

Nora Webster Study Guide

Nora Webster by Colm Tóibín

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Plot Summary

“Nora Webster” is an historical literary novel by Colm Toibin, dealing with the life of Nora Webster through three years after the death of her husband, Maurice. When the novel begins, it is the late 1960s in Wexford, County Wexford, Ireland. Nora is reeling with the recent death of her husband, and is doing all she can to keep on a strong exterior for her children. Her children include Fiona, training to be a teacher, Aine, at university in Bunclody, 13-year-old Donal, who has developed a stutter, and Conor, the youngest.

Money is a major issue for the family right away. Nora begins by selling the family's vacation cottage, which gives the family some breathing room financially, but makes the all of the children very upset. They love the beach cottage because it holds so many good memories for them. Apart from needing money, Nora cannot bear to face the past in the cottage, which helps steel her determination to sell it, which she does.

Nora takes on work at Gibney's, a major mill company in the area owned and operated by the Gibney family, with whom Nora has long been friends. The Gibneys are wealthy not only from their business, but from the investments they have made as well. Nora comes to work handling invoices, bonuses, and expenses for the company, and clashes with Miss Kavanagh, the office manager. Years before, Nora and Kavanagh both worked in the company as teens, but never got along. Nora's primary concern then was to earn money to support her family, for her father had died when she was 14. Marriage to Maurice saved Nora, and gave her freedom.

In the present day, Nora struggles to make enough money to help out her children. Her relatives – her husband's siblings and her own siblings – also help out her children financially in order to make sure they are able to attend college, and have what they need. This is done out of love for one another, and out of love of family. Especially concerned is Aunt Josie, who worries that Nora is exhausting herself. Josie brings Nora away on vacation in Spain, which Nora enjoys. Nevertheless, she still cannot deal with her husband's passing.

Fiona graduates from her program and becomes a teacher in Wexford, while Aine goes on to become a politically-minded student activist in Dublin. The anti-British riots in Dublin prove to be a source of worry for Nora and her family, and some of them head to Dublin to make sure Aine is okay. Donal takes a heavy interest in photography, and decides to go to boarding school to help eliminate his stutter. Conor also takes an interest in photography, and worries about everything from finances to how the family car runs.

Despite the family growing closer, and Nora stepping back out into the social scene with her friends and family, Nora still has a difficult time getting over the past. She decides to remodel her house, doing some of the painting herself. She hyperextends muscles, and must go on pain killers which keep her up at night. As a result, she loses much sleep, and passes out at work. She is prescribed sleep medication, and has a vision of Maurice.



Maurice tells her that everyone in the family will be fine except Conor. He will not give any details. He also tells her that she should be worried about the “other one”, by which he means Nora herself, though Nora does not understand this right away. Nora goes to see her Aunt Josie about the vision, but Josie writes it off as exhaustion on Nora’s part. Josie has Nora stay the weekend, tends to her, and takes care of her. She tells Nora that this is what family is for. By the end of the novel, Nora feels renewed, and decides it is finally time to let the past go. She gets rid of Maurice’s old things, and burns old letters from Maurice when they first began dating.



Chapters 1 – 5

Summary

Chapter 1 – Nora Webster is a resident of County Wexford, Ireland. Her husband, Maurice, has recently died. Many people, including elderly May Lacey, come to see Nora and her younger children, Donal and Conor. Nora also has two older children. Aine is at school in Bunclody while Fiona is training to be a teacher in Dublin. May wishes to read to Nora from a letter written by her son Jack whom Nora has not seen in twenty years, but May cannot find the letter.

Nora takes a trip to the family's vacation cottage in Cush, near the town of Blackwater. She remembers how the family would begin each summer there by giving the cottage a good cleaning. Mrs. Darcy, who watches over the place, arrives at the cottage and insists Nora come up to her house. They have tea. Nora considers in her mind how she wants to sell the house. She makes a sale offer to Jack Lacey which he accepts. At home in Wexford, Conor and Donal are unhappy with their mother's plan to sell.

To cheer up her sons, Nora brings them to Dublin for the day. She gives them each ten shillings to spend, and rides the escalator in Arnott's on Henry Street at Conor's insistence. They get food at Woolworth's and then meet up with Fiona. Fiona is not happy to learn of plans to sell the house in Cush. Nora says the family needs the money. Back home, Nora lights a fire and the boys fall asleep quickly. She then considers how she is going to get by.

Chapter 2 – In late January, Aunt Josie comes to visit. She brings along novels and theology books for Nora, including one by Thomas Merton, and inquires about the children. Nora says they are getting along fine. Josie takes out some old photos she has found of Nora's days as an infant with her parents. Nora's father died when she was only 14. That night, Donal has a nightmare but doesn't say what it was about. Nora tells him that nightmares do not come back once people wake up from them. She wonders if it is due to Aunt Josie's visit.

Nora decides to drive up to see Aunt Josie. On the way, she remembers how Josie took in Donal and Conor during Maurice's final days when he was at his worst. Nora speaks to Josie about Donal's stammer, and Donal's nightmare. Josie explains the boys developed those things while staying with her, because they missed Nora so dearly and Nora never came to visit. Nora explains it was a difficult time. Josie says everyone did the best they could, and Nora should go home to her sons.

Chapter 3 – Six months have now passed since Maurice died. Nora meets with her sister-in-law, Margaret, and her brother-in-law, Jim, to discuss memory cards for Maurice. As Jim leaves, he gives Nora some money to tide her over. Mrs. Whelan passes along an invitation for Nora to meet with Peggy Gibney, whom Nora has not seen in years. The Gibney family is becoming very wealthy by investing in everything



they can beyond their mill company. Nora remembers her own childhood spent earning money for the family after the death of her father, and how marriage to Maurice gave her freedom.

Nora has her hair cut and dyed by Bernie. The next day, she visits with William and Peggy Gibney. Each of Peggy's children works for the family firm, and each has been required to develop an area of expertise in order to do so. William and Peggy offer Nora a job at the firm, where she worked when she was younger. She can start work whenever she wants.

Chapter 4 – Nora meets with her sister Una, who is interested to learn that Nora will be working for the Gibley firm. Nora and her sons then go to visit Nora's other sister, Catherine. Catherine and her husband Mark live in a large, old house on a farm. Conor wonders if it is haunted, but Nora denies it is despite the stories they have been told about doors opening and furniture moving. At Catherine's, Nora, Catherine, and Catherine's friend Dilly discuss Catherine's new washing machine, which Dilly shows Catherine how to operate.

Going to bed that night, Nora realizes how nothing interests her anymore. She knows that many people have told her that it is time to begin to move on, but Nora cannot move beyond the past. This is because Maurice had a very slow, painful death. Nora realizes being around Catherine and Mark takes her mind off things, and makes her feel normal. Catherine and Mark later discuss finances with Nora, who says that everything is working out.

Chapter 5 – Nora and her children return home. They watch the movie "Gaslight" as Nora's insistence. It is about a man trying to have a woman committed to a mental hospital to steal her house and her aunt's jewels from her. Nora sympathizes with the woman and realizes how much she herself has lost. That weekend, Una, Fiona and Aine come home to visit before Nora begins work. Fiona and Aine worry about their mother working full-time. The office is being run by Francie Kavanagh, who worked at Gibney's with Nora and Una when they were younger. No one liked Francie. Una relates a story where coworkers filled Francie's coat pockets with dog excrement.

Driving Fiona back to Dublin, Nora learns that Fiona hopes to stay on in Dublin to earn a degree at night rather than moving back home. Nora explains there isn't much money. She heads into work the next day where she meets with Miss Kavanagh, who becomes preoccupied. Nora then sees Elizabeth Gibney, who happily talks with Nora until Miss Kavanagh is ready. Nora is tested on her ability to efficiently and quickly add up numbers. Nora is thrilled when the day is over.

Analysis

"Nora Webster" is a historical literary novel by Colm Toibin, dealing with the life of Nora Webster through three years after the death of her husband, Maurice. When the novel opens, Maurice has not been dead for long, and the theme of death is immediately



illustrated through the number of mourners and well-wishers who constantly visit Nora. Nora is devastated after the death of Maurice, but must put on a brave face to be strong for her children whom she knows are also suffering.

The theme of death also brings into play the theme of loss. Not only is death itself a loss of loved ones, but is also a consequence of death. A sense of loss at death is clear among Nora and her family, but with Nora especially. Her brief time spent at the vacation cottage on the shore is a harrowing experience for her, since every room in the cottage summons up good memories that she'll never have again. For Nora, loss means not being able to retrieve the past, or to make similar memories in the future.

Maurice's death also means a physical loss for Nora as well. She now has no income apart from a paltry pension and the goodwill of her family. As such, she decides to sell the vacation cottage to provide some financial breathing room for her family. However, all of her children are upset with Nora's decision to sell the cottage, which they consider to be a tremendous loss. True, the selling of the cottage makes fiscal sense, but it also means that another part of childhood, and the propensity for future good memories, is now lost to the children.

It is for her family that Nora sells the cottage, believing she has made the best decision she could. Through death and loss, the theme of family emerges clearly as one which will be consistent throughout the novel. Family means everything to Nora, her children, and their relatives. Nora remains very close with Margaret and Jim, Maurice's siblings, and remains close with her own aunt and cousins. She also does her best to stay close with her sister, Catherine, but their sister Una is often very distant.

Aunt Josie places tremendous importance on family as well. She is especially concerned for Nora, and brings over novels and works of theology for Nora to read. This is done both to get Nora's mind off things, and to help Nora cope with Maurice's death. Among the books suggested to Nora by Aunt Josie are works by influential American Catholic writer Thomas Merton. Here, the theme of Catholicism subtly emerges. Ireland itself is very Catholic, as are Nora and her family. It is no surprise that Aunt Josie would recommend a Catholic writer to a Catholic widow.

Family is also seen in various other ways in this section of the novel. For example, Nora and her children spend the weekend with Catherine, her husband Mark, and their children. The time spent with family also underscores the fact that Nora feels a sense of loss and aloneness. The theme of loss can be seen through Nora's understanding that she needs to move beyond loss, and also that she relates to the woman in the movie "Gaslight", who is herself feeling a sense of loss and aloneness.

There are two things which seem to drive Nora on to continue despite her sense of loss. Her children need tending to and providing for, and Nora needs to earn money in order to take care of them. She returns to work for the first time since marrying Maurice, taking on a job at the family firm of a friend. The theme of family is reflected in the family's owning and operating the business, and Nora's past with the family and the company also bring to the fore the theme of history.



History, culturally, is as central to Ireland's identity as is Catholicism. Everywhere Nora goes, she meets people from the past who have known Maurice. Maurice's history has become a part of Nora's own history as well as a result. Nora also has a history with the Gibney company, having worked there when she was a teenager following the death of her own father. Nora lost much of her childhood as she had to go to work to help support her family, and death and loss form a core part of Nora's own history as a person. She must also confront her past in Miss Kavanagh, with whom Nora never got along in the first place.

Nora has difficulty moving on from Maurice's death because his death was slow and agonizing. It is not something easily forgotten or gotten over. His death has changed her entire world, much the way her own father's death changed her entire world as a fourteen year-old girl. Then, as now, Nora had a family to support, and others to think about beyond herself. In many ways, history is repeating itself.

Nora herself knows that Maurice offered her a sense of freedom and escape when they married; now, Nora believes she has only herself to truly depend upon. However, this is not true as Nora will come to fully realize late in the novel. Family is still there for her to help her through this time. For example, Jim gives Nora money after a visit to her house, expecting nothing in return. Nora is grateful for the help, but does not truly understand what it means.

Discussion Question 1

While everyone else tells Nora that she must begin to move past Maurice's death, Nora has a difficult time doing this. Why? Do you believe that the others are correct, that Nora must move beyond Maurice's death at this point? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

While Nora believes selling her family's vacation cottage is the best idea, her children do not. Why does Nora believe selling the cottage is best? Why do her children oppose this? Are Nora or her children correct in their beliefs? Why?

Discussion Question 3

Many people believe that history repeats itself, or follows similar patterns at the very least. Between the death of Nora's father and the death of Maurice, how does history seem to repeat itself for Nora? How does Nora react to this? Why do you believe this is?



Vocabulary

quieten, marlpond, hectoring, fathom, seldom, staccato, incapacitated, surreptitiously, metaphor, interjected, loquaciousness, allocated, barrister, precarious, brusque, smarmy



Chapters 6 – 10

Summary

Chapter 6 – Nora's duties at Gibney's are decided. In the morning she will assist Elizabeth with invoices and orders. After lunch, she will work in salaries, bonuses, and expenses. Miss Kavanagh warns Nora not to speak with employees about such things, or to deviate from the system. Nora, however, finds the system for handling commercial travelers is inefficient. Bonuses and allowances are in arrears. Nora tackles the system head-on, straightening things out.

Work with Elizabeth is much more relaxed, with Elizabeth frequently discussing her personal life with Nora. One Monday morning, Elizabeth reveals she met a town clerk named Ray over the weekend, but doesn't remember his last name. She hopes that Nora can help her find out.

Chapter 7 – Fiona moves to London for part of the summer. Fiona heads to the Kerry Gaeltacht. Nora takes weekend trips with the boys to Curracloe, Bentley, and Rosslare Strand. Nora treasures her time with Conor and Donal because she knows they are getting older. Jim, Margaret, Una, Fiona, and Aine all come together for a visit at Nora's. Fiona shows off her London fashions, while Aine recounts running into people who knew Jim from years before. Margaret enjoys being able to help finance Aine's schooling and giving pocket money to Fiona and the boys. Nora is grateful for the time with family and how ordinary the evening seems.

At work, Elizabeth's desire for a social life leads to her falling behind in her work duties. Thomas Gibney becomes angered by this, and gives Miss Kavanagh permission to push Elizabeth along. Elizabeth insists Miss Kavanagh has no right to do this, so she goes to her father, William. William rescinds Thomas's orders. Nora finds it amusing to see Kavanagh put off, but knows Kavanagh will be targeting her next. Kavanagh takes every opportunity to question and bully Nora. The news carries word of pro-Catholic rallies in Derry, Northern Ireland, breaking out into fights with the police.

At home, Donal and Conor are beginning to get into arguments without Nora being around. At work, Elizabeth reveals that Una is now engaged to a man named Seamus. Nora is miffed by not having been told by Una earlier. In October, some commercial travelers request to see their accounts, but Kavanagh denies the information is readily available. Nora explains that the information is available. After the travelers move on, Kavanagh commands her assistant to cut up the files, saying that William Gibney would not want such records kept. She begins to insult Nora's family. When Maurice comes up, Nora has had enough, takes the scissors from Kavanagh's office, and goes home.

Chapter 8 – Nora considers what her next step will be in life and if moving to Dublin would be possible. She goes to the strand at Keating's, and remembers how when young, she and her friend Greta left Kavanagh behind in the dust during a bike ride, not



wanting to be seen with her. Walking along the strand, she encounters Sister Thomas of the Sisters of Saint John of God. Sister Thomas has received a worried phone call about Nora, and says that God has His reason for everything. She tells Nora that everything will be alright, and that she should stop grieving. Nora decides she will indeed head home.

Chapter 9 – Nora decides she will quit Gibney's. At a family gathering, Una shows off her engagement ring and is congratulated. Nora is still annoyed at not having been told sooner. Sister Thomas comes to visit Nora, encouraging her to return to work and to be nice to Una. Peggy Gibney agrees to allow Nora to work only in the mornings, away from Kavanagh. Nora asks Peggy what Sister Thomas has to do with all of this. Peggy reveals that Sister Thomas sided with Peggy and William against William's parents, who disapproved of William marrying Peggy. Peggy's willingness to grant Nora's demands is in thanks to Sister Thomas's past kindnesses.

Nora goes to the golf course clubhouse with Una and Seamus, a banker. They meet another engaged couple there, the man of which is Elizabeth's Ray. Elizabeth has heard all about it by the next morning. For Christmas, Una and Seamus will not be around. This makes Nora feel more at ease, since Jim belongs to an Irish resistance group and Seamus is a member of the establishment. The Christmas season is enjoyable. Nora is glad to have her daughters home. Margaret builds a darkroom in her house for Donal for Christmas. Aine worries that Donal will grow out of an interest in photography, leaving Margaret with a useless darkroom.

Chapter 10 – Nora receives a second widower's pension which helps out tremendously financially. This comes through the help of Minister of Justice Charlie Haughey, who cares about what becomes of widows. In March, a lorry driver named Matt Sinnott Nora has traveled with in the past comes to visit. He knew her father long ago. Matt explains that almost all of the Gibney's workers are going to secretly join the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in Wexford town. Nora is invited to attend. If she does not wish to, Matt hopes that Nora will not say anything about it. Nora agrees to go.

Nora is surprised to learn how much some dislike the Gibneys. They learn about the unionization two days later, and are distraught. Elizabeth says her father feels stabbed in the back for keeping the business local and keeping so many people employed. Things are so bad, Sister Thomas has been called to keep company with the family. Nora knows that the Gibneys will find out sooner or later that she, too, has unionized.

Analysis

As the novel continues, the theme of history is again apparent as Nora must continue to deal with Kavanagh as Nora dealt with Kavanagh as a teen. Nora demonstrates her intelligence and knack for numbers by reworking a faulty record-keeping system as relates to commercial travelers, but runs afoul of Kavanagh for changing the system. Kavanagh is more intent on harassing Nora than actually making the company better, feeling her own authority is challenged, and feeling history repeating itself as the other



girls at the office were not kind to Kavanagh back in the day. History is also reflected in the number of people that Nora continues to meet who knew either her father, or Maurice, years before. The past is not something that can easily be shaken off.

As the summer comes on, Nora spends as much time with her family as possible. She knows her daughters are moving into their own lives at this point, and knows she has precious little time left with her sons. Nora feels a sense of loss at their growing up. The death of Maurice reinforces Nora's desire to stay close with her children, for the death has reminded her short life is, and how quickly time passes. Here, death serves a positive purpose by placing emphasis on life and on the living, and making the most of the time that has been given by God.

Nora's work schedule begins to have some undesirable consequences with her two sons, who are home alone for a few hours between school and the end of Nora's workday. The boys are obviously still reeling from the death of their father, and the time without their mother – limited as it may be – grates on them to the point where they take out their frustrations on each other. They are not ready to deal with the loss of their father, and the loss of their mother for even only a few hours.

The theme of Catholicism also returns in this section of the novel, as the struggle between Donal and Conor is reflected in the Catholic riots in Derry. Heavily-Catholic Ireland is going through a family struggle of its own as it seeks to assert its independence against the British government, and as Catholics themselves divide over whether this means fighting the British or helping out their own people. This will be expanded upon in later sections of the novel through Aine's increasing politicization.

Catholicism is also heavily, and very positively manifested in the figure of Sister Thomas. She appears in the novel at the right times and in the right places, and serves as a sort of moral conscience, guide, and authority figure for Wexford. She also serves as a source of emotional and moral support. It is Sister Thomas who helps Nora to resolve to return to work, and reminds that everything that happens is in accord with God's reasons. This does not immediately reassure Nora, but is in line with the theology and philosophy of the Catholic faith. It is also Sister Thomas who made it possible for Peggy to marry her husband by throwing her weight into a family dispute.

Interestingly enough, despite the social changes taking place in Ireland, faith in Catholicism is not questioned as a whole. While there are certainly some theological questions raised with respect to Catholicism, that Catholicism as a whole should be abandoned in pursuit of social justice or equality is never seriously considered. This is a testament to the deep and abiding faith of most Catholics, young and old alike, and how much Catholicism matters on a personal level to them. For example, the unionizing Gibneys workers do not have a problem with ideas about hierarchy in Catholicism, but have issues with the Gibneys as bosses. They do not need to challenge their faith to challenge authority.



Discussion Question 1

As the summer comes on, why does Nora seek to spend so much time with her children, both those who are grown and those who are not? How do her children feel about all this extra time spent with their mother? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Sister Thomas contends that God has His reasons for everything. Why does she believe this? Does Nora believe this speaking to Sister Thomas on the beach? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Though Nora wants to quit Gibneys', Sister Thomas convinces her to go back. How? Why does Nora decide to go back?

Vocabulary

edifying, interned, queries, marvelous, delegation, syntax, prominent, affiliated



Chapters 11 – 13

Summary

Chapter 11 – Nora begins to feel better while in town, as most people have stopped mournfully approaching her over Maurice's death. She runs into Donal's teacher for science and Latin, Jim Mooney, who reveals that Donal has been acting up in class and being impolite. Nora cautions Donal to do better in school. The Gibneys mostly move past the unionization. Only Thomas Gibney never speaks to Nora again.

Chapter 12 – Nancy Brophy comes to visit Nora. Nancy enlists Nora to keep score during the Guinness-sponsored local annual quiz to be held at Etchingsham's Pub hall in nearby Blackwater. Nora agrees. Phyllis Langdon will be asking the questions. At the pub, Nora runs into Tom Darcy, husband of Mrs. Darcy.

After the contest, Tom Darcy chats with Nora and Phyllis. With him is an elderly man who knew Maurice well. Tim Hegarty, a teacher, and his wife, Philomena, enter the bar. Tim is a very good singer, and sings. Everyone cheers for him. Surrounded by people, Nora feels very alone. Tim's singing also reminds her of her past with Maurice. Phyllis and Nora, now both drunk, decide to sing and earn cheers and laughter from the people at the bar. Phyllis insists Nora try out for Church choir. They sing all the way home.

Chapter 13 – Nora rents a caravan to bring herself, Fiona, Aine, Donal, and Conor to Curracloe. She watches as Donal's photography interest expands. He has stopped taking photos of people in favor of other subjects, such as nature. However, Fiona says that most of Donal's developed photographs are nearly blank, and that Donal says this is on purpose. He begins going up to the TV room at the Strand Hotel to take photos of the coming moonwalk. The manager refuses to let him do this, so Nora brings Donal home to watch the moonwalk.

Fiona, though she is making more money than Nora, asks Nora for a loan for clothes and a week in London before Fiona begins work. In Northern Ireland, the riots continue. They are discussed at a family gathering. Fiona worries that they may spread south. Aine thinks their government is just as responsible as the British government for what has happened. Jim disagrees. Seamus thinks everything will blow over soon. Conor's causal comment that Fiona is going to London for a few days stops a political argument from beginning.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, Nora begins to feel better for the first time since her husband's death in a limited way. With other people moving on from Maurice's death – and here, Nora is no longer being consistently reminded by others about his death or what she has lost – Nora, too, is able to get along better. Here, the reader can see how the themes of death and loss affect the plot. With fewer people speaking about death



and loss, the psychological boost to Nora is clear. She is even able to be convinced to do something purely social by way of the trivia contest.

However, Nora's time out at the Etchingham Pub do not make things better for her. This initial social foray has the opposite effect. She is surrounded by friends and strangers who are all enjoying the evening together. She is reminded, as a result, that she is alone and that Maurice is not with her. His death comes hurtling back at her in her mind, and she feels a tremendous sense of loss and being alone in a room full of people. But this is only natural, for Nora is now doing something alone rather than with Maurice.

Nora takes refuge once again in her family, knowing that time is continuing to move on. Donal's interest in photography, she notes, has expanded. He has also stopped taking pictures of people, and is now taking pictures primarily of nature – a place absent of people. Likewise, the blank photos he takes Fiona believes has to do with his not yet perfecting developing. but Donal says this is intentional. These blank, empty photographs come to symbolize the way that Donal feels: empty. Here, the theme of loss is especially potent.

As riots continue to break out in Ireland, including now in Dublin, Nora's family takes different sides on the issue, though they are all Catholic. For example, Aine holds both the Irish and British governments equally accountable for the riots, while Jim disagrees. While the rioters are predominantly Catholic, and many sympathize with them, some, like Fiona, do not want the riots to spread south. Here, one of the few things which united Irishmen, whether they are for or against the riots, is their Catholicism. Beyond this, they are divided on many things. Catholicism here proves to be central to the Irish identity culturally and nationally.

Discussion Question 1

Although Nora is surrounded by people at Etchingham's Pub, how does she end up feeling? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Donal's photography is a reflection of his emotional state or photographic amateurism? Why?

Discussion Question 3

As time passes, fewer and fewer people speak to Nora about Maurice's death. Why do you believe is this? What kind of effect does it have on Nora? Why?

Vocabulary

impertinent, ordination, cretin, bliss, tact, contemptuously, imperious, allude



Chapters 14 – 16

Summary

Chapter 14 – Phyllis comes to see Nora about vacancies in a choir in Wexford town run by pianist Laurie O’Keefe, an ex-nun who also taught Fiona and Aine. Nora goes to try out with Laurie. Laurie explains that God made music to help heal people, and Nora agrees to train her voice with Laurie. She goes for lessons each Tuesday. Phyllis goes on to invite Nora to Thursday meetings of the Gramophone Society in Murphy Floods Hotel. The Society listens to and discusses music.

After several meetings, Dr. and Mrs. Radford invites Nora to their home at Riverside House for company and music, which Nora agrees to. Phyllis urges Nora to cancel because the Radfords are boring. She also relates that everyone in the Society likes Nora because they all believe Nora is dignified. Nora still decides to go. Dr. and Mrs. Radford are happy to have Nora at their home. She realizes that they are lonely, for their children have all grown and left home. They lend her a Beethoven record.

Chapter 15 – Nora does her best to save money whenever she can. She learns that Charlie Haughey, now minister for finance, has been arrested for gun-running to the north. She also learns that Mick Sinnott has been elected to lead the local union. Aunt Josie comes by the house to let Nora know she has been saving money to take her and Nora on a holiday to Spain. Everyone insists Nora go. Nora is amazed by the sunshine and heat in Sitges, Spain. She is annoyed nightly by Josie’s snoring, but enjoys the sights and sounds of Spain with Carol, their tour guide. Nora finally takes an old, out-of-the-way basement room to get away from Josie’s snoring. It improves her mood and outlook.

Back home, Nora learns that Conor has been moved into the B-class by Brother Herlihy. Nora goes to see the Brother, insisting Conor be moved back to A-class. Herlihy explains that students have been moved around to make the classes more even. Nora demands that Conor be returned to A-class. Herlihy says this cannot be done. Nora threatens protest if this is not done. Two teachers, Val Dempsey and John Kerrigan, intercede on Nora’s behalf. They tell Brother Herlihy that the teachers will also strike unless things are made right. Herlihy agrees, saying he will move Conor back within the week. Fiona, who now works with the teachers, is upset by the letter her mother has sent because many think she had a hand in things.

Nora’s fight with Brother Herlihy has made her feel empowered. With Phyllis’s help, Nora selects a record player to purchase from Cloke’s store. A few weeks later, Nora, Fiona, and the boys go to Dublin to see Aine. While in Dublin, Nora buys ten records. She plays them through the coming months into the New Year. While watching a talk-show on the political unrest with the family, Nora is surprised to see Aine in the audience. She says that politicians should be taking care of the needs of Dubliners, not



running guns to the north. This amuses Jim, and causes Donal to wonder if Aine is a socialist.

Chapter 16 – Nora continues training with Laurie while Fiona begins dating an older man named Paul Whitney, a solicitor from Gorey. He gets along very well with the family. He is well-versed in the church, politics, law, music, and literature. Fiona worries that Paul and Nora are getting along too well, so she stops bringing him by the house. Nora later tries out for the choir at the Loreto Convent, but has difficulty singing to the arrangement played on the piano. She is unkindly dismissed by Frank Redmond, the choirmaster.

At home, Fiona, Jim, and Margaret discuss sending Donal to St. Peter's College boarding school to deal with his stammer. Nora learns it is something that Donal wants. Margaret volunteers to pay the tuition and fees. Father Doyle, head of the school, and friend of Maurice, has already agreed to take Donal on. Donal explains that one of the reasons he wants to go away to school, beyond a photography club and wanting to fix his stammer, is because he is reminded of his father every day at school in Wexford. Maurice taught at the same school Donal attends.

Nora meets with Laurie, who has since paid an unfriendly visit to Frank Redmond. She angrily calls him ignorance personified. Laurie says she will be hosting a small concert of her own, and Nora will perform at that. Father Doyle kindly calls Nora to let he know that Donal is having difficulty adjusting, and suggests a visit. Nora goes to see Donal. She reassures him, promises to visit each week, but also reminds him he needs to tough it out. She asks that Donal write to her. She notices his mood improves.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, Nora continues to do her best to move beyond the past and deal with her sense of loss. Phyllis's suggestion that Nora taking singing lessons and join the Gramophone Society are both a part of this process. Laurie explains that God made music to help heal people, and this slowly begins to be the case for Nora. She is able to deal with loss through music and the understanding that it serves a greater purpose than mere entertainment or background noise. That God should make music to heal the soul is in keeping with the Catholic tradition, and the theme of Catholicism continues to expand here.

Catholicism also continues to be a uniting cultural factor among the Irish, one of the few things which continue to unite them. The riots in Dublin continue to get worse. Aine contends that, in accord with Catholic tradition, politicians should be taking care of the people who elected them, not running guns to the north to continue to foment violence. Likewise, Donal wants to go away to boarding school in order to pursue photography and effectively treat his stammer. He does not select a secular school, but specifically eyes a Catholic school because he knows they will be accepting of him.



Donal's desire to go away has more to do than merely with just wanting to fix his stammer and pursue photography. As Nora learns, Donal has an even deeper reason for wanting to get away – and this is so that he can deal with his father's death more easily. With his father having been a teacher at the school Donal attends in Wexford, Donal is reminded of his father every single day. This is a heartbreaking thing for Donal which he must deal with on a daily basis.

Donal's desire to fix his stammer is also reflective of Nora's desire to fix her soul and ease her continuing heartache. At first, Nora considers the Gramophone Society to be a silly, antiquated group, but does indeed come to discover how powerful music can be as a source of comfort and healing. Healing also slowly begins to occur along the lines of family. Here, the theme of family returns strongly to the fore.

Aunt Josie personally brings Nora on a vacation to Spain, which does Nora a lot of good. Nora does not understand how much family will truly come to mean to her in the final section of the novel. Nora values family immensely, and sees herself as being its keeper, so to speak. But she does not recognize that family is allowed to be there for her, too. Aunt Josie's trip to Spain is one she has saved up for in order to pay Nora's way completely. It is a lovely and important act of familial loyalty and kindness.

Nora also begins to recognize loss and loneliness in other people as well as she endeavors to heal. For example, she realizes that the Radfords are not boring as she has been told, but are merely dealing with the loss of their children, who have grown up and moved out. As a result, she is able to empathize with the Radfords, and better understand them. This helps Nora to put her own sense of loss in better perspective as well, for it allows her to see that the Radfords cope with their own sense of loss through music. This lends further credibility to the belief that music is intended by God to be healing.

Nora effectively begins to handle her losses by embracing music. While in Dublin on a visit, she purchases not one or two records, but ten. This comes on the heels of her buying a proper stereo system. Music thus becomes both an escape and a soothing pastime for Nora. This also helps her to deal with the fact that her children are continuing to grow. With Donal going away to school and Fiona beginning to seriously date an older man, Nora realizes that she must continue to value every moment in life. Appreciating music helps Nora to appreciate life even more than she already does.

Discussion Question 1

Laurie asserts that music is one of the ways that God helps to heal people, including when it comes to loss and death. How does Nora feel about Laurie's assertion at first? Does her mind about this change later? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Nora comes to discover that other people are dealing with loss in various ways, including the Radfords and Donal. How do the Radfords and Donal seek to deal with their sense of loss? Why? How does this affect Nora?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways does family influence Nora's life in this section of the novel? (Consider the trip in Spain and the arrangements for Donal to attend boarding school, among other things.) How does Nora respond to these influences? Why?

Vocabulary

virtuoso, immediacy, flabbergasted, fetid, esplanade, extravagant, rummaged, approbation, construe



Chapters 17 – 18

Summary

Chapter 17 – Conor buries himself in his studies, and takes an interest in photography. He also begins to worry about everything. For example, if the car does not start, he worries the family needs a new car. Donal also matures and improves at school, and he readily agrees to help Conor in photography. He even sells Conor his old camera for a pound-ten. Meanwhile, Nora continues to invest herself in music, both in performing and listening. It becomes an escape, and begins to heal her. Christmas and New Year's come and go.

In January, British troops open fire on peaceful protestors in Derry. A national day of mourning follows. The British Embassy in Dublin is burned down. The family is worried about Aine's safety. Nora, Paul, and Fiona decide to go to Dublin to see about Aine, because they have been unable to contact her. Aine is found safe and sound at a protest by Fiona and Paul.

Nora decides her house needs some remodeling. She hires Dan Bolger, an old friend of Maurice's, to do some of the work because he will do it at a discounted rate. Mogue Cloney and a helper tackle the fireplace. Nora herself commits to the painting. Working on the ceiling, she gets pains in her arm and chest, and wonders if she is having a heart attack. Her doctor reveals that she was simply using muscles she hasn't used before, and painting should best be left to professionals. She hires Mossy Delaney to do the work.

Chapter 18 – The work at Nora's house continues, and she is pleased with the results. Through a sleepless night brought on by pain pills for her muscles, Nora thinks about death and her mother's dying. She dreams about helping her sisters keep vigil over her mother's body, and how her mother's physical details no longer matter. At work the next morning, Nora passes out. When she comes to, she is driven over to the Gibneys' by Elizabeth. Dr. Cudigan is called, but is out. Elizabeth then drives Nora back home to await Dr. Cudigan. Dr. Cudigan later comes to see Nora, and prescribes sleeping pills.

Later that day, Nora notes that her heart is racing and she is having difficulty breathing. She puts on music to calm herself. She begins to hear noises around the house. She then discovers Maurice sitting in a chair. She asks him if the family will be alright. He explains that everyone will, except Conor. Maurice says there is "one other", but won't say who he is speaking of. Nora wants to be with him. Nora then wakes up on her bed. Nora then goes to see Aunt Josie to tell her about seeing Maurice. Aunt Josie tells Nora she is merely exhausted.

Nora ends up falling asleep on the couch at Josie's. When she awakens, Josie tells Nora that everything is taken care of: her boys are being looked after by Margaret, Una, Seamus and Fiona. Sister Thomas will handle the Gibneys, letting them know Nora will



be out of work for a while. Josie tells Nora that all she has to do is rest, that her family is there for her. Josie then draws a bath for Nora and makes dinner. The next morning, Josie brings clothes from Nora's house. She has noted that Nora has not gotten rid of any of Maurice's clothing. She tells Nora that Maurice has been dead for three years, and it is time to move on. Josie invites Phyllis and Catherine over for dinner. Una also attends. It is a good night.

Nora recovers. She decides it is time to part with Maurice's old things. A cache of old letters are found from when she and Maurice began dating. Nora burns these in the fire. Donal speaks to Nora about the paradox of faith, wherein in order to believe, one has to believe. Only when one believes can one believe more. The first act of belief is a mystery, but all other beliefs are rooted in reason.

Laurie comes by to say she has been tasked with organizing a religious music recital to be paid for by some money left in the will of a recently deceased woman. She believes it is all a gift from God, she explains, because it is the twenty-fifth anniversary of Nora's French convent being reopened after being taken over by the Nazis. Nora is Laurie's first choir member. They will be performing Bach's "German Requiem". She tells Conor about this when he comes home, and sits by the fire.

Analysis

Family comes to be essential in this final section of the novel. Nora's desire to move beyond death, loss, and history leads to a remodeling of her home. Nora herself attempts to take on some of the painting, but she is not used to physical work like this. As a result, she becomes injured, and must take pain killers which cause her to lose sleep. Between worry for her children, especially Aine, and work, Nora exhausts herself, and her family is there to take care of her when she finally breaks down.

While at Aunt Josie's house, Nora is finally able to get some sleep. During this time, Aunt Josie tends to things for Nora, rallying the family around her to help her handle her various responsibilities and issues. Everyone needs a break, and not everyone is invincible as Nora discovers. Aunt Josie warmly and beautifully explains that Nora has nothing to worry about, that this is what family is for.

Here, Nora comes to understand why Aunt Josie places such emphasis on family. Everyone helps hold each other up. Even Una, who has often been distant, rallies to Nora's side as Nora falls down. Here, the patterns of history have been broken. Nora is longer required to hold the rest of her family up, as the rest of the family comes to hold Nora up through the difficult times she has experienced.

Indeed, the reader should note that the scene where Nora confronts Maurice is also symbolic of acknowledging the past, but looking to the future. It is never fully explained if Maurice is a ghost or merely a dream, but the reader suspects that Nora truly did believe that she saw and spoke with Maurice's spirit.



Nora does not ask Maurice much about the past. Most of her questions are directed to the future and whether or not everyone will be okay. Maurice reveals that Conor is the one that Nora needs to watch out for. His inability to say exactly what will happen to Conor is indicative of the fact that Nora still has a chance to avert whatever may come to happen to Conor. Likewise, Maurice's cryptic statement that there is "one other" causes Nora and the reader to assume he is speaking about someone else.

But the reader comes to understand that Maurice is speaking about Nora herself: she is the other whose future she is not too concerned with. That this should happen before Nora's passing out is emblematic of the fact that Nora needs to take better care of herself. It is clear, therein, that Nora's health and future will directly affect Conor. Conor will not be able to handle losing both parents, so Nora needs to reevaluate how she is handling her life.'

The Catholic theological idea that all things are done by God with a clear reason in mind seems to be true of Maurice's visit and its consequences, of the healing power of music, and of the timing of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the monastery incident of which Laurie speaks.

It is also through family that Nora finally decides it is time to let go of the past. Her husband is dead, and his loss is something that she has to accept. She decides to do this by getting rid of all of his old clothing, and by burning the letters he sent her early in their relationship. The use of fire to burn the letter should be noted as an act of emotional cleansing by the reader. Fire, symbolically, is representative of cleansing and purging. Here, Nora cleanses herself from the past. She will remember the past, but she will not be brought down by it. Maurice's death, likewise, will be instrumental in her life, but will not come to define her life.

Discussion Question 1

Do you believe that Nora's vision of Maurice is real or dreamt? Does this change the importance of the message that Maurice delivers to Nora? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

What messages does Maurice give to Nora? How does Nora apply this message to her own life? While Aunt Josie is convinced that Nora did not actually see Maurice, Nora believes she did. Why? How does this affect the importance of the message Maurice gives to Laura?

Discussion Question 3

At the end of the novel, does Nora come to accept the Catholic idea that everything that happens God has a reason for? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

vigilant, jeering, vernacular, pelmet, anxiety, intensify, obliging



Characters

Nora Webster

Nora Webster is the eponymous main character of the novel “Nora Webster” by Colm Toibin. Nora is a woman in her forties, is the recent widow of Maurice Webster, and is the mother of four children – Fiona, Aine, Donal, and Conor. Nora is reeling from the death of Maurice, but she puts on a brave face for her children, the rest of her family, and the town of Wexford. Nora’s Aunt Josie, sisters Catherine and Una, sister-in-law Margaret, and brother-in-law Jim are very worried about Nora, and tell her that she needs to move on. Nora, however, cannot do this.

Nora experiences tremendous difficulty moving on from her husband’s death for two primary reasons. First, her husband died slowly and agonizingly, and the experience has seared itself into Nora’s mind. Her horror at seeing the love of her life in such pain is crushing to Nora. Secondly, Nora’s marriage to Maurice gave her a freedom and security she had lost at 14. Then, her own father had died, and she had had to go to work, forgoing childhood in order to support her family. With Maurice dead, Nora must again go back to work to support her family.

Nora returns to the place she worked as a teenager, the Gibney mill. There, she is bullied and demeaned by Miss Kavanagh, who also worked alongside Nora as a teenager years before. Nora intends to quit, but Sister Thomas and Peggy Gibney intervene, preventing this from happening. Nora will no longer have to directly work under Kavanagh. Nora is then able to better balance her work life and her home life, spending as much time with her family as possible. Her husband’s death has made her realize all the more how precious life is. She endeavors to be closer to her children, and her other family members.

As the novel continues, Nora also begins to return to having a social life. She takes voice lessons, prepares to join a choir, joins the musical Gramophone Society, and participates in local events, such as keeping score for a trivia contest. She becomes very friendly with Phyllis Langdon and Laurie O’Keefe, who encourage Nora’s burgeoning musical interest. Nora slowly begins to put her life back together, and decides to remodel her house as a result. In the process, Nora injures some muscles, must take painkillers, and loses so much sleep she exhausts herself.

Nora is then visited by the spirit of Maurice, who cautions her to keep an eye on Conor, and reminds her to watch out for herself as well. Aunt Josie leads the family charge to rally around the exhausted Nora, to take care of her, and to help her truly get back on her feet. Nora then decides to get rid of all of Maurice’s old things, and burns old letters he sent to her when they just began to date. The process has a healing and cleansing effect on Nora, who is finally able to look forward to the future.



Fiona

Fiona Webster is the eldest child of Nora and Maurice Webster. She is the older sister of Aine, Donal, and Conor. Fiona is a pretty, sweet, and kind girl in her early twenties who has just completed her teaching training. As a result, she becomes a teacher in her hometown of Wexford. She misses her father dearly, and worries all the time about her mother's health and state of mind. Early on in the novel, Fiona has a hard time keeping track of her finances, but this is largely due to the fact that she helps to ease the pain of her father's death by buying things. She later meets and falls in love with Paul Whitney, a solicitor from Gorey in his early thirties. The two travel to Dublin with Nora later in the book to make sure Aine is alive and well during the Dublin riots.

Aine

Aine Webster is the second oldest child of Nora and Maurice Webster. Aine is the younger sister of Fiona, and the older sister of Donal and Conor. Aine is studying at college in Bunclody. She becomes especially interested in politics later in her college career in Dublin, where she declares that the riots are the fault of both the Irish and British governments. She also takes the very Catholic stance that politicians should be looking to improve the lives of their constituents, not running guns to the north. During the Dublin riots, no one can get in touch with Aine, so Nora, Fiona, and Paul travel to Dublin to find her. Fiona and Paul discover Aine alive, safe and sound, in a protest.

Donal

Donal is the third eldest child of Nora and Maurice Webster. He is an early teenager, is the younger brother of Fiona and Aine, and is the older brother of Conor. Donal has been deeply troubled by the death of his father. Having been left with Aunt Josie while Nora tended to Maurice, Donal developed a bad stutter which plagues him through the present time. He takes an interest in photography during the novel, choosing to photograph nature rather than people, and choosing to take blank, or nearly-blank photographs. This is a reflection of his sense of loss and emptiness. By the end of the novel, he is allowed to attend a boarding school where he hopes to pursue photography further and handle his stutter. He explains to his mother that the real reason he wishes to go away to school is because he doesn't like being reminded of his father on a daily basis at school Wexford, where Maurice used to teach. By the end of the novel, Donal is doing better, and is helping Conor to learn photography.

Conor

Conor is the youngest child of Nora and Maurice Webster. He is the younger brother of Fiona, Aine, and Donal. He is kind, gentle, and very sensitive. He misses his father dearly, and seeks to spend as much time as possible with his family. He is incredibly intelligent, and is unhappy when he is forced from A-class to B-class at school in the



interest of evening out the classes. Nora rails against this, and has him successfully returned to A-class. Conor also comes to worry about everything, from the family's finances to the condition of the family's car. Everything is frail and to be concerned about with the death of his father. By the end of the novel, he has settled down somewhat, and is thrilled to be aided in the learning of photography by Donal.

Maurice Webster

Maurice Webster is the deceased husband of Nora Webster, and the deceased father of Fiona, Aine, Donal, and Conor. By all accounts, he was a decent and goodhearted man who always put his family first. He was traditional, writing letters to Nora at the beginning of their relationship, and worked as a teacher in Wexford. Maurice's marriage to Nora gave her a sense of love, security, and freedom that she had not known since the death of her father. Maurice's death plunges Nora into uncertainty once more. Later in the novel, Maurice's spirit visits Nora, urging her to watch after Conor, and to take care of herself.

Aunt Josie

Aunt Josie is the aunt of Nora, and is the great-aunt of Fiona, Aine, Donal, and Conor. A widow, mother, and grandmother, she is an immensely kind woman who is deeply committed to Catholicism and family. She enjoys being able to garden in the morning, and visit with friends and family in the afternoons. She is among the first people to tell Nora that Nora must find a way to begin to move on after the death of Maurice. Aunt Josie later pays for a vacation with Nora to Spain. When Nora becomes exhausted and her health is threatened, Aunt Josie rallies the family around Nora to care for her and tend to her so she can recover. Aunt Josie explains that this is what family is meant to be about: love and loyalty.

Sister Thomas

Sister Thomas is a nun and member of the Order of Sisters of Saint John of God. She appears to be in her sixties, is deeply faithful, incredibly well-respected and well-loved, and proves to be the moral backbone and emotional and religious support for the community of Wexford and its surrounding areas. Sister Thomas's good deeds are numerous and life-changing. For example, she intercedes on behalf of William Gibney and Peggy, urging William's parents to approve of the marriage. She also intercedes on Nora's behalf to encourage Nora to keep her job, and to remind her that God has a reason for everything He does.

Phyllis Langdon

Phyllis Langdon is an acquaintance and local resident of Wexford. She is brash and friendly, and hosts the county's annual trivial quizzes sponsored by Guinness. She and



Nora become very close friends over the course of the book. It is Phyllis who urges Nora to take voice lessons with Laurie O'Keefe, and to try out for a choir. It is also Phyllis who urges Nora to join the Gramophone Society.

Laurie O'Keefe

Laurie O'Keefe is a local piano teacher and voice instructor in her early fifties. Now married to Bill, Laurie is a former nun having served in France during World War II. Laurie is incredibly thoughtful and kind, and takes Nora on as a vocal student. She sees great potential in Nora, and reminds Nora that music is intended by God to be healing. Laurie is later tasked with organizing a choir to perform religious music pursuant to a recently deceased woman's will. Laurie believes that God has intended this concert, for it occurs on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the restoration of Laurie's convent following World War II. Laurie's first pick for the show's choir is Nora.

Symbols and Symbolism

Letter to Jack

Nora writes a letter to Jack Lacey early in the novel. Nora has not seen Jack in years. The letter is intended to set a price on Nora's vacation cottage at Cush so that Nora can sell it. Jack accepts the offer, and Nora is able to use the money gained from the transaction in order to give her family some financial breathing room.

Thomas Merton books

Thomas Merton books are among the volumes given to Nora by Aunt Josie early in the novel. Thomas Merton was an important and very influential American Catholic writer in the Twentieth Century. Aunt Josie's giving to Nora of Thomas Merton books demonstrates their shared Catholic heritage and faith, and demonstrates that Aunt Josie is seeking to give Nora some comfort after Maurice's death through works of faith.

Old photographs

Old photographs are discovered by Aunt Josie while she is cleaning out part of her house. They are given to Nora. The old photographs are black-and-white, and capture images of Nora's life as an infant, as well as the lives of her parents. They are a window into the past for Nora, and serve to help remind her of how her own father died when she was 14.

Caravan

A caravan (known in America as a camper and/or an RV) is rented by Nora during part of the summer on the shore at Curracloe. This is done following the selling of the family's vacation cottage so that the family has a place to go and stay during the summer months. The caravan is much smaller than the cottage, and none of the characters seem to be particularly thrilled about staying in one.

Camera

A camera is used by Donal to take photographs as he develops an interest in photography. His Aunt Margaret constructs a darkroom for him to use in her house nearby, so that he can develop his own photos. Donal takes the camera everywhere, ultimately focusing on nature rather than people as subject-matter. Donal later sells the camera to his younger brother, Conor, for a pound ten.



Blank photographs

Blank photographs are developed by Donal during the novel. Nora believes the photographs are blank because Donal isn't very good at developing, but Donal says the photographs are intentionally blank. The blank photographs, empty of any real subject matter, thus come to be symbolic of Donal's own feelings following the death of his father. He feels empty and blank.

Money

Money is desperately needed by Nora and her family early in the novel. Following the death of Maurice, Nora must sell the family's vacation cottage and return to work in order to gain an income that will support herself and her four children. This causes Nora to reflect on how she had to go to work at the age of 14 when her father died, to support her mother and her siblings. Money becomes essential to the family's physical survival very quickly.

Maurice's clothing

Old clothing belonging to Maurice is kept by Nora for three years after his death. Following a visit from Maurice's ghost, and after a discussion with Aunt Josie, Nora decides it is time to finally part with the clothing. Removing the clothing is a cleansing act for Nora, who has also decided that parting with the clothing is a way of her being able to move on.

Letters from Maurice

Letters from Maurice are kept by Nora in her bedroom. They are found when Maurice's old clothing is taken out. The letters are from early in the relationship between Nora and Maurice. She notes they are from another time and another place, and no longer matter in the present. She ultimately feeds them into the fireplace to burn them, a symbolic act of cleansing the past and looking forward to the future.

Fire

Fire is often seen symbolically in literature as a purifying and cleansing element. At the end of the novel, Nora decides to burn old letters from Maurice when they were just beginning to date. The burning of the letters is a symbolic act of cleansing the past and looking forward to the future by Nora. Nora later comes to sit in front of the fire into which she has fed the letters, and her proximity to the fire is symbolic also of her having been cleansed.



Settings

Wexford

Wexford is a town in the county of Wexford, Ireland, and is where much of the novel takes place. It is a large town, home to the Gibney mills and company, and home to numerous shops, stores, and pubs. It is located close enough to Dublin to make day trips possible, but far enough away to ensure that an entire day is needed for a trip. Wexford is the home of Nora, Donal, Conor, and later Fiona as she returns home to Wexford to teach. The surrounding environs of Wexford prove to be home to many friends and family, including Aunt Josie and her part of the family who live on a farm near the town. Maurice worked as a teacher in Wexford during life, and it is because of this that Donal no longer wishes to attend school there, but wants to go away to board.

Dublin

Dublin is the capital city of Ireland. It is a large city with great culture and deep historical roots. It becomes a hotbed for social reform protests and riots as the Irish seek to become independent of the British. Dublin is also where Aine attends both classes and demonstrations for different causes. Dublin is also the setting for numerous day trips that Nora, Donal, and Conor take during the novel to visit Fiona and Aine, respectively. Dublin is also where Nora purchases the records that she listens to at home.

Cush

Cush is a seaside area near the town of Blackwater where Nora and her family have a vacation cottage. Nora and her family have gone to the cottage for years during the summer in order to enjoy the shore and the company of one another. Cush, and the cottage, are full of happy memories for Nora, something which she cannot bear now that Maurice has died. Nora ultimately decides to sell the cottage in Cush not only for financial reasons, but for emotional reasons as well.

Spain

Spain is a country in Western Europe to which Nora and Aunt Josie vacation during the course of the novel. Spain is a beautiful country, Nora finds, with tremendous heat and sunshine. The vacation in Spain gives Nora a good rest, and is something she sorely needs. When she returns to Ireland and to work, she feels refreshed and better-rested.

Curraclloe

Curraclloe is a town at the seashore in Ireland. It is where Nora and her family vacation several times during the novel. It is where Nora begins to bring her family to vacation following the selling of the vacation house in Cush. While they stay at Curraclloe, Nora and her family rent a caravan on the shore itself. The trips, however, do not hold the same enjoyment or magic as the time spent in the vacation house in Cush.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “Nora Webster” by Colm Toibin. Family, thematically, involves the mutual love, loyalty, compassion, and emotional, physical, and even spiritual support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who still act in accord with the traditional family unit. In the novel, family appears primarily as an incredibly important, positive thing, and influences the novel in many important ways.

When the novel begins, however, the Webster family has been ruptured by the death of Maurice, husband of Nora, and father of Fiona, Aine, Donal, and Conor. Nora herself is especially reeling from the death of Maurice, finding that her family is incomplete without him. She does her best to put on a brave face for her children, for she deeply loves them and worries about them now that Maurice is gone. Indeed, almost everything Nora does throughout the course of the novel has to do with seeking to take care of her family.

Almost immediately, Nora decides to sell the family’s vacation house in Cush. The decision is a difficult one, for the children oppose the selling. Nora sells the house, however, both out of being unable to deal with the good memories of the place, and because her family needs financial breathing room. The money gleaned from the sale helps to give the family fiscal stability. Nora soon after takes on work at Gibney’s in order to provide for her family.

Nora’s decision to take work at Gibney’s to support her children is very similar to a situation Nora found herself in years before. At the age of 14, her father died and she went to work in order to support her mother and her siblings, out of love and sense of loyalty toward them. Nora’s decision to take on work following Maurice’s death clearly demonstrates how much she loves her children, and how much she is determined to see that they are well-provided for.

While Nora does everything she can to care for her family, what Nora doesn’t realize until later in the novel is that family is allowed to be there for her as well. She is so concerned about making sure that she holds everyone else up, that she ends up not realizing that everyone else can help do the same for her when needed. This, Aunt Josie explains to Nora later in the novel, is what family is for. No one member of the family has to bear everything alone.

When Nora becomes exhausted after pulling muscles and trying to balance a work and home life, she more or less breaks down at Aunt Josie’s house. Aunt Josie then contacts each of the members of the family to ensure that everything Nora needs is taken care of while she recovers. For example, Conor and Donal will be watched by various members of the family so they are not alone until Nora is able to return home.



Nora is pleasantly surprised and very warmed by all of this kindness. It helps her to heal, and helps her to realize that she must move past the death of her husband.

Loss

Loss is an important theme in the novel “Nora Webster” by Colm Toibin. Loss, thematically, has to do with tragedies, absences, loneliness, and sadness suffered by characters in relation to someone, or something that has been lost. In the novel, loss is deeply felt by many of the characters, is expressed in different ways, and deeply affects the plot of the novel.

When the novel begins, Nora and her children are reeling from the loss of husband and father, Maurice, who has died. The loss of Maurice affects the family in many ways. Now strapped for money, Nora must sell the vacation home in Cush in order to provide some fiscal breathing room. Nora’s decision to sell the house comes not only by way of needing money, but by a sense of loss because the house is full of good memories that Nora knows she will never have again, especially now that Maurice is dead.

While her older children handle the death of Maurice better than anticipated, Nora’s younger children do not handle the loss well at all. Donal develops a stutter while staying with Aunt Josie during the time that Maurice was dying. Conor becomes increasingly worried about everything, from the family’s finances to the family’s car not always starting on the first try. The sense of loss both boys have felt is expressed in different ways.

Nora comes to see how other people express a sense of loss over dramatic changes in life. Aunt Josie, for example, takes to gardening in the mornings, and visiting friends and family in the afternoon in order to cope with the loss of her own husband years before. Nora, visiting the Radfords, comes to discover that they are empty-nesters dealing with the growing up and moving out of all of their children through the use of music, and by joining musical groups like the Gramophone Society.

Nora herself must deal with the loss of her husband by not only getting a job to ensure a stable income, but does her best to keep the family together. She brings them on vacations to the shore at Curracloe, watches movies with her sons at night, and makes sure to host and visit extended family members whenever the need arises.

Nora also feels loss in other ways as well. Early on, Nora is consistently reminded of what she has lost by all of the people who wish her well and ask how she is doing since Maurice’s death. As these well-meaning individuals begin to stop asking, Nora is less reminded about what she has lost, and is able to begin to get over it. During her first outing in years, Nora goes to Etchingham’s Pub with Phyllis for a trivial contest sponsored by Guinness. There, surrounded by a group of people who have all come together for socialization and drinks, Nora feels a sense of loss, and feels very alone for Maurice is not with her. It is the first social outing she has been to since getting married where Maurice has not been at her side.



Nora is only able to deal with her sense of loss when she comes to realize that, although Maurice may be gone, the rest of her family is still truly there for her. Her ability to competently handle the loss is demonstrated when she burns the old letters she has kept from Maurice. This symbolic act of cleansing and purifying enables Nora to let the lost past go, and to focus on the future.

Catholicism

Catholicism is an important theme in the novel “Nora Webster” by Colm Toibin. The world’s single largest and oldest Christian religion, Catholicism appears in the novel as both a cultural staple of Ireland, a guiding and comforting moral force, and a hallmark of faith, thought, and belief. It affects the novel in various ways.

Catholicism is the dominant religion in Ireland in the novel. Nora, her family, Aunt Josie, and the extended family are all Catholic. The local schools are administered by Catholic clergy, and the area is also home to a convent of the Sisters of Saint John of God, of which Sister Thomas is a member. The mutual Catholic faith shared by so many is first seen when Aunt Josie gives Nora several books, including some written by Thomas Merton, an important and influential American Catholic writer.

The community itself is morally held together by the Catholic Church as well. This occurs in the form of Sister Thomas, who is well-loved, well-respected, and very influential among locals. Sister Thomas, for example, intercedes on behalf of William Gibney and Peggy, who want to get married even though William’s father disapproves of the marriage. Sister Thomas is able to get William’s parents to withdraw their objections. When the workers at the Gibney company unionize, the Gibneys call in Sister Thomas for emotional and moral support. When Nora considers quitting the company, it is Sister Thomas who convinces her not to do this.

The theological and philosophical aspects of Catholicism can also be seen through Sister Thomas, Laurie O’Keefe (a former nun), and Donal, who has learned much more about faith and Catholicism at boarding school. Sister Thomas explains to Nora that God has a reason for all things, indicating that Nora’s suffering is not just suffering or cruelty, but has a higher purpose. This does not comfort Nora until later on in the novel. Laurie explains to Nora that music is God’s gift and way of healing people and securing beauty for them. Nora quickly comes to understand this, enmeshing herself in music as the novel continues on.

Donal himself speaks to Nora about the paradox of faith, wherein in order to believe, one has to believe. Only when one believes can one believe more. The first act of belief is a mystery, but all other beliefs are rooted in reason. This gives Nora some evidence that her encounter with Maurice is not a dream at all, but has actually happened. Her belief in Maurice’s visitation makes everything he says founded on reason –that she is to take care of Conor, and herself, better.



Elsewhere in the novel, Catholicism proves to be one of the few unifying features of the Irish people pressing for reform and independence. Catholicism is a sacred and central aspect of Ireland's national and cultural identity. Though some may question different parts of Catholicism, no one questions the import of Catholicism itself. For example, the divisions in the reform and independence movements are best illustrated by Aine. Aine argues, in a very Catholic way, that politicians should be more concerned with improving the lives of their constituents at home, rather than running guns up north. Rather than fueling violence, leaders should be working for peace.

History

History is an important theme in the novel "Nora Webster" by Colm Toibin. History, thematically, involves the past and how it bears on the present. History, like Catholicism, is central to the lives of characters in the novel, especially Nora.

When the novel begins, Nora's husband, Maurice, has died. She is dealing with the consequences of his death, and is everywhere reminded of his life. For example, her trip to the cottage at Cush reminds of many good memories of her past with Maurice and their children, and this is something she cannot bear. Nora is also constantly reminded of history by encountering well-wishers and friends of Maurice who knew him from years before.

Indeed, Maurice's death also reminds Nora of the past. In this way, history repeats itself, or at the very least follows similar patterns. Maurice's death means that Nora must go to work to support her family. This reminds Nora of the death of her own father when she was fourteen, and how she had to go to work to support her mother and her siblings. Nora was only freed and offered real security by marriage to Maurice, and now that Maurice is dead, she is beholden to insecurity once more. She feels she has gone backwards rather than forwards.

History also has important implications on life in the present in Wexford. William and Peggy were denied permission to be married by William's parents years before. Sister Thomas intervened on their behalf, securing the marriage for them. Years later, Peggy is indebted to Sister Thomas, and works with Sister Thomas to ensure that Nora remains employed at the Gibney company.

Laurie O'Keefe is an ex-nun who maintains that music is a gift from God meant to heal, soothe, and relate beauty. As a nun, she served in France during World War II, where her monastery was targeted by the Nazis. It was reconstructed after the war. Twenty-five years to the day, Laurie is given the honor of organizing a religious music concert to be paid for from the will of a recently deceased woman. Laurie believes the event is therefore blessed by God, and the first person she selects for her choir is Nora.



Death

Death is an important theme in the novel “Nora Webster” by Colm Toibin. Death involves the physical and metaphorical dying of an individual, or multiple individuals, in a novel. Death is a very consequential thing in the novel, influencing the plot in profound and tremendous ways – especially when it comes to the character of Nora Webster.

When the novel begins, Maurice is not long dead. He has died a slow and agonizing death over the course of months, mostly likely from cancer. This has seared itself as a horrible memory into the heart and mind of Nora, who takes three years to begin to move on as a result. For three years, Nora herself lives a sort of metaphorical death, feeling empty and listless without Maurice in her life. Donal, too, feels empty and alone – dead inside – without having his father around anymore.

As a result of Maurice’s death, Nora must sell the family cottage to give the family financial breathing room. She must then go to work at Gibney’s company in order to secure a stable income. This is reminiscent, historically, of Nora’s childhood. When she was 14, her father died. Her mother died later on. Accordingly, Nora had to begin working to support her family. Only with marriage to Maurice did Nora experience a true sense of freedom and security. With Maurice dead, Nora no longer has that sense of freedom and security anymore.

Maurice’s dying also gives Nora’s youngest children pause to think, and causes them to change in dramatic ways. While staying with Aunt Josie while Maurice was dying, Donal developed a stutter which persists to the present day. He hopes boarding school and therapy will take it away. Conor, in turn, has assumed a very father-like role since the death of his father in that he constantly worries about everything. This includes finances and how well the family care is running.

Apart from the agony of Maurice’s death, Nora finds it difficult to move beyond his death because she loved him so very much. Only after three long years of attempting to regroup herself is Nora able to move on with the love and support of her family. At the end of the novel, Nora decides to burn old letters Maurice wrote to her when they first began seeing one another. These letters were from a different time and a different place, Nora believes. By burning them, she symbolically cleanses and purifies herself of the past and of death, and is able to look to the future.

Styles

Point of View

Colm Toibin tells his novel “Nora Webster” from the third-person limited-omniscient point of view. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the third-person point of view allows Toibin not only to tell a story to the reader, but allows him to expand on events and people in the novel in various places. For example, in Chapter 13, the author is able to fill in the reader on Fiona’s entry into the field of teaching as background information, rather than forcing characters themselves to reveal what the reader needs to know. Secondly, the limited-omniscient aspect of the novel lends a sense of both drama, mystery, and faith to the novel. When Aine is unable to be contacted in Dublin during the protests and riots, the family panics. Only as the characters themselves learn that Aine is safe does the reader learn that Aine is safe. Likewise, when Nora is visited by the ghost of her husband, it is not explicitly said whether the vision is real or imagined. Yet, the reader knows from drawing on both faith and Nora’s level-headedness that the experience probably did happen.

Language and Meaning

Colm Toibin tells his novel “Nora Webster” in language that is simple and straightforward. The language is modern and fits not only the time in which it is set (the modernism of the late 1960s) but also fits the contemporary reader’s level of education and vernacular. The simple language employed also allows Toibin to make points and deliver important messages clearly and succinctly. Two of the most poignant and powerful of these messages come in only a handful of words. For example, Sister Thomas’s contention that God has a reason for everything is conveyed simply, but has immensely powerful connotations. Likewise, when Aunt Josie and the family tend to Nora’s needs when Nora finally breaks down, Aunt Josie’s explanation that family is there for her is forcefully delivered in a handful of words.

Structure

Colm Toibin divides his novel “Nora Webster” into 18 chronological, linear, numbered chapters from 1-18. These 18 chapters span a time period of three years. While some chapters are a few pages long, others take up dozens of pages. Each chapter involves numerous events and situations, and oftentimes the passage of a great deal of time. This simple and straightforward approach to the novel is in keeping with the author’s simple and straightforward language. Like the simple words which allow the reader to focus on the messages, the simple structure of the novel allows the reader to focus on the plot.



Quotes

She knew that wishing friends were with her or allowing herself to shiver in the car like this were ways of postponing the moment when she would have to open the door and walk into the empty house.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 69)

Importance: Nora Webster has come to her family's vacation cottage in Cush. She is determined to sell it to be able to cut out an old part of her life which she does not want to remember. Yet even arriving at the house brings up memories from the past, of when her husband was still alive. Her facing of the empty house is reflective of her now facing life alone without her husband.

Nightmares never come back once you wake up from them.

-- Nora (Chapter 2 paragraph 131)

Importance: Here, Nora comforts Donal after he has a nightmare which causes him to wake up screaming. Nora's gentle reminder that nightmares do not come back once someone has woken up applies to Donal's dream as much as it applies to Nora's life. Nora had a difficult childhood, and the death of her husband has been a real-life nightmare for her. Nora must wake up from this nightmare.

Every room, every sound, every piece of space, was filled not only with what had been lost, but with the years themselves, and the days.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 31)

Importance: Nora reflects on watching the movie "Gaslight" with her sons in relation to her own life. The woman in "Gaslight" was very alone in her home, and Nora also feels very alone in her home. Every part of the house is full of memories, and is a constant reminder to Nora of everything that she has lost now that Maurice is dead.

In all this noise and confusion, she felt a sharp longing now to be anywhere but here... Since she was a girl, she had never been alone in a crowd like this.

-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 156)

Importance: While at Etchingham's Pub, Nora is keenly aware of how alone she truly is, even though she is surrounded by so many other people. Seeing other people together makes her feel alone, and Nora wishes she could leave as quickly as possible. It is one of the areas of her life that has not improved since Maurice's death, in that she hasn't been able to truly get over being without him in public places like this.

D-daddy didn't t-teach there.

-- Donal (Chapter 16 paragraph 136)

Importance: Donal wants to go away to boarding school not only to study photography, but also to deal with his stammer. Nora learns the root cause of Donal's wanting to go



away has to do with the fact that he hates going to a school everyday where his deceased father taught. This underscores the fact that Nora's children are having just as difficult a time with Maurice's death as Nora is.

What she had told no one, because it was too strange, was how much this music had come to stand for.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 24)

Importance: Here, Nora's love of music as both an escape and a means of healing is revealed. Nora had never really previously considered music as anything important, but now it is transformative to her. It is helping her to move on in life, to deal with the death of her husband, and to accept the changes that his death has meant.

She drove to Dublin sure that, wherever Aine was, she had not been arrested. Had anything happened to her, Nora was certain that they would have notified her.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 129)

Importance: Having been unable to contact Aine for days, Nora, Fiona, and Paul rush into Dublin in the attempt to find her. Nora tries to take comfort in the fact that she hasn't heard anything negative about her daughter – that she has been injured, arrested, or killed. Fortunately, Aine turns up alive and well at one of a number of protests throughout the city.

Nora remembered that she felt a sadness then, something she had not felt before. It had come to her in one second what death meant: her mother would never speak again, never come into a room again.

-- Narrator (Chapter 18 paragraph 12)

Importance: Here, Nora reflects on not only her mother's death, but on the idea of death in general. Death is a transformative thing, not only for the individual who has died, but also for the people left behind. Nora will never again be able to speak with her mother, or see her. The same is true with Maurice. Death in this life, she knows, is a permanent thing and something which can only be accepted.

The chin ceased to matter, it was a mere detail, and details now were of no consequence. What mattered could not be named or easily seen.

-- Narrator (Chapter 18 paragraph 24)

Importance: Still reflecting on death, Nora knows that the physical features of a person – what they look like – don't ultimately matter. What does matter are feelings, emotions, memories, experiences, beliefs, and the time spent with these individuals. These should not be avoided, wasted, or forgotten. They matter tremendously even in the present, as Nora comes to believe with Maurice. It isn't what is physical that truly matters, but it is what emanates from the heart that truly matters.

That's what we are all for.

-- Aunt Josie (Chapter 18 paragraph 197)



Importance: At the end of the novel, Nora comes to understand what Aunt Josie has meant all along about family. Family is not a question of one supporting all, but all supporting one out of love and loyalty. Everyone in a family consistently worries about the others and helps to hold them up. They, in turn, are held up when they need the help. Just because one member of the family dies doesn't mean that the family ends or stops being a family. It just means they draw more heavily on one another.