

Reading in the Dark Study Guide

Reading in the Dark by Seamus Deane

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Plot Summary

Reading in the Dark is the personal account of the boy narrator's childhood and youth in 1940s and 1950s Northern Ireland. The boy's Catholic family has associations with the Irish Liberation Army (IRA) and through his telling of the family's story we learn how politics and wider events can have deeply wounding effects on individuals and their personal relationships.

The storyline centers on the mystery surrounding the boy's Uncle Eddie, his father's brother, who reputedly escaped from Northern Ireland after being discovered as an IRA informer, following the famous shoot-out between the police and the IRA at a local distillery in 1922. Over time, the boy discovers that his uncle was actually executed as an informer by his own people; the boy's grandfather-his mother's father-ordered the murder. It later emerges that Eddie was innocent and that the real informer was a man called Tony McIlhenny. McIlhenny had married the boy's Aunt Katie but had disappeared shortly after, never to be seen again. The boy discovers that his mother had had a relationship with McIlhenny before he married her sister and that it was his mother that tipped McIlhenny off, allowing him to escape the country. Later she met and married the boy's father and only then realized the pain that had been caused to him by his brother's death; she does not learn until much later that it was her own father who was responsible.

The mystery of what happened to Eddie and the events surrounding it gradually unfold throughout the novel, with various characters revealing pieces of information to the boy until he is aware of the whole story.

Much of the information about Eddie and McIlhenny was kept secret over the years and the boy never fully understands whether his father ever suspected or knew about his wife's earlier relationship with McIlhenny. A major theme running through the novel concerns the choices that individuals make about whether to keep secrets or to share the information and the impact that these choices have on themselves and other people. Through the choices that they have made, the boy observes how his own family members effectively destroy their own lives and the pain they have to live with.

The events of the novel and the actions of the main characters are strongly influenced not only by the very strict religious beliefs that dominated so many aspects of life in Northern Ireland at that time, but also by the co-existence of strong traditional beliefs about the supernatural. The boy is told many stories of people in his own community being haunted by evil spirits and demons and even these stories are intertwined with his family history and with events in his own day-to-day life.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story begins on the stairs of the boy's home in February 1945. His mother warns him not to cross the window at the turn of the stairs, as she senses a ghost of somebody that is unhappy. The young narrator tells of the fierce superstitions that were held in his community at that time. For example, it was believed that people with green eyes were really fairies, looking for a human child to take away. At the same time there were very strong religious beliefs about the afterlife and the importance of the last rites to ensure that a dying person did not go to hell.

We learn in the first chapter that the boy is the third eldest of a family of seven and he is aged around five or six when the novel opens in 1945. One of his earliest memories is of being taken by his older sister and brother to the circus to see Bamboozelem, a magician who did a disappearing act. While the other children laughed and clapped, the boy was distressed and worried about whether the magician was all right.

The next section of Chapter 1 moves on to 1947, when the boy introduces us to a key theme of the novel, the disappearance in 1922 of his Uncle Eddie, as told by his mother's brothers as they chat in the kitchen of the family house. These uncles often talk of the famous shoot-out at a distillery between the IRA and the police, after which Eddie had mysteriously disappeared and never been seen again. The boy's father always refused to talk of the incident or shed light on the mystery.

In June 1948 the boy witnesses an accident in which a boy called Rory Hannaway was killed by a reversing lorry. The boy feels sympathy for the police who attend the accident, but is uncomfortable with this feeling, as he has been taught to hate the Protestant police. Around this time, the boy's five-year-old sister, Una, contracts meningitis and dies. Some weeks after Una's death, the boy is asked by his mother to visit her grave and put wild flowers on it. As he leaves the graveside, he sees a vision of Una in front of him for an instant and is fearful. At home, his mother is still inconsolable in her grief for Una and is often heard crying and wailing.

The next section is the one from which the novel takes its title, *Reading in the Dark*. The boy tells us that the first book he ever read was a novel called *The Shan Van Vocht*, meaning *The Poor Old Woman*, a traditional name for Ireland. The book told of the rebellion of 1798, the subject of most of the songs that the Catholics sang at their traditional August bonfires on the Feast of the Assumption. Reading this book in bed at night, he idolizes the heroine of the story, Ann, whom he feels is too good for the hero, Robert. His imagination runs wild as he thinks about the story and dreams of being with Ann.

At school in December 1948, Brother Regan tells a story of how a local man was arrested in 1921 and charged with the murder of a policeman, Billy Mahon, who was



pushed over Craigavon Bridge and drowned. A local man was arrested two days later, but the only evidence the police had was that he had been a friend of Neil McLaughlin, another local man who had been murdered by policemen a month previously. Before McLaughlin died, he had apparently whispered the name of his killer to the man that had been arrested and who was heard to swear that he would get revenge for his friend's death. However, on the night of the policeman's murder, this man had witnesses to prove that he was not even in the area and the case was thrown out.

Brother Regan tells the boys that this man had later told another priest that he had not been to confession in twenty years, as there was something on his conscience that no penance could relieve. He told the priest that he did kill the policeman and was not sorry for doing so. Brother Regan tells this story to the boys as a lesson to teach them not to become involved in violence, as so much evil had been created from it and it was only God that should judge people and decide their fate. After the talk, friends tell the boy that it was his own grandfather that was arrested by the police for killing the policeman.

In 1949 the police search the family's house for a gun that the boy had found in the wardrobe of his sisters' bedroom. He had smuggled it out to show some friends, despite having been warned by his parents never to mention the gun, which was a gift to his father from a German sailor. Having been told about the gun by an informer, the police ransack the house and interrogate and brutally beat the boy, his brother Liam and their father. The boy has nightmares about this incident for a long time afterwards.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The sections of this chapter are headed separately and introduce to the reader the characteristics of the society in which the boy narrator lives, as well as some specific themes around which the novel is based. Chapter 1 covers the period from 1945 to 1949, when the boy is aged from around five to nine and already he is aware of incidents in his family history that are surrounded by mystery. They have clearly had a major impact on the family, notably the disappearance of Uncle Eddie, his father's brother.

It is also made clear early on that the family has IRA connections and that they live in the thick of a society where violence and conflict between Protestants and Catholics prevails. The story of Hannaway being run over by a lorry in 1948 and the confused feelings that this incident arouses in the boy demonstrate the hatred in his community for the Protestant police. He is also made aware of his own family's involvement in the conflict by the story that his grandfather killed of a policeman. The constant threat and actual incidents of violence in the boy's own life, are graphically portrayed by the brutal beating he and his father and brother receive following the search for the gun.

The boy belongs to a family of seven children, with both older and younger siblings and a significant number of extended family members, many of which have significance to the storyline. It is notable that the reader never learns the narrator's first name, possibly



because the author does not wish him to be the focus of the story in his own right, but a conduit through which the story of others can be told.

The importance of both religion and non-Christian superstitions, often intertwined, in Northern Ireland at the time are central to the story from the outset. The opening of Chapter 1, when the boy's mother warns him of a troubled spirit on their staircase, foreshadows many other incidents and stories throughout the novel in which living people are affected by their supernatural beliefs. The opening scene also spookily foreshadows the closing scene of the novel, in which the boy stands on the same stairs on the eve of his father's funeral; his father had been troubled and in sadness throughout his life.

The theme of disappearance is also introduced, both with the mention of Eddie and also the boy's visit to the circus to see the disappearing magician act. The act distresses the boy, perhaps because to him the magician is symbolic of his uncle, whose disappearance he already senses is a source of unhappiness in the family. We also learn by his reaction that he is a sensitive boy who thinks about and questions things rather than just accepting them at face value. This curiosity leads to his own entanglement in the family story later on, as his questioning exacerbates his parents' dilemmas and unhappiness.

The themes of death and sadness are also present from the first chapter. The boy's mother's acute grief over the death of Una foreshadows her later spells of crying and depression, giving rise to the suspicion that Una's death may have given her an outlet for the unhappiness which had already been within her for many years.

Other key themes which appear include: fire and its importance in the history and traditions of Ireland and its separate communities; and female symbolism, with Ireland itself being portrayed as a woman in the novel that the boy reads. His first stirrings of sexual excitement emerge as he fantasizes about the woman in the book.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter opens in 1949, with the narrator telling of the significance of bonfires in the traditional celebrations of both Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and of his excitement at seeing them. He goes on to describe the ruins of the distillery where his uncle Eddie had fought in the shoot-out against the police and what he has heard about it. He mentions how the crowd in the streets was shouting rebel songs and the police fired to scatter it, while the IRA gunmen fired single shots from the distillery rooftop and windows in a final protest against the founding of the new state of Northern Ireland. The distillery then exploded and burst into flames and the buildings had been left as ruins ever since.

In the next section the boy listens to his uncles chatting over their card game about how fire had been known to destroy cities and of the stories they had heard about how the whiskey was running along the gutters after the distillery fires, with blue flames leaping above it. They talk of Tony McIlhenny, Aunt Kate's husband who had left her and gone to America and of Uncle Eddie, who was also believed to have gone to America.

In October 1949, Aunt Ena, one of the boy's father's sisters, is taken ill and dies. At the funeral he listens to some relations talking in strange accents, who comment on the similarity in looks between his Aunt Bernadette and Uncle Eddie. The boy is fascinated by the mystery of Uncle Eddie and intrigued to have some idea of what he looked like. He questions his mother but she is clearly reluctant to talk about Eddie. The boy comments on how broken his father's family is.

While helping his father to wash the dishes one day, the boy tells him how he would love to go to Donegal more often, to visit their family home. His father tells him that after his parents died suddenly from fever, he came home from the funeral to find that the relatives had already taken much of the furniture and possessions and closed up the house. They divided up the children between them. His sisters were sent to live with their mother's sister and her husband in Donegal; Eddie went away and was never seen again, although he had apparently enlisted in the IRA. That was when the boy's father had been left in charge of the family at twelve years old and had to find work. He eventually obtained the job he still has, as an electrician at the naval base. Over time, relatives took all of their family possessions and he discovered that his sisters Bernadette and Ena were sleeping in a shack beside the henhouse at the farm where they were living. That was when he decided never to have anything to do with his relatives again.

The boy recalls a holiday the family made to Bunrana in 1950. His father had taken him and his brother Liam walking near the family farmhouse where the feud had started, saying that he wanted to show them something. He told them to watch a strip of green grass known as the Field of the Disappeared. He showed them how the birds flying



above it disappeared from sight as they flew over the field. Their father related the local belief that the souls of all those from the area who had disappeared or who had not had a Christian burial gathered there at Christmas and other festivals, to cry like birds and look down on the fields where they had been born. Any human entering the field would suffer the same fate.

In the next section, still set in 1950, we learn about Grianan, an ancient stone ring and parapet, with a secret passage leading from the inside wall, at the end of which is a wishing-chair of slabbed stone. People believe that the bodies of the legendary ancient warriors of Fianna lay below it. The warriors wait for a person to make a wish that will rouse them from their thousand-year sleep to drive out the English forever, as in the prophecy of St Columcille. The boy and his friends spend time during their summer holidays playing at Grianan and he recalls once being trapped by his friends in the pitch-black secret passage when he went to sit on the wishing chair.

We learn of Aunt Katie, his mother's sister, who had married young and had one daughter, Maeve, already in her twenties. Katie's husband, Tony McIlhenny, had disappeared for good when Katie was pregnant and had apparently gone to America. The boy is fond of Aunt Katie, who often tells stories to him and his brothers and sisters. One day she tells the story of a young woman called Brigid McLaughlin, who was hired to look after two orphans in southern Donegal. The orphans were a boy called Francis, aged seven and a nine-year old girl called Frances.

Every day the children went to put flowers on their parents' grave in the field behind the house, but eventually Brigid forbade them from going out when the weather was too bad in case they became ill. They quarreled with her and went to bed. In the morning, Brigid found that the boy had become dark-haired, as his sister had been and the girl had become fair-haired! The children denied that anything was different and Brigid took them to see the priest, but by the time they arrived, they were back to normal. Brigid became very scared, knowing that she was either going mad or there was something very strange going on in the house.

One night Brigid looks out of her bedroom window and sees a greenish light above the parents' grave and the children standing by it. She cries for the children and rushes to their room, where she finds them both still in bed. In the morning, the boy has the girl's voice and the girl has the boy's and when Brigid undresses them it is to find that they have both changed sexes! Yet the children still seem to think nothing was unusual.

Aunt Katie pauses at this point in the story and tells the children that some families are devil-haunted. Brigid McLaughlin was from the same family, she said, as a man called Larry, who had been struck dumb since he had apparently seen the devil on the day before his marriage.

Returning to the story, Aunt Katie tells them that Brigid started writing down in a notebook all the physical changes that happened to the children, which were now taking place frequently. She also saw on many occasions the green light over the grave and the children standing beside it. Suddenly, things became worse. On the 21st of



November, Brigid was brushing the girl's hair in front of a mirror when she suddenly realized the girl could not be seen in the mirror. As the boy moved into the mirror's range of vision, he too disappeared. At that moment, the grandfather clock struck ten and then stopped for good. Although Brigid didn't know it at the time, it was the exact hour and day the children's parents had died, five years before.

The children then stopped going to the grave and Brigid knew that the dead parents had come into the house. One night, they came for the children. They were in bed and Brigid saw all the physical changes passing over them, faster and faster. The green light then appeared and suddenly the children had gone, never to be seen again. Brigid rushed to get the priest, who then also saw the green light over the grave and heard the voices of the children singing. Initially, Brigid told everyone about her experiences, but then she stopped talking for the rest of her life, except for singing the children's song every year on the 21st of November. According to Aunt Katie, Brigid's family was blighted from that time onward.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The main purposes of the sections that make up Chapter 2 are to develop the story of Eddie's disappearance, to introduce the character of Tony McIlhenny and to tell of the feud that evolved between the boy's father and his relatives. The reader learns of the various sad events in his father's family history, which led up to the feud. He is made aware of the very difficult and sad life that his father has led. Many questions, however, are left unanswered and his father's reluctance to tell the boy the whole story suggests that there are sensitive issues that he wants to keep secret. The theme of secrets is central to the novel and we gradually learn how the various secrets kept by the boy's parents and other family members have had negative effects on the family.

The topic of fires continues in this chapter, with the opening section telling of the significance of bonfires in the traditional celebrations of both Protestants and Catholics, leading on to the boy's uncles' conversation about cities burning down and their recollections of the distillery shoot-out and fire, following which Eddie disappeared.

The key themes of disappearance, the supernatural, death and religion are once again intertwined in a very graphic sense when the boy's father shows him the "field of the disappeared," in which troubled spirits are believed to return as birds on Christian feast-days.

In this chapter we are also introduced to a location, which has been very significant in the boy's history, although he does not know it at the time. This is Grianan, the ancient hill fort where Eddie was shot. When his friends trap the boy inside on the wishing chair, this presages what he will later discover about Eddie's fate in the same place more than twenty years before.

Katie's story of Brigid McLaughlin is another example of how belief in the supernatural was such a powerful force in Northern Ireland at that time, although it is not clear

whether Katie herself actually believes the story or not. Although this appears initially to be a digression from the main storyline, in fact it is linked by the familial relationship between Brigid and Larry, the man who shot Eddie. Both Brigid and Larry, moreover, were apparently visited by supernatural beings and later lost their power of speech.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In the first chapter of Part 2, the boy recalls the time in 1950 when rats overran the neighborhood where the family lived and they had to be smoked out of their nests. The rat problem occurred because the air-raid shelters behind a row of houses were demolished in the spring of that year and the area left behind became a dumping ground. During the war, the shelters had never been used; the Germans only bombed the docks once, unsuccessfully. Whenever there were false alarms the family sheltered in the house, under the stairs. The boy graphically describes the process of killing the rats, by seeking out their nests using neighborhood dogs, putting burning, paraffin-soaked rags in them so that the rats would escape into the trench and then throwing all the burning torches on them. Lastly, a king rat emerged and was finished off by one of the dogs. Going home afterwards, the boy feels sickened by the experience and imagines living rats remaining underground and plotting their revenge.

In the next section we are introduced to Crazy Joe, an eccentric who wanders the streets of Derry talking to everyone but making little sense. The children have been warned not to make fun of Joe, who apparently had been affected by something that happened when he was young; they believe him to be harmless. Crazy Joe makes the boy feel uneasy. He remembers a time when he visits the public library and sees Joe in the "Reserved for Adults" art room. Joe took him into the art room and showed him a Boucher painting of a naked woman in a book. Over the following weeks, the boy often meets up with Joe in the park and Joe tells him that the woman in the picture was Irish and that she had sexual intercourse with the kings of France. Because she was Irish, Joe said, he himself had also known her carnally.

Joe goes on to tell the boy the story of Larry McLaughlin, a relative of the Brigid in Katie's story. On the eve of his marriage, Larry had been walking out when a woman on the road in front turned and smiled at him, making him feel that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. They walked together and she pulled him down on top of her in a field and then suddenly disappeared! As Larry got up, he saw a nearby fox standing watching him, which according to Joe, was actually the woman! Larry was insane by the time he reached home and the priest told his fiancée to call off the wedding, as Larry could never know a woman in his whole life. Larry is well known to the boy, as he always stands looking up the lane where this event happened, but has never talked since.

The next section, set in November 1951, takes us to the boy's math class and the unusual teaching style of the elaborately verbose Father Gildea. Following a regular pattern, the classes take the form of verbal challenges, both mathematical and grammatical and which the priest spits out like machine fire. The boys must answer correctly or be punished by extra homework or by caning.



In May 1952, Sergeant Burke, a local policeman, takes the boy home in a police car. A gang of boys led by Willie Barr had been bullying him, along with his friend Rory Griffin.. When the police car came by, the boy threw a stone at the window to get it to stop. On the way home, Sergeant Burke told the boy he should wonder why the police let his father go after they ransacked the house looking for his gun. He suggests that perhaps his father doesn't know what really happened to his brother Eddie and that the boy should ask his mother, especially as her father is now sick. When he is let out of the police car, the boy feels very upset and confused by what the policeman said.

After the talk with Sergeant Burke, the boy tries unsuccessfully to run away from home and his parents prohibit him from going anywhere except school. Following the incident, neighbors ostracize him and his family and his parents are very angry with him for involving Sergeant Burke when he was being bullied; he should have just taken the punches. On one occasion, his father hits him very hard after the boy tells him he should be blaming Eddie rather than him.

In anger at the way he is being treated by his parents, the boy uproots some of his father's beloved rose bushes and covers the rest in cement dust. When his mother asks why he has done such a thing, he tells her to ask his father, who will know. The boy stays in bed all night and the rest of the following day. He sees his father and uncles out of his bedroom window concreting over the whole back yard, his father having not gone to work for the first time he can ever recall. No one comes to offer the boy any food and he sleeps alone again that night. The following day, he is told he can come down for dinner. This time his father orders him to ask no more questions and to stay out of his way. Later, when the boy is in bed again and half asleep, he realizes his father has come in and kissed him on the head.

In August 1952, Liam tells his brother to go and tell the Bishop what has happened to him, about why he has been cut off by everyone following the Sergeant Burke incident. He wants the boy to be seen going into the police station with a priest to make his apology to the Sergeant, following which they intend to start rumors about Burke. The boy goes to see Bishop Coulter with his request, but the Bishop tells him to return after a year, during which time he will watch his progress at school. However, after two weeks, Father O'Neill, the Bishop's right-hand man, calls at the house and orders the boy to go with him to the police station to apologize to Burke. On his way home afterwards, a gang including Barr stop the boy and ask him why he had been to the police station with the priest. He lies to them that the Bishop sent O'Neill there to tell Burke off for all his lies about the boy and that Burke might be excommunicated.

In October of that year, the boy is sent to live with his sick grandfather, to help his aunt Katie who has moved out of her own house to care for her father. One day, when the boy's mother comes to visit her father, she leaves his room looking very pale and wretched and starts to sob. Suddenly, she sits up straight and speaks Eddie's name. When the boy questions her, she orders him not to say anything and says she is just upset about her father dying. That was the beginning we are told, of her long trouble.



After this incident, the boy tries to get his grandfather to tell him what he said to his mother about Eddie, but he refuses.

During the last few days of his grandfather's life in December 1952, the boy listens to him talk and talk about his life. One night he tells the boy the story of Eddie, saying that only his mother knows, but she could not forgive and he wanted to tell someone the whole story. He told him that Eddie had been executed as an informer and that he himself had ordered the execution. However, he had discovered that he had been wrong and that Eddie had been set up. He tells the boy who the real informer was. At this news, the boy resolves never to talk to his mother or father properly again, for what they know and haven't told him.

Not long after this, the grandfather dies after being taken to a hospital following a stroke. The boy feels the burden of carrying the information that his grandfather gave him and that something is missing, something that his mother knows but his grandfather didn't mention. He tries to get his mother to open up and talk, without revealing that he knows anything about Eddie, but to no avail. During a conversation he overhears between his mother and Aunt Katie, they talk about their father's past drinking binges and Katie wonders why they had stopped during the early 1920s but started again in 1926. His mother claims not to understand why, but the boy now knows that they started after the discovery that McIlhenny was the informer and that Eddie had been innocent. His mother is lying and it is clear from the conversation that Katie really does not know why Tony disappeared.

In the last section of chapter 3, the boy and Liam are taken by their father out on a rowboat across the river to where they are going to build the British Oxygen Plant, to walk round the area before it is taken over by the buildings. It is windy and raining and they are soaked by the waves by the time they reach the other bank. As they shelter in a country church, their father tells them that his parents used to bring him to this area with Eddie, as they had relatives here. Suddenly, he announces to them that Eddie was not killed in the shoot-out, that he was an informer who was killed by his own people. The boy feels uncomfortable that he knows even more than his father does. His father tells them that their mother has known this since just after they were married.

The boy wonders what his mother's parents had thought when they found out who she was marrying and wishes that his father had been able to tell her what he thought was a secret before they were married. He asks his father who had told him about Eddie's killing and is told that it was his Aunts Ena and Bernadette, as Eddie had been taken to the farmhouse where they were staying. After this, the boys and their father return home and the boy sees his mother's face full of welcome, then turn intuitively to pain as they enter the house, presumably realizing her husband had told their sons about Eddie.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The reader is introduced in this chapter to Crazy Joe, who later turns out to have had played a significant part in the events of the boy's family history of nearly thirty years



before. In the boy's meeting with Joe at the library, the female symbol of Ireland again emerges, as Joe shares his interpretation of the Boucher painting with him. Joe is also the person who first tells the boy the story of Larry's meeting with the devil woman, which led to him being struck dumb. Since we later learn of Larry's involvement in Eddie's killing, which is likely to be the real reason why he stopped talking, we might interpret this as demonstrating the way in which the local community gave supernatural explanations for events, which they could not otherwise explain.

Various school scenes such as Father Gildea's math class are interspersed throughout the novel and generally contribute in some way to the key themes, or to our understanding of the boy's life. The priest's unusual teaching methods, in which the pupils are often confounded by the difficulties of giving an acceptable answer, might be regarded as symbolizing the difficulties in life of making the right choices and choosing between right and wrong. This is a dilemma, which has been central to the boy's family history over time.

The incident in the police car with Sergeant Burke is the first hint the boy receives that his mother knows something about Eddie's fate, which his father is not aware of and has something to do with his grandfather. The ostracizing of the schoolboy by his family and community after they saw him in the car with Sergeant Burke is a stark reminder of exactly how strong the Catholics' hatred is of the police and their sensitivity to any possibility that their own members are informers, a theme again central to the earlier events surrounding Eddie's disappearance. Despite his anger towards his son after the rose bush incident, the father shows love and perhaps remorse for the way he has been treated when he kisses him on the head in bed.

In the last sections of Chapter 3, there are significant developments in the boy's knowledge about what happened to Eddie, while his mother closes in upon herself in sadness and distress following her father's confession. As we will learn later, it was not only her father who killed Eddie, but also her who let the real informer escape. When his grandfather tells the boy the true story about what happened to Eddie and who the real informer was, but his mother fails to share this information with him, the boy becomes yet another member of the family who holds a secret which he cannot share. The secret makes him resent his parent's lack of openness. When his father tells the boy, whilst on their outing, that Eddie had been killed as an informer, this just increases his discomfort and awkwardness. He realizes what his mother has held back from his father and now believes that he knows more than his father does.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In spring 1953 the boy's mother sinks into depression and mental illness. The boy thinks he knows the reason why, especially by the way she looks at his father with such pity and fear, as if there is something she wants to be forgiven for. The boy wants to comfort her, but cannot tell her that he knows her secret. She often looks out of the stair window whispering and crying and she has visions of fires outside. At night, she starts sleepwalking and going outside in her nightdress, saying that everything is burning.

The boy's father thinks that it is the result of losing her father, which had also brought back her grief at the loss of Una. The boy senses that there is someone else that his mother is grieving for. After being prescribed drugs by the doctor, she becomes robotic and starts crying for months on end. At this time, the children helped their parents by doing odd jobs for people in order to raise money, such as collecting scrap metal, jars and rags for a dealer. Their mother is becoming increasingly confused and distracted. One day, as the boy helps his father dry the dishes, out of the blue his mother says, "Paradise was not far away when I died." Although his father and sister appear to take no notice, the boy knows that she had been in love with someone other than his father. Similar but disjointed comments follow over the next weeks and months, mainly spoken to the younger children of the family and the boy feels she is becoming increasingly lost in her own world. He feels hurt and excluded by her, as she will not talk directly to him about anything significant.

One day, some months later, she asks the boy to throw all her pills into the fire and she pours her medicines down the sink, complaining that the chemicals had ruined her teeth. Then she hugs the boy, telling him that she is better now, but that she will never be as she was before and that she pities her family. Gradually her state of mind improves; her illness, however, had aged both her and the boy's father.

In September 1953, at school the boy is summoned to the Spiritual Director, Father Nugent, for the fact-of-life talk that the schoolboys are all given individually. Father Nugent talks directly about the sexual act and the body parts involved and the boy feels embarrassed and uncomfortable. He is a little confused, as he has very little existing knowledge of the subject but does not want to ask the priest for clarification. Father Nugent goes on to tell him how, although the boys might wonder how a celibate priest knows all this, the acts of dedicating your life to a person and dedicating your life to God are very similar, as they are based on unconditional love.

At the mention of this term, the boy's mind wanders to his confirmation, when the Bishop selected him for questioning on the altar. Having answered the initial questions successfully, he was then asked about the nature of God's love for us. Not able to recall the term "unconditional" at first, he felt panicky, but finally got it right. He had felt wonderful at his triumph and because the Bishop had spoken to him. Now turning his



attention back to Father Nugent, he hears the priest explaining that he had renounced the flesh for the sake of the spirit. He goes on to tell the boy that sex without love is akin to murder, the murder of your own body and the body of the woman with whom the loveless act is performed. He finally tells the boy to always avoid brutality in his relationships with women before dismissing him. The boy leaves, hoping to catch sight of Irene Mackey, the girl he is attracted to.

In November of that year, the boy takes Irene to the cinema with a group of friends, although she is actually the girlfriend of Grenaghan, a tough kid. As the boy kisses her goodnight on the street corner near his house, Grenaghan suddenly appears and hits the boy on the head, but is chased away by Liam and his friends. Irene has disappeared and Liam tells his brother that she set him up to be caught by Grenaghan.

Later, Liam tells him a story to explain why Grenaghan should be left alone. Apparently Grenaghan's grandfather Jimmy was in love with a woman called Claire Falkener but was too shy to tell her, although she was aware of it anyway. Instead she married a man called Danno Bredin, who was in the Merchant Navy and away from home a lot. Jimmy went off to England to work for several years and by the time he returned he was much more confident. He was still in love with Claire and started visiting her often. When it was reported that Danno had been lost at sea, Jimmy moved in with her. But Danno was still alive and when he returned to find that his wife no longer wanted him, he rented a room opposite and stayed there staring at their house all the time. Eventually he became ill and died and his relatives cursed his wife's house and everyone in it.

After a time, strange noises started being heard in the house and the door wouldn't open properly, as if someone was holding it. One day, Jimmy shouted a curse at the window of the room where Bredin had lived. The next day he was found with a broken neck at the bottom of the stairs. Six months later, Claire died in her bed, a look of terror on her face. After that, it was told, every house belonging to a Grenaghan or Falkener was haunted and people said that no one from those families should ever get married, so that the families would die out.

In 1954, the Dean punishes the boy for leaving the school grounds along with his friend Moran during the annual spiritual retreat to attend a football match. They are required to undertake a month-long course in spiritual reading, studying selections from the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola. The Dean himself directs the boy in this and asks him to learn passages by heart and contemplate them. He finds the passages about the choices between good and evil consoling and he takes pleasure in seeing someone develop from them who is perfect and makes choices in accordance with that perfection. He is troubled, however, when he thinks of himself and his family members in comparison and their inability to choose between right and wrong.

One day, the boy is dared by Liam and their friends to go up to the door of a house reputed to be a brothel and ask for his "Uncle" Charlie McCabe, a local Post Office Inspector who is known to frequent the place. A young woman answers and the boy asks for Charlie, saying that his daughter is sick. The man chases him away, telling him he has no daughter. Afterwards, the boy wonders about the brothel and what it would be



like to be with the woman. While he longs to experience a woman, however, he is still scared by the story of what happened to Larry McLaughlin.

Aunt Katie has been to England as her daughter Maeve was married there. The other adults in the family had refused to accompany her to the wedding, because the groom was a black man and a non-Christian. On her return, she argues with the boy's mother and stays away from their house for a long time, until the news comes that Maeve is pregnant.

When Katie returns, her sister upsets her by suggesting that history will repeat itself and that Maeve's husband will leave her just as Tony McIlhenny had left Katie. Katie tells the boy that she is not the fool her mother took her for, something else happened when Tony left, but she didn't know it was. She then remarks, however, that her sister's comments were in spite because Tony had dropped her to marry Katie when she was twenty-six and Katie was eighteen. She says that was the last story she would tell any of the children and that it was a true one.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter describes the boy's mother's increasingly poor state of health, which can be assumed to be related to what she now knows about Eddie's death and the secret which she cannot share with her husband or son. Fire is again a theme in this part of the novel, as the mother's mental symptoms give her visions of fires burning outside. The visions perhaps originate with her recollections of the burning distillery or what she has been told about this incident, which led to Eddie's fate. From occasional comments she makes, it is increasingly clear to the boy that she is mourning the loss of someone she used to be in love with.

It is likely that his mother suspects that the boy knows about her history, which explains the cruel way that she starts to treat him compared with his siblings. The descriptions of the poor relationship between the boy and his mother at this time are effectively juxtaposed with sections describing the nature of unconditional love, in the boy's talk with Father Nugent and the recollections of his communion day.

The story of the Grenaghans and Falkeners is yet another example of the community beliefs in the supernatural which continue to affect relationships and families. Linked so often to adultery or other unacceptable social behavior, the stories of evil spirits seem to serve a role within the community of deterring people from committing such sins.

In this chapter, the boy himself explores the theme of choices between good and evil in his spiritual studies and relates this to his own family's experiences and their inability to make the right choices. His own pain and discomfort with the knowledge he now holds are becoming increasingly evident. A further piece of the mystery is now revealed to him as Aunt Katie tells him of his mother's relationship with McIlhenny. It is clear, however, that Katie is not aware that McIlhenny was the real informer.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

In a religious knowledge class in September 1954, the boys' teacher asks them a series of unanswerable questions, or those to which the answer makes no rational sense. The point is to demonstrate the nature of religious faith and the ways in which religion as a school subject is different from subjects such as geography and mathematics.

By November 1954 the boy is at last able to piece together some of this family history and the story of what happened to Eddie. His grandparents, Eddie's parents, had both died in December 1921 and Billy Mahon had been murdered the month before. His father's sisters, Bernadette and Ena, had been sent to live at the farmhouse in February 1922 and were there for eight months before his father took them away in November of the same year.

At that time they told the boy's father about Eddie being taken to the farmhouse by hooded men. This means that his father had known since November 1922 what he thought was the whole story about Eddie being an informant. The boy's mother had been going out with McIlhenny around the same time and he had left her for Katie, who he married in 1926. In July 1926 the police had helped McIlhenny escape to Chicago after someone tipped off the boy's maternal grandfather about McIlhenny being the real informant.

The boy's parents had met around 1930 and married in 1935. The boy now knows that his grandfather and the other hooded men had taken Eddie to the Donegal farmhouse where they interrogated him, sending the boy's aunt and uncle out to the shed and telling them that their traitorous nephew was going to be dealt with. Some time after that, the aunt and uncle had banished Bernadette and Ena to the shed and treated them as skivvies, until the boy's father discovered them months later. The argument in the farmhouse that the boy remembered from childhood was twenty-three years later when the aunt had died and had left the boy's father some possessions from his childhood home, yet her husband refused to hand them over, threatening him that he would expose the truth about Eddie.

Returning to the story of what happened the night that Eddie was taken to the farmhouse, the boy explains how, after possibly being tortured at the farmhouse, Eddie was moved to Grianan and put in the secret passage with the entrance sealed. Although he doesn't know exactly what happened next, he guesses that his grandfather had given a revolver to Larry and asked him to go in and shoot Eddie. No one will ever know exactly what happened in that secret passage, as Larry had on his way home met the devil-woman and stopped speaking. He had apparently never spoken another word to anyone and just stood on the street corner, looking up the lane.



The boy concludes that his mother had always known that McIlhenny was an informer, but she didn't know the truth about what happened to Eddie until her father told her just before he died. His father still didn't know about this at all and the boy feels that it is not his place to tell him, that keeping the secret is his way of loving both his parents.

One day, the boy meets Crazy Joe in the park, after he has been thrown out the library and shortly after one of Joe's spells in the local asylum, which has a reputation for cruel treatment of patients. After asking the boy to sing him some songs, Crazy Joe reveals to the boy that he saw McIlhenny, the informer, getting out of Sergeant Burke's police car in July 1926. What he doesn't know, he tells the boy, is who tipped off McIlhenny, raising the suspicion in the boy's mind that it was Crazy Joe himself.

Now the boy wants to tell his mother everything he knows, but he is scared to do so because of what her reaction might be. So he writes it all down in an exercise book and then translates it into Irish, burning the pages that contain the English version. Several days later, he reads it all out to his parents, neither of which can understand Irish, telling them it was an essay he had written at school. He knows his mother understands what he is doing. His father goes outside to sweep the yard and he sees him after a while just staring at the ground. The boy cries.

In November 1956, an Anglican army chaplain comes to the school to give a talk to the boys about the growing threat of Communism in the world and the need to fight Communism and the atheism it is based on. The boys discuss the speech in Father McAuley's history class the next day. They are confused by the way in which he started by talking about their homeland and the priest explains that this was a technique to help them understand their own role in the world.

Several years later the boy's mother tells him that in late 1957 Sergeant Burke had visited her while her husband was at work, saying that he wanted to clear things up for good. He apologized for beating up Frank for possession of the gun, but said that although he knew he was innocent he had to do that to keep the Special Branch officers from Belfast happy, so that they would not send Frank to gaol. He also apologized for what had happened when the boy threw the stone at his car. He said he wanted everything to stop before all their children were poisoned by it and so that he could retire in peace.

Burke admitted to the boy's mother that the police had used McIlhenny to get back at her father for the death of Billy Mahon and then used Larry McLaughlin as a fall guy to incriminate Eddie as the informant, by letting slip some information that Larry could pick up. He tells her that after Eddie was shot, they had kept McIlhenny in place until after he married Katie, when someone had found out about his informant activities and they had to help him escape quickly. McIlhenny had been very distressed and didn't want to leave Katie. The boy's mother told him all this, but she still didn't tell him about her own relationship with McIlhenny or about how much she and his father knew when they married. This leaves him confused and hurt, wondering whether she would tell him if she loved him more. He wants to help her but feels he is not being able to.



Chapter 5 Analysis

This is a very significant chapter in which the whole story of Eddie is at last pieced together as it is revealed to the boy, right up to Eddie's murder at the hands of Larry in the secret passage at Grianan. He understands that his mother had a relationship with McIlhenny, the real informer, before he married her sister Katie and that it was his mother who tip-off enabled McIlhenny to escape the country. The boy suspects that, although his mother knew that McIlhenny was the real informer, she did not know exactly what had happened to Eddie until her father told her on his deathbed. As far as he knows, his father is not aware of what happened.

Crazy Joe provides one of the final pieces of the jigsaw, the boy believes, when he reveals that he was the one that identified McIlhenny as the true informer. It does not emerge until later, however, that he told the boy's mother rather than going direct to the police himself.

The boy's reading out of the whole family story in Irish is intriguing, as he knows that neither of his parents will be able to understand what he has written. Despite this, his actions clearly have an impact on both his parents, who seem to understand what he is doing, even if they can't understand his language. This appears to be the boy's way of telling them both that he knows the family story, without having to disclose details, which may not be known to each of them, particularly his father.

Sergeant Burke revealed further information during his visit to the boy's mother in 1957, in which he tried to bring the long-standing feud between the police and the family to a close before his retirement. We now learn of the link between the death of the policeman Billy Mahon on the one hand and the death of Eddie on the other, as McIlhenny had been recruited by the police as an IRA informant to get back at the boy's grandfather for Mahon's death, while at the same time they planted evidence to falsely incriminate Eddie as the informant.

The boy's love for his mother and his pain at her refusal to confide in him is increasingly apparent in this chapter.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The boy remembers talking to his mother in 1958 about a story that McIlhenny had told to Katie before he disappeared. McIlhenny had been working as a bus conductor on a rural route and one of his regular passengers was a man called Sean who always carried a small brown case, inside of which was just one baby sock. The man had once shown the sock to McIlhenny and told him that when he found its match, he would stop traveling on the bus. The sock had belonged to Sean's baby daughter, who had died many years before. When Sean collected her belongings from the fever hospital, one sock was missing. After that, Sean went to the hospital every day, waiting for the sock to be found. According to McIlhenny, this was Sean's way of blaming himself for the baby's death, as he believed that his daughter could not enter Paradise until he had collected all her belongings. The boy's mother says that the moral of the story is that people in small places make big mistakes, which McIlhenny and they now know.

Around this time, Crazy Joe started visiting the boy's mother regularly, talking about his spells in the asylum. One day, when Frank arrives home, Joe gets up to leave and announces to the boy's mother that he never told anyone her family secret. The boy realizes that his mother had been tormented by the knowledge that Joe knew everything and might have let things slip when he was in the asylum.

The boy's mother now turns hostile towards him, as if she realizes that he knows her secret. Despite his high academic achievements at school, nothing he does is good enough for her. His father seems puzzled and doesn't understand what is going on. He has aged significantly, the boy notices. His mother grows cold and distant from everyone. When the boy brings her a flower and tells her not to worry about anything, she cruelly tears off the petals and throws them on the floor, quoting a rhyme, which indicates she doesn't care whether he tells or not.

When social evenings with music are introduced at a local community hall, everyone goes along, although the boy feels uncomfortable, worrying that a girl will ask him to dance. Instead, he is approached by Crazy Joe, who sits beside him and advises him to stick to books, rather than women. When Joe puts his hand on the boy's knee as he talks, the boy's father appears and pulls him away, threatening Joe not to ever lay a hand on his son.

Later, his mother warns him to stay away from Joe and begs God to forgive her for what she has done. The boy believes that she is paralyzed by shame and feels uncomfortable because he knows her secret. He wants to know whether she had loved McIlhenny, but is afraid of what the answer might be. He now understands that it was his mother, with Joe's help, who had identified McIlhenny as the informer and had tipped him off and who had later met his father and realized what Eddie had meant to him and his family. He can't believe that his father didn't suspect anything during the following



years, by noticing the similarities between the story of Eddie and the story of McIlhenny and wonders whether he had kept it to himself so as not to destroy their marriage.

Sergeant Burke dies in 1959 and his sons, who have become priests, celebrate his Requiem Mass with the Bishop in attendance. The boy's mother is furious and cannot believe it when told that the police and priests actually collaborated with each other. When the boy asks his mother what she would like for her birthday, she tells him that she would like to forget about everything, just for one day. Then she asks him to go away and he gives her a birthday promise to do so, after university.

In 1961 the boy goes off to university in Belfast, feeling that he is staying loyal to his mother but being disloyal to his father by not telling him what he knows. On the day he gets his degree several years later, he recalls arriving home late for the family gathering in his honor. His father had been waiting all evening for the news of his degree and the boy remembers his obvious great pride on being told that he had earned a first. The boy reflects on his father's difficult life and great sorrow and remembers a time when, after listening to a boxing match on the radio, his father had gone to the coal shed and violently smashed all the coal and logs, although the boy didn't understand what was going on at the time.

The novel concludes in 1971. The boy continues to keep his mother's secret and hopes that she will notice that he is keeping a pact with her, yet she does not acknowledge him. He finally understands without any doubt that Joe went to his mother with the information about McIlhenny and that she took him to tell her father what he had seen. That was when he realized his error in executing Eddie. But instead of informing on McIlhenny, his mother had tipped him off so that he could escape. Then she had married Frank, haunted forever by the knowledge of what she had done. The boy now realizes that by wanting to know what had "plagued her," he had "become the plague myself."

In 1968 his mother suffers a stroke and loses her ability to speak. It is only now that the boy feels that they can love each other again, because her secret is locked inside her. Outside, the troubles are starting in Northern Ireland and the family lives in the midst of explosions, gunfire and riots. The boy's parents now live alone as all their children have grown up and left and they often sit holding hands, watching the television, to the noise of the violence in the background.

Just before his father retires, he suffers a heart attack and is forced to leave his job early. Once, the boy visits his parents for a weekend two days after a British soldier has been shot dead on their doorstep. While the boy is visiting, the dead soldier's father visits from England to ask them what had happened and the boy's father expresses pity for him. Shortly after this he dies from a second heart attack. Going downstairs at dawn the next day, the boy thinks he hears a sigh on the stairs but there is no one there. He sees the cathedral where they would later bury his father, reflected in the stair window, where his mother so often used to see her ghosts.



Chapter 6 Analysis

The boy's mother's interpretation of the story of Sean and the baby's sock, that "people in small places make big mistakes," seems to be her way of admitting her own guilt for her relationship with McIlhenny and her role in Eddie's murder. It is not entirely clear why she turns so hostile towards her son, but it is likely that the knowledge of what he knows about her makes it very painful for her to live with him. She is clearly very nervous about his contact with Crazy Joe, which can be explained by the fact that Joe knows the whole story and in his fragile state of mind might disclose too much information. The boy finally understands that it was his mother who tipped off McIlhenny after Joe told her that he had seen him in the police car.

The boy now realizes that his father probably does know what happened to Eddie, but has kept the secret to himself for the sake of his marriage. His life has been very sad because of the events of his family history and the need to keep such painful secrets. Occasionally his suppressed anger was released harmlessly, for example when he violently smashed up the coal and logs in the yard. When his son graduates with a first class degree, his patient expectation of the result and tremendous pride in his son's achievement is touching and there is a rewarding sense that he has at last achieved something worthwhile through his son.

As the novel draws to a close, there is a sense that the boy is now aware of his own role in the family story and the ways in which he has exacerbated the problems by becoming aware of them and thus threatening his mother's already fragile state of mind. He is reconciled with his mother only when her stroke takes away her power of speech and she no longer feels any pressure to release her secrets.

As the years pass and the boy's father eventually dies, the political problems and violence of Northern Ireland grow even more serious, giving rise to the question of how many more families will suffer the consequences through their involvement in the hostilities. The account of the British soldier dying on the doorstep and his mourning father's visit to the family demonstrates just how far reaching the effects of the violence can be. It is a sad ending, as the boy waits to bury his father, whilst the presence of the British army in the streets is a stark reminder that the problems of Northern Ireland are far from over.



Characters

Boy narrator

The boy narrator is the channel through which the family's story is told and the novel is written from his perspective in an autobiographical style. It opens in 1945 when the boy is apparently aged around 5 or 6 and concludes many years later after he has graduated from university. However, the story spans a much greater time period than this, as the boy pieces together his family history from the early 1920s onwards. We never learn the boy's first name, but a conversation he has with Crazy Joe reveals his family name to be Caliban. The boy is third eldest in a family of seven, later reduced to six by his younger sister's death.

This is a highly intelligent and academically gifted boy, who loves reading and who eventually earns distinctions in his end-of-school examinations and a first class degree. Although he does not favor participating in sports, he leads an active life, much of it outdoors, with his brother Liam and their friends. He has an inquiring mind, which leads to his avid curiosity about the story of Eddie. He is fascinated by the unanswered questions and persistent in his determination to unravel the family mysteries.

The boy is also highly sensitive and his curiosity ultimately leads to his own sadness as he realizes what his parents have each been through and how he himself ultimately contributed to their unhappiness. He has a tendency to worry about things, demonstrated by his concerns about the disappearing magician when still very young. He has a very vivid imagination, portrayed, for example, in his fears about the rats living underground and plotting revenge and in his fantasies about the woman in the first novel he read.

As the boy grows up, he demonstrates a remarkable ability to understand his parents' own points of view and their need for privacy and is able to deal very maturely with his own mother's cruelty and rejection of him during her mental illness.

The boy's mother

Although we learn very little about the mother's character prior to her depression, she appears never to have been a strong person. Small in stature, she is fragile in body and mind and her mental and physical health deteriorates as she finds herself unable to cope with her sadness and guilt over Eddie's death. She is highly superstitious and believes strongly in the supernatural.

When her depression strikes, she becomes very withdrawn and later cold and hostile towards her son. Although retaining some tenderness towards her other children, she never appears very motherly and the children seem to prefer being looked after by their Aunt Katie.



The boy's father

This is a man who had to grow up very early and shoulder the responsibility of taking care of his siblings after his parents died and Eddie disappeared. He initially had a brief career in boxing, but had to give this up in order to support his siblings, working as an electrician's mate until shortly before his death.

The treatment of himself and his siblings by their relatives left him sad and bitter and he has very occasionally been known to display bouts of temper, but in general he is a reserved man, who refrains from taking part in the lively discussions of his own brothers. He works hard and shows love and affection to his wife and children. There is a suggestion that he knows much more about his wife's past than he reveals and if so he shows considerable constraint in keeping this to himself for the sake of his marriage and family. He is teetotaler, which was probably quite unusual in the Catholic community of Northern Ireland at that time.

Grandfather

At the time that the boy knows his grandfather, he is a scrawny, small man, but he retains an air of power about him as a reflection of the influential roles he held when he was younger. As well as being a prominent local figure who ran a football league, he was also an IRA activist, who had been responsible for at least two killings: that of the policeman Billy Mahon and that of Uncle Eddie.

The grandfather is an atheist, who has no respect for the church and hates the priests. Unlike the majority of people in his community, he had no fear of the after-life and refused the last rites on his deathbed. He had been prone to drinking binges when younger but these had stopped after he discovered his mistake in killing Eddie.

Uncle Eddie

The boy's father's older brother, this is the person whose death as an alleged informer in the 1920s is the focus of the storyline. We know nothing about his character or background except that he was involved in IRA activities.

Tony McIlhenny

Tony McIlhenny was the real IRA informer, who worked with the police for several years before he was tipped off and left the country, apparently for Chicago. He had a relationship with the boy's mother when she was single, but married her sister Katie shortly before leaving the country, when she was pregnant with his child. He never made contact with Katie again or saw his daughter, but there were rumors that he had become a respected member of his community in Chicago. Although portrayed as



heartless, he had, according to Sergeant Burke, been very upset to leave Katie when the police arranged his escape from the country.

Crazy Joe

Joe is a well-known local character who is mentally disturbed and regularly confined to an asylum. At other times he roams the streets, humming to himself and talking to everyone he meets, but making little sense. It is said that something happened to him in his youth, which had affected his mentality. Physically he is of small build, but with a large head, which seems out of proportion to his body. He is clean-shaven and has very white false teeth, but his appearance is sometimes grubby.

Apparently an educated man, Joe is knowledgeable about art and literature and can frequently be found in the library. When he is having a particularly unstable mental spell, he can be disruptive and has been removed from the library, for example, for making lots of noise and throwing books on the floor. There are indications that Joe is schizophrenic: "To live with this condition of his was, he said, the great connubium of his infelicity-the condition of being sane married to the condition of being mad; the knowledge that he was mad married to the knowledge that he was sane."

Sergeant Burke

This is the local policeman who has been closely associated with the case of Eddie and the boy's family history. All we know of his appearance is that he is a very large man. He was involved in recruiting McIlhenny as an IRA informer and in setting Eddie up. He was also responsible for planting the first suspicions in the boy's mind that his mother had information about Eddie's killing that his father is not aware of. He also takes part in the brutal police attack on the family in a search for the gun. Before Burke's retirement and subsequent death he visited the boy's mother and apologized for the way he had treated the family, apparently wanting to make peace.

Larry

We know little about Larry's background and character. He was set up as a "fall guy" by the police to implicate Eddie as the informant and then used by the boy's grandfather to shoot the gun that killed Eddie, on the eve of his own wedding. Although Eddie's fate and Larry's involvement in this remained a mystery to the community, he is known never to have spoken again. He was reputed to have met a devil woman on the way home that night and everyday since then he stands staring up the lane where this was believed to have happened. Despite this, he maintains a neat appearance: "There he stood, dark in his shiny suit, his neat shirt, buttoned at the neck, the same greasy tie twisted like a tongue inside his V-necked pullover, his small feet in black shoes with polished toecaps, his hands in his pockets, his sharp face grey and odourless under his peaked cap."



Katie

The boy's Auntie is his mother's sister Katie, who had been briefly married to McIlhenny and had his child, Maeve. Maeve is already grown and living in England when the boy is growing up in Belfast. The boy is fond of Katie, who is like a second mother to him and his siblings. In some respects she is more motherly towards them than their own mother, who is too wrapped up in her own thoughts and memories and then her depression to give them proper attention. Katie often tells the children stories, which are full of the supernatural and of local superstition.

Liam

The boy's older brother Liam is the sibling to whom he seems particularly close. They often spend time together along with other friends. Liam seems to be more down-to-earth and less sensitive to his parents' unhappiness than his brother.



Objects/Places

Ireland

Although he lives in the city of Derry, the boy identifies strongly with the surrounding land on either side of the Eire/Northern Ireland Border, where he roams and plays with his friends. This area is outside of Derry and is a very rural area with hills, lakes (Loughs) and the Inishowen peninsula. The main landmarks that the boy identifies with are the old hill fort of Grianan, the feud farmhouse over the border in Donegal and the smoky city of Derry. Donegal is where his father's family originated from and where many of his relatives still live.

Grianan

Grianan is the name of the ruins of an ancient hill fort. It consists of a stone ring with worn steps on the inside leading to a parapet which looks out over the countryside. From one inside wall led a secret passage with a slabbed stone "chair" at one end, which was the site of Eddie's killing. The locals believed that legendary warriors were buried beneath the fort, waiting for the time when they would banish the British from Ireland forever.

The Farmhouse

This was the home of the boy's father's relatives, where his sisters Ena and Bernadette were taken following the death of their parents and mistreated. Eddie was also brought to the farmhouse and interrogated before being taken to Grianan and shot.

Home

The boy's home is in a row of houses backing onto fields on the outskirts of the city of Derry. It is apparently a rather run-down area, which becomes rat-infested after rubbish is allowed to accumulate on the site of old air-raid shelters.

School

The boy attends a Catholic boys' school, where the teachers are priests.

Themes

Betrayal

The main theme of the novel, which manifests itself in various forms, can be regarded as betrayal. McIlhenny first betrayed the confidences of his IRA associates when he informed on them to the police, while the police in their turn betrayed Uncle Eddie when they set him up to be discovered as an informer by the boy's grandfather. These initial incidents were directly or indirectly linked to a series of events and consequences in which betrayal and disloyalty of various forms characterize the history of the boy's family over time and ultimately his own experiences.

The boy's father's relatives betrayed him and his siblings after the death of their parents and the disappearance of Eddie, mistreating the sisters who were sent to stay with them and stealing all the possessions from the siblings' family home. The mother also unwittingly betrayed her husband's family by tipping off McIlhenny, the true informer and allowing him to escape, thus preventing Uncle Eddie's name from being cleared.

Perhaps the biggest betrayal of all takes the form of the secrets that are held from one another by various members of the family. Many questions remain about how much was really known at various points in time by the main characters, particularly the boy's mother and father, but it is clear that information was withheld and that this resulted in much pain and resentment. The mother apparently never told her husband about her relationship with McIlhenny, the true informer whose activities resulted in Eddie's death and after she found out that her father had been the one that killed Eddie, she likewise did not share this information, perhaps in shame.

The father, on the other hand, did not tell his wife before they were married that Eddie was killed as an informer, although it is likely that she already knew this. Their secrets from one another and from others in the family, as well as their possible suspicions about what the other one knew, results in much pain, which is ultimately passed onto their son as he discovers their secrets but is prevented from sharing them. His mother's cruelty towards him can be regarded as another form of betrayal, in which she rejects his love and willingness to help her.

Beliefs

Three different strands of belief co-exist in the boy's community and infiltrate practically every aspect of daily life: political beliefs, religious beliefs and superstition.

The boy's Catholic family history has been shaped by their involvement in the IRA, the organization that is fighting against their Protestant neighbors and against the British Government for the independence of Ireland. His grandfather in particular was clearly a highly active member of the IRA and it was his initial alleged action in killing the policeman that set off a train of events, which continue to have negative effects on



subsequent generations of the family. Political conflict continues to characterize daily life in the state, with frequent clashes particularly between the Catholics and the Protestant police force.

The church is highly influential in the life of the Catholic community, but the community's beliefs are a curious mixture of Christianity and heathen superstition. They are highly indoctrinated into the traditional Catholic faith and have a particular fear of purgatory and hell, fates which could be prevented by receipt of the last rites by a priest, whatever sins they may have committed.

The priests are very influential in daily life and are sometimes used to mediate between the people and the police. They are also frequently called in to exorcise the spirits that are often believed to haunt people, a manifestation of the non-Christian aspects of the belief system. It is interesting how Christian and heathen beliefs are closely interrelated, as demonstrated for example in the story of the Field of the Disappeared, where the spirits of the dead are believed to return only on Christian festivals.

There are several accounts in the novel of families that are haunted by the dead or by evil spirits, including Larry's encounter with the devil woman, the story of Brigid McLaughlin and the orphans and the tale of the Grenaghans and Falkeners. It is unclear to what extent the storytellers actually believe in their stories, but clearly they have an important place in the society of that time. It seems common for stories of the supernatural to be used to explain the fate of someone who has sinned in some way and they may therefore have developed as a social control tool to deter people from unacceptable behavior.

Fire

The underlying theme of fire emerges at many points in the novel and might be interpreted as symbolic of the powerful and destructive forces that steadily destroy the boy's family.

Fire has a particularly significant role in the history of Northern Ireland. Bonfires are used in traditional celebrations of both the Protestant and the Catholic communities, in which they remember significant events in the history of their conflict and their rebellion against the British.

In the story's recent history, it is fire that destroyed the distillery, the site of the famous last shoot-out between the police and the IRA, in which it is believed that Uncle Eddie has taken part and after which he disappears. The destructiveness of fire is a keen topic of conversation among the boy's other uncles, who discuss the fate of cities, which they believe have been destroyed by fire. On a smaller scale, the destructive power of fire is harnessed in the boy's neighborhood to kill the rats.

The other way in which fire is portrayed in the novel is through the boy's mother's visions of everything burning while she is mentally ill. It is possible that these were related to her memories of the distillery fire, when Eddie's fate was perhaps first sealed.

When the boy later writes down his account of his family history in Irish, he first throws the English version into the fire, giving the reader a graphic image of everything that happened as being wiped out, yet still persisting in the other version. In the same way, the lasting impact of what happened to Eddie cannot be destroyed.



Style

Point of View

This novel is written in an autobiographical style, from the point of view of the boy narrator. His first name is never revealed, an interesting technique, which may have been employed to play down his own importance in the storyline whilst using his perspective to tell of the family's experiences.

The personal style in which the novel is written is also an effective way of portraying the far-reaching effects of national political events on individuals, families and communities.

Although a work of fiction, the novel is heavily based on fact and the history and geography of Northern Ireland.

Setting

The story is set in Northern Ireland, mainly in the 1940s and 1950s, when the boy is in his childhood and youth. However, it spans more than 40 years as the boy recounts the history of his family in the 1920s, until the time up to his graduation and his father's death in the 1960s. This was a tense and turbulent time in the history of Northern Ireland, with frequent clashes between the IRA and the police, leading up to the fierce conflict of the violent 'Troubles' of the 1960s, which were starting right at the end of the novel.

The specific setting is the area in and around the boy's home of Derry and the surrounding border country between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Eire. The events of the novel take place in various localities including the boy's home in a fairly poor area of the city, his Catholic school and key locations to do with the story of Eddie's disappearance and family events, such as the farmhouse in Donegal and the ancient hill fort of Grianan.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in a straightforward, easy to follow style, with heavy use of dialogue as well as description, which are effective in portraying images and facilitating understanding of the nature of places and people. The language throughout is conversational and is in keeping with the autobiographical style, as the boy narrates his story.

Structure

The novel is subdivided on various levels. There are three main parts, divided into 6 chapters, which run throughout the three parts. Each chapter is divided into many separately titled sections, which range between two and ten pages long. This structure helps to keep the reader's interest, as there is considerable variation by topic and sometimes by time between juxtaposed sections.



Quotes

"People with green eyes were close to the fairies, we were told; they were just here for a little while, looking for a human child they could take away. If we ever met anyone with one green and one brown eye we were to cross ourselves, for that was a human child that had been taken over by the fairies. The brown eye was the sign it had been human. When it died, it would go into the fairy mounds that lay behind the Donegal mountains, not to heaven, purgatory, limbo or hell like the rest of us." (p. 7)

"The heroine was called Ann and the hero was Robert. She was too good for him. When they whispered, she did all the interesting talking. He just kept on about dying and remembering her always, even when she was there in front of him with her dark hair and her deep golden-brown eyes and her olive skin. So I talked to her instead and told her how beautiful she was and how I wouldn't go out on the rebellion at all but just sit there and whisper in her ear and let her know that now was forever and not some time in the future when the shooting and the hacking would be over, when what was left of life would be spend listening to the night wind wailing on graveyards and empty hillsides." (p. 20)

"Policemen with huge faces bent down to ask me, quietly at first, then more and more loudly. They made my father sit at a table and then lean over it, with his arms outspread. Then they beat him on the neck and shoulders with rubber truncheons, short and gorged-red in colour. He told them, but they didn't believe him. So they beat us too, Liam and me, across the table from him. I remember the sweat and rage on his face as he looked. When they pushed my chin down on the table for a moment, I was looking up at him. Did he wink at me? Or were there tears in his eyes? Then my head bounced so hard on the table with the blows that I bit hard on my tongue." (p. 29)

"My father knowing something about Eddie, not saying it, not talking but sometimes nearly talking, signalling. I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from him ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it." (p. 43)

"There was a belief that it was here that the souls of all those from the area who had disappeared, or had never had a Christian burial, like fishermen who had drowned and whose bodies had never been recovered, collected three or four times a year-on St Brigid's Day, on the festival of Samhain, on Christmas Day-to cry like birds and look down on the fields where they had been born. Any human who entered the field would suffer the same fate; and any who heard their cries on those days should cross themselves and pray out loud to drown out the sound." (p. 53)

"One night, she said, they came for the children. Francis and Frances were in her bed as usual. They lay there awake, unable to sleep and the little girl began to sing a song Brigid has never heard before in a language that was not Irish or Latin or English and the little boy joined in. Brigid stood before them, a crucifix in her hand, praying, praying, with the flesh prickling all over her. Those children lay there, she said, their voices in



unison, singing this sad, slow air and all the changes she had seen before passing over them, one by one, faster and faster, until she didn't know which was the boy, which the girl. The whole house was booming, as with the sound of heavy feet on the wooden stair. The greenish light came into the room in mid-air and spread all over it and with that came this whispering of voices, a man's and a woman's whispering, whispering, furious, almost as if they were spitting in anger, except that the voices were dry, whipped up like swirlings of dust in a wind." (p. 69)

"He lay there in a collarless, cream-coloured simmet that exposed the scrawniness of his throat and threw his severe features into relief. He looked at and through me at such times. To his children, he was both pathetic and autocratic, crumpled and unforgiving as he lay there, not losing his power to those around him but drawing it back into himself, taking it away with him, reefing it round him like a sheet." (p. 125)

"When we came into the kitchen, my mother looked up and the whole history of his family and her family and ourselves passed over her face in one intuitive waltz of welcome and then of pain." (p. 136)

"My mother's grief was so inconsolable, I thought it must be for a lost soul, someone woven into the fires of hell the way gas was into a flame." (p. 141)

"The Exercises were clean and tonic. A man grew out of them, one whom I had never seen nor known, in all perfection, making choices in accord with that perfection. He was a star, sure and yet troubled, but always reducing his trouble gradually by accumulating certainty, by making decision after decision, knowing the more, the more trouble it took him to know. But when I imagined him so, then I would see myself again in a dither of light and dark, see my father again, see Eddie, re-recognise my mother, see them blur and fade, know that I too was blurred, was astray for not knowing how to choose." (p. 168).

"And then she had married my father, closing herself in forever, haunted forever." (p. 229)

"Maybe it was wise for him, for the whole marriage had been preserved by his not allowing the poison that had been released over all these years, as from a time-release capsule, to ever get to him in a lethal dose." (p. 229)

"Was nothing ever said, in all those years afterwards, as we grew up, as their marriage mutated slowly around the secrets that she kept in a nucleus within herself and that he sensed, even though he also thought he was free of the one secret he knew, since he had told us, false as it was?" (p. 229)



Topics for Discussion

Why do you think that the narrator's first name is never revealed in the novel?

Discuss the significance of the character of Crazy Joe to the story.

How is female symbolism used in the novel?

How do the boy's accounts of his school lessons contribute to the storyline?

Compare and contrast the boy's relationship with his mother and his relationship with his father. Who do you think he is closest to and why?

Discuss the character of the grandfather's political and religious beliefs to the story.

Discuss the ways in which religious and superstitious beliefs co-existed in the boy's community and how they affected people's lives.

Discuss the character of Sergeant Burke and his role in relation to the boy's family history. Do you think his intentions were good when he tried to make peace with the family before his retirement?

What does the story of Brigid McLaughlin and the orphans add to the novel?

Do you think that the boy's father really knew about his wife's relationship with McIlhenny? Explain your answer.

The boy's mother said that the moral of the story about the baby's sock was that "people in small places make big mistakes." Why do you think she said this?