

# **The Owl Service Study Guide**

## **The Owl Service by Alan Garner**

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# Plot Summary

The Owl Service, by Alan Garner is a young adult's/children's fantasy story set in seventies Britain, in the country of Wales and features the tumultuous friendship of three children Alison, Roger and Gwyn as they are forced to spend a summer in a mysterious isolated valley. During their stay we discover that ancient secrets are buried not only in the Valley but also in the past's of each of the younger character's as they struggle to come to terms with who they are, and where they are going.

Alison and Roger are step-siblings, their parent's Margaret and Clive having remarried after Alison's father died and Roger's mother left Clive and was subsequently divorced. Now that they are a new family unit, Clive and Margaret decide to holiday in Wales in an attempt to bond the two sides of their family together: an attempt that goes disastrously wrong as they encounter Gwyn, a Welsh lad who is the son of the house keeper Nancy and is forced to come to help his mum look after the house.

What follows for the three is a chilling adventure, part ghost story, part myth and partly a Coming of Age Tale. Gwyn and Alison discover a set of plates in the loft (the dinner service for which the book gets its name), and Alison sees almost immediately that she can turn the floral pattern on its face into little paper owls with a little origami. This she does, but soon her tracing of each plate and cutting out the shape of the owl soon becomes an obsession, and it is only Gwyn who realises that something is amiss.

Meanwhile Roger discovers the Stone of Gronw by the river that runs through the Valley, a stone where once the hero from Welsh legend Gronw was killed by Lleu Llaw Gryffydd's, in spite of him stealing away his wife Blodeuwydd.

As Gwyn tries to answer why Alison is becoming 'entranced' with owls, other strange things start to happen; noises are heard in locked rooms and the plaster render on a wall mysteriously flakes away, revealing an ancient mural of woman made of flowers. Added to this confusion are the cryptic pronouncements of Huw Halfbacon the grounds keeper (who seems to know much more about what is happening to the three children than he lets on), and the antagonism that Gwyn's mother Nancy holds for Huw and the English family.

As events race towards a climax, Gwyn tries to escape the valley but to no avail, finally finding out the awful truth that he, Roger and Alison are doomed to repeat the myth of Blodeuwudd, Gronw and Lleu Llaw Gryffydd's just as Huw, Nancy and the deceased Bertram (Alison's uncle) once had; which resulted in Bertram's death.

As the English parents are blithely unaware of what is going on, the children have to find a way to reconcile their cultural and emotional differences if they are to avoid suffering a similar tragic fate to all of those other triads of people who have met their doom here in this valley.



# Chapter 1-3

## Chapter 1-3 Summary

In the first three chapters of "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner, we see a young English family staying in a Welsh cottage in a secluded valley in this hilly and mountainous country. Here Clive and Margaret have taken their respective stepchildren Roger and Alison on a summer holiday in an attempt to heal the rifts that have emerged due to their recent marriage. Whilst on holiday they employ Nancy the matron, cook and cleaner of the house who comes with her own boy Gwyn, and Huw Halfbacon, the groundsman.

In the very first chapter we find Gwyn, the child of the house maid Nancy, checking on Alison who is feeling ill after suffering a stomach ache. Alison jokes with Gwyn that she is fine and doesn't need any help, but that she has been hearing scratching in the roof above her room all night. Gwyn suggests that it must be rats and taps the walls and, to his surprise he finds that the rats scratch back; the exact number of times that he knocks. He decides to investigate by taking a rat trap up until the loft space which has an attic door in the ceiling of Alison's room. There he finds a set of dinner plates with a curious floral design on them.

In the next chapter (Chapter 2) the narrative switches to Roger who is swimming and wading by the river that encircles their holiday cottage. Whilst there Roger suddenly is startled by a scream and feels like a shock has passed through him. He steps out of the river and looks around as to what could have made the scream, to see nothing but the large rock that he was standing near has a neat hole bored all of the way through. When he looks through he realizes that the hole neatly frames the stand of trees on the far side of the valley. It was then that Roger encounters Huw Halfbacon the grounds-keeper, who seems to allude to something mysterious but, before Roger can figure it out Gwyn catches up with him and tells him about the plates they have found in the roof above Alison's bedroom. When the boys get back to the house, Gwyn's mother Nancy demands to know why he has been so late and what he has been doing so Gwyn tells her about the plates. At the news of the plates, Gwyn's mother Nancy becomes angry and upset and rushes upstairs to demand that Alison give her the plates and that the attic be boarded up. At first Alison tries to refuse, but reluctantly hands over the plate, only to find that the last that she hands over is bone-white and nothing at all like the one with the design upon it which she traced just a few minutes previously.

In Chapter Three Roger goes to see his father (and Alison's stepfather) Clive whilst he plays billiards in the study, and informs him that Nancy has thrown a tantrum and is threatening to leave the house because Alison switched the plates on her. He notices how there is one wall of the study which has been pebble-dashed whilst all the rest are clad in wood. He remarks that it is strange to just have one wall pebble dashed and not the whole room, and that now there also seems to be a crack in the wall where previously there had not been. Clive. His father seems unconcerned about the whole



affair and promises to have a talk with Nancy (offering her some more money to stay), and then talks with Alison. The girl swears that she did not switch the plates, that somehow the plate lost its design all by itself, and herself is angry why she should have to answer herself to the 'cook'. It is revealed that Alison is in fact the owner of the house, as it was bequeathed to her mother by a long distant cousin Bertram, who then transferred her house to her daughter's name to avoid having to pay death duties upon it.

## Chapter 1-3 Analysis

In the first three chapters we are introduced to all of the main protagonists of the story; the children whom are staying in the valley, and all of the adults as well. In this first section there are a few interesting elements to mention; the use of foreshadowing, gathering menace and implicit strife.

The story foreshadows conflict between the characters in the way that there is already repressed emotion and arguments erupting between Nancy and her employer, and between Gwyn and Nancy his mother. We can sense that there is something about to happen or about to explode but we cannot see quite what it is.

The gathering menace describes the way that the author uses the three chapters to slowly lead the reader along a chain of events, each one becoming a little more out of ordinary than the last. The first intimation of horror is the scratching sounds coming from the ceiling above Alison's room, which hangs like a threat over the girl both actually and symbolically for the later events that befall her.

Although we have already witnessed a strange event (the counting rats and Roger's strange experience by the river), we can already sense that, underneath the surface there are tensions as none of the human relationships are easily understandable at first glance. It emerges that Alison and Roger are not actually brother and sister but are step-siblings of each other, and that the house they are visiting is not actually a holiday cottage but is owned by the English family, and, even stranger that it is owned by the young girl.

In the use of the setting, that of Wales, the author tackles the main underlying themes of Myth and that of Discrimination obliquely as he slowly presents to the reader the difference in lifestyle and surroundings that that which Alison and Roger are so usually accustomed. Clive the father seems to treat this excursion as nothing but an excuse to go fishing, and seems miles away fro the sensibilities of the Welsh locals already present in the narrative (Gwyn, Nancy and Hugh).



# Chapter 4-5

## Chapter 4-5 Summary

The next day, in Chapters Four and Five the mystery surrounding the plates and the stone by the river deepens as the children start to experience even more strange happenings amidst the antagonising attitudes of their respective parents.

The day starts with Gwyn talking to Roger, who is telling his friend how last night he heard Alison having a bad dream. He went in to check on her and heard the same scratching that Gwyn heard the day before; but this time it seemed to be everywhere, above the girl's bed and behind the walls. Gwyn asks if it could have been rats but Roger replies that if it was, they must have been very big rats...

Roger tells Gwyn that Alison swears that she did not switch the plate that she gave to Nancy, and so that must mean that somehow, the design disappeared from the Owl Service after Alison traced out the design and made her paper owls. At that point Alison comes down, feeling a little better than the day before and claims again that she did not switch the plate and now her paper owl's have disappeared. Gwyn and Roger are finding it hard to believe her when all of a sudden there is a crash and Nancy rushes into the room, saying that Alison had just thrown a plate at her. She is so furious that she threatens to leave the cottage but Gwyn hurriedly tells his mother that it wasn't the girl but himself, in an effort to avoid any further trouble. Gwyn tells the other two children that they should each go and placate their parents before his mother Nancy talks to them, and Roger and Alison leave. At that point Gwyn hears an almighty crash from the billiard room and he rushes to investigate. Here he finds that the few plates that he has brought down from the loft already have all broken, being flung against the pebble dashed wall. As he stealthily tries to pick up the mess he sees that more cracks have appeared in the pebble-dashed wall, and that, from the cracks in the render there are two eyes staring out at him from the other side.

Chapter Five finds Roger going to the stone by the river, where he finds his father Clive and tells him about the plate incident, claiming that no one knew who threw the plate at Nancy, but that the maid had probably dropped it herself. This explanation Clive believes as they both examine the rock. Roger's father sees how it frames the brow of the hill on the far side of the valley perfectly, and that the hole must have been machine tooled, but with no explanation.

Meanwhile, Gwyn finds Huw Halfbacon and asks him to help board up the loft, and why his mother Nancy has taken against him. Huw appears to be in a kind of reverie as he chants before coming to senses, and replying that he has no quarrel with Gwyn's mother. At that moment Roger and Clive emerge and ask Huw about the stone by the river, who tells them that it is called the Stone of Gronw, and that here a man was killed by another who threw a spear from that hill and straight through the rock. The man was killed for having stolen the murderer's wife in the ancient past, and neither Roger or



Clive believe him. They decide to go to the local shop to get some supplies, and for Roger to find some developing film so he can take pictures of the Stone of Gronw.

## Chapter 4-5 Analysis

In these two chapters there hangs a sense of foreboding as mysterious and unsettling events start to surround the children and notably, the girl Alison.

First we discover through the narrative of Roger that Alison was surrounded by scratchings the night before, and this experienced is symbolic of the future threat that surrounds the girl. Later, with the smashing of the plate and Alison' insistence that she must make the owl models, we start to see that Alison is almost becoming obsessive with her new found past time, and only Gwyn has really properly diagnosed it at this time: a dangerous obsession.

The sense of unease deepens when we find Huw Halfbacon half murmuring, half chanting in the garden and his words seem to be a mixture of an ancient song and a magic spell. Through these instances we can feel that the story is drawing itself around the children and that they are powerless to stop it. From Huw's description of the story we can see that he is describing the story of Blodeuwedd from the Mabinogion (one of the cycles of Welsh myth); who was a bride created from flowers for the young lord Lleu llaw Gruffyds, but fell in love with another man (Gronw). Gronw first attempted to kill Lleu but failed because of the hero's magical nature, and when the favor was returned Lleu killed Gronw and turned his wife into an owl as punishment.

In these two chapters there is also the sense of discrimination and class distinction between the English and the Welsh in the seventies. Both Roger and Clive seem to share the idea that Huw is half mad, and that 'all the Welsh are the same' (a derogatory comment). Clive, the father, even seems to display the characteristic nonchalance of a member of the upper middle classes who doesn't seem to spend much time worrying or thinking about what his staff or even his children are thinking about.



## Chapter 6-8

### Chapter 6-8 Summary

In the next three short Chapters of Alan Garner's "The Owl Service", the story continues with Gwyn, Roger and Alison discovering the painting on the wall, and trying to find a way to detach the girl from her obsession with the curious dinner plates.

Chapter Six sees the children examining the painting of the woman behind the pebble dash wall. It is an old painting which Gwyn thinks was made at some point in the late Middle Ages of a woman made of flowers but that all the flowers, instead of petals, have claws. Afterward, the children set about lowering the last of the plates from the loft, Gwyn in the hope of taking them and hiding them away from Alison. While he is up in the loft Gwyn removes the rat trap and finds in there an owl pellet (the bits of fur and bone that an owl coughs up after they have eaten).

In Chapter Seven Nancy the cook and Gwyn's mother distracts them just as they are finished, telling Gwyn to go to the shops to get some flour for her tea scones, and also that he should have nothing more to do with the loft. Gwyn and Roger decide to go together. Whilst at the shops, Roger and Gwyn walk in to find the people in there already speaking in Welsh, and Gwyn understands that they are gossiping about the return of 'her' and that the locals feel sorry both for 'her' and for the family in the valley. They also mysteriously claim that going anywhere, even as far away as Aberystwyth wouldn't be far enough.

In Chapter Eight the boys have returned home but when they ask Alison what has happened to the Owl Service she feigns confusion that she doesn't know where the plates have been stashed, and that they have disappeared. Gwyn rounds on Alison angrily, kicking the book out from her hands and Alison suddenly turns angry, warning the boy that he shouldn't have done that. Out of nowhere, suddenly, a breeze starts up, sending the book that Alison had been reading into the air and launching itself at Gwyn, shedding pages which all fly at him. Gwyn flees for the far edge of the field, where the book and the leaves follow him to the edge of the marsh. There the sudden attack stops, and Gwyn realizes that he has dropped the flour. He idly starts picking up the book pages and, reading them realizes that it is the story of Blodeuwedd, from a book given to him by his English Teacher in Aberystwyth.

When he gets back to the others, Gwyn tells them the story of the flower maiden Blodeuwedd, who was turned into an owl by Llew Llaw Gruffydd for having cheated on him with the hero Gronw. Roger takes the story cynically, failing to see the relevance.

### Chapter 6-8 Analysis

In these three chapters the Myth that is surrounding the children starts to appear, and the author uses Roger's and Gwyn's perspective to reveal the full extent of the story



around them. By the end of these three chapters the characters now know that their valley has something inexplicably tied up with the legend of Blodeuwedd, although at this time it is only Gwyn who believes it.

Another interesting element of these chapters is the dynamic between the children. Contentions start to arise as we see Roger mock Gwyn for his superstitious ways (which is actually a form of discrimination against his perceived 'Welshness'), and also when Gwyn suddenly reacts with anger towards Alison, kicking the book out of her hands. What was once a supposedly happy friendship between the three is now showing cracks and strains, and we can sense that it is not 'three characters against the ghost' but rather, each character struggling on their own with the conflict implied in the story.

Discrimination is implied by the casual words of Roger as he leaves the shop, although not consciously meant. This scene in particular shows the perceived differences between two cultures and all of the contrasts between Welsh and English, Rural and Urban, which can lead to misunderstanding, ignorance and prejudice.



# Chapter 9-10

## Chapter 9-10 Summary

Chapters Nine and Ten concern the greater mystery surrounding the adult character's in the novel, mostly Huw Halfbacon, Nancy, and Roger's parents. As the children strive to understand what is happening around them, there starts to emerge mysteries concerning their own parents and the past.

Clive returns from Aberystwyth with some developer's film for his son, Roger, and a gift of tracing paper for his step daughter Alison. Roger takes Gwyn and immediately they go off to try and take some pictures of the Stone of Gronw, and the hill framed through its hole in the middle. While there Gwyn tries to talk through their situation with Roger, explaining that something is happening in this valley, something to do with flowers and owls, the plates and the story of Blodeuwedd from the Mabinogion. Roger agrees that there is definitely something strange going on, counting the strange and unnerving scratching that he heard in Alison's room the night before, but prefers to leave the situation alone. When they discover that Alison has disappeared Gwyn insists that they search for the plates but find that they too have disappeared. At first Gwyn insists that they must find her and the plates, and stop her from making those paper owls, but Roger says that it would be better if they left her. Gwyn leaves angrily, stating that he must find Huw Halfbacon and ask him just what is going on.

Meanwhile, the groundsman Huw encounters Roger while Gwyn is gone, and starts to explain to him the story behind the myth. That Lleu Llaw is a jealous lord while Gronw was a mighty one. He also explains that Blodeuwedd never wanted to be an owl, nor a woman, just wanting to be flowers, and in that way has turned cruel. At the end of Chapter Nine Huw starts laughing, telling Roger a story of how he got his name - by tricking the farmer in the next valley by giving him a magical gift of horses and hounds in return for pigs, but making them out of toadstools.

Chapter Ten: that night finds Gwyn desperately trying to talk to Alison about the plates, but she is avoiding him. Clive, Roger's father admonishes Gwyn for leaving notes in the brussel sprouts for his stepdaughter and asks him to leave the family to their business. Gwyn is angry and upset, even more so when he sees Alison coming downstairs but then ignoring him as she goes into the sitting room with her step family. Upset, Gwyn goes into the parlor to see his Mam, who is angry with him for talking to Huw Halfbacon. Gwyn doesn't understand why his mother left the valley so many years ago or what happened to his father. Gwyn's mother Nancy threatens that if he keeps inquiring and talking to Huw she will take him out of the school in Aberystwyth and get him to start working in the Co-op. Angrily, Gwyn storms off to bed.



## Chapter 9-10 Analysis

In these two chapters we see the theme of the 'Power of Myth' developed the most directly so far. The author focuses the main tensions of the plot around Gwyn as the boy feels more and more frustrated about what is happening to Alison and in the valley, and through his eyes we see how the Power of Myth is returning and coming alive for the inhabitants of the cottage. This theme is reinforced by the strange character of Huw Halfbacon, whose cryptic pronouncements always seem to take the form of the present tense, asserting that the power of myth is that it is timeless and is simultaneously happening at one and the same time as the present day. This is one of the major ideas of the book; namely, that poignant tales, myths and even 'truths' have a way of being relevant to our present circumstance, and that we can find ourselves re-enacting ancient ideas and ways of being without consciously recognizing it. This is because a lot of fairy stories, myths, religious scripture and legend can be read as emotionally, or psychologically relevant: they contain facts about how we think, feel and act as humans and can warn us of dangers that we may face because of our actions.

For the story of "The Owl Service", the chosen myth is that of Blodeuwydd the Flower Maiden of the Mabinogion, a tale where three characters are caught in a struggle with each other for acceptance and love and none of them seem able to escape. Their being thrown together (Llew had his wife 'made' for him, Gronw fell helplessly in love with her, and Blodeuwydd never wanted to be a wife or a woman in the first place) leads them to their inevitable destruction.



# Chapter 11-12

## Chapter 11-12 Summary

Chapter Eleven and Twelve largely centers around the actions of Gwyn and Alison over the course of that night, as Gwyn attempts to stop Alison from making any more of the paper Owls, and he finally understands what is happening within the valley.

That night, in Chapter Eleven, after going to bed Gwyn sneaks out of the house and waits in the darkness under the trees for what he knows is about to happen. He watches the windows of the house as, one by one the lights go off - all save one (Alison's). He waits as he watches a torchlight cautiously move through the house, taking over an hour to get to the back door and there follows her as the girl steals through the night towards the woods.

Concentrating on following her, Gwyn keeps the occasional light of her torchlight at a good distance away from himself as he makes his way carefully through the woods that he is forbidden to go into, until he sees a second light, suddenly moving towards him. Terrified, Gwyn sees another light coming forwards, and it appears to be a tall flame of flickering blue and green. Thinking that this is the place where his grandfather went mad, Gwyn suddenly believes that they valley is trying to send him mad as he backs against a tree and he uses his revision notes of scientific formula to try and convince himself that he is rational and sane. He suddenly remembers then, the scientific formulation of methane or marsh gas and, emboldened, swipes through one of the flames approaching him. It was only marsh gas let out by the dank bog and the peat underneath the trees. Gwyn then returns to trying to follow Alison, and sees a figure at the end of the causeway which he assumes must be her, until he hears her not too far off, and realizes that the figure was nothing but a made up picture of hedgerow and brambles.

Nearby, he finds Alison making the last owls in a deserted chicken coop in the middle of the woods, where she has taken the plates and stacked them neatly. She seems to be in a delirium so Gwyn tackles her, waking for her anger to subside and for Alison to come to her senses. Alison doesn't seem to know how she makes things like the book throw themselves, or even why she is so concerned with making the owls, merely that she has to or she feel that she will burst.

In Chapter Twelve, Gwyn awaits morning and then takes Alison back to the house, where he encounters Huw Halfbacon sweeping the driveway. Gwyn waits until Alison is safely in the house and then rounds on Huw, angrily kicking his rake away and demanding answers.

Huw remains cryptic, saying that Blodeuwydd is finally coming again, but, when asked what he means, finds that he cannot answer. Huw states that his grandfather made the plates, and his uncle made the painting, in an effort to tame the spirit of Blodeuwydd by



locking her into the walls and the ceramics, but that she has been released from the plates by Alison. Gwyn is angry, stating that most of this is impossible, and that Huw is confusing himself with another character from the Mabinogion, the wizard Gwydion. When Huw suddenly looks afraid, as if he does not know who he really is, Gwyn reacts angrily by stating that he should make the cover for the loft and leaves.

## Chapter 11-12 Analysis

In Chapters Eleven and Twelve, the character of Gwyn is finally told what is happening by Huw Halfbacon; that the myth of Blodeuwydd is coming alive in front of their eyes, and we are given the impression that it has been 'coming' back again and again. This is alluded to by the gossipers in the village shop, who insisted that "she is coming" and that "this time, it was owls" (thus inferring that it has happened before). This fact is reinforced by Huw who states that both his own grandfather and Huw tries to tame Blodeuwydd by making the plates and the painting (and subsequently pebble dashing the wall).

The idea of the Myth returning starts to make for the us, the readers, the impression that all of these characters are playing out an endless drama, and the author uses this impression when he starts to mix the characters and events of the real world with that of the mythical. Huw Halfbacon (as his very name alludes to) is taking on the characteristics of the wizard Gwydion from the Ancient Welsh cycle of stories, The Mabinogion.



# Chapter 13-14

## Chapter 13-14 Summary

In these two chapters we see Gwyn trying to reach out to Alison to warn her of the danger that she is in, but her family gets in the way and discrimination starts to affect their friendship.

Chapter Thirteen begins the next day from the events of the previous chapter, when Alison comes down from oversleeping that mid-morning. Clive, the father of Roger asks if she is feeling all right, completely unaware that she had stolen into the boggy woods just last night under the compulsion to make paper owls and to free the spirit of the flower maiden Blodeuwydd. Alison asks where Roger is (who is downstairs in the cellar developing the photographs he took of the Bryn through the Stone of Gronw).

When she leaves the house, Alison encounters Gwyn, who persuades her to go to the old hen house where he had found her the previous night. There he shows her the smashed and cracked plates to prove to her that there is indeed something magical happening to them all in this valley, but Alison tells him that she is scared and that she doesn't want to talk about it. She confides in Gwyn that her mother has forbidden her to speak to him, after he put the message into her sprouts that dinner night, and is afraid that she will be hurting his feelings.

At that moment Roger appears, reminded Alison that she mustn't speak to Gwyn and then asking her to come with him. Gwyn tries to argue with Roger that this is none of his business and that it is important, but Alison agrees to go with Roger anyway. Roger and Alison cannot seem to really understand just how deeply Gwyn's feelings have been hurt.

In Chapter Fourteen Roger tries to get Alison to look at his developed pictures but she is too upset to agree with her stepbrother so instead, Roger gets his father Clive to look at them for him. When Roger goes to the dining room he discovers that Nancy has moved his drying pictures and he is furious, shouting at Nancy, who is taken aside by Clive and given more money to calm down. Instead, Clive and Roger look at the developed pictures in the hallway where they notice that in his enlargements of the gap in the Stone of Gronw, in the very last few pictures they see a figure on the Bryn. Because it is enlarged and the detail is lost they cannot figure out what figure it is, but that is appears to either riding a small motorbike or riding a pony and is looking out down to the Stone. Roger is dumbfounded because he didn't see anyone or hear a motorbike whilst he was there.

Roger and Clive take the developments to the billiard room, but discover that in their way if a wheelbarrow full of the broken pebble dash and mortar as Gwyn is clearing up the mess. Clive and Roger order him to move but Gwyn, already angry but his treatment earlier carries on performing his job. This makes Clive the more angry but Gwyn



finishes in his own time and then leaves with the wheelbarrow. As Roger goes in to show his dad the mural he finds that it has gone and immediately suspects Gwyn. Roger races after him, cursing, and Gwyn roundly tells him that he might get thumped if he starts shouting at him like that.

## Chapter 13-14 Analysis

In these two chapters we see the the theme of prejudice and discrimination played out in the pronouncement of Margaret, Alison's mother that she should not have anything to do with the 'hired help' Gwyn, and also in Roger's treatment of Gwyn when he suspects the young lad of damaging the mural that they had discovered together.

These chapters encompass a complication to the plot, where we can see that the characters really need to start talking to each other and trusting each other but cannot because of the constraints on their behavior by their parents. Instead of openly trusting each other, Roger in particular retreats into prejudice as he reacts out of pride and assumed privilege towards Gwyn.

For Gwyn himself, he feels as though his actions are useless and that he is being treated as an inferior by the family whom he is looking after, and reacts angrily.



# Chapter 15-16

## Chapter 15-16 Summary

In Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen we see a miniature breakthrough as Gwyn finally manages to confront Alison about what she is experiencing, and Gwyn learns a little more about the mysterious Mr. Bertram, and his connection with his mother, Nancy.

Chapter Fifteen starts with Alison seeing Gwyn walking off with the barrow of render and pebble dash through her window, before stopping and looking into the pool. Alison thinks that he can see her reflection in the water, and suddenly feels empathy for him.

Meanwhile, that evening while the English family have their dinner Nancy has a chance to talk to her son Gwyn. They sit in the parlor while Gwyn plies her with cigarettes and niceties. His mother Nancy starts to complain about the family that they are working for, that Clive in particular is ignorant and shouldn't be treating her like he does. Gwyn reveals that he had an argument and almost hit Roger but his mother laughs, claiming that if things had once been different then it would have been her sitting at the head of the table. Gwyn asks why, and his mother replies that she had been betrothed to Bertram, the previous owner of the house, before he died. Nancy then goes on to say at the end of the chapter that she thinks Bertram was killed.

Chapter Sixteen begins the next day as Alison and Roger are playing by the river, Roger trying to get Alison interested in his photography whilst Alison herself wants to walk up the old peat road up the mountain. As her stepbrother and stepfather refuse to go, Alison decides to walk up the mountain road on her own. As she ascends the mountain, she is suddenly surprised to see Gwyn, who has followed her to try and get a chance to talk to her. Whilst there, Gwyn shows Alison the mountain and the view from the small plateau down to the valley and onto the next. They talk honestly for the first time since Gwyn found her tracing the owls in the old chicken hutch in the middle of the wood. Gwyn reveals how Nancy his mother hates him, and wants him to leave the school - even though he is doing well at it. Gwyn teases Alison about her stepbrother, Roger, and Alison imparts the story about Roger's unfaithful mother, 'the Birmingham Belle'.

Towards the end of Chapter Sixteen Gwyn starts to tell Alison about the life of the Valley, and how all of the people living here were under some sort of spell.

## Chapter 15-16 Analysis

In these two chapters the continuing themes of Prejudice and Discrimination are developed as Gwyn talks to his mother about his and her past. What we see here being examined is the differences and similarities in the social class of the two families (in Britain towards the end of the seventies).





Both Nancy and Gwyn feel like they belong where they are, they have a deep understanding about Wales and the Valley in particular; but this belonging has also become a trap for them. Gwyn in particular wants more from his life than that of a farmer, and Nancy feels like she has been cheated out of her future by the death of her lover Bertram. This stifled opportunity is contrasted against the family of Clive and Margaret, Alison and Roger who feel a sense of ownership and entitlement without any sense of belonging. What Alison and Roger haven't understood up until now is that they come from a privileged background, for which many things have been made naturally easy for them, and they haven't had to struggle as Gwyn and Nancy have had to. This appreciating of their different social classes (working class and upper middle class) lends itself to the majority of the conflict and tension between the two families.

However, when Alison finally acquiesces and spends time to befriend Gwyn, she finds out that they are not so different. Gwyn himself is bright and intelligent, and wishes more for himself and for his life whilst Alison too is unsure of her future but knows that she wants something greater.



# Chapter 17-18

## Chapter 17-18 Summary

In Chapter's Seventeen and Eighteen we watch with almost alarm how the plot shifts from reconciliation to confrontation; as Alison and Gwyn figure out a part of the mystery of the Valley while below, Clive and Roger make accusations and divisions between the two families.

Chapter Seventeen begins by continuing the earlier scene of Gwyn and Alison on the top of the old mountain that hedges their valley. Gwyn explains that he believes that the old myths are true, to a degree. That at some point, many generations ago there were people here who found a way to control the forces of nature and to use it, perhaps even shaping it into the form of a woman. But as soon as it was forced into its unnatural form things went wrong, it now had a brain behind it and so acted strangely, wanting to revert back to its natural state. When Alison asks how this could have happened and why it keeps on happening, Gwyn replies that he believes that this valley is itself like a reservoir, it fills up with this energy or magic and is then, just when it is about to burst has to release it, and that energy becomes a pattern.

Alison states that it must have been her fault, that now she has released the pattern that was on the plates and it is free, but Gwyn says that he doesn't believe it is as simple; now that pattern - the owls - have been transferred to the three people involved the most in the story, and they have to act out that energy until it is finally released.

Alison and Gwyn wonder if they are strong enough to stop it, and Alison finds herself suddenly caring about her new friend Gwyn. He confides in her that he is taking elocution lessons and would like to borrow her record player, but Alison doesn't see why he needs to learn to speak 'middle class English'. At the end of the chapter Alison decides to give him a present, which is the small souvenir that Clive had brought her.

In the next Chapter we find Clive and Roger playing ping-pong in the games room a few days later, and they are laughing about the apparent stupidity of their workers. Roger reveals that he also develops the pictures that Alison and Margaret had taken on their walk, and the only surprising thing was the sight of Gwyn on the top of the mountain, and that he wasn't surprised to find pictures of Gwyn apparently laying off from his work. They walk out into the grounds where Roger hears rustling coming from the locked garage that Huw Halfbacon uses. Clive then investigates and confirms that he things there must be someone in there, but no one answers his call. He shouts out to the grounds keeper Huw to open the garage immediately but he claims that he cannot because the key has been lost, saying only that 'she' took it. Thinking that the 'she' must refer to Nancy, Clive and Roger immediately leave to try and retrieve the key to open the garage.



Left to her own devices, Alison idly looks at her reflection in the lake, and finds herself becoming entranced by her own reflection. She is stirred out of her reverie by Huw Halfbacon and Gwyn, who are watching her strangely.

## Chapter 17-18 Analysis

Chapter Seventeen is interesting as it contains the first explanation from the character's view about what is happening to them, Gwyn's 'pattern' theory. In the use of this theory the Valley itself takes on an active role in the story. The description of its high mountain passes and the way that it encircles the cottage below gives the reader the sense of a brooding figure (like that of Blodeuwydd) attempting to crush the lives of the characters within it. This metaphor and description by Gwyn can be seen as a way that the author is heightening the tension and the drama of the story, making the characters appear to be victims of their circumstances.

The idea that each character is trapped continues in these chapters, as we find out that Gwyn feels trapped by his opportunities and by his mother. Alison on the other hand, is trapped by her upbringing and her present position as being caught between Gwyn and her own family.

In the next chapter we see how Roger and his father Clive are now oblivious to the danger around them (a danger represented by Alison becoming strangely hypnotized by her own reflection), encouraging a sense of fear.



# Chapter 19-20

## Chapter 19-20 Summary

Chapter Nineteen begins with Gwyn trying to catch Alison's eye after she has been ignoring him for a few days and he doesn't understand why. He wonders why she has not turned up at their arranged meeting place over the last week, and then is rounded on by his mother, Nancy.

His mother is angry that Clive has been asking about the key to the locked garage, and thinks that Gwyn must have told Clive about the garage and the fact that she had once had the key but had thrown it away. Gwyn is astonished, saying that he doesn't know anything about a key or the locked garage, and feels hurt by being shouted at. Nancy continues regardless saying that she has handed in her notice and that they will be leaving the day after tomorrow. What is more, that when they get back to Aberystwyth Gwyn will not be returning to school, but that she is taking him out getting him to work in a shop, crushing his dreams. Gwyn flees the room and collapses on the stairs, weeping.

Elsewhere, Roger finds Alison and laughs at Gwyn for appearing to be childish for weeping, which sparks a row between him and his stepsister as Alison asks why Roger is so heartless. She brings up the fact that Roger is secretly upset over the stories concerning his own mother, and Roger gets angry. Alison tries to make him see that Gwyn has nothing in his life and has to fight for everything, telling her brother that he has brought records of elocution lessons so that he can better his chances for finding work. Roger sniggers at the idea, and Alison storms off.

In the next chapter, the next day Gwyn again seeks out Alison and tells her that he is leaving the very next day, and that he has to see her. He drags her out into the garden and states that he has been talking to his mother about the past and it turns out that Nancy and Bertram were in love, before he died on the high mountain pass. Gwyn states that they have to find a way to stop the pattern before then, and that she must come and see him the next day, before he goes. Alison states that she cannot, that her mother Margaret has forbidden her to speak to Gwyn and that her mother will cancel all of her clubs and societies if she continues seeing Gwyn. Gwyn is hurt and astonished, and Alison angrily cries that when she is with Gwyn she feels like she believes in him and his story, but that when she is with her mother she feels like she is normal, and how can she choose?

At that point Roger appears, and makes fun of Gwyn's elocution lessons, and the fact that he knows sends Gwyn into a rage and he departs, thinking that he has had enough of everyone in that cottage.



## Chapter 19-20 Analysis

By the end of Chapter twenty we see the final confrontation building, as the 'pattern' begins to emerge between the three central characters/ Alison feels torn between Roger, her family, and Gwyn, her new friend in the same way that Nancy was torn between Huw and Bertram, and Blodeuwydd between Llew Llaw and Gronw. Just as the other previous stories have ended in tragedy, we feel that now their fates are set and their own story must surely end in disaster.

The themes of Prejudice and Discrimination continue as Roger pokes fun at Gwyn for taking his grammar and elocution lessons; a fact that we can see how Roger really doesn't understand how hard Gwyn has had to fight to get as far as he has done with his education.

One of the main sympathies that are evoked for the reader is for the character of Alison, who is being asked to choose between her family and friends, whilst suffering the strange powers of Blodeuwydd. However, even that being so we feel that the bargain that her mother makes with her child (the choice or loss of social clubs) to be a false choice, as Alison finds herself unable to break away from her social class.

Surrounding all of these events is the sudden change in the tone of the book, here symbolized by the author in the weather. The Welsh clouds, rain and mists (for which the reason is famous for) descends and the valley is enclosed, trapped in an ominous foreshadowing of events that are about to happen in the next chapter.



# Chapter 21-22

## Chapter 21-22 Summary

As the storm descends on the valley and the people steadily become trapped inside for the final moments of the plot, the narrative finds Gwyn attempting his escape.

Chapter Twenty One begins with Gwyn lying in the cold grass of the old peat road as he fell asleep the previous night and now, remembering himself wakes up and sees all around him, daisies starting to pop. They are bursting out of the ground despite the fact that the grass is trampled all around him and Gwyn takes it as a sign that whatever has been threatened before is now about to happen. He makes his way through the mists and the cold, finally finding his way to the Ravenstone at the very top of the mountain. Suddenly Gwyn hears a low whistle and out of the mist comes the sheep dogs of the neighboring shepherd. Although he cannot see the shepherd himself, the shepherd uses his whistles and calls to corral the dogs and sends them after Gwyn, making him retreat before their nipping teeth. Gwyn tries to flee but the dogs and the shepherd are too good, and they steer him back down towards the valley, effectively trapping him.

The short Chapter Twenty Two concerns the events back at the house, as the family wake up to find that their house is almost deserted, the boy Gwyn has disappeared and Nancy is packing her things ready to go. Clive and Roger continue their game of billiards oblivious to the danger, merely commenting that the weather is so atrocious that it would be better if they all stayed indoors today. Clive reveals that some supplies have gone missing however, some cheese and bread and so he and Margaret will be driving to the shop to resupply. He offers the children to come with him but they both state that they would rather stay inside today. Whilst they are talking Roger reveals that his anorak has gone missing as have his climbing boots, and that the disappeared Gwyn must have stolen them. Clive tries to calm him down by saying that he will merely buy some more.

Huw Halfbacon asks to come into the house and asks them if any of them has seen Gwyn, as he is worried about him, and Clive and Roger angrily state that Gwyn has vanished and stolen half of their supplies, and that they are not sorry to see him go. Clive then also asks if Huw can find another housekeeper, to which he replies that he cannot, and leaves.

## Chapter 21-22 Analysis

In these two Chapters the action starts to pick up pace as the events of the plot race towards their inevitable conclusion. The author uses the environment of the storm, the mountains and the mist to enhance the tension and the feeling of being trapped.

For Gwyn, who attempts to escape the valley because he is so angry with Alison, Nancy and Roger, we see how he is thwarted in his attempt by the weather and by the

mysterious shepherd's dog's. Now the full impact of the theme of the 'living myth' is revealed as it is now obvious that everyone else in the area is attempting to stop the events in the valley from 'leaking out'. With a growing sense of horror, we realise that whatever is about to happen now cannot be stopped.



# Chapter 23-24

## Chapter 23-24 Summary

In Chapters Twenty Three and Twenty Four, we see Gwyn again attempting to leave the valley, and as he does so he uncovers the final piece of the puzzle of his parents.

Gwyn, undefeated, decides to take the route through the gorge known as the Black Hiding, where foxes go when they are avoiding being hunted by dogs. He scrambles along the scree and the foam of the gorge, when suddenly his footing gives away and he almost slides down the slope and into the ravine. Gwyn clutches to the shale and clay, wondering how if ever he is going to survive, but finds his courage when he realizes that he only has to get up the gorge and then he will be able to pass over into the next valley, and get a lift into Aberystwyth. After that he doesn't know what he will do, but he has plans of leaving Wales for good.

Gwyn leaps over onto the outcropping of rock and makes it to the top of the ravine by scrambling the boulders when, all of a sudden one of the boulders tries to attack him: it is the big sow, the black pig of the neighboring farmer. He scrambles away from the pig and swings himself up on a tree root before climbing the stunted tree that sits atop the ravine. Here he decides to wait out the night and leave in the morning, when the pig has gone to sleep. Just as he is dozing off he sees a man approach his hiding space with a cap, who nonchalantly sits down on the edge of the waterfall and asks the boy to sit down.

In the next chapter we find out that the searcher who has found Gwyn is none other than Huw Halfbacon, who says that Gwyn might as well come down from the tree as Huw wont harm him, to prove this he even crosses the gulley so Gwyn will have a chance to escape if Huw were to do anything. Huw tells the boy that this is not chance, that Gwyn was destined to come to this tree on this ravine, and yesterday they had to use the dogs to try and stop him from taking the wrong path.

At first Gwyn distrusts him, but when Huw tells him to reach into the crack at the foot of the old tree and pull out what he finds there., he suddenly realizes that what old Huw has been saying is all true. Underneath the tree there is an assortment of artifacts, one of which is an ancient spear head with a tapered, paper thin point. On all of the other objects there is a simple face with a brow line and two dots for eyes (which to Gwyn looks like it could either be a birds face or a person, he cannot tell). Gwyn is told that he can take an object if he has something to leave, so he leaves the souvenir that Alison gave him and instead takes a circle disk with the same face on it and asks Huw to give the disk to Alison as his final and last present.

As he is putting things back Gwyn finds some other objects, these ones made of rubber: break blocks for a motorbike. Realizing that Huw must have left them there, and that they must have been the break blocks from Bertram's motorbike. Gwyn demands to





know why Huw killed Bertram and in their argument he finds out that it was meant as a joke, that Bertram only ever used his bike to go up and down the driveway before, but when the pattern started emerging Bertram had tried to escape the Valley and Huw didn't realize.

When asked why he did it, Huw replies that Bertram had taken his lover, Nancy, and that Gwyn was his only child.

## Chapter 23-24 Analysis

These two chapters have within them an air of finality as, at every turn the boy Gwyn is thwarted in his attempt to leave the valley. When he finally manages to scale the waterfall ravine it becomes obvious that he is there for a reason. As Huw points out, the reason is because that Gwyn is his only child and he is also a descendant of Llew Llaw Gruffydds and Gwydion the wizard, and thus the lord of this valley and one of the ones who must re-enact the ancient play.

There is an air of tragedy in these final chapters, enhanced by the weather and the gloom which the action takes place in, and although some of these facts we could have guessed from clues in previous chapters, we are left watching the plot work itself out in dread fascination as if we too are trapped.

The author decides to use deliberately mythological imagery in these chapters: the black sow, the twisted tree and the dogs. These are creatures and locations common to many fairy stories and legends, and allows us, the reader, the impression that Gwyn is now entering into a fairy story himself and has fully left the 'real world' behind. This imagery almost always associates the earthly things such as the black sow, animals, and the natural world (trees and rocks) with ancient knowledge and primordial fears, which the young hero must battle and expose to the light. With reference to our story, these primordial, natural things represent the past and the dark feelings of envy, hatred and jealousy which Gwyn must expose to allow them to a chance to heal.



# Chapter 25-26

## Chapter 25-26 Summary

In Chapters Twenty Five and Twenty Six, the narrative continues its relentless pace to the end of the book, as the 'pattern' of the three ill-met friends transfers itself to the children fully.

This section begins with Chapter Twenty Five as Roger sees Clive and Margaret leave the valley to go and restock their supplies before the worst of the storm hits. Roger wonders what he is going to do, when he realizes that there is a way to get into the locked garage after all, rummaging for the toolbox. He sees Alison about to get washed and informs her that she could come and watch this, as he is about to take the door off of the garage if they cannot have the key.

He manages to undo the screws that are holding the door in place and finally finds out what is being kept inside. There is one old fashioned motorbike, in good condition apart from a set of missing break pads, and a large glass case containing a stuffed eagle owl. In front of the glass case Roger can see the tens of little paper owls that Alison had been making, and he thinks that Alison must have made her way into the garage without telling anyone, but then sees how each little paper owl has around it a swirl of patterning in the dust, as if it had been dancing. The only other footprints in the dust are his own. Just as Roger starts to get really scared, wondering how on earth the owls came here and placed the paper owls without anyone knowing, and what it would mean if she didn't, a shape looms over him. It is Nancy, carrying a poker.

Nancy the housekeeper destroys the glass case and attacks the stuffed bird, who explodes in feathers and sawdust, which suddenly fills the room and chokes Roger's throat. Him and Nancy throw themselves out into the rain, coughing and spluttering.

In the next chapter Gwyn has returned home, only to find his mother emerging coughing into the parlor and handing him two suitcases. She demands that he takes them and that they are going to ring for a taxi from the public pay phone. They walk through the storm as a crowd begins to gather, and Gwyn recognizes some of the sheep dogs as the same ones that stopped him from leaving before. The crowd try to tell Gwyn that getting a taxi in this weather would be a bad idea, but neither him nor his mother listen to them as they wait. When the taxi finally comes the taxi takes them out of town to find a tree blocking their path, and a pair of shepherd working at it, claiming that all the soil had washed out. When Nancy tells the taxi driver to try the high pass, again they find a tree laid across the road, but Nancy hops out and says that she has had enough, and that she will be walking out of the valley. Gwyn shouts after her, that he needs her, that he knows Huw is his real father but to no avail.



## Chapter 25-26 Analysis

The events of these two chapters are mostly concerned with the actions of Nancy, as we see, for her, the final straw being added.

Roger's discovery in the garage reveals that Nancy had kept the garage exactly the way it had been after her lover Bertram's death, almost like a shrine, and this fact has not allowed her to move on emotionally from his death but instead be forever tormented by her own past. We also see that, for Huw, Nancy and Bertram the manifestation of Blodeuwydd was again an owl, just as it is for Gwyn, Alison and Roger. As the appearance of the owl means that the owl has to hunt, this also infers a darker note that the author only hints that; that there will almost certainly be a death associated with this myth.

As Nancy is phoning the taxi, trying to leave the valley and eventually deciding to walk out, it is possible to finally empathize with her figure as a tragic one, as we can see that there is every chance that she will probably fail in her quest. It also becomes obvious that, for her character this valley has become a place of torment for her and only brings with it bad memories. When she attacks the stuffed owl in the glass cabinet she really does believe that she is 'finally' laying the spirit to rest.

Gwyn however, realizes that for himself he cannot leave (as he is one of the three involved in the trio at the heart of the myth), and thus decides to stay, as effectively he and his mother finally realize that their differences are irreconcilable.



# Chapter 27

## Chapter 27 Summary

In the final chapter of "The Owl Service", the events come to a crescendo as all of the adults except Huw have left the valley, leaving the trio of children on their own to re-enact the events of the myth.

Alison is confused as she sees Gwyn and Nancy walking past the driveway, heading for the pass when her stepbrother Roger suddenly emerges covered in feathers, and shouts that they have left. Alison wonders what she should do, whether she go to speak to them and races out, only to find Huw Halfbacon. He says that he has something to give her, a present from Gwyn and hands her the slate disc with the face carved on it.

Back in the house, Roger has finished changing and getting washed when he sees Huw entering house, holding the unconscious form of his stepsister. He races to help, seeing that she has deep red scratches on her face, but that they are beneath the skin as if she was clawed from the inside out and not the other way around. Roger shouts angrily what is going on, and where he can find a doctor but Huw tells him angrily to find Gwyn and bring him here.

Roger ignores Huw, instead running to the shop to try and use the telephone but, finding it out of order he asks the shopkeeper where the doctor is. Instead, the shop keeper merely says that he should find Gwyn, who will be up at the house. Roger is confused, but finds Gwyn sitting on the gate to the house and asks him to come and help Alison, quickly, because something has happened to her.

As they both enter the room, the storm follows them and a skylight breaks above the prone form of Alison as feathers and leaves fill the room, swirling around the trio. Both Gwyn and Roger shout that they don't know what to do, and all Huw can recommend is that they try to comfort her, remind her to be flowers, and not owls.

As the scratches continue and Alison moans, Gwyn finds that he cannot comfort Alison, who has broken his heart and Roger is distraught. In the end it is Roger who takes Alison's hand and calms her, telling her that she is really flowers, that the designs on the plates were of flowers and not of owls, and that flowers were all that she ever wanted. Suddenly, the air changes and the mood lifts as, at the end of the story Alison is saved and the room is inexplicably filled with petals.

## Chapter 27 Analysis

In the final chapter we see the events turn mysterious as they reach their resolution, but with a surprising twist at the end.



We expect Gwyn to become the 'hero' of the story, as a lion's share of the narrative has concerned him and his feelings. However, this cannot be so, as Huw himself stated that the ancient Lleu Llaw of the myth was hard, angry man and in this role Gwyn is the same. Gwyn finds it impossible to forgive Alison or to comfort her, and he cannot get over his anger at Roger and so is paralyzed in his own resentment. For Roger on the other hand, who exemplifies Gronw who stole Blodeuwydd away, his only crime was that of loving Blodeuwydd, and didn't want her to change into anything, and so in this way Roger is the only one who finds that his anger for Gwyn does not stop him from trying to help his step sister. As he comforts her and reminds her that the plate design could indeed have been flowers and not owls, the energy is released and the spirit of Blodeuwydd is allowed to return to nature.



# Characters

## Gwyn

Gwyn is a young adolescent who grew up near Aberystwyth, in the country of Wales in the United Kingdom. He is the son of the Nanny who looks after the little house in the valley where Alison, Roger and their parents come to stay for a summer holiday, and, as such is brought along to help out his mother with the chores and upkeep of the house.

Gwyn is about fifteen years old and is a confident, practical young lad who is necessarily self-reliant (having grown up not knowing his father and having to adapt himself to new surroundings of rural village life and the city life). He is generally quick witted and equally as quick tempered, but reserves most of his frustrated anger for his mother and the strict way in which she parents him.

During the course of the novel the character of Gwyn gradually starts to become confused as his role seems to blur with other, far more ancient characters (that of Lleu Llaw Gruffyd, a legendary hero from the Mabinogion). The start of this blurring begins when Gwyn finds the Owl Service dinner plates and, around him and the other children ghostly events start to take place as the vengeful spirit of Blodeuwedd seeks to come back and take over their lives, re-enacting the tragedy that caused her own transformation and death.

Gwyn is a somewhat troubled youth, who has found it difficult to belong to any particular group or identity because of not knowing whom his father is, his stern mother and their moving from the village to the town. As he is only just coming of age, Gwyn can hardly understand what is happening to him as he wrestles with the tragedies of the past (his mother's failed marriage), and his own awkward feelings over being left abandoned and spurned by those around him. This feeling of rejection makes him an outsider figure in the story, who longs for acceptance and friendship (which he thinks he finds in the two young English children of Robert and Alison). However, as the magical elements in the story starts to unfurl Gwyn is forced to confront his own feelings of being let down or they will be used against him by the spirit of Blodeuwedd.

## Roger

Roger is the child of Clive and his own, divorced mother who was famously unfaithful and broke their family's heart when they divorced, a fact that Roger still has trouble coming to terms with. Roger is the stepbrother of Alison, although they are both around the same age; as his father Clive remarried Alison's mother Margaret.

Roger comes across in the book as a likeable, independent young boy, but one who has not really challenged his accepted views of the world yet. In this way he makes careless remarks about the Huw, Nancy, and the other Welsh characters in the story. During the course of events Roger has to learn to accept the friendship of Gwyn and to overcome



his own prejudices and question his experience of the world, if he is to help his stepsister Alison. During the first part of the story Roger seems to spend his time ignoring the signs that are happening around him, as he expresses the stereotypically middle-class views of his father Clive towards Gwyn and the Welsh. Roger doesn't really understand how privileged he is, and it is only when Alison's very existence is threatened later on in the book that he turns to Gwyn and Huw for help and finally overcomes his ignorance, unthinking discrimination and stubbornness.

In this book, we can say that Roger starts to adopt one corner of the triangle that is formed by Gwyn, Roger and Alison and, in a sense strives against Gwyn for 'ownership' of Alison (whom he perceives as 'belonging' to their English family and as such Gwyn shouldn't interfere).

## Alison

Alison is the child of Margaret, who later married Roger's father Clive (her own dad having died years previously). She is intelligent and independent, if a little strong willed in her outlook. Of all the characters in "The Owl Service", Alison appears to be one of the most mature as her inquisitive mind seeks to find answers to the events that are happening to her and her compatriots through the course of the narrative. Her inquisitiveness however, is offset by her stubbornness as she continues to unwittingly invoke the spirit of Blodeuwedd without really realizing what she is doing.

At the start of the story it is Alison who discovers the design of the owl within the dinner plates, and starts to create the paper owls which magically begins to 'free' the legend and the spirit of Blodeuwedd. The events that then take place seem to center around the young girl Alison as she starts to assume the role of Blodeuwedd and is almost possessed by the spirit at the end of the book.

Alison stands at the apex of the triangle that is made up of herself, and the two boys Roger and Gwyn, both of whom feel protective towards her (and on the part of Gwyn, some affection). This triangle is exploited by the spirit of the myth which is manifesting in the valley, and turns into a destructive cycle as Alison becomes the center of the other boy's arguments and attentions.

## Clive

Clive is the father of Roger, who has remarried Alison's mother Margaret only recently after his previous wife (and Roger's mother) left him after having a scandalous affair (Margaret refers to her as 'the Belle of Birmingham' - a scandal which was in the newspapers of that English city).

Clive is an ex RAF officer who is now in business, and is seemingly oblivious to the inner feelings of his children, but tries in his distracted way to give them a good holiday. He presents in his character an almost ignorant air as he pays no heed to the tensions that his children are going through, and answers any such problems with the giving of



gifts. The ease of which he gives Nancy extra money after each time that she is upset shows that Clive is used to having money, and is comfortable using it to plaster over any problems that he might face. He is also the character who shows traces of Prejudice and Discrimination in the casual way that he disregards and the off handed comments about Gwyn and Huw, although we can see that these reactions are more a result of his own upbringing and social circles than then are of any vindictive or malicious nature.

## Huw Halfbacon

Huw Halfbacon, otherwise known as Huw the Flitch, is the grounds keeper who comes with the ownership of the cottage who seems to spend most of his time raking the gravel and keeping an eye on the land around him.

As the story progresses his character becomes more strange as he tries to infer and imply things to the children, but is seemingly unable to talk in anything but cryptic riddles. We discover that he himself is under the spell of the Valley, and is a descendant of the wizard Gwydion and the hero Llew Llaw Gruffydds of the Mabinogion; as such he is quite a respected figure in the Valley and the surroundings and regarded as a wise figure.

The enigma of Huw Halfbacon starts to unravel as we discover that he knows Nancy Gwyn's mother and that he is implicated in the death of Bertram (as a mischievous prank rather than a wilful act) as he, Nancy and Bertram were the previous characters to re-enact the ongoing myth of Blodeuwydd before Gwyn, Alison and Roger. We discover at the end of the book that Huw is probably Gwyn's father, which is why Nancy won't let Gwyn speak to him and hates him with a passion.

The character of Huw in general takes on the role of the wise old sage, the elder and the wizard from folk tales for the story of the Owl Service; it is only by Gwyn and Alison finally puzzling out Huw's strange pronouncements and heeding his warnings that they finally are able to confront the vengeful side to the Myth that is taking over their lives.

## Nancy

Nancy is mother to the boy Gwyn, and one time engaged to Margaret's distant cousin Bertram (who owned the cottage in the valley before he died). This last fact is unknown to the characters through most of the book however, as Nancy and Gwyn come to look after the cottage for the English family and act as cooks, cleaners and house servants.

Nancy at first was resistant to the idea of ever going back to the cottage where she lost one of her loves, but the large amount of money promised to her and the economic poverty that exists in Wales forced her to accept the job. Whilst she is there she seems angry and upset most of the time, and proceeds to take this resentment out on her son most of the time (perhaps because his father was Huw Halfbacon).





Nancy is a contentious and difficult figure in the narrative, and a force that Gwyn has to find a way to navigate and to be reconciled with if he is to reach a resolution by the end of the story. The way that this happens (with Nancy finally making good on her promises and walking out of the valley on her own) comes as a shocking surprise with a twist towards the end of the book.

## Bertram

The mysterious figure of Bertram is long dead by the time that the events in "The Owl Service" takes place, but the importance of his actions later becomes relevant to the events in the story as he is the shade that haunts the memories of one set of characters; Nancy and Huw.

Bertram was one of the owners of the cottage who fell in love with Nancy and to whom he was secretly engaged to marry. This led to a violent spiral of events between Bertram and Huw as the trio fell under the spell of the previous myth of Blodeuwydd and the myth alive in the valley. It is Bertram who tried to imprison the spirit of the flower maiden previously, who died in a motorbike accident many years ago. Bertram was a distant relation of Margaret (Alison's mother) and so, when he died the house fell into the possession of her side of the family until, to avoid death duties it was passed into the name of Alison.

The implicit threat here is, that if the trio of children cannot find a way to resolve and put an end to the myth (to release Blodeuwydd finally from her captivity to return to the flowers), then they too could share the same fate as Bertram, Huw and Nancy.



## Objects/Places

### The Owl Service

The Owl Service is a set of dinner plates that Gwyn finds stacked in the loft above Alison's room. At first they appear to be harmless, a pretty collection of plates each bearing a floral owl design which the girl Alison starts to trace on paper, realizing that she can twist the designs into paper owls. As soon as she does so, however, the paper owls disappear and the plates lose all of their design and color.

Later in the story it emerges that the plates were created by one of Huw's relatives in the potteries near Stoke-on-Trent (in England, UK) in an attempt to imprison the magic of Blodeuwydd. As Alison releases the owls from each plate, she starts to release the 'pattern' of the myth into their valley and their lives.

### The Stone of Gronw

The Stone of Gronw (an actual object in North Wales), is a large piece of natural slate stone with a neat circular hole travelling all of the way through. It is told that this stone was where the hero Gronw was killed by Lleu Llaw Gruffydds, for stealing his wife made of flowers, the maiden Blodeuwydd.

During the course of the story, the stone is discovered by Roger by the river the runs at the bottom of their land, and he espies that though the hole he can see the perspective perfectly frames the ridgeline on the hill beyond. Little does he know that what he is seeing is the spot where Lleu threw the spear that pierced the stone and pierced Gronw.

### The Painting of Blodeuwedd

The mural painting of Blodeuwydd materializes in the billiard room, where one wall in the whole house has been pebble-dashed and the layer starts to flake off, revealing the picture painted on the wooden board below. The painting depicts a beautiful maiden with blonde hair covered in flowers, but each flower has claws instead of petals.

Gwyn and Roger are amazed that someone would hide this work of art, and Huw Halfbacon alludes to his uncle and grandfather who may have painted and covered the picture in an attempt to trap the spirit of the flower maiden, just as they about to tell the parents of the house of their discovery, the painting flakes off the wall however.

### The Mabinogian

The Mabinogion is a collection of folk tales that form one of the oldest cycles of mythology in the British Isles, modeled closely on Irish cultural mythology (and dating



back to a time when there was more of a distinct cultural identity between the 'Celtic' tribes of Wales, Ireland and Scotland.

The Mabinogian itself contains many legends of hero's and their deeds, and one of them is the legend of Blodeuwydd the flower maiden who was made for the hero of the saga Lleu, by the wizard Gwydion. In the book "The Owl Service", Gwyn knows some of these tales off by heart, but it is not until Alison borrows a book from him which he was told to learn for school that he realizes the full importance of these old myths.

## **Aberystwyth**

Aberystwyth is a fairly large coastal town halfway down the Welsh Coast, on the border of the County of Ceredigion. It is here that Gwyn went to school for many years, and where he lived before being brought to the cottage in the valley by his mother Nancy to help her keep house for the English family of Roger and Alison.

## **The Valley**

The exact location is not exactly specified and probably kept deliberately vague by the author. The secluded valley lies a little way out from the town of Aberystwyth and used to belong to an Englishman called Bertram and his family. It has high, steep mountainous hills all around upon which peat used to be cut and sheep grazed, and down in its center is built the holiday cottage where Roger, Alison, Clive and Margaret go to spend their summer's. It contains a little river, a choked-up marshy wood and the Stone of Gronw on the banks of the river.

Most of the events of the story concentrate themselves around the events that happen in the Valley, until the Valley itself seems to have a character and a force living within it which can be best described as the power of the Blodeuwydd Myth (which replays itself again and again through successive generations).



# Themes

## Prejudice & Discrimination

The themes of Prejudice & Discrimination play throughout the book, as the English and Welsh character's interact and their different cultural backgrounds are thrown into contrast against each other.

Set in Wales, a region with a strong national identity and a rich cultural identity, the English family of Clive, Margaret, Roger and Alison find it difficult to lose their wealthy class distinction when they deal with the Welsh family and retainers that are looking after their house, notably Nancy the house cook and cleaner, her son Gwyn and the grounds keeper Huw Halfbacon. It becomes apparent that Clive and Margaret are used to 'life being easy' for them as they come from an upper-middle class household, which expects to have hired help in the form of cleaners and workers that do all of the odd jobs for them. This attitude carries over to how they deal with the staff in their Welsh cottage, not realizing that these 'staff' actually know much more about the valley (and that Nancy herself had a claim to the house in her own when she was about to be married to one of the previous owners and Margaret's cousin Bertram.

The Welsh characters on the other hand appear resentful of the money and privilege of the English family, and find their attitudes and easy assumption of power difficult to bear. They 'close ranks' and take on an obviously close-lipped approach to fool the English family, leaving them in the dark about their feelings and the real history of the Valley and the cottage.

These patterns of Discrimination begin to play out, repeated in the actions of the young adults, notably Roger and Gwyn but occasionally Alison as well as sparks begin to fly between the two boys. It becomes clear that the discrimination is casual and almost automatic on the behalf of Roger and Clive, who do not even seem to be aware of what they are doing; and thus can be blamed for ignorance rather than spite. Underneath this prejudice and discrimination too there seems to be a deeper resentment from the character's about their own lives; Gwyn feels resentful over the fact that his mother is trying to take him out of school to work in the Co-op when he wants to go on studying and maybe even attend University. Roger feels that Gwyn is getting in the way of his family and messing up his friendship with his sister, and these resentments are surfacing in the form of prejudice as more strain is placed upon the family.

## The Power of Myth

Another strong theme in the book "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner is the Power of Myth (a theme that he comes back to in his other works). In this book, the author uses the idea of the Power of Myth to explore how certain tales, legends and fairy stories hold truths about being human, and can re-enact themselves in our current lives without



us knowing about it. This is based upon the idea that the old myths and legends were actually ways of teaching older cultures about values and emotional facts before organized religion.

Choosing as his setting the landscape and country of Wales, a country steeped in old legends, the author has the advantage that myths are very much 'alive' in the landscape. Place names, towns and villages can more often than not be found to reference a myth, hero, local legend or saint: and we can see that this as a way for the country to keep alive its folk identity.

Using this idea, the author has placed his characters into that 'mythic landscape' and allows them to interact with the stories that are 'embodied' in the landscape itself (the story of Blodeuwydd) to tell a story about human relationships, feeling trapped, and trying to turn someone into something that they do not want to be.

The use of Myths here can be seen and are described by Gwyn as 'patterns' that emerge and re-emerge in the Valley. These patterns are symbolically represented in the patterns on the Owl Service and the mural painting of the flower maiden, but when they are 'released' unwittingly by Alison they become patterns of behavior between Alison, Gwyn and Roger. For the purposes of this story, the author reveals that these patterns have been repeated within this valley again and again in others' lives (notably between Huw, Nancy and Bertram).

## Coming of Age

Coming of Age, and all the difficulties and responsibilities that implies, is a natural theme for the tale of the three children Gwyn, Alison and Roger in "The Owl Service". A classic young adult's/children's story, "The Owl Service" follows the adventures of one pivotal summer for the three children (each around fifteen years old, during their adolescence), during which they discover facts about themselves, their feelings and their relationships with each other.

At the start of the book and running through all of the younger characters is immaturity or some childishness. Gwyn is impetuous and prone to sudden bouts of anger whilst Roger retreats into the beliefs and prejudices of his father Clive. For Alison, she is one of the most stubborn, afraid to upset her mother and tries to hide what is happening to her from the rest of the family. All of these qualities have to change by the end of the book if the youthful characters are to achieve a certain resolution to the tensions implied within the book. During the narrative Gwyn must find a way to overcome his emotions and be rational about the danger that they are facing, learning to negotiate and compromise with Alison and Roger, whilst for the other boy, Roger must learn to step out from under his father's shadow and forgive his own past, his absentee natural mother. A personal journey is implied for Alison too, as she learns to trust Gwyn and defies her mother to do so.

A facet of this Coming of Age theme is the ability to accept responsibility and the consequences of your actions, and also the ability to negotiate a difficult situation without losing one's integrity. This eventually happens as Roger and Gwyn are forced at the very end to work together to overcome their problems, and setting aside their differences and their prejudices.

# Style

## Point of View

The narrative Point of View of "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner is that of the third person personal, meaning that no one character holds the complete command over the text, and the events are narrated from 'outside' of the characters and referring to their characters as if the reader were a viewer of the entire series of events. Third person personal allows the author to use emotions and motivations, as it refers to the character's in each scene's feelings in a commanding, narrative fashion 'Gwyn felt this' and 'Alison then realized that...' However there lacks a depth of emotion and perspective about each character, and we can assume that this is deliberate on the part of the writer.

The majority of the Point of View centers around Gwyn, and occasionally shifts to Roger and Alison, although Alison remains the character which events happen to, giving us the impression that she can become an object of the plot rather than an active participant of the story. This is deliberate (the focusing of the narrative point of view on the male character's) and is intended to heighten the threat and the danger around the young girl.

The over all lack of an in depth characterization captures the feeling of the oppressive, dictatorial nature of the valley that is impressing its own myth upon the characters. In this way we see less and less of the inner motivations of the three young characters and more of their surface reactions to the events of the book as the Myth attempts to take over their lives. Of the adult character's, their own personal feelings are almost never mentioned and so Clive, Nancy and Huw become the immovable backdrop which the children shuttle around. Of the character Margaret (Alison's mother) nothing is ever seen, she is only talked about. This gives her a curiously absent feel, and we can discern that a lot of the energy spent by the family is maintaining her sense of well being and not allowing her to become upset. All of these factors force the action onto the children, and gives the reader the sense that the tension is mounting throughout the story as these three are the only ones who can really see what is going on.

During the narrative, the story is revealed by mysteries being uncovered and clues exposed by the three children in a linear fashion, but from different children. So, in one chapter we may see Gwyn discover the plates, in the next Alison reveals that the designs have vanished from the plates and in still another we find Roger discovering that one wall in the house is pebble-dashed to conceal something. This use of the different character's point's of view keeps them in partly in the dark about the bigger picture of the return of the spirit of Blodeuwydd, and forces them to act together.



## Setting

The Setting for almost the entire story is that of a secluded valley in the country of Wales, a part of the United Kingdom. This valley contains the cottage belonging to Alison (put in her name after the death of Bertram, a distant relative), a river winding through their property, a choked up marshy wood and the old peat roads that lead to the top of the hill.

This singular setting gives the novel an oppressive, constrained air as quite a few characters are contained within a small space and have little do spend their time apart from with each other. This helps the theme of the Power of Myth, and that of Coming of Age as the characters are forced to work out their differences in order to counteract the malign influence of the spirit of Blodeuwydd.

The settings mood is characterized by the use of heavy and dark words such as the boggy marsh, grey and dark hills and the black line of the mountainous hills. These frame the emotions of the characters, almost giving the whole book a choked feeling.

What starts as a rural idyl soon takes on greater levels of meaning as the theme of the Power of Myth really comes to the fore through the middle chapter of the book, as the locations described have fantastical names 'The Stone of Gronw' or the 'Bryn of Lleu' (Bryn meaning 'hill'). In this way the setting changes from that of a holiday get away to an much older setting of archetypal myth (what is meant by the term; a 'mythic landscape') as the story develops, giving all of the characters and their actions much greater importance and poignancy.

## Language and Meaning

There are a few interesting features of the language and the choice of words used in "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner. One important feature is the use of the Welsh language in place names and individual names. Other interesting features is the style of the language (that of a straightforward, minimal use of words), and the seventies nomenclature.

As the story is set in Wales, a lot of the character's names are Welsh in origin (Huw, Gwyn, Blodeuwydd, Gronw) whilst the English character's are typically 'old fashioned' English names (Roger, Clive, Bertram and Margaret). The use of actual Welsh names and the referencing of the ancient Welsh legends from the Mabinogion with its tales of Gwydion the wizard and the hero Lleu Llaw Gruffydds serves to enhance the idea of an ancient landscape and culture that few really understand. This 'fully formed' series of myths and places, with an importance understood by the inhabitants but not by the incomers creates the sense that the characters are entering into another tale which they may eventually become the victims of, if they are not careful.

The Language used by each member of the cast of the book varies interestingly, as the author illustrates the theme of Prejudice and Discrimination. Clive and Roger particularly





use an upper-class type of language as they speak ("Good Show..." and "That's a bit rum, isn't it...?") showing the uses of phrases which are largely out of fashion for anyone save a small elite group of society. Their language is profoundly different than that of the Welsh character's in the novel, as exemplified by Nancy and Huw who speak in clipped colloquial tones (as a lot of Welsh people speak two languages, Welsh and English). The character of Gwyn in particular finds this dissonance hard to deal with as he is trying to succeed academically whilst his mother Nancy wants him to remain distinctly working class, and his education at odds with his mother's expectations (as shown in their arguments together).

The Language itself becomes an important theme for the book, mostly highlighting the different in the social status between the English character's, Gwyn and the Welsh character's. Over all, the choice of words for each character and the book entire is that of a simple, straightforward and direct use of words without long explanations or adjectives. This allows the book to be presented as a 'children's book' and the meanings understood fairly clearly and immediately.

An interesting side note however worthy of inclusion here is the use of seventies British nomenclature which has largely gone out of fashion nowadays (and reflects the times that the book was written, and the antagonisms between the two cultures at the time).

## Structure

The structure of the book is that of twenty seven fairly short chapters (ten to thirty pages long), each focused around a particular event that happens that continues the story. Chapter progression is linear in nature for the most part with a couple of notable exceptions (when Alison takes some pictures of the hill and finds Gwyn standing on the hill, and we later hear about Gwyn's experiences of that moment after the fact). The overall linear progression means that the book progresses day by day, hour by hour towards its conclusion, giving the sense of the immediacy and threat of time running out for the characters.

Internal to the chapters, the structure starts with the most significant event, and is not necessarily the first hour of the day, but will relate a few interesting events that involve the mystery of Blodeuwydd before moving on to the next chapter.

In a couple of chapter's the action split over the two segments, the first ending from one perspective and then being taken up by another. This mini 'cliffhanger' as it is called, encourages the flow of the story to progress with urgency and speed, encouraging the reader to keep on reading the events as they unfold.

On the whole, *The Owl Service* by Alan Garner is a fairly straightforward book to read, smoothly moving from one chapter to the next to unfold the plot, with a gradual build up tension that reaches a fever pitch by the end of the story.

## Quotes

"In the darkest corner of the loft a plank lay over the joists, and on it was a whole dinner service: squat towers of plates, a mound of dishes, and all covered in grime, straw, droppings and blackened pieces of birds nests." Chapter 1, page 11.

"A fiver cures most things." Clive, Chapter 3, page 28.

"You Welsh are all the same," said Roger. "Sxcratch one and they all bleed." Roger being disparaging about the Welsh, Chapter 5, page 43.

"Who'se going to rent to us when stuffed shirts from Birmingham pay eight quid a week so they can swank about their cottage in Wales?" Gwyn, Chapter 9, page 68.

"I feel like Im going to burst, and if I trace the pattern it goes into that. I'd nearly finished." Alison, Chapter 11, page 91.

"Oh, their name is on the books of the law, but I own the ground, the mountain, the valley: I own the song of the cuckoo, the brambles, the berries; the dark cave is mine!" Huw, Chapter 12, page 101.

"I'm as useless as one of those girls in fashion photographs - just stuck in a field of wheat, or a puddle, or on a mountain, and they look gorgeous but they dont belong where they are. I'm like that. I don't belong." Alison, Chapter 13, page 104.

"I think this valley is really a kind of reservoir... I think the power is always there and always will be. It builds up and up until it has to be let loose - like filling and emptying a dam. And it works through people." Gwyn talking to Alison, Chapter 17, page 139.

"They're mad, every one of them," Said Roger. "The way they smile and nod their heads, and they could be saying anything. You never know where you are with them." Roger, Chapter 18, page 149.

"You and Mummy! You go on till I don't know who I am, what I'm doing. Of course I see! Now. But afterwards she starts, and what she says is right, then." Alison, Chapter 20, page 167.

"She is here, the lady, and you have made her owls: she will go hunting. But don't let her destroy. She will be the worse for my fault, and my uncles fault and my grandfather's fault, who tried to stop what can't be stopped." Huw, Chapter 24, page 189.

"That's better. There now: yes: yes: of course they're flowers. What made you think those plates could be anything else? Why didn't you cut thye pattern into flowers right at the start, you silly girl?" Roger talking to Alison, Chapter 27, page 220.



## Topics for Discussion

Describe the character of Gwyn. What are his main strengths and weaknesses in the novel "The Owl Service" by Alan Garner?

How does the author use the Power of Myth to examine the differences and difficult relationships between Gwyn, Roger and Alison?

What objects does Gwyn pull out of the tree at the top of the gulley towards the end of the book? What do they mean?

Why is Nancy so angry and resentful at working in the valley?

What Prejudice and Discrimination does the English character's of Clive and Roger show to the Welsh characters in the novel of "The Owl Service"? Give at least three examples and explain why they might be so offensive.

Give a brief account of the Myth of Blodeuwydd from the Welsh Mabinogion, as you understand it from the novel of "The Owl Service".

Why was Gwyn unable to comfort Alison right at the end of the novel, and help the 'owl pattern' become the 'flower pattern'?

What events stop Gwyn from leaving the valley?