

Strange Fits of Passion Study Guide

Strange Fits of Passion by Anita Shreve

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Strange Fits of Passion Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
The Beginning and The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970.....	5
The Notes and Transcripts: June 8, 1967-December 3, 1970.....	9
The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971.....	12
The Notes and Transcripts: January 15, 1971 and January 15-Summer 1971.....	17
The Article and The End.....	19
Characters.....	22
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	36



Plot Summary

Strange Fits of Passion is a novel by acclaimed author Anita Shreve. This novel is written as though the reader were sifting through the notes of a writer who authored a non-fiction article about a woman who killed her husband in an attempt to free herself to be with her new lover. This woman, writing to the author from prison where she awaits trial on murder, describes a relationship that was volatile and abusive. Unfortunately, the author interprets these claims as a thinly veiled attempt at sympathy and wrote an article that very likely influenced the judge to sentence the domestic violence survivor to life in prison. Strange Fits of Passion is a unique work of fiction that leaves the reader struggling to answer the question of what constitutes self defense.

Maureen English met Harrold English her first day on the job at a New York City magazine. Maureen falls under Harrold's spell and before she knows what has happened, she's practically living with him. When Harrold becomes violent, forcing Maureen to be intimate with him even though she does not want to, Maureen makes excuses, blaming herself for his actions. Later, when Harrold takes Maureen to meet his father and she finds him a cruel, angry man, she understands the temper that Harrold often shows. Maureen believes Harrold only needs to be loved, that she can help him change if only she can make him happy enough.

Maureen struggles with the escalating violence in her marriage, giving up her career and her social life in order to please Harrold. When the violence becomes too much, Maureen considers leaving. However, Maureen soon learns she is pregnant and believes that this child will help Harrold to stop his cruel behavior. Instead Harrold becomes more violent, more angry, as though he resents his inability to control what is happening to his wife's body and to their shared life. When the child is born, Harrold seems to become calmer for a short time. Harrold spends time with the baby, walking the floor with her at night, the picture of a good, caring father. Maureen begins to hope things will change.

When Harrold becomes violent again, Maureen believes not only is her life in danger, but the safety of her child is now in question. Maureen leaves Harrold, going to the safety of her mother's home. Maureen, an only child born to a single mother, is afraid of a future alone, but is determined to keep her child safe. However, Harrold finds her and tells her if she does not come home, he will kill her. Maureen returns to Harrold and finds him repentant, eager to make their marriage work. For a short time, Maureen believes Harrold has really changed this time. Maureen and the baby attend a party at the magazine with Harrold, appearing to everyone to be a happy family. Unfortunately, Harrold becomes convinced that Maureen is flirting with a rival writer and tells her to go home.

Harrold arrives home a short time after Maureen, drunk and angry. Harrold beats Maureen more severely than he ever has before. Maureen knows that Harrold will kill her the next time. Maureen packs a bag for herself and the baby, takes the money from Harrold's wallet, and runs away. Maureen buys a map of the east coast and picks a



destination at random, a small dot that seems insignificant enough that a woman could disappear there.

Maureen arrives in St. Hilaire, Maine late in the evening and stops at the general store for a few necessities. The owner directs Maureen to the only hotel in town. It is here that Maureen ceases to exist and Mary Amesbury is born. Mary finds a cottage to rent the following day. As Mary settles in, she is befriended by both her new landlady and a local fisherman, Willis Beale. Willis makes it clear that he is interested in an affair, but Mary politely declines. The last thing on Mary's mind is an affair, until she meets Jack Strout. Jack is quiet, polite, unlike any man Mary has known before. Their few weeks together are the happiest Mary has ever known.

One morning, Mary wakes to find the baby burning with fever. When Jack comes, he takes them to the next town where there is a medical clinic. The doctor diagnoses an ear infection, but Mary cannot remember which type of antibiotic her baby is allergic to. Mary is forced to give the doctor the name and number of her pediatrician in New York even though she knows contacting him may alert her husband to her location. In fact, it does. The next morning, Harrold arrives, determined to take his family back to New York. When Mary refuses, Harrold attacks her with a fork and rapes her. Mary waits until Harrold passes out from the excess of alcohol he has drunk and then goes to Jack's boat where she knows there is a gun. Mary takes the gun back to the cottage and shoots Harrold out of fear of what he might do to her or the baby when he comes to.

After Mary's first trial ends in a mistrial, a reporter for the same magazine where she worked begins to research a story about the case. Mary sends the reporter letters in which she tells her story. From these letters and interviews she conducted with the people in St. Hilaire, the reporter writes an article suggesting Mary killed her husband in order to be free to be with Jack. Shortly after the article appears in the national media, Mary is sentenced to life in prison. Mary's sentence is commuted after twelve years. Many years later, the author sees that Mary has died and decides to give her notes to Mary's daughter, hoping she might find some answers within them. Unfortunately, it seems the story only creates more questions for the young woman who was only six months old when her mother killed her father.



The Beginning and The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970

The Beginning and The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970 Summary

In January of 1971, a woman killed her husband in the small fishing village of St. Hilaire, Maine. The woman claimed she was acting in self defense. The woman's first trial ended in a mistrial. While awaiting her second trial, the woman is approached by a reporter working for the same magazine where the woman's husband was employed at the time of his death who is hoping to do a story on the case.

The beginning takes place in the present. A writer, Helen Scofield, arrives at the dorm room of Caroline English, the daughter of Mary Amesbury and Harrold English. In the seventies, Ms. Scofield wrote an article about Mary Amesbury and has brought her notes and research for the article for the young woman to read. Ms. Scofield gives these documents to the young woman and then leaves to allow her the time to read through them. December 3-4, 1970 begins with a letter from Mary Amesbury to Ms. Scofield in which she describes her arrival in St. Hilaire, Maine. Maureen stops at the small general store, hides her face behind a scarf and sunglasses, and enters the store with her six-month-old baby to buy a few supplies. When Maureen pays for her items, she can feel the curiosity of the owner and two customers. Maureen asks for directions to a motel and is told by the male customer to go to the Gateway, a small hotel halfway between St. Hilaire and the next big town, Machias. Maureen pays for her groceries and leaves, aware of the three people behind her discussing her situation.

Everett Shedd later tells Ms. Scofield that it was clear Maureen was a battered woman. The scarf and sunglasses only drew the eyes to her battered face rather than hide it. Everett tells how he and Willis Beale and Julia Strout discussed Maureen, or Mary as he knew her, after she left, and how it was clear what a beautiful woman she once was. Everett also talks about the village, how fishing is the only thing people there can do, and how small the place is. Everett is the only law in town, taking care of the fights and petty crimes that take place and calling the Machias cops when something bigger happens. St. Hilaire is a small, close knit community that does not usually embrace new people. Mary was an exception.

Maureen left the general store and drove up the highway the way she was directed. Maureen soon began to think she had passed the place, so she turned around, only to discover she had not gone far enough. Maureen eventually finds the hotel and asks for a room. It is as Maureen signs the guest book that she stops being Maureen English and becomes Mary Amesbury. Mary takes the baby to their room and feeds her before settling down for the night. Mary wakes in the middle of the night and goes for a walk in the freezing cold, trying to figure out what she will do next. At the same time, Mary



begins to think about her past, taking this moment to write to Ms. Scofield about her childhood in Chicago.

Maureen English was born to a single mother at a time when being a single mother was shameful. Maureen's mother moved out of the slums where she grew up and bought a small house in a suburb of Chicago where her daughter to grow up safe. Maureen's mother would take the train to and from work every day, and Maureen's happiest moments were the evenings when she would walk with her mother from the train station to their small home. Maureen adored her mother, but as she grew older, she came to realize that her mere existence prevented her mother from finding a good man to marry and settle down with. Soon Maureen became convinced that the best way to make her mother happy would be if she could live her own life, find the happiness her mother would never know.

Muriel Noyes is the owner of the Gateway Motel in St. Hilaire. Muriel tells Ms. Scofield that she saw the bruises on Mary's face and knew what they were because she too lived with an abusive man once. Muriel says this is why she helped Mary like she did. Muriel called Julia Strout and arranged for Mary to rent one of Julia's cottages. Julia admits to Ms. Scofield that she too saw the bruises on Mary's face and believed them to be from violence, not the car accident Mary claimed to have been the cause. Julia also insists that Mary's time in her cottage were possibly the happiest days of her life.

Mary wakes in the motel and decides to ask the owner if she could stay another night. When the owner appears to see the bruises on Mary's face, she is embarrassed, causing her to blurt out a request for some permanent lodgings rather than simply asking for another night in the motel room. The owner of the motel arranges for Mary to meet with Julia Strout, who owns several cottages she rents out. Mary drives to Julia's, a large home across from the general store, and together they drive out to the point to look at the cottage. Julia explains as they arrive at the point that several local fishermen keep their boats here and that the small shed Mary notices near the cottage is a fish house where the fishermen work on their gear during the off season. Mary likes the cottage and agrees to rent it, paying the first month's rent. Julia tells Mary there is a medical clinic in Machias and a store with a pay phone she can use since there is no phone in the cottage. Julia also mentions that if there is an emergency, Mary can use the phone at her house or at the home of her nearest neighbor, a couple down the road.

Mary drives Julia back home and then stops at the general store for groceries and supplies. Back at the cottage, Mary is in the middle of an inspection when Willis Beale arrives to plow the drive and to give her a crib to use for the baby. Willis flirts with Mary, asking her lots of pointed questions while drinking her beer. Willis offers to give Mary a ride on his fishing boat and warns her to be careful of the honeypots, small patches of quicksand that are exposed during low tide. Later, when Willis speaks to Ms. Scofield, his apparent affection for Mary is gone, replaced by a conviction that Mary deserves to pay for the crime she committed.

Shortly after Willis leaves, Mary hears a vehicle outside the cottage and is afraid Willis has returned. Instead, Mary watches as a stranger rows out to a green and white lobster



boat, retrieves something, and rows back to shore. After the stranger leaves, the point is quiet. Mary enjoys a quiet dinner and soaks in a hot bath. Afterward, Mary lies in bed and imagines she can hear Harrold coming through the front door. Mary is suddenly frightened, convinced that if Harrold finds her, he will kill her.

The Beginning and The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970 Analysis

Many key characters are presented in these opening sections of the novel. In the beginning, the reader is introduced to Helen Scofield, a writer who wrote an article about a woman, Mary Amesbury, twenty years ago and has come to show her research on that article to Mary Amesbury's daughter, Caroline. Caroline is a nineteen-year-old college student who was only six months old when her mother killed her father. At this point, the reader knows nothing more about either of these characters, but is aware that Ms. Scofield feels a certain amount of remorse about her article or else she most likely would not have come to see Caroline. Caroline, on the other hand, seems unhappy to have met Ms. Scofield, but is willing to look through the material she has brought, if only from a sense of curiosity about her mother and father.

The next section of the novel, Notes and Transcripts, begins the presentation of the notes and research Ms. Scofield used in writing her article about Mary Amesbury. The notes include interviews Ms. Scofield did with persons with knowledge of Mary and the crime as well as letters Mary sent to Ms. Scofield from prison where she was awaiting trial for murder. The letters make up the bulk of Ms. Scofield's research and are supported by the interviews Ms. Scofield conducted. These letters are written in the first person point of view and are implied to be of an unreliable narrator, as Ms. Scofield implies in the beginning that the story told there is not the story as Mary would have told her daughter and therefore is a version Caroline may not have heard before. Also in question is Mary's honesty, as it seems the letters could have been written to support Mary's defense of murder in self defense rather than to tell the truth about that fateful morning when her husband was murdered.

Mary is introduced in these sections. Mary talks about leaving her husband after a terrible beating and arriving in St. Hilaire. The reader does not know at this point the circumstances of the beating, but it is clear from the observations of others that the bruises are the result of a beating and not a car accident, as Mary later claims. In fact, the reader knows little about Mary at this point. Mary is not even her name. Mary began life as Maureen, the daughter of a single mother in a time when being a single mother was disgraceful. The circumstances of her birth are important to Mary's character development, exposing her to unique situations that impact the way she looks at marriage and relationships. Perhaps it is this childhood that led Mary to remain with Harrold English as long as she did.

Mary settles down in a new home in these sections, getting to know a handful of the local people who will impact her stay in St. Hilaire. Of importance are Julia Strout and Willis Beale. Julia Strout is a widow who rents out cottages, herself an unusual woman



because she is strong and works to support herself in a time when women were just beginning to become independent of the societal expectations of earlier decades. This idea of strong, independent women appears to be a theme in Mary's life even if she has not managed to break free of her own husband at this point. Perhaps the theme suggests a time when Mary will find a way to free herself. Willis Beale is also important because the reader can see that he has developed a sense of affection for Mary, flirting with her and attempting to help take care of her. Willis represents the role of the strong man who needs to care for the vulnerable woman, representing to Mary an avenue to return to the traditional roles of the man and the woman. The reader sees Mary's reaction to Willis and wonders if she will run to the safe harbor, this familiar role, or if she will continue to fight for her own independence, safe from the abuse and degradation of her relationship with Harrold. After all, Mary is a new persona, a new person independent from Maureen English.



The Notes and Transcripts: June 8, 1967-December 3, 1970

The Notes and Transcripts: June 8, 1967-December 3, 1970 Summary

Maureen and Harrold meet the first day Maureen works at the magazine in New York. Maureen has just graduated from college and this is her first job. Maureen is anxious to prove her skills as a writer. Harrold is a veteran at the magazine, one of the magazine's top writers. Their first meeting is somewhat awkward, but leads to a date for drinks after work. Maureen and Harrold spend the evening in a bar, ending in Harrold's apartment. The next day, Harrold leaves on assignment, leaving Maureen unclear as to his feelings for her. Harrold does not call for weeks, leaving Maureen wondering if he had simply used her. When Harrold finally returns from assignment, he announces they will be going to dinner in three days.

As their relationship continues, Maureen begins to feel as though their lives are symmetrical. Maureen grew up without a father, Harrold grew up without a mother. They continue to see each other whenever Harrold is in town, with Maureen moving into his apartment almost as an afterthought. Alcohol is an important part of their relationship. Maureen and Harrold often spend whole evenings at the local bars before retiring to Harrold's bed. Harrold encourages Maureen in her career, often making suggestions about her dress and suggesting ways in which she might advance her career. Maureen, thanks to Harrold's encouragement, becomes a writer on the national desk.

When they are together about a year, Maureen becomes ill. Maureen wants to be alone to nurse her cold. When Harrold comes home and senses Maureen's need to be alone, he becomes enraged. Harrold forces Maureen to be intimate with him. Maureen convinces herself that she imagined portions of the incidence because of her illness. It is this same night that Harrold asks Maureen to marry him. No one at the magazine has known about their relationship, so their marriage comes as a surprise. Everyone is happy for them.

Before their wedding, Harrold and Maureen drive out to Rhode Island to tell Harrold's father about their engagement. Maureen discovers Harrold's father to be a bitter old man who is an alcoholic and filled with anger toward his only child. Harrold tells Maureen how he saw his father seducing his aunt when he was a small child. Harrold told his mother what he saw, despite the fact she was lying in bed, dying. Harrold's mother refused to speak to Harrold's father from that point on until her death. Harrold's father still blames Harrold for that. Maureen feels sorry for Harrold, convinced that this is the cause of Harrold's cruelty and that her love for him can make it all better.

Not long after the wedding, Maureen travels on a story with two co-workers. Harrold calls the hotel one evening and one of the men with Maureen answers. The man is in



the room because they were working on the story, but Harrold assumes there is something sexual going on. When Maureen returns home, Harrold beats her for her infidelity. Afterward, Maureen tells her bosses that she cannot travel anymore in hopes that if she remains close to home, Harrold will not have reason to distrust her. From this point, the abuse became regular, both physical and mental. Maureen resolves to leave, but then learns she is pregnant. Maureen hopes the pregnancy will bring out a gentler side in Harrold. However, it seems the pregnancy causes Harrold to become even more violent, as though he is frustrated over his lack of control in regards to the pregnancy.

Harrold travels a great deal during Maureen's pregnancy and is in London when Maureen gives birth to their daughter, Caroline. Maureen's mother comes to stay after the baby arrives, telling Maureen how lucky she is to have this perfect family. When Caroline is six or seven weeks old, Harrold becomes violent after an evening of drinking. Harrold keeps Maureen from going to her baby, causing Maureen more trauma than any beating could have. Harrold and Maureen's relationship disintegrates from this point. Maureen finally makes the decision to leave. Maureen waits until Harrold leaves town on a story and then goes to her mother. When Harrold arrives home to an empty house, he calls her mother and demands that she come home. Harrold threatens to kill Maureen if she ever takes his child away again.

Maureen has become isolated. Maureen no longer works, has no friends, and has no reason to leave the house. Maureen has no one she can tell about the violence in her marriage. The first week of December, there is a party at the magazine. Harrold allows Maureen to go. Maureen buys herself a new dress and puts the baby in a new Christmas dress her mother sent. At the party, Maureen and Harrold look like a perfect couple as they mingle and show off their baby. Maureen speaks with a new writer at the magazine, a man who has become Harrold's rival. Harrold becomes enraged, telling Maureen he knows she is flirting and that she should stop. Maureen tries not to speak to any other men at the party, but they seek her out. Finally, Harrold tells Maureen to go home. When Harrold arrives a few hours later, he beats Maureen more severely than ever before. Maureen manages to lock herself in the bathroom and waits until Harrold passes out from the alcohol. When she feels it is safe, Maureen leaves the bathroom and packs a bag for herself and the baby. Maureen takes money from Harrold's wallet and escapes into the night, picking her destination randomly from a map she buys at a local gas station.

The section ends with an interview Ms. Scofield did with the man who was editor of the magazine at the time Maureen and Harrold worked there and is now a book editor. The man says he never saw any signs of abuse in Harrold and Maureen's relationship and does not believe it existed. The man also suggests that if Ms. Scofield's article is good enough it could be expanded into a book, giving her an opportunity to propel herself to greater success.



The Notes and Transcripts: June 8, 1967-December 3, 1970 Analysis

This section presents background on Maureen and Harrold English's past together. Mary presents this information in a letter to Ms. Scofield in response to a request Ms. Scofield made to learn more about their marriage. Mary presents the marriage as one that was both happy and violent, a marriage that disintegrated over time into a controlling relationship in which one partner was extremely dominate and the other subordinate. This relationship, minus the violence, is almost classic of the expectations of society in the decades before this setting. Maureen is the housewife, the one who is responsible for caring for the home and raising the child. Harrold is the provider, the one who makes the money and provides security for his growing family. Maureen slowly becomes trapped in this role, leaving her powerless to change her circumstances without leaving her forced to chose between caring for her child or making a living to provide for herself.

Spousal abuse as a theme is clearly presented here. Maureen describes incidents of rape and abuse, of suffering beatings as well as verbal attacks. Maureen is isolated, removed from her job and her friends until she has no one to rely on but her abuser. Maureen is ashamed and feels as though she is to blame for her circumstances; therefore, she hides her situation from the few people she does come into contact with. These people include a doctor, a man who is obligated to help, and a neighbor. However, Maureen protects Harrold, refusing to admit to anyone the truth about her abuse. This denial is important as it will be recalled later in the novel when Maureen needs to prove the abuse in order to defend herself.

Harrold English is a troubled man. Maureen paints him as an emotionally abused child who grows up to become like his abuser. This situation causes Maureen to feel pity for her abuser, to believe that she can change him and help him change. It is this situation that keeps Maureen with Harrold longer than common sense tells her she should stay. This situation also gives the reader motivation for Harrold's actions. Finally, the chapter ends with Ms. Scofield speaking with an editor who once worked with Harrold and Maureen. Important about this is the man's claims that he never saw signs of abuse in Harrold and Maureen's relationship, a theme that will appear often in the coming chapters. Second, this man suggests Ms. Scofield turn her article into a book, supplying Ms. Scofield with motivation to create an article that will propel her career into a bigger league of success.



The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971

The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971 Summary

The first morning on the point Mary is awoken by the sound of a truck arriving at dawn. Mary watches a man board the green and white fishing boat and sail away. Mary feeds the baby and makes a list of the things she still needs for the house. Mary drives into Machias, the neighboring town, and does some shopping. Back at the cottage, Mary is just moving her purchases into the house when Willis arrives with some fish. Mary offers to pay for the fish, but Willis insists it is a gift. Willis asks about Mary's situation and suggests they fool around to satisfy her need to seek revenge on her husband. Mary politely refuses. Before Willis leaves, the fisherman in the green and white boat returns. Willis tells Mary that the man is Jack Strout, Julia's cousin by marriage. Jack is married to a woman who suffers from depression, Willis tells Mary. Jack also likes to fish longer than the rest of the men. Willis says Jack will keep his boat in the water until after Christmas even though the rest of the men will bring their boats in over the next week or so.

That night, Mary has trouble getting Caroline to settle down. The baby is teething and Mary does not have aspirin to soothe her. Mary decides to go for a walk. As they walk, Mary becomes aware of a vehicle arriving on the point. Mary will cross the path of the man who has come to get something off his boat. Mary considers waiting until he leaves before returning to the cottage, but decides to be friendly. Mary calls out a greeting. The man is tall, good looking, and quiet. Their conversation is polite, sociable, and insignificant. Over the next couple of weeks, Mary settles into a routine, beginning her day with the sound of Jack leaving in his boat and ending with the sound of Jack returning. Willis comes by nearly every day, always uninvited, and Mary finds herself enduring his visits out of a fear of alienating any of the locals, even though Willis's visits are unwelcome. Mary becomes a regular in town, visiting the local library and shopping at the general store.

One afternoon, Mary stops in for tea with Julia Strout. Julia asks Mary right out if she is on the run from her husband. Mary does not say the words aloud, but allows Julia to believe it is true. Julia offers to help in any way she can, especially when it comes to caring for the baby. Afterward, in a gesture of defiance, Mary buys a nightgown Harrold would never have liked. A few days later, Mary decides to drive into town to buy some coffee. The point is quiet because all the fishermen except Jack have hauled in their boats and none have come to the fishing house to work on equipment. Mary is halfway down the lane when she realizes she has a flat tire on her car. Mary takes the baby back into the house and attempts to change the tire herself, but the lug nuts are too tight. Jack comes in while Mary is working on the car. When he sees her struggling,



Jack comes over to change the tire for her. As Jack finishes and turns to leave, Willis pulls up. Willis demands to know what is going on, acting almost like a jealous lover. Mary explains the situation. Willis offers to take the tire to be fixed, but Mary insists on doing it herself. Finally Willis tells Mary he came to the point that day to tell her about the Christmas bonfire. The town has a bonfire every Christmas Eve on the town common. Mary thinks this announcement is just a rouse to be near her because Christmas Eve is still over ten days away.

The next few weeks pass in a blur for Mary. On Christmas Eve, Mary bundles up the baby and goes to the bonfire because it is something to do. Willis is there with his family. Mary becomes uncomfortable when Willis makes a point of being at her side, so she makes an excuse to get away from him. Mary goes inside to get some hot cider, but becomes too warm and decides to go back outside. A fight breaks out near the bonfire between some teenagers arguing over the war in Vietnam. In the aftermath of the fight, Mary becomes dizzy and passes out. Jack comes to her rescue, helping her into Julia's house. Everett was occupied with the fight, having had to take the boys inside and straighten out the argument that caused it. Everett is aware of Mary's fainting spell and tells Ms. Scofield that Julia was protective of Mary in the aftermath, refusing to talk to anyone about it. This attitude on Julia's part led to others in town to keep their mouths shut about Mary as well because Julia is well respected in St. Hilaire. Julia tells Ms. Scofield that she was standing on her porch that night, watching the fire to be sure it did not get out of control. Julia saw Mary pass out and rushed to her aid, caring for the baby while Mary recovered on the couch. Julia insisted that Mary eat something, afraid it was a lack of nourishment that caused her fainting spell. Julia also invited Mary to spend Christmas with her the next day, but Mary refused. Later, Mary did go to Julia's, but only to make a phone call.

Mary remembers fainting in the town common, frightened for what might have happened to Caroline had she fallen forward. Mary is embarrassed by the episode and by everyone's concern. Mary does not remember calling her mother from Julia's the next day, but her mother assures her she did. Several days after Christmas, a thaw causes a thick fog to settle over the point. Mary becomes claustrophobic and unhappy. Willis comes by to check on her, telling her that he will not be around much starting the following week because he has to take another job to provide for his family. Mary is concerned about Jack that day because she heard him leave, but he has not returned by the time the fog rolls back in. When it becomes late, Mary wonders if she should sound an alarm about Jack. Mary decides to go for a walk to work off her nervous energy. The fog is so thick, Mary quickly becomes lost. Jack returns and Mary finds herself drawn toward his truck. Jack is surprised to find her out in the fog and insists on guiding her back to the cottage.

After Mary puts the baby down for a nap, she and Jack talk in the kitchen. Jack tells Mary about his wife and her depression. Mary finds herself telling Jack the truth about Harrold and the abuse she suffered at his hands. Mary also admits that she is afraid to go to the police because she knows Harrold will claim she has stolen his child. Jack tells Mary he wants to be with her, but that he can never leave his wife. Mary agrees to Jack's conditions. The next morning, Jack arrives on the point earlier than usual. Mary



and Jack spend a few stolen moments in her bed. At dawn, Jack leaves to take his boat out. For the next few days, Jack comes every morning before dawn. One morning, Mary shows Jack her scars from her marriage and he shows her his, assuring her that they are only battle scars. One Sunday, Jack takes Mary out on his boat. Jack shares with Mary his job, showing her what he does each day after he leaves her. Mary finds books on the boat that seem more appropriate to a student's library than a lobster boat. Mary asks if Jack resents having to give up his education, but he assures her he is happy with his life. When Caroline needs to nurse, Jack directs Mary to a cupboard where she can find a towel to shield herself from the wind. When Mary retrieves the towel, she finds a gun. Jack says he keeps the gun to scare poachers away from his pots.

When Mary and Jack arrive back at the point, they find Willis there. Willis wants to know what is going on. Willis tells Mary he was concerned when he arrived and found her gone. Willis clearly suspects the growing relationship between Mary and Jack. Later, when Willis talks to Ms. Scofield about that day, he is clearly angry and jealous. Willis suggests that based on this relationship, Mary Amesbury is not the pillar of innocence she would like everyone to believe she is.

The next morning, Mary wakes early to the sounds of Caroline crying. The baby is running a dangerously high fever. Mary immediately attempts to get the temperature down, frightened by the baby's obvious discomfort. Jack arrives at dawn to find Mary frantic. Immediately Jack goes to the neighbors and phones the health clinic in Machias. Jack then drives Mary and Caroline to the clinic. The doctor diagnoses Caroline with an ear infection and wants to prescribe antibiotics. Mary recalls that Caroline had antibiotics once before and was allergic to it, but she cannot remember what medication specifically she had the reaction to. Mary is caught in a position in which she can either guess and put her daughter's life in jeopardy, or give the doctor the name of Caroline's pediatrician in New York and risk Harold learning of their location. Mary chooses to give the doctor the pediatrician's information.

Jack drives Mary back to the cottage and goes to get the medication for her. Willis is on the point when Jack returns, so Jack refuses to come into the house, afraid of further giving away their secret affair. Jack promises to come the following day. When he does come, Jack tells Mary that he will be bringing his boat in after that week and it will be spring before he will have an excuse to come to her again. Jack wants to leave his wife, but he is afraid of what she might do. Instead, Jack tells Mary that they will just have to enjoy the few moments they have together. Jack does not come the next day. Mary knows that Harold will surely find her soon and wants to move on, but she cannot without speaking to Jack. Mary goes into town, half hoping to run into Jack. Instead, Mary runs into Julia, who tells her that Jack's wife is ill. Julia also tells Mary that a man has been asking about her around town. Julia advises her to go to the police, but Mary refuses, still hoping that Harold does not know where she is. Jack does not come the next day, either. Mary goes into town again. This time she runs into Jack and his daughter at the general store. They speak briefly, but only polite conversation. The following morning, Mary lays awake waiting for Jack. This is the last morning they can be together. However, when he comes into the room, it is not Jack.



The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971 Analysis

Mary settles in at the cottage on the point, structuring her days around the comings and goings of Jack Strout on his lobster boat. This structure to her life makes Jack an important part of her day, despite the fact that she has never spoken to him. Therefore, it seems inevitable when Mary and Jack begin running into one another and her thoughts become filled with him. Jack speaks politely to Mary on their first meeting and helps her change a flat tire on her car. It is also Jack who rescues Mary when she becomes overwhelmed at a bonfire and faints. Jack becomes the knight in shining armor to Mary. Jack is quiet, gentle, and concerned. Jack is also unavailable. Before their first meeting, Mary knows that Jack is married to a woman who suffers depression. Mary is also aware that Jack would never leave his wife as long as she continues to suffer from her illness. This makes Jack safe, someone she can draw affection from but not be expected to take care of and support in any way other than within the mutually consented confines of her bedroom.

Willis becomes a regular visitor to the cottage. Willis clearly has feelings for Mary, but Mary does not return these feelings. Willis even asks Mary outright to share her bed with him, but Mary refuses. Willis is too much like Harrold for Mary to go down that road. Mary does not want to return to the confines of a controlling relationship. Mary needs the freedom to be herself, even if this is a new persona she has created in the aftermath of leaving her abusive husband. Mary's reaction to Willis says volumes about her personality to the reader, suggesting that she sees the freedom she has in front of her and she is fighting to keep it, rather than giving in to the first oppressive man who comes her way.

When Caroline becomes ill, Mary reacts as any mother would and quickly takes her to get help. By this time, Mary has begun her affair with Jack and is aware of the damage it would do if anyone learned about it. Mary does not want Jack to compromise himself, but in light of the child's illness, they both throw caution to the wind and do what is necessary to protect the child. Mary follows Jack's example when it appears that the baby's life could be in danger if Mary does not give the doctor the name of Caroline's pediatrician in New York even though a phone call to this office could reveal her location to Harrold. Mary's only concern is that of her daughter. The reader sees this as proof of Mary's strength and the depth of her love for the child. However, it could also carry with it the suggestion that Mary is tired of hiding and is ready for the confrontation to come, to end this ordeal once and for all.

When Jack takes Mary on his boat, she finds a gun. This discovery appears to be almost random in the narration, but could prove to be of significance when Harrold arrives at the cottage at the end of this section. Also in this section, Mary has twice told two different people that she cannot call the police to protect herself against Harrold. The first time, Mary tells Jack that she is afraid Harrold will claim that she stole his child. The novel is set in the seventies, a time in which the man still had what can be construed as the bulk of the rights in a marriage. A man practically owned his wife and



children. Therefore, it is reasonable that Mary might be concerned that Harrold could convince the police she had kidnapped the child and return her to her father, taking her away from Mary or forcing Mary to return as well. Second, Mary claims that Harrold might not know where she is, but the police would have to inform him. Mary is afraid of Harrold showing up at her cottage despite the fact that she is aware of a man asking about her in town and the possibility that Harrold already knows. This calls into question Mary's desire to involve the police at all and also suggests that Mary was perhaps preparing for a confrontation with Harrold.



The Notes and Transcripts: January 15, 1971 and January 15-Summer 1971

The Notes and Transcripts: January 15, 1971 and January 15-Summer 1971 Summary

In January 15, 1971, Ms. Scofield includes an interview with Everett in which he tells Ms. Scofield that he knew Jack had taken Mary and Caroline to Machias to see the doctor, but that he only began to suspect their relationship when Mary ran into Jack and his daughter in his store the day before the murder. Everett says there was no longer any doubt when Jack called him the following morning and told him to hurry out to the point.

Mary is lying in bed waiting for Jack when Harrold appears at the foot of her bed. Harrold demands she get out of bed and make him some coffee. Mary does as she is told. As the coffee boils, Harrold tells Mary that he drove all night and that he only wants to talk. Harrold found her through the doctor's office, thanks to a nurse who alerted him when the doctor from Machias called. Harrold wants Mary to go home with him. Mary refuses. Harrold gets up to make himself something to eat, pretending as though he did not hear her. Mary again tells Harrold she will not be going home with him. Harrold hits Mary with a fork. Harrold then drags Mary into the living room and forces her to undress. Harrold rapes her, hitting her so hard on the head that she passes out for a short time. Mary pretends to still be unconscious after she wakes, waiting for Harrold to pass out from the excessive amount of alcohol he drank on the drive to Maine.

When Harrold is finally asleep, Mary considers stabbing Harrold with a knife, but knows she is not strong enough to kill him before he would wake and turn the knife on her. Mary has an idea and leaves the house. Mary runs across the point toward the dingy Jack uses to get to his boat. Mary falls into a honeypot and struggles for a moment before remembering to lie flat in order to break the suction of the wet sand on her body. Mary is able to escape the honeypot and reach Jack's boat, where she retrieves the gun. Mary returns to the house, covered in mud, and sits at the kitchen table while she contemplates what to do. Mary knows if she does not kill Harrold, he will kill her or take Caroline and eventually abuse her as well. Mary stands in front of Harrold and aims the gun. Jack comes in and tells her to stop, but Mary fires. Harrold wakes and Mary fires again.

January 15-Summer 1971 begins as Everett arrives at the cottage. Everett asks both Mary and Jack what happened. Everett knows they are lying, partly because Jack says Mary only fired once, but Everett can clearly see two bullet wounds on Harrold. Mary then tells Everett that Harrold raped her after attacking her with a fork. Mary also says that Jack arrived after she shot Harrold. Again Everett does not believe that because Jack admits to coming into the house as Mary is firing the weapon. Everett is forced to call the police in Machias. Everett believes Mary killed Harrold in self defense despite



the lies he sees in her stories, but knows the police in Machias did not believe her because Harrold was asleep when she first fired the weapon. Everett also knows that Mary's case is weakened by Harrold's choice of weapons. Even Everett does not believe a fork can constitute a deadly weapon. Willis Beale believes outright that Mary is a murderer. Julia Strout continues to support Mary despite having to testify at the first trial that Mary told her the bruises she had on her face were caused by a car accident. Julia has custody of the baby, perhaps explaining her continued support of Mary.

The Notes and Transcripts: January 15, 1971 and January 15-Summer 1971 Analysis

The murder is described in this section. The entire set of notes and transcripts has been leading to this moment. Mary describes Harrold attacking her after learning that she does not want to return to New York with him. What Mary describes is a violent rape. The reader recalls previous rapes in this relationship and sees this as a traumatic experience for Mary. Mary wants to kill Harrold because she knows she will never truly be able to escape him. Mary goes to Jack's boat and retrieves his gun. Mary then returns to the house where she sits down to think about what she is going to do. Then Mary kills Harrold even though Jack arrives and attempts to talk her out of her actions.

Unfortunately, Mary's actions bring into question whether or not her crime was one of self defense, a theme of the novel. Mary claims she did it to protect herself and her child. However, Mary waited until Harrold was passed out on the couch. Mary then went out to Jack's boat, a trip that took her a significant amount of time because of its distance from shore and the trouble she had getting there. When Mary returns to the house, she does not immediately kill Harrold. Instead, Mary sits and thinks about the situation. Mary then kills Harrold while Jack, a big, capable man, is standing beside her. The idea that Mary's life is in immediate danger is questionable when all of this is taken into consideration. Not even Mary's closest supporters can quite grasp this idea. Willis clearly believes Mary is a cold blooded murderer, but Willis is in love with Mary and jealous of her relationship with Jack. Everett has trouble believing Mary and Jack's stories, especially when they obviously lied. Everett also has trouble believing a fork can be used as a deadly weapon, foreshadowing this same argument when Mary goes to trial. Finally, Julia supports Mary without a doubt, but Julia has taken custody of Caroline and if she does not support Mary she could lose this opportunity to be a mother.



The Article and The End

The Article and The End Summary

The article begins by describing a trip to the point by the defense attorney in Mary's second trial, Sam Cotton. Cotton claims that Mary killed Harrold out of self defense following two years of escalating violence within their marriage. Cotton compares Mary to Hester Prynne, the heroine of the novel *The Scarlett Letter*, with the exception that rather than meaning adulteress, her A stands for abuse. However, the author of the article finds it hard to find sympathy for Maureen English, who refuses to respond to any name other than Mary Amesbury. The author, Helen Scofield, describes her only meeting with Mary Amesbury and the description of her childhood that Mary supplied to Ms. Scofield in a series of letters describing the days before her crime. Ms. Scofield also refers to these letters when she suggests that rather than playing the role of victim, Mary was an active participant in episodes of sadistic sex and perhaps a passive player in violent drama that characterized her marriage.

Ms. Scofield continues to tear apart Mary Amesbury's claim of abuse by quoting co-workers of Harrold and Maureen English who claim to have never seen any signs of abuse in the relationship. The author herself admits to meeting Maureen English at a party on December 3, 1970 and being unaware of anything unpleasant in her marriage. The prosecutors never found anyone who could establish a pattern of abuse, and even the defense had trouble presenting witnesses to episodes of abuse or seeing bruises on Maureen. Even the people of St. Hilaire who testified to the bruises on Mary's face in the days after she arrived in the small village were forced to admit that Mary claimed the bruises were a result of a car accident.

Ms. Scofield continues her article by describing the tiny village of St. Hilaire and the lack of sophistication and intelligence of the village's inhabitants. Ms. Scofield also introduces the prosecutor to her readers, describing his amusement at the idea that Mary Amesbury could fear a fork could be used as a lethal weapon. The prosecutor believes that Mary Amesbury was not abused, that her husband never did anything to harm her, but that Mary chose to kill him in order to be free to be with her lover, Jack Strout. The prosecutor argues that Mary could not have feared for her life because Harrold was asleep and a fork could not possibly cause enough harm to lead to death. The prosecutor also claims that Mary had ample opportunity to call the police and that Jack's arrival at the cottage should have implied a level of security that should have ended Mary's fear of immediate danger.

Mary Amesbury's first trial ended in a mistrial. When Cotton learned that the new trial would be in the court of a judge who is known to be liberal with women, he advised his client to waive her right to a jury. Cotton hopes to be able to bring enough doubt to the mind of the judge to help his client go free. Unfortunately, Ms. Scofield believes that Cotton faces too many obstacles. Ms. Scofield points out that neither Mary nor her attorney can prove abuse, that Mary cannot prove her life was in danger, and Mary



cannot prove she was not a willing participant in the rapes supposedly perpetrated against her. In the end, it seems someone should pay, not only for Harrold's death, but for the death of Jack Strout's wife, Rebecca, who committed suicide when she learned the truth about her husband's affair. Three children are now motherless. Someone has to be held accountable.

In the end, Helen Scofield returns to Caroline English's dorm room. Caroline tells Ms. Scofield how she was always taught to blame her for the way her mother's trial ended. The article came out while the judge was deliberating the evidence. Some people believe that despite the fact the judge is not supposed to be influenced by the media, that he might have been swayed by this article. Mary received a life sentence for first degree murder, a sentence that was commuted after twelve years. Ms. Scofield explains that the article she wrote was influenced by the time in which it was written. People simply did not understand domestic abuse and the emotional impact on the victim. Ms. Scofield can look back now and see that some of what she interpreted as Mary's complacency in her abuse was really a psychological response that is typical of victims of repeated abuse.

Caroline asks Ms. Scofield if her mother could have lied in the letters she wrote. Ms. Scofield tells her that no one can ever know for sure if her mother told the truth, but that she believes the letters are closer to the truth as anyone will ever get. Finally, Ms. Scofield asks about the people in Mary's life while she was in St. Hilaire. Caroline says that Mary and Jack married after her release from prison and were happy until Mary's death from pneumonia earlier that year. Jack has remained a lobsterman. Julia died. Finally, Caroline asks why Ms. Scofield came to see her. Ms. Scofield admits to feeling guilty for building her career on Mary Amesbury's bad fortune. Ms. Scofield wrote a book based on the article that established her as a serious writer. Ms. Scofield cannot change what she has done, but hopes to bring some peace to Caroline by giving her the notes and transcripts from her research into the case.

The Article and The End Analysis

Ms. Scofield presents the article she wrote based on her notes and transcripts that were presented in the bulk of the novel. This article presents the facts, but it also dismisses Mary's claims of abuse and suggests that Mary killed Harrold in order to be with Jack. Ms. Scofield uses the prosecution's claims that Mary should not have been frightened of a simple fork and that she could have called the police for protection to support her opinion. Ms. Scofield also agrees with the prosecution's argument that Mary should have felt secure once Jack arrived at the cottage. A reader might see this article and feel inclined to agree with Ms. Scofield, especially a reader from the seventies. However, as Ms. Scofield points out more than twenty years later, people did not understand the psychological impact of years of abuse in the seventies. Mary truly believed she had no avenue but to kill her husband.

In today's society, a reader might come to this story and understand that Mary had been abused for so long that she did not see a way out except for murder. Even with Jack



standing beside her, Mary could not really trust that Harrold would not find some way to charm Jack into leaving them alone, giving him the opportunity to kill her. Mary did not believe her life was in immediate danger, but knew it would be at some point in the near future. Mary felt she had no choice. Whether this constitutes self defense, even in modern times, the reader has to decide for themselves. However, Mary's story might be more easily accepted now.

Caroline wonders if her mother told the truth in her letters to Ms. Scofield. Caroline will never know the truth about her father's truth because her mother is the only one who can tell her and her mother died earlier that year. Caroline never really knew her mother, never knew her father, and grew up in a world biased against both Harrold and Ms. Scofield. Now Caroline is in the ironic position of having to believe Ms. Scofield in order to satisfy her desire to learn the truth. It is a difficult position for both women, fueled by guilt on one side and a desire to know herself on the other. It seems there is no winning for anyone in this novel.



Characters

Maureen English/Mary Amesbury

Maureen English grew up in Chicago with a single mother during a decade when single mothers were looked down on, were uncommon, and unwelcome. Maureen felt as though she was an obstacle in her mother's life, keeping her mother from finding the happiness she might have otherwise known. Maureen believes the best thing she can do for her mother is to grow up and live the life her mother would never experience. Maureen wants to get married, have children, and enjoy the joys of a normal life. After college, Maureen takes a job writing for a New York magazine. On her very first day, Maureen meets Harrold English, a charming, talented writer also working for the magazine. Maureen and Harrold hit it off immediately and begin a whirlwind romance.

Maureen adores Harrold and is willing to do just about anything for him. Maureen does not notice what a big role alcohol plays in their relationship until the first time Harrold assaults her. Maureen begins to notice things about Harrold she had never seen before. Harrold is possessive, jealous. Harrold also is an alcoholic who buries his dark emotions left from his childhood in a bottle. Maureen slowly becomes frightened of Harrold and his dark moods. Maureen does everything she can to please Harrold, even giving up her career to keep him from jealous rages. However, nothing Maureen does seems to keep Harrold from hurting her. Maureen considers leaving Harrold, but when she becomes pregnant she has new hope that Harrold will change. Unfortunately, the beatings only become more frequent.

Maureen tries to run away. Maureen goes to her mother until she can decide what to do. Harrold finds Maureen and tells her if she does not return home he will kill her. Maureen does as she's told, only to be beaten unconscious a short time later. Maureen leaves again, this time driving to a place she has never been, a tiny speck on a map. Maureen becomes Mary Amesbury, a persona she will forever embrace as though Maureen English died the night Harrold beat her for the last time. Mary settles into a small cottage she rents in a tiny fishing town. Mary is embraced by the locals and finds love with a fisherman who moors his boat near her cottage. Mary is happy for the first time. However, when her daughter becomes dangerously ill, Mary is forced to allow the doctor to contact her child's pediatrician and expose her hiding place. Harrold finds Mary and attacks her. Mary feels she has no choice but to kill him. Later, Mary is convicted of murder and serves twelve years of a life sentence before her sentence is commuted.

Caroline English

Caroline English is in college when the novel opens. Caroline is the daughter of Maureen and Harrold English. When Caroline was just six months old, her mother left her father and hid in a small fishing village in Maine. After Caroline becomes



dangerously ill, Harrold finds his family. Maureen feels as though she has no choice but to kill Harrold in order to protect herself and Caroline. Afterward, Maureen is arrested for murder and Caroline is given to a local widow who befriended the young mother and child. Caroline grows up believing that an article written by a writer working for the same magazine where her parents met is responsible for her mother's conviction on murder charges.

Caroline is in college when the author of that article comes to see her. The woman is aware that Caroline's mother has recently passed away and wants her to see the research on which the article was based. Caroline reads her mother's story, written in letters from her mother to the author, and learns things about the case she had never known before. Caroline wonders, however, if her mother was completely truthful in her story. No one believed that Mary Amesbury's life was in danger at the moment she killed her husband. Caroline wants to believe her mother was trying to protect herself as well as her child, but doubts linger.

Jack Strout

Jack Strout is a lobster fisherman who moors his boat off the point where Mary Amesbury rents a cottage. Jack is an educated man who was in college when his father became injured and needed his son to return to Maine in order to provide for the family. Jack accepted his fate and has embraced his life as a fisherman. Jack is also married to a woman who suffers from clinical depression. During the time in which they lived, depression was not fully understood and not treated as it is in modern days. Jack's wife spends most of her time in bed, lost in a dark void that makes her incapable of fulfilling her role as wife and mother.

Jack becomes aware of Mary when he runs into her on several occasions on the point. Jack is drawn to Mary because she is a damaged person, but also strong. Jack and Mary begin an affair that they both know cannot go anywhere. Jack will not leave his wife because he does not want to be responsible for what his wife might do in the aftermath of a separation. Mary accepts this and enjoys the time they can share together. When Caroline becomes ill, Jack takes Mary to the health clinic to get her help. The day Harrold arrives in the little village, Jack comes to Mary and finds her about to shoot her husband. Jack tries to talk her out of it, but Mary is determined to protect her daughter. Afterward, both Jack and Mary lie to the police, but the story eventually comes out. Jack's wife kills herself the same day the truth about Mary and Jack's affair spreads through town. However, Jack stands by Mary and the two marry when Mary is released from prison.

Harrold English

Harrold English is a charming, talented writer. Harrold can have any woman he wants, but he chooses Maureen English. Harrold loves Maureen, but he is so scarred from a dark childhood that he cannot control his violent temper. Harrold's mother died of



cancer, a lingering, painful death. In the days before her death, Harrold told his mother that he had seen his father attempting to seduce her sister. Harrold's mother refused to talk to her husband until her death. Harrold's father, an alcoholic, blamed Harrold for this and never forgave him. Harrold lived with a deep sense of guilt and became an alcoholic himself.

As Harrold and Maureen's relationship continues to develop, Harrold becomes increasingly violent with her. Harrold will often rape Maureen when he has been drinking a lot or when he believes she has flirted with another man. Harrold is very possessive of Maureen and causes a situation in which she feels she must curtail her career in order to please him. After a time, Maureen cannot leave the house without causing Harrold to go into a jealous rage. Finally, Maureen leaves Harrold in fear for her life and the safety of her child. Harrold searches for Maureen, finally finding her after the child becomes ill. Harrold attacks Maureen, rapes her, and threatens her life. After Harrold passes out from consumption of alcohol, Maureen retrieves a gun and kills him.

Everett Shedd

Everett Shedd owns a general store in St. Hilaire and serves as the village's only law officer. Everett meets Mary Amesbury the first night she arrives in town when she stops at his store to buy some food. Everett directs Mary to the only hotel in the area. Everett meets Mary again on several different occasions during the six weeks she lives in St. Hilaire, finding her to be a quiet, private person who has clearly been through a difficult time. Everett sees the bruises on Mary's face when she first arrives in town and knows they are not bruises received in a car accident as Mary has said.

Everett, as the only law officer in town, is the person Jack calls after Mary shoots Harrold English. Everett can see that Mary killed Harrold in self defense, but knows that the law in the neighboring town will not see it his way because they do not know Mary and did not see her bruises. Everett attempts to help Mary, but Mary is determined to face her punishment no matter what it is. Everett will continue to defend Mary throughout both her trials and the aftermath.

Julia Strout

Julia Strout is a widow who lives in St. Hilaire. Julia's family left her a small sum of money, leaving her well off after the death of her husband. Julia's husband was a fisherman who drowned when he was pulled off his boat into freezing water. Julia now lives in town in a large home left over from the days when life was more profitable in St. Hilaire. Julia makes her living by renting out two cottages to tourists during the summer. It is one of Julia's cottages that Mary rents when she comes to St. Hilaire.

Julia is a strong, kind woman who can see that Mary has suffered greatly in her marriage. Julia takes Mary under her wing and tries to care for the woman as much as she will allow. When Mary begins having an affair with Jack, Julia is concerned but does not say anything to anyone. Later, when Mary is arrested for killing Harrold, Julia takes



custody of her daughter, Caroline, and raises her as though she were her own until Mary is released from prison after serving twelve years.

Willis Beale

Willis Beale is a fisherman who lives in St. Hilaire. Willis moors his boat at the point where Mary rents a cottage and appoints himself her guardian. Willis comes to Mary's cottage nearly every day for a beer and to make sure she is okay. Willis wants to become Mary's lover and even goes as far as to offer her sexual favors. Mary is turned off by Willis' caveman attitude and refuses to share intimacies with him. Willis continues to try even though Mary would prefer for him to stay away from her. After Willis learns that Mary has begun an affair with Jack, he becomes enraged with jealousy. Willis takes the opportunity to hurt Mary when a private detective asks him if he knows where Willis is. Willis gives away Mary's location and makes it possible for Harrold to find his wife.

Rebecca Strout

Rebecca Strout is Jack Strout's wife. Rebecca was once a vivacious, loving woman. However, clinical depression has dropped Rebecca into a dark, listless world. Rebecca is so trapped in her depression that she can barely function in day-to-day life, let alone be a proper wife and mother. Rebecca lives in the early seventies, a time before depression was understood, leaving her with no treatment for her symptoms. As a result, Rebecca cannot function. Rebecca ends up committing suicide off the point the day Mary kills Harrold and the truth about her relationship with Jack becomes public knowledge.

Helen Scofield

Helen Scofield is a successful writer who built her career on a book she wrote based on an article she wrote about Mary Amesbury. Helen wrote in both her article and book that Mary killed Harrold English in order to free herself to be with her lover, Jack Strout. Helen completely dismissed Mary's claims of spousal abuse, claiming that Mary was an active participant in Harrold's violent sex play and that the bruises Mary suffered were as much her fault as his. Helen wrote these things in a time when spousal abuse and domestic violence were not well understood. Now, reflecting back on what she wrote, Helen has come to understand that what Mary did she did to protect herself and her child. Helen feels guilt for her role in Mary's murder conviction and goes to Mary's child to give her the research she did on the case in order to allow the child to understand her mother and the murder of her father.

Machias Health Clinic Doctor, Dr. Posner

The doctor at the health clinic where Mary Amesbury takes Caroline during a dangerous illness, Dr. Posner, wants to give Caroline antibiotics, but Caroline is allergic to a type of



antibiotic. Mary cannot remember which medication her daughter is allergic to and consents to allow the doctor to call Caroline's pediatrician in New York. This phone call alerts a nurse in the doctor's office whom Harrold has asked to inform him of any word as to his wife's location. It is this doctor and Mary choice that leads to Harrold finding Mary and ultimately his death.



Objects/Places

Fork

Harrold uses a fork to attack Mary the morning she decides to kill him. Later, the prosecutor insists that a fork could not be considered a lethal weapon and therefore could not have made Mary afraid enough to kill in self defense.

Gun

Mary sees a gun on Jack's boat and later goes back to get it when Harrold finds her at the cottage.

Honeypots

Honeypots are small pockets of quicksand along the edges of the point that are uncovered when the tide is low. Mary falls into one of these honeypots when she goes out to Jack's boat to retrieve the gun.

Dingy

Jack uses a dingy to get to his boat. Mary uses the dingy the morning she retrieves the gun from Jack's boat.

Jack's Lobster Boat

Jack keeps his green and white lobster boat off the point where Mary's rental cottage is located.

Fishing House

There is a small shed near the cottage Mary rents where the fishermen often spend the off season repairing their gear. Willis often spends a great deal of time at this shed while Mary is renting the cottage.

Julia's House

Julia Strout owns a large home across from the general store. Mary visits Julia several times during her time in St. Hilaire at this home. Later, when Mary is arrested, Julia raises Caroline in this home.



Julia's Cottage

Julia owns a cottage on the point that she bought from a retired couple after the husband died. Julia rents this cottage to Mary and it is here that Harrold is killed.

General Store

Everett Shedd owns a small general store in St. Hilaire that Mary visits the first evening she is in town. At this store, Mary gets directions to a small motel where she stays the first night.

Machias Health Clinic

Jack and Mary take Caroline to the Machias Health Clinic when she begins running a dangerously high fever. During the visit, Mary is forced to tell the doctor her previous pediatrician's name in order to get Caroline's health records, allowing Harrold to find Mary.

The Point

The point is a section of beach and sand bar on the outer section of St. Hilaire where several fishermen keep their boats. The point is also where the cottage is located that Mary rents from Julia.

Machias, Maine

Machias is the next town up from St. Hilaire. Machias is where Mary takes Caroline when she suffers from an ear infection. Machias is also where Mary does her shopping and from where she calls her mother during her six weeks of exile.

St. Hilaire, Maine

St. Hilaire is a small fishing village in Maine where Mary Amesbury hides after she leaves her abusive husband.



Themes

Spousal Abuse

The main question in this novel is whether or not the violence in Maureen and Harrold's relationship constitutes abuse. After her arrest, Mary describes her marriage in letters to a writer at the same magazine where she and her husband worked. Mary claims that Harrold forced her to have sexual intercourse before their wedding because she did not want to be intimate with him. Mary then says that Harrold would drink too much and then would become violent, often beating Mary for imagined offenses. Mary is frightened of Harrold. Eventually Mary runs away, hoping to keep herself and her baby safe. Harrold finds Mary and forces her to return home. Later, Harrold again beats Mary so badly she looks as though she was in a terrible car accident. Mary again runs away, escaping this time to Maine and changing her name.

Helen Scofield begins researching the story shortly after the first trial ends in a mistrial. Helen convinces Maureen, who now prefers to be called Mary, to tell her the story. Helen sees inconsistencies in the story. Mary claims that Harrold would often tie her up during sex and Helen sees this as Mary's acceptance of the violence Harrold perpetrated against her. Helen also believes that Mary's acknowledgment that she was having an affair with a married man in St. Hilaire a motive for the murder of her husband. At the time she wrote the article, Helen believes there was no abuse in Mary's marriage to Harrold.

Mary's entire defense for killing her husband is based on the fact that he abused her their entire marriage. Mary is attacked in her new home and is frightened that her husband will kill her. Mary is also concerned that her husband will try to steal her daughter. Mary decides she must kill her husband before he can hurt her. Mary goes out to Jack's boat and retrieves a gun. Mary then comes back to her house and shoots her husband twice while he is passed out on the couch. Mary believes she has done this because of the abuse and to protect her child. Helen believes Mary did this in order to free herself to be with the man she has been having an affair with. The reader is left to make a decision based on the story Mary tells. Mary's story about abuse is what makes spousal abuse a theme of the novel.

Self Defense

Mary claims she killed her husband in self defense. Mary ran away from her husband to escape his abuse, but was found after six weeks. The morning Mary's husband finds her, he rapes her and threatens her with a fork. Mary waits for her husband to pass out from the excessive amount of alcohol he consumed and then retrieves a gun from a boat moored out in the bay. Mary then sits in a chair and contemplates what she intends to do. Finally, Mary approaches her husband with the gun. Mary's lover comes into the house and tells her not to do what he knows she is thinking. Mary fires the gun anyway.



The prosecution claims that because it took Mary so long to get the gun and because she took so much time to think about it, that the murder was premeditated. Mary's life was not in trouble at the time that she fired the weapon. Mary had time to think about what she was going to do. Not only this, but a strong, capable man had come into the room and could have protected her from her husband. All of these things, combined with the fact that Mary could have called the police at any time for help, add up to premeditation in the prosecutor's case. Mary disagrees, however. Mary did not call the police because she knew all her husband had to say was that she stole his child. Rape is not considered a crime of marriage. Finally, Mary knows no one would ever believe that she was abused. Mary fired the gun in self defense because she believed that eventually her husband would kill her and the only way she could stop him would be when he was passed out and unable to stop her. This is what makes self defense a theme of the novel.

Extramarital Affairs

Mary is still legally married to Harrold English despite the fact that she changed her name and has run away from him. Jack Strout is still legally married even though his wife is clinically depressed and unable to participate fully in their marriage. Mary and Jack seek comfort from one another, beginning an affair that they both know cannot go beyond their few stolen moments together. Mary simply needs to be with a man who is kind and gentle. Jack needs a woman who is fully engaged in life and willing to share that life with him. It is a situation that is dangerous for them both, but also some of the most exciting days of their lives.

Willis Beale is a boorish, uneducated man who believes he is God's gift to women. Willis likes Mary from the moment he meets her and immediately offers his services to her. Willis believes a woman who has recently left her husband enjoys a tumble in bed with a strange man. Willis offers to be that man for Mary. When Mary refuses, it does little to discourage Willis's continued attention. Willis wants to be with Mary and he becomes jealous when he realizes that Mary is having an affair with Jack, even though Willis himself is married.

Extramarital affairs is a theme of this novel because Mary's affair with Jack is the only motive outside of self defense that people can find for Mary to murder her husband, Harrold English. Clearly Mary has decided she no longer wants to be with Harrold and would rather be with Jack, but a divorce could mean losing the custody of her tiny daughter, Caroline. Mary claims she was protecting herself and her daughter from an abusive man, but as this was the 1970s, she was afraid no one would believe her. In the end, it seems people would rather believe she killed her husband to be with Jack than that she was abused and desperate.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is unique. In the beginning and ending chapters, the point of view is third person through the narrating character of Helen Scofield, a reporter who has brought her research notes to the daughter of a woman she once wrote an article about. These chapters are narrated much like any other novel told in the third person omniscient point of view. However, the bulk of the novel is presented as though they were the typed notes Ms. Scofield took based on interviews with important people involved in the murder trial of Mary Amesbury/Maureen English. These sections are told in the first person point of view, as with the letters Mary Amesbury wrote to Ms. Scofield, or the authorial voice as with interviews Ms. Scofield conducted with important participants in the case.

The point of view of this novel is unique in that the novel is not structured like a traditional novel. The novel begins in modern times, but travels back nearly twenty years to the time of Mary Amesbury's crime, coming back again to modern times as the reader sees how Mary's daughter reacts to the revelation of the story behind her mother's crime. The point of view works well with this structure because it allows the reader to feel as though they are there, reading over Caroline English's shoulder as she reads the research based on the article that had a hand in sending her mother to jail for more than twelve years. This point of view does not reveal anything too quickly, nor does it allow the author to hide anything except what Mary Amesbury herself might have hidden from the author of the article. It is a unique point of view that works well with this novel's structure.

Setting

The majority of the novel takes place in the small Maine fishing village of St. Hilaire in the seventies. St. Hilaire is no more than a cluster of homes and a few small businesses. St. Hilaire seems like it is such an insignificant place that it would be easy for an angry husband to overlook his wife's refuge in this village. St. Hilaire is where Mary Amesbury hides after leaving her abusive husband. Mary moves into a small cottage in this village where she feels safe for the first time since the abuse in her marriage began. However, this is also the scene of another attack by her husband and where Mary kills her husband. The village is a strange backdrop for such violence, making it difficult for Mary to claim self defense when the police come to investigate the crime.

The setting of this novel is perfect at the beginning because it seems like the perfect place for a frightened, abused woman to hide. Later, the location of the cottage that Mary rents seems ideal as a lover's getaway when she begins having an affair with a local fisherman. The cottage is cozy, safe, a place where a woman could raise her child



in peace and not feel fear. However, when Harrold finds Mary in this place, the setting is spoiled by his anger and his abuse. Mary kills Harrold to protect herself and her daughter, changing the setting, making it seem too isolated, too frightening for a woman such as Mary. The setting is also important because of the decade in which it takes place. In the seventies, little was known about spousal abuse and the emotional trauma this abuse could cause; therefore, no one knew that Mary's actions were consistent with the abuse she suffered. In this way, the setting is perfect because it is a backdrop for each stage of the novel's development.

Language and Meaning

The novel is written in straightforward English. The novel includes some unfamiliar words, especially for those readers who have never been fishing and are not familiar with fishing jargon. The novel also includes words that are shortened or modified in order to express a Maine accent. Finally, the novel revolves around a magazine writer and an article she wrote. The novel, therefore, includes some jargon that one would expect to find in the vocabulary of people who work in the publishing industry.

The language of this novel is appropriate to both its setting and premise. The jargon specific to fishing and the publishing industry is important because it lends authenticity to the novel. The modification of certain words and sentence structure to express the Maine accent is important because the novel is set in Maine where the dialect is unique to its location. Finally, the language of this novel works because it sets Mary apart from the other characters in the novel as an outsider who has sought refuge from a tight knit community, which is exactly what Mary has done.

Structure

The novel is divided into several sections. The first and last sections take place in modern times, telling the story of Helen Scofield, a writer who, out of guilt, has brought the research she did on an article on twenty years before to the daughter of the woman she was writing about. The bulk of the novel is divided into a series of time, the six weeks between the day Maureen English left her husband and became Mary Amesbury and the day Mary killed Maureen's husband, Harrold English. These sections consist of interviews done by the writer, Helen Scofield, and letters Mary sent to her while awaiting her second trial for murder.

The novel's structure is unique in that it does not tell a straightforward story with a classic narrator and simple time line. Instead, this novel is encircled by the story of Helen Scofield bringing her research to Maureen and Harrold English's daughter to explain her father's death and her mother's claim of self defense. The bulk of the novel takes place in the seventies, during a time when domestic abuse was not fully understood. Mary Amesbury tells her story in this section of the novel, claiming horrible abuse by her husband, Harrold English, and explaining that she committed the murder

in order to protect herself and her infant daughter from Harrold's violent temper. This structure is unique, but does not interfere with the unfolding of the plot within the novel.



Quotes

"Once the storyteller has her facts, whether they be told to her or be a product of her investigations, what then does she do with her material?" Beginning, p. 3

"She looked at me as if I were a stranger who had not yet entered her room. I could only guess at what she was thinking, what she was hearing, and what she feared."
Beginning, pp. 8-9

"I was driving north and east. It was as far east as I could go. I had an image in my mind that sustained me—of driving to the edge and jumping off, though it was just an image, not a plan." The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970, p. 17

"You could tell she was in trouble the minute she walked in the door there. She had a gray scarf wound all round her face, 'n' those sunglasses, 'n' I know she meant to hide herself, but the fact is, she looked so unusual, don't you know, with those dark glasses when it was already sundown outside, that you had to look at her." The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970, p. 29

"I took the name of Mary; it was my aunt's. But in the forming of that M, I thought of other names: Didn't I wish for a name more intriguing than my own? An Alexandra or a Noel? But something sensible—a practical need for anonymity—stopped a possible A or an N."
The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970, p. 42

"I guess it was 'cause I had a feeling of what she'd been through, and with the baby and all, that made me call Julia myself. Up here, we usually don't bother much with strangers, but this was different, you understand?" The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, 1970, p. 57

"The women who are awaiting trial or sentencing live in a suspended state, like purgatory or limbo. We say at meals or in the yard, Do you have any news? Or, Do you have a date yet?" The Notes and Transcripts: December 3-4, p. 137

"The rumble of the motor was a complaint, a boat disturbed too early and grumbling under her skipper." The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971, p. 153

"The rhythms I had heard and understood and counted on disappeared, and those hours until darkness were somewhat harder for me to negotiate. I tried to fill them with a drive or a walk or a nap. But I understood that these were gestures of defiance, skirmishes against empty time."
The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971, p. 173



"I let him look at me. I made him look at me. I knew that I was damaged in some places, ugly in others, but I didn't mind his eyes. I felt no shame in myself, nor any sense of judgment from him. I didn't want him to say that I was beautiful; that wasn't what I hoped for. I think I wanted only to have it behind me, to have it done. But then he did a funny thing. He got out of his side of the bed. There was a line across his abdomen from a ruptured appendix, which he pointed out. He stood on one foot and showed me a dent from a rope burn on his shin. His hands had many nicks, he said, displaying them, and I saw a mark, like something made with jagged scissors, on his upper arm. He'd been a boy, he said, pegging lobsters for his father, and he'd gotten stung by a bee, lost control of the lobster, and it had clawed him. I began to laugh."

The Notes and Transcripts: December 5, 1970-January 15, 1971, p. 222

"Perhaps Willis Beale put it best: 'Before Mary Amesbury came here, this was a peaceful little town. Then she came, and it was like a hurricane had blown through. I'm not saying she tried to cause trouble. It's just that she did, didn't she?'

'By the time she left us, we had one murder, one suicide, and three kids had lost their mothers.

'She's got something to answer for, doesn't she?'"

The Article, p. 324

"'Mightn't she have edited her own story a bit, changed a quote here and there, exaggerated or altered something in order to help herself?'

"The question lay between us like an abyss. An abyss in which the story and the storyteller were endlessly repeated and diminished like images in two reflecting mirrors.

"Who could ever know where a story had begun? I wanted to say. Where the truth was in a story like Mary Amesbury's?" The End, pp. 334-335



Topics for Discussion

Who is Mary Amesbury? Why does Maureen change her name? Why does Maureen refuse to answer to any name other than Mary Amesbury after her husband's death? What does this say about Maureen English? How does this separate Maureen English from the woman who falls in love with Jack Strout and kills Harrold English?

Who is Willis Beales? What does Willis want from Mary? Compare and contrast Willis and Harrold English. In how many ways are they alike? How is Willis's affection for Mary like Harrold's affection for his wife? How is Willis's attention frightening for Mary? Why? Why does Willis tell the private detective where Mary is? Is this done with malice? Why or why not?

Who is Jack Strout? Why does Mary become attracted to Jack? What is different about Jack as compared to Willis or Harrold? Why does Jack become attracted to Mary? What is wrong with Jack's wife? How does this impact Jack's affections for Mary? Does Jack intend to help Mary? Does Jack feel sorry for Mary?

Who is Harrold English? Why does Mary become attracted to him? What is it about Harrold that makes Mary turn a blind eye to his violence? What changes in their marriage that makes Mary want to leave Harrold? Why is Harrold a heavy drinker? Why does Mary believe Harrold abuses her? What does Harrold's childhood have to do with his abusive behavior? Is this an excuse? Does Harrold deserve to die for this abuse?

Discuss St. Hilaire. Why does Mary chose St. Hilaire to hide? Why does St. Hilaire embrace Mary? Do the citizens of St. Hilaire believe Mary is abused? Why? Why do they believe but the jury does not? Why does Mary elect to allow a citizen of St. Hilaire to raise her child over her own mother? What is it about St. Hilaire that Mary trusts?

What constitutes spousal abuse? Can a husband rape a wife? Why or why not? Was Mary raped? Did the fork at her throat constitute a threat on Mary's life? Why did Mary choose to kill Harrold? Was abuse part of Mary's motive or did she kill him to be with Jack? Why did Mary not want to call the police? Is this reasonable? How would this situation be different if it were to take place in modern times?

Discuss self defense. What is self defense? Can a person kill to protect themselves? Why or why not? Was Mary's life in danger at the time she killed her husband? Should Mary have gone to jail for her crime? Could Mary have left and gotten a divorce? Why or why not? Could Jack have protected Mary from Harrold? Why or why not? What would have happened if Mary had waited for Harrold to wake up? Would Mary be alive? Would Harrold be alive? Should Mary have gone to jail for Harrold's death?