

# **A Swift Pure Cry Study Guide**

**A Swift Pure Cry by Siobhan Dowd**

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## Plot Summary

"A Swift Pure Cry" by Siobhan Dowd, is a novel about coming of age in poverty, the weight of societal views on small town life, and the pain and suffering of life after the death of a loved one. Based on a true story, the book follows one family's struggles through heartache to find peace and resolution.

"A Swift Pure Cry" is a novel about fifteen-year-old Shell Talent's life, following the death of her mother. With a drunk and depressed father, Shell is left to care for her younger brother and sister in extreme poverty, not just as an older sister, but often as a mother figure. Distanced from God by her anger, Shell is surprised when a new pastor, Father Rose, comes to town and is able to guide her to again find God in her life. With few friends, Shell manages to find a kindred soul in Declan Ronin and Bridie Quinn, two other low income children in town. However, when she and Declan begin a romantic fling, she loses her friendship with Bridie, only to also lose Declan as well, as he leaves for America. Troubled, Shell begins speaking with Father Rose as well as thinking about her mother. One evening, after putting on her mother's old dress, her father comes in, drunk, and nearly molests her, not realizing it is his daughter.

A month later, Shell realizes that she is pregnant, but refuses to tell anyone. She hides the pregnancy from everyone, even quitting school when her figure becomes too large, but her younger brother and sister are aware. When she finally does have the child, it is stillborn. Unable to cope, Shell cares for her child for a day before she even admits to herself, and her tormented siblings, that the baby is dead. The family buries the young child in the field, and tries to move on.

Unfortunately, around the same time, another young woman gives birth, and allows the child to freeze to death in a cave. Accused of killing her baby, Shell is jailed, only to find her father has admitted to killing the baby. Confused, Shell confronts her father, only to find out he thinks he impregnated her the night he came in drunk. Shell confesses the name of her baby's father, and leads investigators to the body. Eventually Shell is cleared, and she realizes the killed baby likely belongs to Bridie, also impregnated by Declan. In the end, Shell's father sobers up. Although she is still a mother figure to her siblings, she learns to say goodbye to the past, accept the deaths of her mother and her baby, and embrace the freedom of her future.



# Chapter One through Chapter Five

## Chapter One through Chapter Five Summary

"A Swift Pure Cry" is the story of Shell Talent, a fifteen-year-old young woman in Ireland in 1894 who must overcome suffering, death, alcoholism, family dysfunction, and teenage pregnancy to find her peace. It is a heart-wrenching story that ends in hope and a look for the future.

Chapter One finds Shell Talent with her younger siblings Trix and Jimmy and her father in church. Since her mother died a year ago, her father has been religiously crazy, quitting his job and raising money for the church. Shell, on the other hand, finished with God the day her mother died. As her father winds down the reading at church, Shell is relieved, as he has become highly agitated and excited. When Father Rose, the new curate, begins to preach, Shell finds herself transported to the story he spoke of, and finds herself feeling God. She likens Father Rose to Christ.

In Chapter Two, Joe sends the children out in the rain to gather stones in the field, as he does everyday. Shell knows she once loved her father, and tries to wish away the hate within her. Jimmy, hearing her, begins throwing stones, and Shell allows it, from him and from Trix. Father Rose, driving by, stops however, and chastises them for their play. Asking her name, he leaves her and Shell lays on the ground.

Joe sends Shell with the collection money to deliver to Father Carroll in Chapter Three, warning her not to steal any. She is annoyed, as she herself knows he steals from it, and stole her mother's wedding ring before they buried her. Out of spite, she sprinkles some of the money on the ground for the poor to find. In town, a local shop owner gives her bubblegum, spoiling her a bit. At the priest's house, she expects Nora, the cook, and Father Carroll, but is instead greeted by Father Rose. He invites her in to chat after asking about school, and they talk of her father, and Rose's struggle not to smoke. When pressed as to why Shell was allowing her siblings to throw stones, Shell admits she was praying, and their stones helped her feel her prayers. Rose assures her prayer doesn't have to hurt as he walks her out, and Shell is touched by his kindness.

In Chapter Four, as Joe leads the family in the rosary, Shell daydreams of Father Rose and Jesus. That night, she dreams again of Jesus.

In Chapter Five, Joe forces the children to go to school, as he's had a call about their absence. Shell gets her siblings ready and sends them off, rushing herself to get to school in town. Bridie Quinn, Shell's only friend, chastises her for not wearing a bra, and Shell admits she can't afford one, and doesn't know anything about cup sizes. Bridie offers to steal one for her, although she leaves her alone at afternoon break to talk to Declan Ronan, a boy from their village. Later, Shell and Declan share a cigarette, and Declan harmlessly teases her.



## Chapter One through Chapter Five Analysis

Chapter One introduces several key characters in the story, and provides some of the background needed for the plot. It is clear Shell has taken the death of her mother hard, as has her father. Shell's turning away from God and religion shows the depth of her pain, as she describes the death of her mother coinciding with Jesus leaving her life. Her situation is dire, as is explained through the actions of her father, and it is easy to see his pain, as well. Her father's turn to religion, along with the loss of his job, suggests a deep pain and suffering following his wife's death. Even in this brief chapter, Shell shows herself to be caretaker of her family, a theme that is expanded on throughout the novel.

Shell's immediate connection to Father Rose shows her own need for kindness and compassion. She compares Rose to Jesus, and it is Rose that allows Shell to shut off her life, and return to her faith. Rose's kind words and gentle behavior, so opposite what Shell is used to, allow her to again feel a love for God she believed she had lost. This theme of religious ebb and flow continues throughout the novel.

Chapter Two introduces Shell's father's behaviors at home. Although a religious man, it is also obvious he is not a caring father, and that he physically abuses his children, and pays them little attention other than to do what is absolutely necessary. Shell's feelings about her father, a mix of love and hate, show she has memories of a life that was lost when her mother passed. One can sense Shell's longing for her life before the death, and her feelings of sympathy and guilt for Jimmy and Trix shows she thinks of them now as children more than siblings. She knows Jimmy and Trix have had things rough, and she believes in taking their stones, she is helping them rid themselves of the pain that exists within them. Father Rose's appearance at this point foreshadows his questions about their play activities later in the novel.

Chapter Three reveals more about Father Rose, and Joe Talent, Shell's father. First, Shell's father is a desperate, drunken man, and Shell's spite for him in part clearly stems from his theft of his wife's ring on the day of her funeral. Shell doesn't think much of her father, or his "collections" for charity, and her own defiant move to help the poor shows this clearly. The shopkeeper in town who gives Shell bubblegum symbolizes those who feel badly for Shell and her family, and who are kind to them. Shell's reaction is one of innocence as she blushes, showing her to be a good person.

At the priest's house, Rose's questions about Shell going to school foreshadow his calling the school later in the novel. His questions also show he doesn't respect Joe, and although he knows Joe collects for charity, he also thinks Joe should be home, caring for his children. It is clear Rose feels sorry for Shell, but at the same time, it is also clear Shell is beginning to grow a crush on Father Rose. Additionally, her admission that she was using the stones to help her feel her prayers shows her belief that God is harsh, a belief Rose seeks to change. His kindness, however, only furthers Shell's crush on him. Chapter Four, while short, solidifies the theme that Shell has a



crush on Rose, seeming to link him with Jesus in her mind. As Father Rose brought faith back into Shell's life, she naturally equates Father Rose with Jesus himself.

Chapter Five reveals that Rose did in fact call the school about Shell and her siblings, implying he does care about their actions. Again in this chapter, readers see Shell in a parent role, but at the same time, this chapter also shows her to be a naive young woman. Her lack of knowledge about bigger vocabulary words, combined with her lack of knowledge about her own breasts, suggest Shell is not well educated in the ways of the world. This foreshadows her lack of knowledge about pregnancy later in the novel. Bridie Quinn is also introduced in this chapter, and it is clear that while she is a friend to Shell, she is also volatile. Her dealings with Declan, when combined with his flirting with Shell later, suggest problems on the horizon for these friends.



# Chapter Six through Chapter Ten

## Chapter Six through Chapter Ten Summary

In Chapter Six, Bridie and Shell steal a bra, and Bridie leaves Shell to go on a date in town. Shell, trying on the bra, misses her bus, but eventually makes it to pick up Trix and Jimmy from school, where the teacher asks about her father. Shell defends him, but knows when they arrive home he will not be there, as it is his drinking night. The children play happily after dinner, but eventually, Shell leaves the younger ones, so she can examine herself in the bra. Looking into mirrors in her parent's room, she decides to try on the only remaining clothing item of her mother's, a pink dress. Shell imagines her mother's spirit in the room, and her smile in the mirror, when suddenly her father arrives. Trembling, he reaches out to her, calling her by her mother's name, and Shell flees the room.

In Chapter Seven, Shell changes out of the dress, and fetches her younger siblings from their outdoor play. After they are in bed, she returns to the fields, and prays to God for him to take her father, as his life is a misery to himself and his family. She hears an owl, sounding as though it says "wait", and she believes Jesus is speaking to her.

Chapter Eight finds Shell with Declan again at school, where he teaches her about prostitutes. He also tells her that a book he recently read discusses Jesus' marriage to Mary, and their child. He soon questions whether Shell would consider sleeping with him, and after teasing a bit, he asks her for a kiss. Expecting a small kiss, Shell agrees, only to find Declan French kissing her. She flees, and sees Bridie, watching angrily. Bridie doesn't show back up in class, and Shell is surprised to find herself tingling at the thought of Declan.

In Chapter Nine, following end of school mass where Shell compares Father Rose to Declan, Shell leaves to find Bridie waiting for her. Bridie pounces and beats on Shell, claiming Declan is going out with her and that Shell is trying to steal him, until Father Rose separates the girls. Father Rose gives Shell a ride to pick up Jimmy and Trix, and she is surprised to find he drives a beat up, purple car filled with gum wrappers, maps, and other debris. Named Jezebel, the car starts difficultly, but does finally start. The two drive the long way, by the coast, and talk of Rose's brother, who died of meningitis as a young boy. Father Rose pulls over to wait for the rain to start, and Shell realizes he is only twenty five. Asked if she is happy, Shell has difficulty replying, but does note she and Father rose have many things in common. Beginning their drive again, they see a beautiful rainbow, and Father Rose reminds shell Ireland is beautiful.

Chapter Ten finds Jimmy ill as Shell tries to get him to go to bed. He mutters about wanting his mother and rejects Shell, but she knows he is very ill. When her father doesn't come home, Shell puts Trix to bed, and waits, thinking of the good and bad portions of her day.



## Chapter Six through Chapter Ten Analysis

Chapter Six shows the depths of the Talent family's grief at the loss of their loved one. Bridie proves to be at least a caring friend as she helps Shell steal a bra, but this chapter also shows Bridie is more interested in whomever she is dating. This foreshadows she and Shell's argument later in the novel regarding Declan. Shell's reaction to her new bra shows she is maturing, and slowly becoming a woman, foreshadowing her physical relation with Declan. Shell's maturity also shows with the wave of love she feels for her siblings, but unfortunately, this scene also reveals another individual who is judgmental of the Talent's, but unwilling to help. The teacher realizes Shell is caring for her younger siblings in absence of a father, but does nothing to help them. This shows the small town attitude that eventually contributes to Shell's troubles later in the novel. At home, Shell again shows an interest in her figure, showing her as a maturing young woman, and the putting on of her mother's dress shows she is beginning to see herself in a more mature manner as well. Unfortunately, her father's reaction, in part due to alcohol and in part due to Shell's similarity to her mother, foreshadow problems, as Joe clearly misses Moira, and drinks enough to possibly mistake his daughter for his deceased wife. The pain in Joe is clear, and shows the depth of his torment over the loss of his wife.

Chapter Seven reveals how tormented Shell herself is over her father's behaviors and actions. Her prayers to God to take her father show she understands his pain, but also that she understands how his actions and behaviors contribute to the pain and suffering of the family. Shell is unhappy, but her interpretation of the owl's message to her show that subconsciously, she knows she must deal with the situation. At the same time, her belief that Jesus speaks through the owl shows a strengthening of her faith.

Chapter Eight begins the affair between Shell and Declan, although at first this is minor, as well as foreshadows the loss of Bridie as a friend. Declan shows himself to be well educated and seemingly caring, but also somewhat sexist. He clearly is interested in Shell, but her lack of real world knowledge hinders her to protect herself from him. His seemingly innocent advances prove to be rather serious, and Shell finds herself both confused and excited. Had she had more friends or females to talk with, Shell may have been able to stop events, but she doesn't understand what is happening. Bridie witnessing the kiss has clearly upset her, foreshadowing not only her fight with Shell, but also the knowledge that she and Declan were serious in their own relations, as well.

Chapter Nine continues the drama with Bridie, as she reveals why she is so angry with Shell. The complete knowledge that Bridie and Declan are having a relationship foreshadows the knowledge later that Bridie was also pregnant. This chapter also reveals more about Father Rose. He is a caring young man, but he is also a modern man. His addiction to cigarettes, his lack of organization, and the name of his car, all show Father Rose to be different than Father Carroll. This leads to problems for him later, as the town is not accepting of change. His talk of his brother shows he questions his own role as a priest, but also foreshadows Jimmy's illness in the next chapters.





Finally, Shell's inability to answer if she is happy shows she has difficulty even understanding happiness in her current life.

In Chapter Ten, Jimmy's response to Shell shows he too misses his mother. His illness is clearly concerning, and Shell's thoughts about the day show she struggles between her happiness and her misery. Again, Joe's lack of parenting puts Shell in a bad circumstance, foreshadowing her parenting role in the upcoming chapters.



# Chapter Eleven through Chapter Sixteen

## Chapter Eleven through Chapter Sixteen Summary

In Chapter Eleven, Joe Talent returns home, very drunk. Shell serves his meal as he explains that he went to call on Nora, Father Carroll's housekeeper, but she wouldn't go out with him. He claims he did it for Shell and her siblings, to find a new mother, but Shell is shocked, and angered at his actions. When she protests, Joe grabs her and forces her to swear not to tell anyone. She agrees, and he goes into the night, crying. Shell cleans up, locking the bolt to her bedroom door, and sleeps.

Chapter Twelve finds Shell waking in the middle of the night to hear Jimmy moaning, sweating in a high fever. Shell, fearing meningitis, flees the house to run to town to call on Dr. Fallon. Angry at first, Fallon soon realizes Shell is in panic, and agrees to go with her. At the house, Fallon finds Jimmy has an infected cut that needs attention. Fallon notes Shell did well by calling on him, as the cut had been infected for several days, and Shell feels ashamed she didn't notice. When the doctor goes to speak with Joe, he comes back quickly, clearly upset at the obvious situation. He gives Shell the instructions, and wishes her luck, understanding Shell is fairly on her own. Jimmy wakes, and explains that he cut himself on a rock he collected, and Shell promises him a present if he gets better. He asks for a bucket and spade, and she promises as she strokes him softly, feeling her mother all around them.

In Chapter Thirteen, Shell finds the money she spread on the ground, and steals some more, in order to buy Jimmy his gift. At the store, Mr. McGrath sells her the bucket and spade, and throws another in for free with a smile. On the way home she stops at the church, but hides when she hears Father Rose and Father Carroll nearby, talking about her father. Carroll explains that Joe is lost without his wife, and that they are very poor. When Rose complains the children are missing school, Carroll agrees, noting they should pray about it. Rose, on the other hand, says he rang the school, who rang Joe, and Shell now understands why her father wanted them at school. Carroll is angry, noting that Rose should leave the situation alone, that those in Coolbar take care of their own. He also admonishes that Rose should be careful, and not give rides to Shell, as the town may think they are having improper relations. Carroll also admits he knows Joe steals from the charity money, but that since he himself is poor, Carroll does nothing. Carroll leaves, and Father Rose cries quietly. Shell sneaks away, and returns home.

Chapter Fourteen finds Shell and her siblings doing laundry on Maundy Thursday, while Joe sleeps until four. Rising, he takes the children to church, where Shell and the other children are asked by Father Rose to play the apostles. One by one, he washes the feet of the children, much to the surprise of the congregation. Shell finds herself again comparing Father Rose to Jesus.



In Chapter Fifteen, at church again, Shell tries to make up with Bridie, but Bridie wants nothing to do with her, or, she claims, with Declan. Declan, on the other hand, winks at her, and gives her lewd gestures. After church, Joe heads to the bar while Shell is followed by Declan, who begs her to meet him in Duggan's field. After teasing her a bit, he leaves, and Mrs. Duggan arrives to offer the kids a ride to her house for tea. Mrs. Duggan acts much like a mother to the children, as she herself was best friends with Moira. After complimenting her, Mrs. Duggan loans her a bike, so she can ride to the shore, and spend some time alone. As she walks the beach, she sees her mother in the distance, but blinks, and she is gone.

Chapter Sixteen finds Shell on Holy Saturday caring for the children as Joe sleeps. Later, she dresses in the pink dress again, but runs when her father wakes to go into town. She returns to the house and falls asleep, dreaming of Declan and herself in the fields, and she and Father Rose together, in love with one another. In the dream, she arrives at her mother's grave, where she hears her mother singing. She is transported to her room, where she hears her mother coming in, but realizes she is dead. When she wakes, she realizes her father is in her room, asking for Moira, naked. He touches her thigh and reaches for her, but she slips away quickly, and bolts from the room. Joe sits on the bed, sad, while Shell quietly closes the door behind her. She cries in the living room, missing her mother, and decides to take a walk. In Duggan's field, she finds Declan, waiting for her.

## Chapter Eleven through Chapter Sixteen Analysis

Chapter Eleven again shows the depths of pain and suffering Joe is in. His alcoholism is clearly getting worse, and his attempts to hit on other women, combined with his guilt over this, shows he is torn between his deceased wife and his current life. Shell can see his pain, and feels for him, but her bolting of the door shows she also knows he is a danger.

Chapter Twelve reveals again that Shell is the parent figure in the family. Her immediate trip to the doctor, despite dangers to herself, shows her level of responsibility for Jimmy, as does her shame at not realizing his injury. However, the doctor also represents again those in society who believe they "take care" of their own, but in reality, merely ignore the situation. Dr. Fallon sees that Joe is unfit, and sees that Shell is parenting the household, but he does nothing to help her. Her dealings with Jimmy in this chapter are touching, and show her love for the children, and also show her own missing of her mother.

Chapter Thirteen continues this trend of Shell parenting her siblings, as she struggles to find the money for a gift for Jimmy. She is resourceful in a way poor children can be, in that she can find money in her father's belonging, and can manage without assistance, although it is difficult. Mr. McGrath shows he, and a few others, do what they can to help her without drawing attention, but again, McGrath does nothing in terms of long term help for Shell or her family. This same thread continues when Shell hears Rose and Carroll discussing her family. It is his duty, Father Rose feels, to care for those in the



community, but Father Carroll believes in staying out of things. His knowledge that Joe is stealing, and drinking, and that Shell cares for the siblings, should prompt him to action, but instead, he chastises Rose for wanting to interfere. Rose is frustrated as a result, and this foreshadows his eventual feelings of distance from God and the church. Carroll's comments about perceived misbehavior foreshadow the belief in town that Rose may be the father later in the novel. Finally, Shell's reaction to Father Rose's tears show she still puts Father Rose on a pedestal. This too is continued in Chapter Fourteen, when Shell compares Father Rose to Jesus. Again, the congregation sees Father Rose as a threat, in that he is modern and less willing to stay in the confines of church culture. This foreshadows the town's eventual turning on him by the end of the novel.

In Chapter Fifteen, Declan again shows his interest in Shell, and it is clear Bridie and Shell will not be friends. Bridie's reaction to Shell may suggest by this time that she is already aware she is pregnant, but this is never confirmed. Declan's actions foreshadow their eventual sexual relations Easter morning. For the first time, this chapter also reveals there are those who genuinely care for the Talent's in a parenting way. Mrs. Duggan cares deeply for the kids, as is shown through her actions. Her comments to Shell not only show she, too, sees her as a maturing woman, but also explain why Joe keeps envisioning her as Moira in his drunkenness. Shell's constant visions of her mother may be a reflection of seeing her mother in herself.

Chapter Sixteen culminates Shell's romantic feelings for Father Rose and Declan, as well as her maturation into a woman. Her dressing in the pink dress reminds her of her femininity, and her dreams show a longing for love, affection, and physical attention. When she wakes however, it is her father who stands before her. Joe believes he is looking at his wife, and is clearly desiring her in his drunken state. Had Shell not been so quick, it is unthinkable what may have happened, but Shell's fast thinking saves her, and she is able to escape. It is here she finally breaks down, able to admit she misses her mother, and the life she used to have. This longing for affection and stability is what leads her, consciously or unconsciously, to Duggan's field to meet Declan. Knowing how she has been feeling, and knowing Declan is attracted to her, the situation foreshadows their sexual activities.



# Chapter Seventeen through Chapter Twenty-Two

## Chapter Seventeen through Chapter Twenty-Two Summary

Chapter Seventeen reveals Declan and Shell are sexually involved, privately, as demanded by Declan. When pressed for who she likes best in the world, Shell is promised a bra by Declan, and she lets him know she is a size bigger than she used to be. The two playfully talk back and forth, with Declan asking Shell to declare him the finest, and Shell asking the same of him. They make love as Shell says what he asks, and she agrees to continue their sessions. Declan does give her funds for a new bra and leaves before she realizes he never told her he loved her. In four months, he has never said anything remotely close. She smiles, and assumes his lack of words is simply a boy thing.

In Chapter Eighteen, Shell collects the children from Mrs. Duggans, and finds she is ravenously hungry, and nearly happy at the idea that her missing father has died. She sits after dinner and thinks of she and Declan, but her thoughts are scattered with fear, as she has missed her period for several months. Her mother had explained her menstrual cycle before she died, and Shell knows she is rightfully concerned about being pregnant. Her father arrives home after two days, driven by Father Carroll, and yells for Shell.

Chapter Nineteen finds Shell standing up to her father, and holding her ground as he acts to strike her. He lowers his hand, and simply tells her to get out. She does, but spies on her father and finds him sneaking a drink from a bottle hidden in the piano. Later, she sneaks in and finds whiskey, along with a stash of money in the piano. Although she aches to steal the money, she realizes the one she could share it with, Bridie, is no longer her friend, so she returns it to the piano, and leaves everything as it was.

In Chapter Twenty, Shell travels to the mobile library, and peruses the books. When the operator leaves, Shell looks at a book on the human body, and steals it to read further. Afraid she will be caught, she leaves hurriedly. In Chapter Twenty One, she is walking home when she finds Father Rose, his car seemingly dead. Shell reflects that Father Rose hasn't been himself, hasn't seemed as passionate about his faith, and has seemed distant. He mentions he would give her a ride, and then trails off, and she knows he means he can't because of Father Carroll. She leaves, and as she does, Father Rose calls to her, blessing her. Shell feels the blessing deep within her, and she smiles at his kindness. She continues to think of him as his car starts and the two part ways.



Chapter Twenty Two finds Shell reading and rereading the anatomy book, and convincing herself she isn't pregnant. A conversation with Mrs. Duggan nearly convinces her, as Mrs. Duggan claims to always begin to dislike salmon when she is pregnant. As Shell still likes salmon, she figures she is safe. Back at home, however, she begins to feel the fear again as she realizes it has been several months, and her stomach is more pronounced.

## Chapter Seventeen through Chapter Twenty-Two Analysis

The relationship between Declan and Shell by Chapter Seventeen is not surprising, but does foreshadow Shell's eventual pregnancy, as does her growing breast size, and the knowledge that they have been having sexual relations for over four months. It is also clear from this chapter that although Declan may care about Shell, he has a reason for keeping her a secret. This foreshadows the knowledge he is still seeing Bridie. His refusal to tell Shell she is important to him should be concerning for her, but Shell, having Joe for a father, is used to not hearing words of affection. She has convinced herself things are fine.

By Chapter Eighteen, this fear is realized, as Shell herself begins to openly recognize her failed menstruation. Her hunger, her mood swings, and her missed period all lend to the idea that Shell is, in fact, pregnant. This foreshadows her eventual giving birth. Additionally, her father's arrival back home after two days, driven by Father Carroll, show again that the priest does little to help the Shell family other than to shove the entire situation under the rug. Joe, for his part, shows he is not as powerful as he once was, as he backs down in Chapter Nineteen. His sneaking of whiskey shows he is an alcoholic, and his hoarding of money shows he knows he is giving his family little, but keep plenty for himself, so he can continue to drink. Shell's refusal to take the money shows her again as a responsible parenting figure to her siblings. Chapter Twenty reveals Shell is more worried about pregnancy than she lets on, however, as she goes so far as to steal a book on the topic.

Chapter Twenty One reveals Father Rose may be having a crisis of faith. Shell's note about his lack of passion and his distance from her ever since Carroll's remarks suggest that his lack of support to help the Talent family may have impacted Rose more than Carroll intended. Rose knows now that Carroll refuses to do anything to help, and he likely feels a lack of faith as a result. His role, he believes is to help those in need, and he has difficulty simply ignoring the problem. Having been told to avoid Shell, he is likely torn between his desire to help, and his position in the church. His blessing to her shows, however, that he still cares, and this is enough to please Shell. This pleasure is short lived, however, when Mrs. Duggan reveals she is pregnant in Chapter Twenty Two, and Shell again begins to question her own situation, knowing her body is changing.



# Chapter Twenty-Three through Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Chapter Twenty-Three through Chapter Twenty-Seven Summary

Chapter Twenty-Three finds Shell surprised when she arrives at Duggan's field to find the crops have been cut, so there is no cover. Soon, Declan comes in his car, and drives her to Goat Island along the back roads, and takes her swimming. Suddenly, Shell feels something moving inside of her, and she knows she is pregnant. Ignoring it, she and Declan swim, and he takes her to a cave he used to play in. He admits couples now come here to make love, and she questions inwardly if he has brought Bridie here. Shell begins to sing, and Declan again makes love to her, as she thinks of other things to keep her mind off her pregnancy. Declan orgasms, and as they relax, Declan talks of Ireland as a hellhole, and he notes Coolbar is the worst, as the inhabitants are uppity. He drives her back to town, stopping on the edge to let her out. As she leaves, he grabs her hand for the first time, and tells her that she is in a class of her own. She asks if they will see one another Thursday, and he is unusually vague. He yells a goodbye as he drives away, and she feels the baby again inside her. The next day, Shell learns Declan has run away to America.

In Chapter Twenty Four, Shell returns to school, realizing her clothes are now too tight. Talking to another girl at lunch, she learns some are saying Bridie has gone to Kilbran, but in reality, some think she ran away to America with Declan. The young girl also explains Bridie and Declan were still going together throughout the summer. Shell leaves school, dazed, thinking of Bridie and Declan, and she formulates a plan. In Chapter Twenty Five, Shell readies herself to leave, feeling Mam's spirit all around her. As she prepares to go to London for an abortion, she steals money from home, but turns around after only making it to the field. She remembers her siblings, her mother, and Jesus speaking to her, and she returns home, and bakes scones.

In Chapter Twenty Six, Shell decides to quit school, and her father only begins to return home on the weekends. He is distant, and often looks at her strangely, before leaving for the tavern. She finds she is angry at Declan, but at the same time, realizes he didn't know she was pregnant when he left. She wants him to succeed, she discovers. It is not long before Trix and Jimmy notice Shell's increasing stomach, but they agree to keep a secret, knowing Joe will kill her if he finds out. Shell explains she will be having the baby at home, without hospital help.

Chapter Twenty Seven finds Jimmy and Trix helping Shell hide her pregnancy, but supporting her emotionally. Joe becomes even more distant and drunk, and Shell knows something is preying on him. He tries to lead them in evening rosaries, but eventually those stop, as well. He even allows her to stop attending church. She begins wearing a huge raincoat to hide her stomach, and is grateful few people ask why.





## Chapter Twenty-Three through Chapter Twenty-Seven Analysis

Chapter Twenty Three confirms what readers already know, that Shell is, in fact, pregnant. It is also clear that even Shell knows Declan is less than honest, as she thinks about Bridie and Declan at the cave. Declan's comments about his hatred of Ireland foreshadow his departure later in the novel, and his comments about Coolbar confirm that the town often sees everyone but the finest as outsiders. However, his actions as he drops her off so they are not seen together is equally terrible, as is his way of saying goodbye. His seemingly tender moment is later revealed to be a permanent goodbye, and although it is somewhat tender, in reality, it is clear here that to Declan, Shell is merely a pastime. This is further revealed in Chapter Twenty Four, as Shell learns Birdie and Declan were romantically together over the summer. The idea that they have run off together is plausible, but not likely and even Shell knows this.

Chapter Twenty Five shows that Shell is more responsible than even she would like to be. She wants to get an abortion, but her own conscious is keeping her from it. Again, when Shell's subconscious is against her actions, Shell senses or sees her mother. It is as though by thinking of her mother, Shell is able to do what she needs to. By Chapter Twenty Six, Shell has accepted her pregnancy, but there is something wrong with Joe. More and more distant, and seemingly supportive of his daughter's urge to always stay home, it appears Joe knows something is wrong. This foreshadows knowledge later that he realized she was pregnant, and thought he was the cause. At the same time, Shell is resigned to her fate, knowing she has to do this with only her younger siblings for help. By Chapter Twenty Seven, Joe's behavior clearly shows a sense of guilt, and Shell is bound to soon give birth, forcing the issue to the forefront.





# Chapter Twenty-Eight through Chapter Thirty-One

## Chapter Twenty-Eight through Chapter Thirty-One Summary

Chapter Twenty-Eight finds Shell trying to find a way to buy presents for her siblings, as her dad stays in Cork most of the time, Shell supposes with a woman. One evening, Jimmy explains he saw a cow being born, and that it didn't look easy. Shell notes that birthing a human baby is easier. When asked what she will do with it to avoid detection, she claims she has it worked out. Chapter Twenty Nine reveals, however, that she has no idea what to do. She learns about the birthing process, but she begins to fear something will go wrong. Shell wants to tell a friend, but has no one, although she tries to tell her mother's spirit. Mrs. Duggan is in the hospital, having issues with her own pregnancy. She thinks to tell Father Rose, and even goes to the church, but when she finds no one in the confessional, she gives up, losing her faith. Reaching the outside door, Father Rose comes in and asks if she'd like to confess, but she loses her nerve. Outside, she feels the beginnings of cramps, and she realizes she is still on her own.

In Chapter Thirty, Shell begins to cramp further, the pain forcing her to her knees. Her siblings look on, trying to help, as she bathes, walks, and tries to stop the pain. Trix and Jimmy know what is happening, and prepare for the coming of the baby. Jimmy takes her to the bedroom, but she ends up on the floor by 2 am, giving birth. She blacks out, and sees her mother, coaxing her to push, and helping her through the pain. When she is conscious, Jimmy is wiping her baby clean, although the umbilical cord is around the neck. They slice it, and tuck the silent baby carefully into a blanket, giving it to Shell, and she names the silent baby Rose.

Chapter Thirty-One reveals Jimmy and Trix trying to take the baby several times. Shell notices the baby is cold and not eating, but thinks little of the problem. She sings to it, but her siblings cry. Jimmy tries to explain to Shell that the calf he saw being born died, but the mother was too out of it to notice. Shell finally brings herself to look at her sleeping baby, only to find the baby is dead. They bury the small baby in the back yard, and surround the grave with stones.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight through Chapter Thirty-One Analysis

Chapter Twenty-Eight again shows Shell as the parent figure, as she tries desperately to find presents for her siblings while still trying to work out her own pregnancy. Joe's absence is difficult, as the money is running out, but it is also less negative. Jimmy's concern over the difficult birthing of the calf foreshadow Shell's own difficult birth later in



the book. Chapter Twenty Nine confirms that Shell doesn't know what to do about the future, although she is learning as much as possible about how to give birth. Once can surmise, from Jimmy's tale to Shell's own concerns to Mrs. Duggans problems, that Shell is going to have difficulty. Her desire to share is natural, and her inability to tell her mother is heart breaking.

Her decision to tell Father Rose serves two purposes. First, this shows Shell trusts Father Rose with her deepest secrets. Secondly, it offers readers a chance to see Father Rose's dwindling faith. It is clear based on his comments that he is becoming angry with the church, and the way it functions. Just as Shell lost her faith when her mother died, Father Rose has lost his faith when those who should help others, like Father Carroll, choose instead to turn a blind eye. The cramps Shell feels at the end of the chapter signify the upcoming labor, that readers witness in Chapter Thirty. The birth is obviously a difficult one, and Shell's struggle to birth the baby with only two young siblings to help foreshadows the death of the baby. Her visions of her mother again suggest Shell uses her mother as a guide when life is difficult. Finally, the silence of the baby indicate subtly that the baby is dead, as does the umbilical cord around the neck.

Chapter Thirty-Two confirms the death of Rose. Jimmy and Trix understand the baby is deceased, but Shell is unable to face this fact. She cares for it, notices the lack of feeding, and the lack of sound and warmth, but she doesn't consciously realize her baby is dead. It is Jimmy's story about the mother cow that forces Shell to look at her situation, and it is then she realizes the baby has died. Her inability to cry merely shows her exhaustion, while the burial of the baby shows she loves the child.



# Chapter Thirty-Two through Chapter Thirty-Six

## Chapter Thirty-Two through Chapter Thirty-Six Summary

In Chapter Thirty-Two, Joe returns home and although he questions his daughter about her health, he does not press her for answers. Shell finds she is hardened by the death of her child, and severely depressed. She steals Christmas gifts, not caring if she is caught. On Christmas Eve, the sheriff arrives at the door, and says they have found a baby in the cave by the beach, and it is dead. Shell is confused, but Joe tells her not to say anything, as they are being taken in for questioning.

Shell is left alone in Chapter Thirty-Three, as doctors examine her and police ask questions, while her father is interrogated in another room. Shell is questioned by a man named Molly, who cruelly explains that her father told them "everything". Shell admits she has had a baby, but when Molly tries to berate her into claiming she didn't want it, Shell presses back finally, sobbing that she loved her baby. In Chapter Thirty-Four, Shell hears Molly and another investigator talking, and learns the baby they found was a boy, and that they think she or her father killed the child. Shell decides to give her statement to the female investigator, and tells them everything from the stealing of the body book through the burial. The woman asks how the body got moved to the cave, and Shell notes that as far as she knows, her baby is still in the field. She admits her father was not at home, but the woman doesn't believe her story.

In Chapter Thirty-Five, Molloy returns, furious as he doesn't believe her story. He explains to her that the baby they found died from exposure, as it was alive at the time it was put in the cave. When asked if it was the crying she couldn't stand, Shell speaks out, noting that her child never cried, as it was dead at birth. As Molloy begins to explain what the dead baby looked like, Shell backs away, hands over her ears, silently screaming and sees two spots of light that she believes are the spirits of her baby and her mother. She feels again at peace.

In Chapter Thirty-Six, Shell learns her father confessed to killing her baby, hence the confusion. He wants to see her, but Shell is more worried about her siblings, who she learns are staying at the Duggans'. Soon Father Rose arrives to help Shell, noting he has spoken with a lawyer to get the facts he needed on her case. She tells Father Rose everything, and he blames himself and the town, noting they let her down. He realizes when he saw her in church, she had come for help, and he chastises himself for not seeing things clearly. Rose asks who the father is, and if it is "someone close", but Shell reassures him it is no one close. Shortly, he leaves, only to return to take her to the Duggan's, as he has fought for and won her release.



## Chapter Thirty-Two through Chapter Thirty-Six Analysis

Chapter Thirty-Two begins to foreshadow not only the upcoming drama of the case against Shell and her father, but also of the true reasoning behind her father's severe alcoholism as of late. It becomes clear from Joe's actions that he knows something has happened. It is suggested that he knows the "headaches" Shell claimed to have were a ruse for her pregnancy, but he does not press her. The reasons for this are given later in the novel. For her part, Shell's dark depression is expected, following the loss of her baby, and when considering her hormonal changes. Even with these concerns, however, she still steals gifts for her siblings, again showing her as a mother figure to them. The arrival of the Sheriff and his information about the dead baby suggest there is a mix up, and Joe's admonishment to Shell not to talk suggests he believes she is already guilty of killing a baby.

Chapter Thirty-Three reveals the nature of why Shell is in the police station. They firmly believe she had a baby, took the child up to the cave, and left it, or that her father did so. She'll responses at first show a lethargy typical of depression, but her strong reaction to Molloy's accusations again reaffirm she loved her baby. Chapter Thirty Four furthers this concept, in that Shell's willingness to tell her story shows she wants the truth to be known. The questions from the investigators show they don't believe her, but readers can see clearly there is a confusion, as there are two different babies being discussed. This foreshadows the discovery later of Bridie as the other mother, and the autopsies of the two children.

Shell's reaction in Chapter Thirty-Five is understandable, as she is not only being accused of killing a baby she loved, but also cruelly being given details of the baby's death. Molloy, convinced she is lying, does everything to break her down, but Shell's strength is solid, in that she knows the truth. She again relies on the "spirit" of her mother, and now her baby, to help her through the pain, and by the end of the chapter, her agony turns to peace as she is able to rely on them for strength.

Chapter Thirty-Six reveals part of the confusion, as readers learn Joe has confessed. This foreshadows conversations in later chapters that explain why Joe believes he is responsible. Here again, Shell shows her parental love for her siblings as she worries more about them than her own situation. Father Rose's arrival is not surprising, as throughout the novel, he has been trying to help Shell, but has failed. His comments that the town let her down show he understands that many in town could have prevented this, but chose not to involve themselves. Father Rose's questions about the father indicate he thinks Joe may be involved, but Shell's words convince him otherwise. Father Rose steps up and helps Shell finally in this chapter, showing he is choosing her over the town gossip. This foreshadows his own fight with his faith later.



# Chapter Thirty-Seven through Chapter Forty Three

## Chapter Thirty-Seven through Chapter Forty Three Summary

In the car in Chapter Thirty-Seven, Father Rose admits he has gone back to smoking, and as he drives her to the Duggan's, she asks to stop at the house, so that she can take him to the grave and he can bless her daughter. After clearing the dishes, and picking up the gifts, the two walk to the field, where Father Rose blesses the site. In Chapter Thirty Eight, Shell is taken to the Duggan's, where the sight of the Duggan's new baby causes Shell to have a small breakdown. She is taken upstairs to bed, and in her mind, she is finally able to put her deceased baby to sleep.

In Chapter Thirty-Nine, Shell thinks about the situation all of Christmas, and although she knows her father lied trying to save her, she doesn't understand why. The next day, she asks Mrs. Duggan if she can go see him, and she agrees, noting that he did call on Christmas. Shel remembers a happier time, when she, her dad, and her mom were at the beach, and she is saddened by the memories. Mrs. Duggan reassures her she will be a mother again.

In Chapter Forty, Shell goes to see her father in jail, only to find him somewhat confused. He keeps repeating that he did this to her, and that he knew, and didn't do anything to help her. He admits he has been in hell, only that for him, hell was when he believed Shell was Moira, and he woke to an empty house, unsure of where he was, as he was in Shell's bed. Shell asks him to retract his statement, but he refuses. As she leaves, he asks her to bring whiskey, then hurls insults at her. The guard explains it is alcohol withdrawal making him behave as he is.

Chapter Forty-One finds Father Rose and Molloy arguing about the truth of Shell's story, and to prove it, Shell is asked to allow them to dig up her child. Reluctantly she agrees, and watches as they pull her baby's body from the ground. However, Molloy orders the body taken for tests to find out how it died, as he still doesn't believe the story. The following day, in Chapter Forty-Two, Shell reads the newspaper and discovers Molloy is now claiming the babies were twins, and that Joe has altered his confession to admit to killing both. Pathologists are working on the two babies to determine if they are, in fact, twins, and how each died. Shell laughs at the ridiculousness of the situation, and briefly thinks she might know where the other child came from, but the thought disappears. She leaves to visit Joe to see why he confessed again.

In Chapter Forty-Three, Shell takes whiskey to her father, realizing he will confess to anything while having DTs from withdrawal. However, her father smashes the bottle against the wall, proud of himself for being able to resist the temptation. He explains he had been seeing a prostitute in Cork, but he couldn't afford her. He says that it all



started when he saw Shell in the pink dress that her mother wore the night she said she would marry him. She had never worn it since, and he had kept it when she died, as it meant so much to him, as it was unpolluted by the years of his alcoholism. He also explains that his alcoholism caused Moira to be disappointed in him, and that he burned all her belongings after she died, as they make him ill with remembrance of her. He describes the night she agreed to marry, and sorrowfully expresses his deep love for her. She leaves him in his pain.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven through Chapter Forty Three Analysis

Chapter Thirty-Seven is heartbreaking, but at the same time, beautiful. Father Rose's blessing of the deceased child allows Shell to finally put her baby to rest in Chapter Thirty-Eight. The pain of looking at Mrs. Duggan's new baby shows, however, that Shell is not yet over her stress and pain, and that she still needs to heal, both physically and mentally. Chapter Thirty Nine shows she is beginning this journey, as she struggles to understand her father's actions. Her memories of her mother in happier times reminds readers that Shell knows and has experienced love and affection, making her recent life more unbearable.

Chapter Forty reveals the true depth of Joe's alcoholism, in that he is suffering from withdrawal. His comments about his guilt in the situation shows he clearly believes himself to be responsible in some way. When he reveals his deep fear about waking in Shell's bed, readers can infer his true concern, that he is responsible for Shell's pregnancy, and therefore, anything she may have done to the baby in response. His craving for whiskey shows his deep addiction, while his hurtful comments are merely a reflection of that addiction.

The cruel excavation of Shell's baby in Chapter Forty-One is terrible, and extremely difficult for her, but it is also necessary to prove the situation. Unfortunately, Molloy is so bent on not being wrong, he goes even further, simply to prove his point, that the babies could be twins. Such an action foreshadows the later investigation of Molloy's handling of the case, as even when he is consistently proved wrong, he still continues to push. This is further suggested when the whole story breaks in Chapter Forty Two, and Shell learns of her father's new confession. Her brief thoughts of the other baby, and the baby's mother, foreshadow her deeper contemplation and realizations later in the book about Bridie.

Chapter Forty-Three again shows Joe is crippled at the loss of his wife, and shows that many of Shell's ideas about her father are untrue. His suffering from DTs is severe, but he still manages to resist temptation, showing he is at least trying to succeed. His admissions to Shell about the prostitute, and about Moira's dislike of his drinking, all show Joe is tormented, both at the loss of his wife as well as the memories of the pain he caused her. His guilt is so tremendous, he finds it difficult to exist. One can see that until he is able to put Moira behind him, he will never be free.





# Chapter Forty Four through Chapter Forty Eight

## Chapter Forty Four through Chapter Forty Eight Summary

In Chapter Forty-Four, Shell learns there are some in town who believe Father Rose is the father of Shell's child. Mrs. Duggan tries to convince Shell to reveal the father, but she refuses. She thinks about the Ronan family, and how they would never believe Declan was the father, or would even go out with someone like Shell. She vows to herself she will only reveal Declan if the rumors of Father Rose continue. In Chapter Forty five, Shell attends church where everyone stares, but she doesn't care. After, she stops Mrs. Quinn, Bridie's mother, and asks of her. Mrs. Quinn claims she is helping an aunt at a B&B out of town. Shell is happy, thinking Bridie is bored and taken care of. As she sits in the car and waits for the Duggan's, she suddenly realizes that while the town thinks Father Rose is responsible for her pregnancy, Father Rose thinks it is her own father. She also finally realizes her father thinks he is responsible as well, as he thinks he impregnated her the night he mistook her for Moira. He doesn't realize Shell escaped him.

In Chapter Forty-Six, Shell visits her father, and explains to him he was not the one to impregnate her. He is relieved, but still suffering withdrawal. He reveals to Shell that he also kept her mother's wedding ring, always in his breast pocket near his heart. He tells Shell he will retract his confession, maybe, if she tells him who the father is. He admits he has been a terrible father, and would rather go to jail than go back to the pub. She tells him Declan is the father, and explains the baby was a girl. Joe finally understands what is happening, and promises Shell he will retract, and Shell watches as he does, wanting to make sure he follows through.

In Chapter Forty-Seven, Father Rose comes to the Duggan's to explain that although Joe retracted, Molloy is still holding him, pending the autopsy of the babies. He does admit he already knows they are different blood types, which is a good indicator they are not of the same birth, but Molloy is determined. Father Rose also mentions there is an upcoming mass for the babies, and Shell determines she will go, despite the town's reactions. Father Rose also reveals that, because he found a note Shell wrote to Bridie, he knows that Declan is the father. When Shell tries to convince him to tell Father Carroll, as he too thinks Rose is responsible, Rose declines, noting it is her secret to keep or tell. He also reveals he saw Bridie in Coolbar, shortly before Christmas, thumbing a ride near the coast.

In Chapter Forty-Eight, Jimmy comes home bruised after a fight with Rory Quinn, Bridie's brother. Shell asks him to find out where Bridie is, and the following day, he comes in more bruised, as Rory reacted negatively to being asked about Bridie. Shell, now curious, calls the B&B where Bridie is supposed to be working, and discovers they



are not employing her. Shell continues to think about the situation, and realizes Bridie was likely pregnant, as well.

## Chapter Forty Four through Chapter Forty Eight Analysis

Chapter Forty-Four reveals the town gossip, as Father Rose is a suspected father. This serves to show the small minded nature of a small town, and the gossip that Father Carroll was worried about earlier in the novel. Shell's protection of Declan is limited, but in part, her protection is also to save herself, as she knows there are those who will not believe her, as she is poor, and to some, unworthy of Declan's affections. However, this protection extends only until Father Rose is in danger, as her loyalties clearly lie more with him than with Declan.

Chapter Forty-Five foreshadows the revelation that Bridie was likely the other mother. Shell's determination to go to church shows she is still strong, as does her conversation with Mrs. Quinn. However, the comments from Mrs. Quinn, combined with her overall reaction to Shell, show that something is not quite right. This suggests there may be more to Bridie's departure than what is being mentioned. Shell's realization that Father Rose thinks her father is the culprit, and that her own father believes the same, has been foreshadowed throughout the last few chapters, but is still surprising. Shell now understands why her father has confessed, and knows now what she needs to tell him.

Chapter Forty-Six is a touching chapter, as Shell learns she has been wrong about her father. It is clear he is relieved at knowing he is not the father of her child, but at the same time, he also knows he has still been a failure as a father. His admission that he would rather be in jail than an alcoholic gives hope that, having been forced to sobriety for a few days, Joe can find the strength to finally give up the alcohol. This hope is even brighter when he learns of the sex of the baby, and retracts his confession, wanting to do what he can for Shell, in memory of his beloved Moira.

Chapter Forty-Seven shows again Molloy refuses to give up, as he continues to hold Joe, and push the pathologists for answers that confirm what he wants to confirm, instead of what is true. Shell's determination to go to her child's mass shows again she is strong enough to stand against the town. Father Rose, for his part, also shows he can stand on his own, as he learns the real father of the child, but instead of using it to clear his own name, he simply leaves it to Shell, as it is her secret to keep. Finally, his sighting of Bridie indicates several things. First, it is clear Mrs. Quinn was lying about her location. Secondly, it suggests that she was in town at the time the second baby was killed.

Chapter Forty-Eight continues to imply Bridie is the other mother. When Shell learns Roy Quinn is angry whenever she is mentioned, coupled with the confirmation that Mrs. Quinn lied about Bridie's location, suggest Bridie has her own secrets to keep. Shell's realization that Bridie was likely pregnant foreshadow her thoughts later about what Bridie likely went through during the last few months.





# Chapter Forty Nine through Chapter Fifty Three

## Chapter Forty Nine through Chapter Fifty Three Summary

In Chapter Forty-Nine, Shell rides her bike to the coast, thinking of Bridie and Declan, and goes to the cave where the dead baby was found. Inside she finds a bouquet of berries, tied with a ribbon. When she thinks back, she realizes there were many signs of Bridie's pregnancy. She imagines Bridie came home over Christmas, having given birth, only to find her family gone. Unable to deal with the crying baby, she went up to the cave and left him there, believing someone would find him. Shell finds herself angry at Bridie, and her mother, as well as at Declan and everyone else in her life. She remembers Father Rose, however, saying the with hate comes love. As she rides by the Quinn home, she notices the bushes outside grow the same berries as those in the bouquet in the cave.

In Chapter Fifty, Shell learns the babies have been proved to not be twins, and actually they were born nearly five weeks apart. Shell also learns her baby died because the umbilical cord was wrapped around the throat during labor. Joe Talent is to be let go, and the police department is being investigated for their poor handling of the case. Only Shell knows the babies were half siblings, born of the same father.

In Chapter Fifty-One, Shell returns to the house to ready it for Joe's return. She finds his room is dank and closed up, and when she opens a window, she seems to feel her mother around her. In the mail, she finds a Christmas card from Declan, telling her of his life in America, and letting her know he still thinks of her. Shell wonders if she will ever see him again, or if he realizes the pain he has caused, as she burns the card.

Chapter Fifty-Two finds Shell at home when Father Rose arrives to say goodbye. He reveals he is leaving for County Offaly, where there is a church for priests who are having a crisis of faith. He reveals that he used to walk into church and feel the presence of the divine, but in the last year, that presence has diminished. He admits those in Coolbar do not have the image of God in their faces, but something harder. Shell admits to Father Rose that he is the reason she was able to again find faith and that her mother has come from the spirits as a result. Father Rose reminds her that if her mother's spirit is in the house, it was she who brought her back, not him. He gives her his mother's address, so that she can always write him. He smiles a final smile and says goodbye, as Shell feels his absence. Joe arrives shortly, and hugs her close.

In Chapter Fifty-Three, Joe quits drinking, but becomes addicted to cards. Shell attends a mass for her baby and the other, and Mrs. Quinn is also in attendance. Shell graciously shakes the hands of the women who gossiped about her. Father Carroll announces a new curate will be coming, but to Shell, Father Rose is still there, his



influence growing bigger in his absence. Shell does not return to school, but does continue lessons with her old teacher, so she can eventually graduate. At the end of winter, the children attend a local fair, as Shell has persuaded Joe to give them enough money for a few rides. Shell swears she sees her mother in the crowd, but when she goes to look for her, she vanishes. Shell takes the children on a Ferris wheel, and at the top, she watches the woman walk out on the pier, and she knows her mother is saying her final goodbye. Shell realizes she, Trix, and Jimmy have the future to look forward to, and she finds joy in her existence.

## Chapter Forty Nine through Chapter Fifty Three Analysis

Chapter Forty-Nine is merely speculation, but it does present a likely scenario for how Bridie's baby came to die in the cave. The bouquet of flowers containing unique berries, which are also found on the bushes of the Quinn's home, are highly suggestive. Shell's anger here is highly justified, and this anger helps her to overcome her pain and suffering, and become stronger. She knows there are many who could have spoken out, saving her, but instead, they were too selfish, and left her and her father to struggle alone. Only Father Rose was helpful, and it is his words here that remind her how closely love and hate are combined, showing he still has influence over her.

The revelation in Chapter Fifty that the babies were not twins, and that they were actually born further apart, further suggest Bridie is the mother. The knowledge that Shell's baby died as a result of the tangled cord is sad, in that it becomes clear had someone taken the time to help her, the baby would have lived, even though it was a bit premature. Had Shell's father, or Father Rose, or any of her friends, or any of the townspeople helped her, none of this situation would have happened. The investigation of the police is valid, in that Molloy clearly acted against police standards.

Chapter Fifty-One functions as closure for Shell. Her opening up of the room of her father shows she is helping him to clear the way for a brighter future. She feels her mother around her, showing she is still struggling with all the things that have happened. The card in the mail from Declan, however, shows Shell that she has to leave the past behind, and move forward. Her burning of the letter shows she is capable, and ready, to do this step. This closure is continued in Chapter Fifty-Two, with the departure of Father Rose. Such a vital part of her recent life, Father Rose himself has to move on, as his own faith is waning. Ironically, the man who helped bring Shell her faith has, in the process, lost his own. The situation with Shell, and with the community's reaction, has caused Father Rose to doubt God, and his faith. His leaving helps Shell, in a way, as she is not able to move forward as long as he is there. His giving her of his address does show he cares for her, and lets her know she always has someone to turn to.

Chapter Fifty-Three is the closing of the story, and Shell's final goodbye to the past. Although her father is no longer a drinker, he is still unavailable to his children, leaving her to care for her siblings. She is able to do so much more readily, however, as a result of Joe's changes, so although he still has issues, the situation has improved. Shell's



decision to continue her lessons shows she does not intend to stay content with her circumstances, but to overcome them. Her seeing of her mother one final time at the fair symbolizes the letting go of the past for she and her siblings, and their looking ahead toward the future. Shell is able to put her mother's death in its place, and move forward, finally.



# Characters

## Shell Talent

Shell Talent is a fifteen-year-old young woman who is the main character of the book. Shell is a kind young girl, but lives in poverty, struggling to take care of her family after her mother's death and her father's resulting depression. Shell loves her family, and has few friends. Those she does have, Bridie Quinn and Declan Ronin, are friends only in that they all come from impoverished families. Shell seeks love wherever she can, and when Father Rose enters her life, she fantasies about his care for her becoming more. She sees him as a friend and a love interest, but also sees him as the man who brings God back into her life. It is this relationship with Father Rose that later convinces some in the town that it is Father Rose who impregnates Shell.

Shell's again sees love with Declan Ronin, a boy who is clearly interested in her. The two do have a romantic fling, but it is clear that Shell thinks more highly of Declan than he thinks of her, and this is proved when Declan flees to America, leaving Shell behind. Unbeknownst to him, Shell is pregnant. Shell's reaction to her pregnancy, first to want to rid herself of it and then to have it, show she is still a young woman trying to make adult decisions. She fears her father's reaction, but also can't bring herself to harm the creature inside her, or to leave her siblings without her protection.

Shell also shows her youth when the baby is born. Unable to deal with reality at the time, Shell cares for her baby for a day before allowing herself to realize the baby was stillborn. Once she does allow herself this realization, she can confront the truth and put it to rest, as she has done throughout the story. Shell deals with things in her own time, as is shown by her handling of the court case against her. Again, it is only when Shell finds she can deal with the consequences that she tells who the real father is, confronts her own father, and helps put the story to rest. Once she can face the death of her mother, and the loss that death brings to her, she finds she is able to look forward to a brighter future. Even though her circumstances do not change, Shell is able to put her past behind her, showing her to be a strong character.

## Joe Talent

Joe Talent is the father of Shell Talent. A farmhand before his wife's death, Joe is crippled, emotionally, when his wife dies an early death. He begins to drink heavily, and quits his job on the farm, claiming back problems. To help feed his family, Joe travels to nearby towns and collects money for the church, all the while skimming from the donations to feed his children. This allows Joe to continue to drink while still feeding his family, although they do still live in extreme poverty. Joe looks to Shell to take care of the smaller children, and to take care of him, when he is at home. Joe is not a bad man, but cannot accept the pain of his wife's passing. He fools his family to allow himself to drink more heavily, and his drinking often leads him to staying out to the point Shell



must care for everyone. Unfortunately, Joe's drinking leads him to several bad decisions, including mistaking his daughter for his deceased wife. Although Shell escapes him easily, Joe thinks that he molested his daughter. As a result, when his daughter is accused of murdering her child, Joe takes all the blame, believing himself to be the cause of the pregnancy in the first place. Although somewhat irrational, this effort to help spare his daughter does show he cares about her, and his family.

## Declan Ronan

Declan Ronan is a young man with who Shell attends school. Declan is an alter boy at church, and although his family is not overly wealthy, they are not as impoverished as Shell's. Declan is clearly a troublemaker, but one who seems harmless enough. His friendship with Shell appears, at first, to be almost brotherly in nature, while his relationship with Bridie appears to be more. Soon, however, Declan makes his sexual feelings for Shell known, in spite of the fact he is also dating Bridie. Shell, not aware of his other relationship, agrees to continue to see Declan, even though he asks that their relationship remain a secret. For Shell, his care for her is enough to satisfy her need for love and affection. Declan continues to use Shell, although it is clear in how he treats her that he does at least care about her. Declan is not an honest, decent character, but he does have some capacity for emotions. He is selfish, as is shown through his leaving behind of Shell and Bridie, despite their pregnancies. It is unclear, however, if Declan ever knew of their conditions, but one can assume Declan would not have made responsible choices even if he had been made aware. Declan represents a teenage boy who cares little for anything other than his own desires and wishes.

## Bridie Quinn

Bridie Quinn is a friend of Shell's at the beginning of the book. Bridie is not a kind girl, but is instead a bit hardened by her impoverished life. She and Shell are both looked down on at school for being poor, and as a result they stick together. Bridie even helps Shell steal a bra when she needs one, and helps her feel more comfortable about herself. However, when Shell unknowingly begins fooling around with Bridie's boyfriend, Declan Ronin, Bridie is furious. When she is discovered, Shell is attacked by Bridie and beaten. Father Rose breaks up the fight, but from that moment forward, Bridie will have nothing to do with Shell, despite Shell's efforts to apologize. Later in the novel, when Bridie suddenly disappears, her family claims she is helping family with a bed and breakfast in another town, but Shell learns this isn't true. Shell pieces together that Bridie was also pregnant, but that when she returned home to her family she was rejected, and she left her child to die in the elements. Bridie is again not necessarily an evil or bad person, but instead is merely a misguided young woman who is alone without support or, she feels, choices. Bridie unwittingly causes the near demise of the Shell family, and could have come out and admitted the truth. Her actions, however, are indicative of a frightened and selfish young woman.



## Father Rose

Father Rose is a young pastor who is new to the town of Coolbar. A young and inspired man, Father Rose, in his first sermon, is able to bring Shell back to religion rather quickly and effectively. He is kind and considerate, and shows a real liking for Shell. From the beginning, it is clear to readers that in Shell, Father Rose sees a young woman who is unhappy, and in need of assistance for herself and her family, as a result of her mother's death and her father's depression and alcoholism. He looks to his superiors for guidance, after he tries unsuccessfully to help Shell himself, but is immediately rejected. The higher priests feel the situation is better left alone, as opposed to calling in for state or government help, and it is this decision, in part, that leads to Shell's unfortunate situation. Father Rose realizes this, and as a result, again tries to help Shell and her family. Again, however, he is dismissed, and this time, he is sent to another parish. In part, this is because some in town, having seen him with Shell, believe him to be the father of her child. Father Rose represents the mistakenly accused in the novel, and shows the small minded thinking of some small town individuals.

## Father Carroll

Father Carroll is the senior priest at the local church in Coolbar. Carroll is a kind man who does care for the Talent family, but who does so in a way that does not disrupt the community, or cause a stir. Carroll knows Joe uses the church as a means to drink, and take money from collections, but Carroll allows it because it is his way of helping the family. He chooses not to interfere because, as he notes, those in small towns take care of their own. However, what Rose realizes that Carroll does not is that the Talent family is in dire straights. Carroll is not a bad man, but his decisions not to interfere play a large role in the tragedy that befalls Shell and her family. Had Father Carroll done what he should have, Shell and her family may not have gone through as much tragedy.

## Trix Talent

Trix Talent is the younger sister of Shell. Trix is a bright, sweet girl, who relies almost solely on her older sister for her well being. Shell is her sister, bather, cook, maid, tutor, and mother figure, and Trix knows Shell is the only parent figure she has. Trix is the first of the siblings to realize Shell is pregnant, but she is also well aware of Joe's anger, and she keeps a secret well. When Shell's baby is born stillborn, Trix is aware of the situation, but is unable to convince Shell to give the baby to her. When Shell finally realizes the death, Trix helps her siblings bury the baby. Trix is an innocent in the book, and represents the real victims of circumstance in the novel, the young child who had no choice in what happened to her.



## Jimmy Talent

Jimmy Talent is the younger brother of Shell. Jimmy is a kind, bright boy who, like Trix, depends almost completely on his older sister. Jimmy is older than Trix, but still dependent on Shell for most of his well being. Unlike Trix, Jimmy openly dislikes his father, as he seems to understand his father's lack of parenting ability more than Trix. Jimmy loves his sister, and tries, as much as possible to protect her, as shown through his fighting at school as a result of the negative things said about her. Jimmy also takes on the task of convincing Shell her baby is dead. Jimmy's character again shows the true innocents of the novel, the young children who are stuck in their circumstances.

## Moira Talent

Moira Talent is the mother of the Talent family. Unfortunately, Moira passed away a year before the story takes place, and as a result, the Shell family fell apart. Moira is presented by Shell and the others in the book as a religious, kind, caring mother, and doting wife who cared for the family in a loving, tender way. Her passing has left a huge hole in the lives of the children, and the lives of Joe, her husband. Moira's spirit inhabits the house, in that her memory lives within the walls and the hearts of those within it. It is the memory of Moira that drives Joe to drink, and drives him into his depression.

## Mr. and Mrs. Duggan

Mr. and Mrs. Duggan are the couple who help the Talents care for the younger children. Prior to Moira's death, Joe worked for the Duggan's on their farm. When Shell is accused of killing her baby, it is the Duggan's who come to her rescue, caring for the younger children, and attempting to shield Shell from the worst of the accusations. Mrs. Duggan is a mother figure to all the Talent children, and to Shell, she is the only female adult figure who seems to care deeply for her. Mrs. Duggan represents those in the novel who genuinely care for the Talents, without judgment or condemnation.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Coolbar, County Cork, Ireland**

Coolbar, County Cork is a small village in Ireland that is relatively poor, where the story takes place.

### **Duggan's Field**

Duggan's Field is the farm field of the Duggan family where Joe Talent used to work, and where Shell and Declan go for their intimate encounters.

### **Jezebel**

Jezebel is the name Father Rose gives to his car, due to its temperamental nature.

### **Haggerty's Hellhole**

Haggerty's Hellhole is a cave on top of the shoreline where Declan takes Shell, and where Bridie eventually leaves her baby to die.

### **America**

America is the country where Declan goes when he flees from Ireland.

### **Cork, Ireland**

Cork, Ireland is where Joe Talent goes to raise money for the church, and for his own benefit.

### **DTs, delirium tremens**

The DTs are a side effect of stopping drinking cold turkey. The DTs cause tremors, hallucinations, and mood changes. In the book, Joe Talent suffers from these.

### **Kilbran**

Kilbran is the city to which Bridie is supposedly sent when she is found to be pregnant.





## **Dail**

The Dail is the lower house of the Irish Parliament. The Dail becomes involved in Shell's case when her father's confession is rejected, as they begin to see corruption in the police department.

## **Umbilical cord**

The Umbilical cord is the cord that attaches the baby to the mother, working as a feeding tube. A problem with the cord is what killed Rose Talent.



# Themes

## Teen Pregnancy

One of the primary themes of the novel is teenage pregnancy, and how it affects the lives of the teenage mothers in the novel differently. When Shell discovers she is pregnant, she ignores it, at first, until it becomes clear that she can no longer pretend she is not with child. Once she accepts her pregnancy, she finds books, and although she steals them, she does learn what to do, so that she can attempt to deliver the child. She does think of abortion, and even manages to prepare to go for one, but in the end, changes her mind. She does not tell anyone, instead hoping to simply deal with the issue. However when her brother and sister discover her pregnancy, they are supportive, giving Shell at least a partial outlet for her concerns. Once she delivers the child, it is clear she loves her, and actually is unable to admit to herself that the baby is deceased. It is only when prompted by her support system, her siblings, that she is able to face, and eventually accept, reality.

On the other hand, Bridie's experience with teenage pregnancy is seemingly much different. Since she disappeared from town, and since her mother clearly lies about her location, it is clear she did not have a support system. Her decision to purposefully kill her child by leaving the baby outside to freeze to death shows too her detachment from the baby. Unlike Shell with her love and care for a dead baby, Bridie cares little for her unwanted and unloved baby. It is unknown where Bridie ends up, but one can assume this tragedy will have a completely negative impact on Bridie, whereas the overall ending impact on Shell may be less negative as a result of her support from her friends, and eventually, her family.

The pregnancy of the teens also has an impact on the community. The gossip that ensues from the deaths of the children shows the immediate impact teen pregnancy has on a community. Between accusations of priest misconduct to accusations of molestation, it is obvious that teen pregnancy plays a large role in the events that unfold in the novel.

## Alcoholism

Alcoholism, and its effects on family and community, is another theme throughout the novel. Joe Talent is clearly an alcoholic, often spending time away from his family to drink. It is revealed in the novel that he even kicks the children out each day in order to sneak a drink from his hidden alcohol. With no job, Joe cannot afford the alcohol he consumes, but he steals from the money he collects for charity in order to fund his habit. His drinking leads him to say things he doesn't mean, often to Shell. His drinking also, in a way, leads to the events at the end of the novel. Had Joe not been an alcoholic, he would have never woken up in Shell's bed, and thus, when she turned up pregnant, would never have thought himself guilty of impregnating her. Joe's drinking leads him to



mistreat Shell, particularly when he is going through withdrawal in jail. His drinking, readers learn later, also caused issues between he and his wife before she died.

It is not only Joe who is affected by alcohol in the book. If Shell had a more responsible, less alcoholic father, it is likely she would have had more stability at home, which may have led to increased watch over her actions. Even if it did not, Shell could have told her father of her condition, which could have saved her baby's life. Shell's younger siblings are equally affected, as their feelings for their father are hindered by their dislike of him when he drinks.

Father Carroll and Father Rose are also affected by Joe's drinking. Father Carroll chooses to turn a blind eye to his drinking and stealing from the collection money, whereas Father Rose is tormented by the knowledge that the Talent children are being mistreated. Both men have to deal with the consequence of knowing about Joe's alcoholism, although they choose to deal with it in different ways.

## Social Judgment

Social judgment is another common theme throughout the novel. From the beginning, Shell admits that she and her only friend, Bridie, are looked down on in school and in the area, as they are poor. Without money for undergarments, new clothing, or other essentials, these girls are made fun of and mimicked often. When Shell begins to speak to and rise with Father Rose, a young priest, the town automatically assumes there is improper behavior occurring. Even Father Carroll, another priest, seems to openly accuse Rose of misbehavior. Father Carroll, who is fully aware of Joe Talent's alcoholism and lack of parenting, turns a blind eye on the plight, in an effort not to get involved. Although he feels obligated to have an opinion on Rose's behaviors, he himself refuses to judge his own.

Those in town are also quick to judge when Shell is accused of killing her child. Accusations of child molestation by Joe occur, as do accusations of sexual relations between Shell and Rose. The women in town suddenly turn on Shell, as though they cared in the first place, but it was clear even before that they looked down on the Talent family. This social judgment is indicative of small town life, and represents those in society who are quick to blame others, but refuse to take any blame for the situation themselves.



# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of the novel is the third-person perspective. This view is reliable, as is shown through the narrators ability to know the actions of the story, but also the narrators ability to know the inner thoughts and emotions of the primary character, Shell Talent. This point of view is important, as one of the primary themes in the novel is the depression and darkness that befalls the Talent family following the death of Moira. Without the third-person view, the readers would be unable to see the depth of alcoholism and despair of Joe Talent, and would be unable to fully grasp the effect of her death on the children in the family. Further, the storyline relies primarily on the view of the world as Shell sees it, and without the narrators explanations of Shell's thoughts and emotions, some of these views would not be as clear.

The story is recounted mostly through descriptive passages of Shell's world, with small sections of dialogue. This method helps the reader to stay focused only on Shell, and her surroundings. Shell spends a lot of the novel by herself, or deep in thought, and without this method of storytelling, the reader would be lost as to the motivations behind Shell's behaviors. There are also sections of the novel that rely on Shell's assumptions of events, and the narration style allows these assumptions to be based on truth seen earlier in the story, lending credibility.

## Setting

The novel is set in a small village in Ireland called Coolbur, settled in County Cork in 1984. The village is small, with a high poverty rate and little work available. Local individuals tend to look out for their own, in that they rarely wish to involve authorities in any happenings within the town. The locals are also fond of gossip, and spend much time talking about one another, or others in the community. The area is one of primarily farming and small business owners. Although there is some shift in socioeconomic backgrounds, many are living below the poverty line. During parts of the novel, Shell travels to other, nearby towns to attend school or shops, but most of those she comes into contact with have little to do with her as a result of her poor situation. Those she does connect with are often of her own similar background. As the village is near the sea, there is considerable rainfall, and gorgeous surroundings, prompting Shell to really enjoy the nature she sees each day.

One of the primary institutions in the village is that of the local church. For Shell and her family, this is a place of both pleasure and pain. Joe Talent became obsessed with religion following his wife's death, but Shell learns to take refuge in Jesus, and her faith. At times, however, the church symbolizes all that is wrong with the town, as those within it are unwilling to raise the alarm about the Talent family's issues, thereby inadvertently leading to Shell's problems later in the book. Those who attend the church show



judgment toward the Talents, again symbolizing the small town mindset of even the church. Although the problems that exist in the novel are common everywhere, the way they are shown in the book is indicative of small town life.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel tends to be very informal, and indicative of a fairly uneducated population. Although the Talent family is not at all unintellectual, they are not well educated, and thus, proper English is not common. Set in Ireland, some of the language is also local in cultural meanings and innuendos. Although informal, the style is easy to adjust to, and it adds a layer of complexity to the characters that would be nonexistent without this language addition. When combined with the narration style, this is a highly effective method for displaying a working class and farming class village.

The language of the novel also helps to display the different cultures and backgrounds of the characters in the novel. Most of the characters are from small towns, and their language is informal. However, the educated priests in the book have a language style that is much more eloquent than the locals. Further, shopkeepers and the more educated members of town show this through their language ability. Much of the novel is descriptive in nature, and there is not much dialog. These descriptive passages help to center the story around Shell and her family, and also keep unnecessary information to a minimum, streamlining the story.

## Structure

The novel is comprised of fifty three chapters, each of unequal, but very short length. Many chapters are fewer than five pages. Each chapter is named only by number, again owing to the short length. Therefore, nothing is revealed about the information in the chapter prior to reading. The shorter of the chapters tend to be entirely descriptive in nature, while the longer chapters tend to contain at least some dialog.

The plot of the novel is somewhat convoluted. There is much happening in the story that is inferred or insinuated, but not openly admitted. The main story is the tale of Shell Talent, a young girl who, after the death of her mother, finds herself lonely and looking for companionship outside of her alcoholic father and younger siblings. Blending religion and teenage love, Shell seemingly gets a crush on a local new pastor, and almost seems to act out her fantasies with a local boy, Declan Ronan. Declan, however, is also sleeping with others in the community, and as a result, Shell loses her best friend. These teenage emotions are blurred when her father drunkenly mistakes her for her mother, and nearly ends up in bed with her. When she later turns up pregnant, there is question over whether Joe, the new pastor, or another boy are responsible. When the baby dies, these questions turn into court proceedings, combined with the discovery of another deceased baby. The confusion ends only when Joe Talent is able to sober up, and when Shell Talent is able to put the past behind her.

The novel's pace is fast, and there are many twists and turns that keep the reader engaged. Although the text is easy to read, the context of the story can be confusing, and the themes in the story might be a bit advanced for younger readers.



## Quotes

"In Shell's mind, Jesus got off the cross and walked off to the nearest bar. Mam's face scrunched up, like a baby's that's about to cry. Then she died. Jesus drained off his glass of beer and went clear out of Shell's life" (Chapter 1, p. 5).

"If anger and love went together, like Father Rose had said, it must mean that she loved her dad" (Chapter 2, p. 12).

"Shell...prayer doesn't have to be painful. Trust me" (Chapter 3, p. 22).

"She thought of all the times she'd slapped Jimmy, feeling a rage with him that she didn't understand. Dear Jesus, forgive me for my lack of loving" (Chapter 12, p. 69).

"He collects for the poor and that's who he is. There's nothing wrong with begging, Gabriel. Beggars have always been close to God. Talent's just a beggar of the prouder kind. Good luck to him" (Chapter 13, p. 75).

"When Jesus dies, she thought, you die a little too" (Chapter 15, p. 88).

"She sat on the hill and looked down on the squat gray bungalow that had always been her home. There'd been a time when Dad had promised to raise the roof and build an upstairs floor. But it had never happened" (Chapter 16, p. 90).

"Maybe the man from Galilee hadn't risen as he should. Maybe he was till cold in the grave, stone dead, just like her mam. An aching chasm yawned inside her, a white-cold loneliness like a distant star" (Chapter 16, p. 96).

"The bad thing she tried not to think about from one end of the day to the other came back...The curse hadn't come. Not in ages" (Chapter 18, p. 108).

"She'd be first on the night-train to London, then first queuing up at whatever hospital it was the Irish girls went to for the abortions. Wherever it was, she'd find it" (Chapter 25, p. 147).

"The little baby, daintily creased, lay in her arms asleep, making not a sound" (Chapter 30, p. 181).

"A great lid slammed down in her heart. She made herself look down at what was in her lap. The baby was blue and stiff. It was dead" (Chapter 31, p. 184).

"It was hell, hell in a glass. You don't have to die to go to hell, Shell. Any devil will take you there, any time. And the devil that came was the image of her. Moira. My Moira. Out of my league, living or dead" (Chapter 40, p. 230).

"The dead babies weren't twins, but half-brother and half-sister, born into the self-same vale of tears" (Chapter 50, p. 295).

"Trix, Jimmy, and she, a silent row going going up the back field, picking up the stones. Together always. Free" (Chapter 53, p. 309).





## Topics for Discussion

One of the themes in the novel is the ebb and flow of Shell and other characters' religious convictions. What prompts Shell to lose her faith? How does she regain it? What happens to Father Rose for him to begin to doubt his church, and his faith? Does he regain his faith? Why or why not? How does Joe Talent deal with his faith? What does this say about the role faith plays in the lives of these characters?

In the novel, two young women are impregnated. One attempts to be responsible, but does so without education, while the other chooses instead to abandon her child. In both cases, a lack of information and options causes the death of the child. How are these two situations similar? How are they different? Since in the end, both children die, is there a difference in the actions of the mother? What are those differences?

Joe Talent confesses to a murder he did not commit. Why does he do this? What pushes him to confess? What actions does he believe himself to be guilty of? What does he believe Shell has done? How does this contribute to his confession? What does this say about his character and about his feelings for his daughter?

When the baby is found in the cave, and Shell is accused, the entire town becomes involved, each person having opinions about the guilt or innocence of Shell, Joe, Father Rose, and others. What do these characters represent? How does their immediate judgment affect Shell? What does this say about small town life? Why do you think these characters behave so cruelly to Shell and to her family?

The "ghost" of Shell's mother appears to plague her throughout the novel, but at times also seems to serve a guiding, caring role. Why does Shell continue to see and feel her mother, long after her death? What does this imply about Shell's ability to let go of her mother? How do you think this impacts Shell's relationship with her father, siblings, Declan, and others?

Compare and contrast Father Rose and Father Carroll. How are they similar? How do they differ? How do their actions in the community affect those in that community? How do they deal differently with social issues? How do these issues affect their faith? How do they relate to Shell?

Why does Shell not realize for almost 24 hours that her baby is dead? What does Jimmy's story of the cow imply? Why does this force Shell to face reality? Why do you think she couldn't do so before? What does this say about Shell's emotional attachment to her baby?