to Emma without wealth or status involved. Instead, it is a theoretical comparison of their bodies. Jane takes ownership of her body in a different way from using it sexually, or sharing it sexually with Paul. She is able to see herself in the mirror and recognize the full scope of herself in a way that she had not previously. Paul is not far from her thoughts though, thinking of how he possessed her.

At this juncture, it is revealed to the reader that Paul is now deceased. The how and why of his death remain unclear, but in contrast with Jane’s freedom, Paul is gone. Of course, Jane does not yet know this, except for in context of her memory looking back.

Jane leaves the library and makes her way to the kitchen. It is not until she eats the leftover pie that she becomes self-conscious and shameful of her nudity. The act of eating allows her to absorb what she is doing and she begins to see it through a darker lens. It remains absurd, but not the lighthearted absurdity of her walking down the stairs in the nude. She sees her naked body again in the dressing table mirror where the picture of Paul’s brothers sits before she gets dressed and leaves. There is finality in what she is doing, mirroring Paul’s death. This addresses the theme of loss.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jane compare Paul possessing her body as possessing the only thing she had?

## Discussion Question 2

What does Paul’s comment about his relationship with Jane not involving “droning on about books” (95) reveal about his character?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Jane spend so much time going through the house while nude?

## Vocabulary

rendezvous, conjure, blatant, bereft, connoisseurs, benefactors, bestowed, deference, guilt, flagrant, simpering, cache, palpably, unadornedly, enclave, retinue, collation, envisaged, marauded, nefarious





## Sections 36-48

### Summary

In Section 36 Jane put the key under a piece of “stone pineapple” (105) and got her bicycle to leave. Leaving the house she felt free and took the old route home. She would always remember the “secret back route” between Beechwood and Upleigh. She raced on the bicycle, thinking about how she might not have been able to conduct herself with Paul if she had a mother to visit on Mothering Sunday. Jane would never forget herself that day and the “air up her skirt and a Dutch cap up her fanny” (110). In Section 37 Jane stopped at the crossroads at three o’clock, thinking of the families sorting out who would pay for lunch, and Paul putting his hand on Emma’s knee. She continued on her way to Beechwood, planning to read her book by Joseph Conrad. Mr. Niven stopped her on the drive and told her that he had “distressing news” (113).

Section 38 reflects on Jane as a writer years later when she was asked when she became a writer. She would reply “At birth” (114) and explain that she had been an orphan, more specifically a “foundling” (115). The last name Fairchild was commonly given to found children. She said that the circumstances of her birth offered her “an innate licence to invent” (116). She would never tell people about how she walked around a house in the nude. Section 39 describes Jane’s childhood in an orphanage and her becoming a servant at fourteen. She went to work for the Nivens after their sons died in the war. Unlike most maids, Jane could read and do simple math. Mr. Niven allowed Jane to read the books in the library and would take extra time while running errands when she would read. Jane did not know whether the Nivens knew about the extra time. In Section 40 the orphanage had given Jane May 1st as a birthdate. She was not given her birthday as a day off of work. The day the servants did get off was Mothering Sunday, but Jane did not have a mother to go to.

In Section 41, when Jane was asked in interviews about life during World War I, she would talk about the “accumulated loss and grief” (124). She revealed that she was able to read and did not have family, while those who did have family were not educated and were sent off to war. Jane claimed “she was very fortunate to have been born destitute” (125). In Section 42, Milly asked Jane if she was an “orchid” (125), mistaking the word for orphan. Later, Jane would write Milly as a character in one of her books and have her say “cucumbered” (126) instead of encumbered. Jane wondered if Milly said orchid intentionally and whether Milly knew about Jane and Paul. In Section 43, Jane reflected on the “inconsistency of words’ (128). She would discuss her thoughts with her husband Donald Campion, but never in interviews.

Section 44 is a brief section where Jane spoke in an interview about adventure stories and “adventures with boys” (130).

Section 45 reveals that Jane would live to be ninety-eight and describes the historical markers of her life: “four kings and one queen” (130), the sinking of the Titanic, and her



first tryst with Paul when she was fifteen. She divided her life into different sections of years: maid, Oxford, London, and Donald. Section 46 addresses Jane's Oxford years when she worked in a bookshop at Oxford, her first job after being a maid. Mr. Niven wrote Jane a recommendation because she had "made more use of his own library than he had" (133). Her employer was Mr. Paxton. Jane began bedding some of the men who frequented the bookshop. She would tell the men that she was a shop girl who wrote. Mr. Paxton offered her an old typewriter after telling her that he was going to purchase a new one.

In Section 47, Jane met Donald Campion at Oxford and he would later become her husband. Something about Donald reminded Jane of Paul, but that they connected sexually and intellectually. She never spoke of the comparison in interviews. At eighty, Jane was asked about her husband's death at a young age from a "brain tumour" (137). At age forty-eight, Jane became famous for her novel *In the Mind's Eye*, which "shocked and scandalised" (138). Jane and Donald did not have any children.

Section 48 returns to Mr. Niven's comment that he had "some distressing news" (139). Jane went pale at the news that Paul had been killed in a car accident.

## Analysis

After Jane leaves Upleigh, the reader begins to learn more about her writing and her relationship with words. The latter part of the novella uses metafiction to comment, not only the work of Joseph Conrad, but on Jane Fairchild, the author. Throughout there have been indications that Jane is giving interviews later in life. For the benefit of the reader, she is telling the story of her relationship with Paul as though the reader is the only other in on the secret.

As soon as Jane leaves, she races on her bicycle and feels free. Given that it is Mothering Sunday – a holiday that was celebrated on a Sunday during Lent, similar to Mother's Day – Jane is thinking about the impact a mother would have had on her life. She may never have engaged in a relationship with Paul (or ever met Paul for that matter), and she may have felt more of an obligation to behave or hold onto ideals of a social standing or expected behavior for a young woman on the time. But Jane is energized by her rebellion as she leaves the house with "air up her skirt and a Dutch cap up her fanny" (110).

More is revealed about Jane's history – or her origin story. She was not just an orphan, but a "foundling" (115), meaning that she had been abandoned. She was given a common first name and a last name that was frequently given to orphans and foundlings. She declares that she became a writer at birth because everything about her identity was invented. Even her birthday is unknown; she was given a birth date that was an estimate to the time when she was born. While the servants did not get their birthdays off, there were allowed Mothering Sunday off in order to spend time with their mothers. Because Jane was an orphan, the day was hers to do with as she saw fit. This separates her from the others in her same class. Yes, Jane is working class, but



because of her differences, she is able to reinvent herself, offering her a class mobility that may not have been availed to the others.

Jane discusses the advantage of being “born destitute” (125). At first glance, the comment seems absurd, but Jane has nothing to lose. She makes this comment in conjunction with the amount of losses from causalities of war. Jane understands that she is different. Instead of viewing those differences as burdens, she uses them to her advantage. She can read, so she is able to educate herself. She is freer with her body and her expression of self, and she uses this to enhance her writing. Her comment does not, however, diminish the sacrifices of the families who lost sons in the war. She understands the weight of grief.

When Milly misspeaks the word orchid for orphan, the author highlights wordplay. Orchids call to mind the vestibule at Upleigh. Jane wonders if the error is a mistake or intentional. This question likely stems from her own self-awareness. If Milly made the comment with intent, it suggests that Milly, like Ethel, has more awareness of the goings on around her, but chooses discretion.

Jane reflects on words in Section 43. While she does not discuss her thoughts on the “inconsistency of words” (128) in interviews, she does discuss it at length with her husband Donald. When Jane thinks about how “A word was not a thing, no. A thing was not a word. But somehow the two – things – became inseparable” (128), she grapples with understanding what is and what could be. She goes so far as to wonder if everything is a “fabrication” (129). If this casts doubts on what has transpired in the novella thus far, it should also call into question the reliability of memory. The story – the memory – is true to her. Her perspective has guided the story, mimicking perhaps, how she would write one of her novels. It does not make it any less true, but rather allows the reader to see the workings of a participant in an experience, reliving a memory through the lens of a writer. This helps to further explore the theme of memory.

The theme of loss is further explored when the news of Paul’s fate is officially given to Jane and the reader learns how Paul died. Just prior to this reveal, the reader also learns about the death of Jane’s husband, Donald. Jane finds similarities in both the men, but does not elaborate. Perhaps it is an essence or it is the memory of loss that connects them. The deaths of these men are revealed in conjunction with each other so that neither death competes with the other. She can mourn these men equally and differently and not have the loss of either be any less potent.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Jane consider herself “fortunate to have been born destitute” (125)?

## Discussion Question 2

How do Jane’s relationships with the men at Oxford shape her character?



## Discussion Question 3

What does Jane's fame from writing a novel that shock and scandalized people reveal about Jane's career as a writer?

## Vocabulary

copse, conflagration, foundling, innate, leniency, bereaved, discernment, rudimentary, destitute, candor, implicitly, beset, vivisector, begotten, vestiges, largess, consort , stoical, quip, oracular, combustion, pyre, quandary, carnal, fickle



## Sections 49-60

### Summary

In Section 49, Jane realized that she would never know how much Mr. Niven knew. Jane knew that Paul left without hurry, but the rest of what happened was revealed as Mr. Niven filled in the blanks following Paul's departure. The car had burst into flames upon impact, leaving a cigarette case with Paul's initials and a signet ring to identify his body. Paul was late and Emma was left to wonder if she had been stood up. She called Upleigh House, but no one answered. Emma called the police. Mr. Niven left the luncheon and returned to tell Jane what happened and asked her if she would "like to sit down" (145). Section 50 reveals that Paul was going at a high rate of speed and took a short cut which included "narrower and twistier" roads. At a sharp bend, he lost control of the car and plowed into a large oak tree. The inquest determined it was a tragic accident because no one wanted to believe that he caused the accident himself two weeks prior to his marriage. Jane was never asked and she had not heard the crash while she was walking around the house naked, but had heard the phone ring.

In Section 51, Mr. Niven apologized for relaying the news to Jane. He explained that the families were going to be with Emma and where everyone should be and Mr. Niven decided that he should go to Upleigh. He then commented that she was "back early" (150) and that he was going to go to Upleigh to let Ethel know about Paul when she returned. Mr. Niven felt that someone should "ascertain the situation at Upleigh" (151) and how Paul left it. He asked Jane to join him, but understood if Jane wanted to stay back and read her book. Jane agreed to go with him. In Section 52, Jane went inside to freshen up from her bike ride as Mr. Niven suggested. They went to Upleigh and found that Ethel was already there. Jane noticed that Ethel closed the bedroom window and gasped. Ethel greeted them at the door.

In Section 53, Ethel was surprised to see them. Mr. Niven explained what happened and Jane thought Ethel's eyes revealed that she knew all of what happened in the house, but that maids must stick together. Ethel offered to make any needed phone calls and told Mr. Niven that she had tidied up. Mr. Niven asked if she found anything in Paul's bedroom. Ethel was confused by the question and Mr. Niven specifically asked if she found a note "anything written" (159), to which Ethel said no. As they prepared to leave, Jane noted that Ethel looked at her like "the sternest and most forgiving of parents" (160). In Section 54, Jane knew there were things she could never know, but she knew that Ethel had changed the bed linens and tidied up the bedroom and house. Jane would later make Ethel into a minor character in one of her books as a side character who managed to "know everything" (161). In Section 55, as Mr. Niven drove Jane home around sunset the warm day had cooled to March-like temperatures. He apologized for keeping Jane from her reading. After a long silence, Mr. Niven commented: "That's all five of them, Jane" (163). He turned off the car and leaned on Jane, sobbing and apologizing.



In Section 56, the title of the book Jane wanted to read was *Youth and Other Stories* by Joseph Conrad. Because of the events of the day, it would be a long time before she read *Heart of Darkness*. She liked that Conrad's works were different from the other books she read and she liked the word "tale" (165). She also liked the word "youth" (166). She thought about what it meant to be a "challenging author" (168), how it applied to Joseph Conrad, and how she reacted to being called one herself. In Section 57, Jane would get annoyed during interviews when she talked about Conrad and the interviewer would suggest that he was "a man's author" (168). In Section 58, Jane read *Youth and Other Stories* and discovered that it was not an adventure story, but about five men sitting around a table telling stories.

In Section 59, Jane sought out other Conrad books after finishing *Youth and Other Stories*. She learned that Conrad had changed his name and felt connected to him because of how she got her name. In interviews she spoke of Conrad as though he had been an "old lover" (173). When she was at Oxford, she was surprised to learn that Conrad lived in England, not far from her. She was shocked when she learned of his death soon after. She had even imagined what it would have been like to lie naked beside Conrad. In Section 60, Jane became a writer of nineteen novels. Being a writer held an "implication that you were trading in lies" (176). The interview over, the "trade of truth-telling" (176) in question was revealed as "finding a language" (177), and that much in life cannot be explained.

## Analysis

The themes of memory and secrecy are used together when Mr. Niven tells Jane about Paul's death. Jane immediately suspects that Mr. Niven may know more than he is letting on. Just as Jane suspected with Milly, she has no way of knowing what the other may know without revealing herself. While Jane has proven to be quite good at keeping a secret, her body does briefly betray her. When Mr. Niven tells her that Paul is dead, she goes pale, appearing as though she may pass out. This is likely an unexpected response. Paul's death would surely be a shock to any of the staff at any of the houses in question, but if Mr. Niven had suspicions about a relationship between the two of them, this may have confirmed it for him. He asks Jane to accompany him to the house. There is nothing to suggest that he would do this out of malice in the event that he did know about the affair. Instead it is as if he is offering Jane an opportunity to set things proper at the house.

When they arrive at Upleigh, Ethel greets them at the door and Jane realizes by the closed window that Ethel has already tended to the bedroom. This must come as a partial relief for her, knowing that Mr. Niven and the rest of the families will not find out about it. Still, she must cope with the knowledge that Ethel knows her secret.

If Mr. Niven did know about Jane and Paul, his question about the note seems unexpected. He may have noticed changes in behavior with Paul, or he may have been more keenly aware of the hold grief had on the families, and understandably on the surviving son. If Paul had been pressured into the engagement to Emma for monetary



reasons to help the family, Paul may not have seen any other way out than to commit suicide. Mr. Niven is trying to protect the Sheringham family. If there had been a note, it is likely that he would have destroyed it in order to confirm the cause of death as an accident. Mr. Niven would have had the discretion of Ethel and Jane if needed as well. In fact, the implication of the variations of what each of them knew about that afternoon would have protected their secrets.

Ethel tells Mr. Niven that there was not a note. Had there actually been a note, Jane surely would have seen it while she explored the house. The question of whether Paul's death was deliberate or accidental is open to interpretation. The answer may vary from reader to reader and this may even be frustrating, but the ambiguity of Paul's death allows for Paul to die without judgment or preconceived ideas of how his death may influence the grieving of the families. If Paul committed suicide, but it cannot be proven, he protects Emma and Jane and his family.

After Paul's death, Jane reflects on her relationship with the author Joseph Conrad who is regarded as "a man's author" (168). For Jane there is a powerful male presence with her at all times, but "everything had a masculine bias in 1924" (169). The books that Jane reads have a reputation for being preferred by boys or men. Mr. Niven allows her access to his library and includes her when he goes to Upleigh after Paul's death. Paul and Donald and her other lovers have had a profound influence on her, as well as Mr. Paxton at the Oxford bookshop who gave her a typewriter, encouraging her writing. While Jane interacts with women, it is the profound influence of men on her life that shapes who she becomes. When Jane considers how differently she would have behaved, especially given the relationship with Paul, if she had had a mother, she neglects to see the influence of men. Does Jane live her life as a man? Certainly for the time period, Jane is very progressive given women's roles. These men allow her to become who she needs to be without the restrictions of her gender, which reinforces the theme class and social identity.

As the novella concludes, Jane reflects on her accomplishments. Like the earlier comment about "fabrication" (129), Jane again casts some doubt on her story. She understands the "implication that you were trading in lies" (176) as a writer and contemplates "truth-telling" (176). Ultimately Jane accepts that there is the unknowable, such as Paul's death or even the loss of her parents, but that "finding a language" (177) has enabled her truth.

## Discussion Question 1

What are the implications of the possibility that Paul may have committed suicide?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Mr. Niven ask Jane to accompany him to Upleigh?





## Discussion Question 3

What does it mean that a writer trades in lies?

## Vocabulary

surmise, immaculately, verve, indignation, conjecture, ignominy, apex, contortion, docile, alighted, edifice, ascertain, transmuted, periphery, pith





# Characters

## Jane Fairchild (Jay)

Jane Fairchild (Jay) is a maid at the Niven house. She is involved in a sexual relationship with Paul, knowing that he is engaged to someone else.

She is aware of her social standing and embraces her sexuality. She compares herself to Ethel, one of the other maids when she knows Ethel will have to clean up after her tryst with Paul. She also compares herself to Emma, imagining how Emma would act in similar situations with Paul and how their bodies compare as well.

After leaving her position at the Niven house, she goes to work at a bookshop. She becomes involved in several relationships with the men she meets there. Eventually she marries one of the men, Donald Campion.

Throughout the novel, Jane is remembering her time with Paul, often reflecting on the relationship while she is being interviewed later in life. She becomes a celebrated author at the age of forty-eight, after her husband Donald dies. Donald sometimes reminds her of Paul. She continues to think fondly of Paul up until her death at age ninety-eight.

In her writing she masks people she knew as characters, most notably Ethel. Her first successful book causes a scandal because of its sexual content. She is forthright, honest, and flirtatious in her interviews, even when she is an old woman. The one story she refuses to tell is about her relationship with Paul. She wants to keep that to herself.

## Paul Sheringham

Paul is the only living son of the Sheringham's. He is engaged to Emma Hobday and is studying law. The marriage is thought to be for money.

He lost two brothers during World War I. He has been involved in a sexual relationship with Jane Fairchild since they were in their teens. The relationship began with Paul paying Jane for sexual favors.

Knowing he is late for a luncheon with his family, the Hobdays, and the Nivens, Paul takes his time dressing to go meet them. He does not speak much with Jane the day of the affair. He offers her leftovers in the kitchen and tells her to lockup when she is done.

On his way to the luncheon, he takes a shortcut and hits a tree while driving around a sharp bend in the road and is killed instantly.



## Mr. Niven

Mr. Niven is Jane's employer. He is married and lost two sons during the war.

He is fond of Jane, allowing her to borrow books from the library, and writes her a recommendation when she leaves to take a job at a bookshop.

After Paul's death, he rushes to Upleigh to ensure that everything in the house is in order before the family returns. He asks Ethel about whether there was a note, suggesting that Paul may have committed suicide. He may know that Paul and Jane had a relationship.

## Emma Hobday

Emma is Paul's fiancée and is due to marry Paul in two weeks. She is never directly seen in the novel. Her behavior is imagined through Jane's perspective.

## Ethel Bligh

Ethel Bligh is the maid at Upleigh. She takes a motherly stance toward Jane. She cleans up Paul's bedroom after Jane and Paul's afternoon together. She likely knows that it was Jane and does not speak about what she found.

## Iris

Iris is the cook at Upleigh. Along with Ethel, Paul takes her to the train station the morning he dies.

## Milly

Milly is the cook at the Beechwood, the Niven household. A few years older than Jane, she goes to visit her mother on Mothering Sunday.

## Mrs. Niven

Mrs. Niven is married to Mr. Niven. She lost two sons during the war. When Mr. Niven suggests a picnic because of the unseasonably warm weather, she rejects the idea, expecting the weather to turn.



## **Donald Champion**

Donald Champion is Jane's husband. They met at the Oxford bookshop where Jane worked. He is a philosopher and dies young from a brain tumor. He sometimes reminds Jane of Paul.

## **Mr. Paxton**

Mr. Paxton runs the Oxford bookshop. He offers Jane the old typewriter when he orders a new one so that she can write.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Second Bicycle

The second bicycle symbolizes Jane's station. She has permission to use the bicycle, but does not own it. Further, she is given the lesser of the two bicycles, representing her position below Emma.

## Library

The library symbolizes how memories are locked away and stored, like the unread books.

## Nudity

Nudity symbolizes the truth of Jane's story. She has not written or spoken of her afternoon with Paul and the use of nudity throughout the novel represents both the truth and vulnerability of her character.

## Stain

The stain on the bed sheets symbolizes the memory of the afternoon, including Paul's death, because it is something to be clean up and not spoken about.

## Orchids

The orchids symbolize Emma. The white orchids represent purity, and by extension Emma's virtue in contrast to Jane. The orchids are preferred by Paul's mother, indicating the family's influence over Paul's relationship.

## Key

The key symbolizes how Jane locks away her memory. After the key is tucked away in its hiding place, Jane's memories move away from the afternoon with Paul and more is revealed about her life after leaving the Nivens and becoming a writer.

## Clothing

Clothing symbolizes how Jane will keep her affair with Paul private. Jane does not know that Paul has been killed, but she dresses afterwards, as though she is covering up what happened.



## **Telephone**

The telephone symbolizes Jane on her best behavior when she takes the call at the Nivens house. When the phone rings when Jane is naked in the library, she does not answer the phone, showing she is out of place.

## **Typewriter**

The typewriter symbolizes Jane's birth as a writer.

## **Unseasonably Warm Day**

The unseasonably warm day symbolizes that Jane and Paul's affair will end abruptly, just as the weather will return to its normal weather pattern by nightfall.



# Settings

## Paul's Bedroom

Paul's bedroom is upstairs at Upleigh. It has a twin bed and a dressing table where he keeps a photograph of his brothers. The afternoon tryst is the only time Jane and Paul have sex in his room. Jane leaves the bedroom window open when she leaves the house, but finds it closed when she arrives with Mr. Niven after Paul's death.

## The Libraries

Two libraries are referenced in the novel: one at Upleigh and one at Beechwood. The library at Upleigh is where Jane hears the phone ring after Paul's death. The library at Beechwood is the Nivens' collection and where Jane is allowed to borrow books.

## Beechwood

Beechwood is the home owned by the Niven family. It is where Jane works along with Milly.

## Upleigh House

Upleigh House is owned by the Sheringham's. It is where Jane and Paul spend the afternoon. Jane spends her time after Paul leaves walking around the house in the nude. There are white orchids in the vestibule.

## The Oxford Bookstore

The Oxford Bookstore is where Jane works after she leaves the Nivens' employ. Mr. Paxton, Jane's boss, offers her a typewriter. Jane meets her future husband Donald Campion at the bookstore.



# Themes and Motifs

## Memory

The author uses memory to convey what happened between Paul and Jane on Mothering Sunday and to illustrate the fallibility of memory. Many of the early sections repeat as though Jane is remembering new details. She creates a composite that gives the reader a fuller picture of what happened.

Because the memories evolve, they may not be accepted as fact. Jane may remember things that happened, but she is also framing it through her preferred lens.

The third person narrative assists with credibility. If a first person narrator were used, the reader may doubt Jane. Instead, the author is able to convey that spending time with each memory elicits new details, thus fleshing out the memory.

Jane keeps the memory of the afternoon private. She is the only one who knows what transpired at Upleigh that afternoon. Paul's death prevents anyone from contradicting her memory, although she keeps the memory a secret.

There are indications that others may have suspicions about what may have happened, but nothing is confirmed. Mr. Niven's comments to Jane after Paul's death are as likely to indicate that Mr. Niven was fearful that Paul committed suicide, rather than knowing that Paul was having an affair with his maid. Ethel had to have known that something transpired at the house with Paul, but she does not confirm that Paul had sex with Jane. She remains discreet for the sake of her employer and someone she considers a friend.

Memory is also employed thematically in regard to the sons lost during the war. Jane sees how the books the Niven's sons had are kept separate in the library, as if holding a place for them. Paul keeps a picture of his brothers who died in the war on his dressing table. When Jane walks through the Upleigh library, she does not see where their books were kept separate. Instead, the books are among the remainder of the collection as though the Sheringham's memories of their sons are tucked away.

## Secrecy

In contrast to Memory, the author uses the theme of secrecy to illustrate how people preserve their memories differently and for varying reasons.

The most obvious secret kept in the novel is the affair between Paul and Jane. Jane never speaks of the affair, even though she remembers during interviews how details about Paul would influence her answers. Paul's death prohibits him from speaking of the affair. In effect, Paul and Jane both take their secret to their graves.



That is not to suggest that others may know about the relationship, which began when they were teenagers, lasting for seven years. It is unlikely that someone at some point realized what was happening. The relationship may have prompted the Sheringhams to arrange for his marriage to Emma Hobday. Because the Sheringhams – and Emma – are all characters existing on the periphery of the story, there is no way to ascertain what they may or may not have known.

Likewise, Mr. Niven may have known about the affair as well. He takes it upon himself to notify the staff at Upleigh about Paul's death, but after telling Jane about the accident, he invites Jane to accompany him to Upleigh. Mr. Niven may have had his suspicions about his maid and Paul, but may not have fully realized until he witnessed Jane's reaction to the news of Paul's death.

Ethel knows for certain that Paul had sex in his room that afternoon, but keeps this to herself. Through an exchange of looks, Jane feels certain that Ethel knows it was her. Whether or not Ethel knew about them prior to that afternoon is unclear or if Jane's suspicions about herself are even correct. The limited narrative perspective prevents this from being known outright, though it appears likely.

Another way in which secrecy is explored is in the way Jane reveals that she has based characters in her novels based on the people in her life. She makes Ethel into a character called Edith, but does not make her a maid. Rather she is a character that exists in the background, but who somehow knows all about what transpires. She also based a character on Milly, indicating her by her mispronunciation of words.

In a way, Jane herself is a secret. As an orphan, more specifically as a foundling, her identity is a secret known to no one. She is able to keep secrets because she identifies as a secret.

## Nudity

The author uses nudity as way to expose the characters and connect them to each other physically and symbolically.

Throughout about half of the novel, Jane is nude. She is nude with Paul after they have had sex and remains nude after he leaves and she explores the house. Her sustained nudity puts her on display. She is vulnerable, but open, and certainly out of place. Roaming the house in the nude may not be what is expected of any given character, but as a maid from another household, Jane's nudity in the house is jarring.

She lingers in her vulnerability, almost savoring it. It is an act of rebellion and it allows her to see herself fully. Prior to that afternoon, Jane was without a clear view of herself, especially in the nude. In this moment she is able to see "her whole unclad self" (87). She feels a sense of pride, thinking: "This is Jane Fairchild! This is me!" (87), as though this is the moment that she comes into herself. Just as humans are born naked, Jane is naked at this symbolic birth.





Paul also lingers in his state of undress. He shows no sense of urgency to get to Emma and the families for the luncheon. He knows that he needs to get dressed and go, but he remains nude. He walks around as though he might get dressed, allowing Jane to study his body. They do not speak much while they are undressed as though there is no need for words. Both are fully exposed. Because of the limited narrative, the reader knows that Jane is actively wondering about his state of undress and about whether or not he is considering hers. In addition to her nudity, she wants him to notice the trickle between her legs: “He must surely have noticed the little patch between her legs” (52). His semen is the most obvious evidence that their affair transpired.

Paul dresses and leaves, leaving Jane nude at the house. By the time Jane dressed, Paul is already dead. Both of them dressed symbolizes the solidification of their secret.

## Loss and Death

The author uses the theme of Loss and Death to demonstrate the toll of war on families and its lasting repercussions.

The Sheringham family lost two sons in World War I – Dick and Freddie. The Niven family also lost two sons in the war – Philip and James. Having both of the families lose two sons in the war shows the amount of loss on a family. Readers may not fully realize that both families lost two sons each, as though the cost of the war was felt by many, not of few. That Jane continues to reflect on this time well into her nineties demonstrates that the cost of war is not easily forgotten.

The Nivens have no other children, but the Sheringhams have Paul. If Paul’s death was a suicide, he may have been inclined to take his own life because of the toll of losing both of his brothers, feeling something akin to survivor’s guilt, or shouldering the burden to do right by his family. If Paul’s impending marriage was designed to help the standing of the Sheringhams, the pressure may have been too great. Further, if he was in love with Jane, he would shame the family if he chose to be with her. He may have chosen to die than to go without Jane.

Paul does not tell Jane that he loves her, however. He calls her his “friend” (28). The two began their sexual relationship as teenagers, with Paul originally paying Jane for sexual favors. Jane identifies at one point with being a “prostitute” (28), and she never outwardly discusses whether or not she loves Paul, likely because she knew she could not. But she remembers Paul until her death and thinks of how that relationship has influenced her life. It does not seem likely that Jane continued with her relationship with Paul as a prostitute, but rather as they matured that they had genuine feelings for her. In this way, Jane loses her first love.

Paul’s death also marks the loss of Jane’s role as a maid. Though the timing is unspecified, after Paul’s death, Jane leaves the Nivens to work the Oxford bookstore. She meets Donald Champion and married him and loses him as well. She thinks to



herself that Donald reminds her of Paul. Perhaps it is their personalities or perhaps it is the depth of feeling associated with losing both of the men.

## Class and Social Identity

The author offers commentary of class and social identity by having the lovers in his story come from different classes.

Jane and Paul are obviously from different classes. Jane is an orphan and became a maid at the age of fourteen. Paul is from a family that, while they have lost some of their fortune, has money. This puts the Sheringham family, in effect, between classes.

Paul's engagement to Emma is suspected to be a way to remedy any money issues the Sheringhams may have. While these issues are inferred, rather than explicating stated, they have reduced their household budget and staff, suggesting the loss. Paul does not seem excited to be marrying Emma.

For seven years, Paul has been carrying on a sexual relationship with Jane, who is a member of the working class. It would be inappropriate for them to be together. Further, when they began their relationship, Paul was paying Jane for sexual favors. Jane reflects on her youth as a time when she was an "orphan, maid, prostitute" (28). Jane does not exhibit shame for her past and is candid about being a maid and an orphan in interviews.

Jane is able to achieve class mobility. Later in life she becomes a famous author. If Paul had wanted to marry Jane instead of Emma, the Sheringham family may have felt differently about the relationship given enough time. Instead, the family guided Paul into a relationship that they deemed appropriate.

While the Sheringhams and Nivens are families with money, their social standing did not preclude them from having sons go to war. In addition to the loss of money, the Sheringhams lost two sons and then suffered the subsequent loss of their third son Paul. It is Mr. Niven, who also lost two sons in the war, who acknowledges the complete loss of the five boys when he is in the car with Jane: "That's all five of them, Jane" (163), he says before he breaks down.

Another way in which social identity is explored is in the way Jane compares herself to Emma and Ethel. She regards both women as virginal, but admits that Ethel would have some knowledge about sex. At the very least, she would be able to recognize what certain stains were while cleaning up. Jane embraces her own sexuality, separating herself from Emma and Ethel on the basis of her experiences.

# Styles

## Point of View

Mothering Sunday is related from a third-person limited point of view. The focus is on Jane Fairchild. Other characters are seen through Jane's lens.

The novel begins with "Once upon a time" (3), as though the story should be a type of fairy tale. Because the story is a tragedy and does not result in a traditional happily ever after, it could be considered a fractured fairy tale – a fairy tale which breaks with the conventions of the form.

Jane's perspective is one of a woman who lives well into her nineties, remembering an affair in her early twenties. Set in 1920s England, the devastation of losses from World War I are felt and stand as a backdrop to the story. The war is not the focus of the story, but merely an aspect of the periphery. The use of memory and repetition seeks to mimic a ninety-year-old woman trying to recapture a memory from her youth.

Jane's background is that of an orphan who was sent from an orphanage to work for the Niven family as a maid. Jane sees the world through the eyes of the working class. In a way she is free of the social constructs of gender identity, viewing herself as a sexual being. She also manages to escape the working class, becoming a famous author later in life.

The narrator is gender neutral, but it may be of note that the novel is written by a man capturing a woman's perspective. The text does not focus on how a woman may view something as opposed to a man. Jane confronts the idea that there is literature for men and women and she prefers the former, in particular the works of Joseph Conrad.

## Language and Meaning

While the novella is short on length, the pace is slow and languid. The images are straightforward with detail building as the story progresses.

The author uses British spelling and colloquialisms. Spelling examples are "practise" (84), "pretence" (98), "licence" (116), and "candour" (125). The British spelling is kept consistent in this study guide. Examples of colloquialisms are "puddings" (110), meant to represent any dessert, and "fanny" (110), which is British slang for vagina.

The language is simple to understand, but because of how the story unfolds, it can be disorienting. This gives a sense of someone struggling to find all the pieces of a memory with it gradually becoming clearer. It also demonstrates how other thoughts wander in during recall.



Dialogue is used sparingly. When it is used, it has a natural, conversational tone that is appropriate to the time and setting.

## Structure

Mothering Sunday is a novella, coming in at 177 pages. There are no chapters or parts designated in the novella. Instead, white space is used to break sections of the book.

For the purposes of this study guide, the sections were numbered and the summary uses the numbers to correspond to the sections in the book. There are a total of sixty sections. Some sections are several pages, while others can be as short as one sentence long. On average, the sections are a couple pages.

Prior to the start of the novella, there is an epigraph reading: “You shall go to the ball!” The opening line is “Once upon a time”, which is repeated on page 6 and on page 7 twice.

The structure of the novel is designed like a memory of a life. It reveals new details about the day in each section, sometimes repeating information from an earlier section. At times, the novel will reveal information in a nonlinear fashion, such as the telephone call from Paul to Jane, which is presented after Paul and Jane have already met in the bedroom at Upleigh.



## Quotes

Whatever else Paul Sheringham was marrying, he was marrying money.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** The quote indicates that Paul may not be marrying for love, but rather to help the family.

The sunshine only applauded their nakedness, dismissing all secrecy from what they were doing, though it was utterly secret.”

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** The quote foreshadows that the afternoon will remain a secret because of Paul's death and Jane's commitment to never speak of it.

She would never quite erase, even when she was ninety, her inner curtsy.”

-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates how Jane, despite her fame, would not deny where she came from.

She did not know how he behaved with Emma Hobday.”

-- Narrator (chapter 9 paragraph 5)

**Importance:** The quote shows Jane's curiosity about Emma in relationship to Paul.

It was not her place, after all, with her ghostly maid's clothing back on again, to speak, suggest or do more than wait.”

-- Narrator (chapter 18 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** “It was not her place, after all, with her ghostly maid's clothing back on again, to speak, suggest or do more than wait.”

It was in some way all for her – that she should watch him dress, watch his nakedness gradually disappear.”

-- Narrator (chapter 20 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** The quote foreshadows Paul's death by his disappearance from her and how Jane is the last person to see Paul alive.

She had never before had the luxury of so many mirrors. She had never before had the means to view her whole unclad self.”

-- Narrator (chapter 28 paragraph 12)

**Importance:** The quote shows how Jane has had a limited view of herself, but beyond



the afternoon, she is able to become more than a maid and achieve successes not predicted for someone of her station.

Then she felt suddenly like the most miserable and desperate of creatures: no clothes to her back, no roof of her own, and eating someone else's pie."

-- Narrator (chapter 33 paragraph 11)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates Jane's awareness of self. She felt freedom walking around the house, but is overcome by her reality.

And so, with a gleam in her eye and tightening of her lips, she would suggest she had come into the world with an innate licence to invent."

-- Narrator (chapter 38 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** The quote demonstrates how Jane reinvented herself throughout her life, creating her life just as she created fiction.

Forty-eight and famous and widowed and childless and not yet halfway through her orphaned life."

-- Narrator (chapter 47 paragraph 16)

**Importance:** The quote summarizes how much Jane survived through the early part of her life.

And she had never heard – it was a never-spoken fact – as she wandered naked round that house and distant 'crump'."

-- Narrator (chapter 50 paragraph 8)

**Importance:** The quote indicates Jane's unawareness of what happened outside of the Upleigh house that day, insulating her in her own story.

Like – a note, Ethel. Anything written.'"

-- Mr. Niven (chapter 53 paragraph 20)

**Importance:** The quote indicates verifies suspicions about Paul's death and whether he may have committed suicide to escape a marriage he did not want.