The Sea Study Guide

The Sea by John Banville

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This poetically written novel takes the form of a series of journal entries written by a lonely middle-aged man as he spends what he sees as his final days in a guesthouse near the scene of a tragedy in his childhood. Themes relating to the nature of identity and death are explored as the narrator's past and present intertwine in an experience of life both haunting and inescapable.

The novel begins with an evocation of the sea and of the narrator's sense of impending death. He then unfolds a series of ever-deepening memories, past and present intertwining in his life and in his writing as he explores and relives his experiences with two powerful female influences: his childhood friend Chloe, and his beloved wife Anna.

As the narrative progresses, the narrator's recollections of his intense summer with Chloe parallel recollections of his equally intense last few months with Anna, who is dying of a fatal disease. Underpinning all these recollections is the narrator's apparent awareness of his own death - he writes in detail of how he feels it approaching, like the tides of the sea, and how he wonders whether this summing up of his life is in fact a preparation for death.

The narrator includes in his memories of Chloe stories of his initial infatuation with her mother, his fascination with her mute twin brother Myles, his relationship with her governess Rose (a relationship consisting of equal parts contempt and pity), and his unease with her father. His memories of Anna include a visit to a doctor's office to receive confirmation of the terminal diagnosis, their mutual discomfort with the narrator's mother (embittered after being abandoned by her husband early in their marriage), and her increasing discomfort as her illness progressed. Underpinning both sets of memories is the narrator's deepening awareness of having used both Chloe and Anna as a means of escaping his detested early life, which was poverty stricken, emotionally violent, spiritually empty. At one point, perhaps inadvertently, the narrator reveals that the name to which he's referred throughout the novel is not his real name, but the name under which he publishes his works of academic research. Indications are, in fact, that he has completely submerged his true identity - it seems he has accomplished his goal of submerging himself, but as the poetic/metaphoric writing in the novel reveals, his past is coming back to haunt him.

As the narrator's memories and experiences of his present life become more and more entwined, a sense of narrative tension builds to the novel's climax - the narrator's simultaneously remembered and recounted deaths of Chloe (by drowning) and Anna (from her fatal disease). Shortly after recalling these key moments in his life, an incident in the present drives the narrator to get drunk and make a half-hearted suicide attempt, from which he is rescued by one of the other inhabitants of the guesthouse. As he recovers, the narrator's writings reveal that the proprietor of the guest house, to whom he has referred throughout the novel almost in passing, is revealed to be the mature version of Rose, Chloe's governess.

As the novel draws to a close, the narrator seems to have come to a kind of peace with both his impending death and his troubled life. The inevitable tide, somehow comfortable in its inescapability, has come in and there is at last, at least, the possibility of peace.

Section 1: Part 1 (pp. 3-18)

Section 1: Part 1 (pp. 3-18) Summary

This poetically written novel takes the form of a series of journal entries, written by a lonely middle-aged man as he spends what he sees as his final days in a guesthouse near the scene of a tragedy in his childhood. Themes relating to the nature of identity and of death are explored as the narrator's past and present intertwine in an experience of life both haunting and inescapable.

The novel begins with a poetic description of how "the gods" left on the day of an unusually high tide, bringing water that rose to the peaks of parched sand-dunes on the beach, upset the sea-birds, and triggered in the narrator the realization that he would not swim, "not ever again." He also describes how a wrecked and long abandoned ship "must have thought it was granted a relaunch," and speaks of having the shivery feeling of someone walking over his grave.

The narrator then describes the boarding house where he's staying, The Cedars, and reveals that he also stayed there in the past ("in the time of the gods"), a time of which he has mixed memories. One in particular remains with him: his first encounter with the Grace family. He describes in detail his first glimpse of the father (overweight, tanned to the soles of his feet, drinking, winking in a conspiratorial fashion), and also the first time he heard the daughter of the family playing inside the house, laughing and chasing with an unseen companion. After contemplating a personal habit that frightens him into thinking he's aging into his father, the narrator's focus shifts to another of the present inhabitants of the house, Colonel Blunden - an elderly, rigid, middle aged military man who, like the narrator, now makes The Cedars his home.

The narrator's focus returns to the past, recalling his next encounter with the Graces -father and mother leaving in their large black car, and their young son greeting him with insolence as he (the narrator) passes. After a momentary narrative shift back to the present, during which he theorizes on Colonel Blunden's frequent visits to the bathroom are the result of prostate problems, the narrator's thoughts again return to the past as he imagines himself walking along the Station Road of the nearby town. Past and present blend as what he recalls of the street blurs with what he sees (see "Quotes," p. 9).

The narrator then recalls a visit he paid with his wife Anna to a doctor named Mr. Todd. He describes in detail the clinical, metallic feeling of the doctor's office, the blend of heartiness and reticence in the doctor's manner, Anna's abrupt and semi-joking insistence that the doctor give her his news, and the doctor's listing of treatments available to her. Her actual illness is never specifically mentioned at this point, but it seems likely to be cancer. Anna answers the doctor's torrent of information with quiet gratitude and leaves. As the narrator (called Max by the doctor) follows, the doctor looks at him with the same sort of conspiratorial expression as Mr. Grace. The narrator and

Anna leave the building, walking "as if [they] were stepping on to a new planet, one where no-one lived but us."

The narrator describes how, after arriving home from the doctor's office, he put on the kettle to make tea, but Anna asked for brandy. The narrator describes in poetic detail how all the everyday things of life - the dishes in the kitchen, the kettle boiling, the brandy glass - all had different, somehow menacing or intimidating, meaning in the wake of the conversation with the doctor. He also describes the hard swelling in Anna's belly, which they joke will make people think she's pregnant but which is in fact the source of her death - again, implying that she has cancer. The narrator describes how he gave Anna brandy but she didn't drink, leaving him to drink it instead. She turns away from him, and asks "What now?"

In a brief interlude, the narrator comments on how the Colonel was a long time in the bathroom, how the narrator's bedroom has a large and interestingly carved bed, and how he was told his room was the master bedroom when the Graces were at the house. He wonders uneasily whether or not it was the bedroom where Mr. and Mrs. Grace slept, and presumably made love. He then comments on his realization that it's been exactly one year since his and Anna's meeting with the doctor. He writes, with some bitterness, that he should have kept a journal - his "diary of the plague."

Section 1: Part 1 (pp. 3-18) Analysis

This opening sequence of scenes introduces several of the novel's key elements. Most important of these is the frequent, unpredictable, fluid shifting of narrative focus between past and present, a stylistic and thematically relevant manifestation of the narrator's predominant state of mind (see "Quotes," p. 9; see also "Themes" and "Style"). The reasons this intertwining exists becomes apparent as the novel develops, but can be usefully noted here - the narrator's memories of the lives and deaths of Chloe Grace and his wife Anna, the two main females in his past, are themselves intertwined, and are in turn deeply bound together with the narrator's present perspective on his own life and death.

The second key element introduced in this section is The Cedars, the setting for much of the action in both the past (when it was the rented summer home of the Grace family) and the present (when it is a boarding house). As discussed later in "Settings," The Cedars is essentially a place where people come to die, albeit without knowing that that's why they're there. Perhaps a better way to phrase it would be that people come to The Cedars and die—literal deaths, in the case of Chloe Grace, and spiritual deaths in the case of the narrator and Colonel Blunden.

The opening lines of the book foreshadow all these deaths, with its description of the wrecked ship (symbolizing those whose lives have been wrecked - physical lives like Chloe's and Anna's, emotional lives like those of the narrator, Colonel Blunden, and Miss Vavasour) and of the moody tide (symbolizing the ebb and flow of life). Meanwhile, there is specific foreshadowing of death in the references to the tide and to the author

never swimming again after "the day of the strange tide." This is a direct reference to the scene later in the book (Section 2: Part 5), set on the day of the strange tide, when Chloe and her twin brother Myles die by drowning.

Another piece of foreshadowing can be found in the narration of the visit to the doctor's office. The narrator revisits this scene several times throughout the novel, suggesting the visit was perhaps even more of a trauma than the deliberately but delicately phrased writing here suggests.

An interesting element to note here is the way in which the members of the Grace family are not at this point identified by name. They are later - Mr. Grace becomes Carlo, the daughter in the house becomes Chloe, the boy by the gate becomes Myles. Mrs. Grace is given a first name (Connie), but is always referred to by the narrator as Mrs. Grace. This perhaps foreshadows the narrator's tendency towards keeping identities hidden - as is discussed in "Themes," a habit with definite thematic resonances.

Section 1: Part 2 (pp. 18-32)

Section 1: Part 2 (pp. 18-32) Summary

The narrator describes how he first came to The Cedars as the result of a dream, which he describes in detail - of himself, hobbling because of a limp, along a country road with no real destination in mind but content to be on the journey. He then describes waking up and having, for the first time in years, thoughts of the Grace family in his mind - in particular, of Chloe Grace.

The narrator recalls his first encounter with Chloe, and it's at this point that it becomes clear that he and Chloe were both eleven years old at the time of their first meeting. The narrator describes seeing the Grace family—father Carlo, mother Connie, son Myles (the boy at the gate), Chloe, and a woman referred to as Rose—at the beach (what her relationship to the family is, at this point, not made clear). The narrator describes how he watched them play, becoming aware of Chloe's sudden and deep shifts of mood, and also how he fell into a deep infatuation with Mrs. Grace.

The narrator then describes his experiences with his own parents at the beach - his mother who couldn't swim and his aggressive father (who, as the narrator writes, left the family shortly after this particular summer). The narrator recalls their ongoing mutual unhappiness that lived not only at the beach but also at home, and his own embarrassment when he realized that their tension-undermined playing in the shallows of the sea had been observed by the silent Chloe and Myles.

His mind back in the present, the narrator describes his landlady (Miss Vavasour, a well dressed and well preserved elderly woman) and a routinely appearing robin. He also describes his ongoing work - an academic paper on the French painter Bonnard, whom the narrator struggles to define, in the same way as he struggles to define himself. Are they workmen, are they craftsmen, are they obsessive? He also describes the latest in a series of perhaps hypochondriac pains and imagines himself cutting the lawn next door - commenting that that's how his mind seems to work these days, having an idea and then imagining himself living it out, portraying it in life as Bonnard would in art.

Section 1: Part 2 (pp. 18-32) Analysis

In this part of Section 1 the narrative begins the process of layering in fragments of information that eventually come together, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, to create a complete picture. Here the Graces are given their first names, the complex interplay of relationships between the Graces and the narrator begins, and perhaps most importantly, the narrator begins to sketch in the portrait of his family, a source of much embarrassment to him throughout his memories and therefore throughout the novel.

Another piece of information, important even though it doesn't seem so at first glance, is the passing reference to Rose. At first, she seems to be simply a friend and companion

for Chloe, but the narrator later reveals that she was in fact a kind of governess. Much later, he also reveals that she had a far more complex and varied relationship with the various members of the Grace family than her brief appearance here might suggest. Later still, it is revealed that she is Miss Vavasour. This deliberate concealing of her identity might, on superficial consideration, be considered to be little more than clever and intriguing story telling - withhold an important truth until the end of the story, in short create a "twist" ending. On deeper consideration, however, it might be seen as a manifestation of the narrator's intent, stated several times throughout the novel, to escape aspects of his uncomfortable past and keep them hidden. He makes good on that intent in terms of his family, escaping them as best he can, and it's conceivable that he wants to do the same thing with the Graces and with Rose, presumably because of the tragedy he and they experience (the exact nature of which is revealed in Section 2: Part 5).

It's interesting to consider, meanwhile, how the strange tide that the narrator describes coming in at the beginning of the book might be symbolic of the "tide" of memory (of the Grace family, of Anna) that seems to be sweeping over him. In spite of his evident efforts to keep his past at bay, he seems to have no defense against the memories of his family and of the Graces sweeping over him, in the same way as he has no defense against the tide - or indeed against death, another aspect of the narrator's experience symbolized by the tide.

The reference to the robin foreshadows its appearance in Section 2: Part 1 where it can clearly be seen as representing Chloe Grace. In that context, the robin's appearance here, and its being portrayed as frequently returning, represents the way that Chloe keeps returning to the forefront of the narrator's thoughts.

Section 1: Part 3 (pp. 32-52)

Section 1: Part 3 (pp. 32-52) Summary

The narrator writes how he received a letter from his daughter Claire, commenting that he has no plans to write her back or indeed contact anyone. After a few reminiscences of Claire's childhood (one of which is of their drives together), he recalls taking a drive with her a short time after Anna's death. He describes how they passed The Cedars, confessing to an embarrassed and unrealistic hope that the Graces would still be there, unchanged, and that he would see them. He then describes their discovery of a fondly remembered lane, where lived a dairy farmer from whom the narrator, as a child, would collect the family's daily portion of milk. When he gets out of Claire's car for a look at the barn, he encounters a woman introducing herself as Avril, who listens to his somewhat incoherent explanations of why he's there and then tells him the family he recalls has left and become scattered all around Europe. The narrator describes his resentment of her, his strange fascination with the freckles across her face, and of how her gruffness disturbed his fondly sentimental recollections of the past. As he leaves the farm, he catches sight of a pot of brightly colored geraniums. "Honestly," he writes, "this world."

As he and Claire take tea in the lobby of a now-seedy hotel, the narrator catches sight of his daughter's stocking feet, commenting that they reminded him of how Myles Grace had webbed toes, which he describes as clearly marking Myles as a "godling." The narrator then describes his and Claire's return home, particularly their argument over whether the narrator is sober enough to drive. He describes how that argument led Claire to state the opinion that the narrator was the cause of the breakup of her relationship - a relationship that, in his turn, the narrator blames for Claire having giving up a promising career as an art historian. The narrator describes how, when they returned to the house he used to share with Anna, he called Miss Vavasour and arranged to move to The Cedars. He also refers to how after Anna's body betrayed her, he became disgusted with his own body. Finally, he recalls a dream he had the night before (see "Quotes," p. 52).

Section 1: Part 3 (pp. 32-52) Analysis

Here again, the difference between memory and reality catches up with the narrator and leaves him shaken. In this case, the memory of the farm and the reality both of its new owner and of what happened to the old owner turn out to be significantly at odds with one another, setting the author even more on edge. Matters aren't helped by the presence of the pouting, practical Claire who, it must remembered, is described from the narrator's perspective alone. Throughout the novel, the narrator reveals himself to be biased and subjective in his perspective, and not entirely honest; he conceals, for example, the true identity of Miss Vavasour, as well as the true nature of his relationship with her. This means that ultimately what he says about anything or anyone can't be taken as pure truth. The point is not made to suggest that the narrator is a liar, but

rather that everything he writes, and perhaps even how or why he writes, ought to be taken with a grain of salt.

The reference to Avril's freckles, and the narrator's somewhat surprisingly intense focus on them, foreshadows Section 2 Part 1 in which the reason for his focus becomes clear.

Section 1: Part 4 (pp. 52-68)

Section 1: Part 4 (pp. 52-68) Summary

This section begins with a brief interlude set in the present, in which the narrator contemplates the night-time silence of The Cedars and wonders what goes on in the other rooms beneath the blanket of darkness and quiet. He imagines, for example, that the Colonel has a secret passion for Miss Vavasour, and that Miss Vavasour sometimes cries herself to sleep (a surmise based on her sometimes coming to breakfast with red, tired eyes). He wonders whether she "blame[s] herself for all that happened and grieve[s] for it still," but doesn't offer any indication of what that "all" might be. "What a little vessel of sadness we are," he writes, "sailing in this muffled silence through the autumn dark."

This experience of night leads the narrator to comment that he thinks most about the Graces most often at night, adding that he used to do so as a child in order to escape the misery of his life - in particular, his constantly fighting parents. He writes that he became particularly obsessed with meeting Mrs. Grace, and describes the depths and manifestations of his passion. He writes about a particular adolescent phase, during which he likened her imagined body to those of the Greek gods (for whom he had a passion both intellectual and sexual), and another time when he collapsed onto his bed in hysterical, frustrated tears at not being able to know her better. He writes of how his mother heard and came in, and how she simply left in silence rather than making pointed comments, which is what he would have expected her to do (see "Quotes," p. 66).

He also describes his efforts at making friends with Chloe in order to get her to invite him into the house, describing how Chloe came to trust him enough to tell him that she and Myles were twins, and that Myles was mute. The narrator then contemplates several things - how it must have felt to be one of a pair of twins, the possible reasons for Myles' muteness, and how Myles reminded him of an eager puppy that he (the narrator) used to take great delight in torturing. The narrator then recalls a single troubling visit he paid to the Graces at The Cedars, with his narration shifting back and forth between first person past and first person present as he details and imagines the events of that day -being alone with Mrs. Grace, and realizing that she wasn't as attractive as he thought she was. He describes how they were interrupted by Myles chasing a dog through the house, and then by Myles being chased out of the house by Mr. Grace.

He also describes how Chloe introduced him to Mr. Grace, how Mr. Grace greeted him with sarcastic, overdone good manners, and how Mrs. Grace watched him with a kind of resigned, patient amusement. The narrator concludes this recollection with the comment that after that day, he never saw the dog again.

Section 1: Part 4 (pp. 52-68) Analysis

The first part of Part 4, with its focus on Miss Vavasour, is a key piece of foreshadowing, referring as it does to Section 2 Part 5, when the hinted-at source of Miss Vavasour's grief (her presence at, and possible responsibility for, the death of Chloe Grace) is identified once and for all.

The second part of Part 4 focuses on the Graces, and the development of the narrator's relationship with them. The first element to consider here is the reference to the gods, here again presented as some kind of an ideal, perhaps even a goal. As he later reveals, the narrator was bound and determined to improve his lot in life, and it may not be going too far to suggest that while developing relationships with the middle class Graces may have been the means, the perfection and peace of the gods were, in fact, the end or the goal. In this context, the second noteworthy element of Part 4, the brief glimpse of compassion in the narrator's mother, becomes even more significant. The mother, as is discussed later in this analysis, is portrayed as the embodiment of everything the narrator yearns to escape - poverty, emotional abuse, general unhappiness. Here, however, she displays a degree of empathy perhaps surprising to both the narrator and to the reader. In spite of the narrator's apparent focus on portraying her as a monster, this side of her seems sudden and jarring, incongruous and almost wrong. This is perhaps why the narrator maintains his more negative perspective on her throughout the remainder of the novel.

Finally, this part of Section 1 contains one of the most vivid examples so far in the novel of the way past and present blend together. The narrator's fluid and unpredictable moving back and forth between past and present tense is very effective in again evoking and manifesting the key quote from p. 9: "The past beats inside me like a second heart."

Section 1: Part 5 (pp. 68-93)

Section 1: Part 5 (pp. 68-93) Summary

The narrator begins this section with commentary on how he always felt energized, philosophically and physically, by storms of the sort that seem to be raging around him as he writes. He then reflects upon how he came to live the life he imagined for himself as a child - quiet, academic, sitting at his desk writing and thinking (see "Quotes", p. 69). This leads him to another reflection on how past and present seem to be intertwining, and on how both when he was a child and now when he's an adult, his contemplations take him to a place "where [he is] neither alive nor the other thing."

This in turn leads to a recollection of how he and Anna both, in the early days of her illness before pain made life intolerable, seemed to move through time and space with little clarity, little energy, and little understanding. He contrasts this first with their experience of being physically and socially strong and attractive, especially in the early days of their marriage. He also draws contrasts here with his memories of Anna's father Charlie, a short, energetic man who was immoral, cheerful, and very much alive. His memories of Charlie lead the narrator first to happy memories of his wedding, and then to an unhappy memory of how Anna realized that when her treatment (presumably chemotherapy) left her bald, she would look exactly like her father. The narrator writes that she indeed did.

The narrator then describes the point at which his passion for Mrs. Grace disappeared: at a picnic, at which he joined the entire Grace family. He recalls being told by his mother that she'd be glad to have him out from under her feet, and being looked at as though she was recalling, as she spoke, how his father left and believing that he (the narrator) would be the next to betray her. He describes how the two families (his and the Graces) never met, how he felt like he'd been gifted by the gods with the opportunity to be with another family, and how the trip to the picnic site saw the repetition of a familiar, physically nasty game between Chloe and Myles. The narrator describes how he and the Graces arrived at the picnic site, how Rose joined them, how they ate the picnic, and how afterwards Chloe, Rose and Myles all ran off and played games in the woods. The narrator then describes how he got a glimpse of Mrs. Grace's crotch, leaving it unclear whether Mrs. Grace offered him the glimpse deliberately. He describes in excruciating detail his excitement at seeing that part of her, and then describes in disappointed detail how he felt when she suddenly dropped her head and fell asleep. This, he writes, was the moment when he realized she was not a goddess but a human being - but then adds that there's nothing to suggest that the human being was any more real (see "Quotes," p.87).

The narrator recalls at this point his guilt at having had sexual thoughts, recollecting how a visiting priest at his Catholic school taught him that thoughts could be just as sinful as actions. He then recalls imagining that Mr. Grace had seen him take special notice of Mrs. Grace, becomes aware that he can also see Mr. Grace's crotch, and

recalls how Mr. Grace had a streak of surprising physical violence. This violence, apparently, got passed on to Chloe who, as the narrator describes, liked taking the legs off grasshoppers and watching them try to get away from her. The narrator describes how his reflections on the character of Mr. Grace were interrupted by the awakening Mrs. Grace, who announces that she wants to play a chasing game. The narrator, Rose, Myles, and the reluctant Chloe are all dragged into the game, which at one point sees Mrs. Grace hiding with the narrator in the bushes - the narrator aware the whole time that he is physically closer to the nearly naked Mrs. Grace than he has been to any woman since he was a baby. Rose discovers them and reacts with disgust. Mrs. Grace comments that she's jealous; Rose runs off, and Mrs. Grace and the narrator return to the picnic site, where they discover that Mr. Grace and Chloe have left, leaving them to clean up the mess.

Section 1: Part 5 (pp. 68-93) Analysis

The reference to storms at the beginning of Part 5 can be seen as a manifestation not only of the narrator's response to climactic storms, but also to the storms of emotion and memory raging inside him (see "Quotes," p. 35). He is, perhaps unconsciously, invigorated by what he's recalling - it's very possible, in fact, for the reader to see him as more vibrant and fully alive than he seems to have been in the past. He seems, as portrayed in his own writing, to have seen himself as actually been a non-entity, barely living, minimally active in his own existence. On the other hand, in this act of writing down his experiences of both his past and his present there is the sense that he is fully engaged in both, coming to life (i.e., approaching it in all its terror and exhilaration) at the point of his life, ironically enough, when he feels himself to be approaching death. In this context, it's interesting to consider the implications of a key quote from Part 5, "Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it" (p. 72). Is the recollection, the reliving, and the sorting through of his life, the narrator's act of preparation?

Meanwhile, the description of the picnic with the Graces is important for several reasons, the primary of which is the narrator's description of his discovery that Mrs. Grace was not a god but a human being. The most apparent reason this moment is so important is that it causes the narrator to transfer his affections to Chloe. Another more thematically relevant reason for the importance of this section is that it marks the first of several metaphorical "deaths" experienced by the narrator throughout the book - deaths of idealism and of spirit. In this case, it's the death of his idealized vision of Mrs. Grace that comes powerfully into play, perhaps giving him even more of an impetus to focus his attention on Chloe.

There is a moment at the end of Part 5 that, in spite of its brevity, is worthy of some mention. This is the point at which the narrator and Mrs. Grace are discovered in the bushes by Rose, and Rose is described as reacting with disgust. At this stage in the narrative it seems that Rose's disgust originates in a kind of prudery, a reluctance to be around anything even remotely sexual, particularly anything that seems improper. Later, however, when the narrator reveals that Rose was romantically and sexually attracted to

Mrs. Grace, the reasons for her disgust here take on more meaning. Meanwhile, it's interesting to note Mrs. Grace's comment that Rose is jealous - does this imply not only that Mrs. Grace is aware of Rose's feelings, but that the two women are having an affair?

Section 1: Part 6 (pp. 93-97)

Section 1: Part 6 (pp. 93-97) Summary

The conclusion to Section 1 begins with the narrator's disgusted observations of his reflection in a mirror, followed by the recounting of his unsuccessful attempts to grow a beard to hide his face from himself. He likens his considerations of himself to self-portraits painted by Bonnard following the death of his wife, and to early, angry self-portraits by the painter Van Gogh. He describes himself and his reflection as being caught in a kind of "white box of light" which transports him to "some far shore, real or imagined." He describes himself as sitting on that shore, holding a stone in his hand, aware of the looming, powerful presence of the sea (see "Quotes," p. 97).

Section 1: Part 6 (pp. 93-97) Analysis

The narrator's disgust with his physical appearance can be seen as a manifestation of his frequently described disgust with both his class status (i.e., he's poor and hates it) and his inner life (i.e., he's minimally talented and has no drive to do anything other than better his lot in life). By the same token, his reference to attempting to grow a beard can be seen as an echo, or physical manifestation, of his also frequently described determination to hide his hated self beneath the better life he believes to be offered by first the Graces and later by Anna.

The reference to the ship at the end of this section (see "Quotes," p. 97) harkens back to the ship referred to at the beginning of the book, and as such reiterates its metaphoric value as a representation of the narrator being physically and spiritually wrecked. Meanwhile, the presence of the sea in this context reinforces its metaphoric value (established, like the ship's, in the novel's opening lines) as a symbol of inevitable, approaching death.

Section 2: Part 1 (pp. 101-119)

Section 2: Part 1 (pp. 101-119) Summary

Section 2 of the novel begins with the narrator's recollection of how he, Chloe and Myles spent much of their time together swimming in the sea, and of how he (the narrator) had the habit of swimming long distances on his own, exasperating those waiting for him on the beach, Chloe in particular. After a brief description of Chloe's sharp-edged physical appearance, and after recalling how a particularly boorish boy at the Field (where the narrator and his parents stayed) described her as having green teeth, the narrator wonders why he cannot recall her in greater detail (see "Quotes," p. 104-105). He then describes the moment at which his passion for Chloe became actualized - he tells how they went to the local moving picture house one stormy Sunday afternoon, kissed while the reels of film were being changed, and came out into a clear, warm, Sunday evening. He compares the change in the weather to the change in their feelings, and describes how they went from the movie house to a local cafy. He seems about to begin a story of what happened at that cafy, but then in another shift from past to present, recalls that Anna died on a similar evening.

The narrator describes how, after Anna's death, he felt he could no longer stay in what had once been their house, and almost immediately made plans to move down to The Cedars, refusing Claire's well intentioned invitation to live with her. He describes how Anna refused to tell anyone, even Claire, that she was dying. Then, after a brief description of how he was greeted upon his arrival at The Cedars by the nervous Miss Vavasour and the jealous Colonel, the narrator recalls the similarities between the circumstances of Anna's death and those of the death of the wife of the painter Bonnard. He also recalls Anna having a degree of pity and compassion for him, even going so far as commenting that he can't hate her any more, and that all human beings are allowed to hate each other, at some point at least a little. The narrator's memory then slips back to the scene of his arrival at The Cedars, recalling particularly how, when he was shown to his room by Miss Vavasour, very little about the place was the same as what he remembered of it when he visited as a child. Nevertheless, he writes, when he arrived in his room it was with a sense that he "had been traveling for a long time, for years, and had at last arrived at the destination to where all along, without knowing it, [he] had been bound ... the only possible refuge ..."

The narrator's perspective returns to the present for a moment, where he writes of having seen the robin (Section 1 Part 3) return. After commenting on how robins are fearless, almost insolent birds, his recollections of other birds lead him to recall how, as a child, he was able to find and study bird's nests. He describes how intensely beautiful and perfect he found bird's eggs, and how intensely upset he was to discover that the eggs in a nest he had been watching for weeks had been stolen - and, in one case, thrown to the ground and shattered. He realizes that this memory is the explanation for why he found Avril (Section 1 Part 4), and in particular her freckles, so disturbing - the specks of brown across her face were of the same color and texture of the flecks of

brown of the shattered egg. This part of Section 1 concludes with the narrator's remembrance of holding the dying Anna, "full and frail as an ostrich egg."

Section 2: Part 1 (pp. 101-119) Analysis

The reference to storms here echoes the references to storms both earlier and later in the novel. Here, as on those occasions, storms become metaphorical representations of inner storms, powerful emotions and/or equally powerful revelations of truth. In this case, the storm represents both - the narrator's powerful emotional attachment to Chloe, and the truth of his attraction to her. Meanwhile, the clear calmness of the weather when they emerge from the picture house can be seen as a manifestation of the clear, calm certainty of his relationship to Chloe that he feels in the aftermath of their kiss. Finally, the interruption of the narrative flow at what seems to be a key point in the narrator's story of Chloe is an effective story-telling technique, leaving the reader at a point of high enough curiosity that the desire for further reading is intensified.

The middle segment of this part of the book contains yet another manifestation of the way past and present blend in both the narrator's experience and in his telling the story of that experience. The common thread between past and present here is death - Anna's death and the narrrator's arrival at The Cedars, which as discussed throughout this analysis, particularly in "Objects/Places," is a place where people go and die. Death in the narrator's case is spiritual, rather than physical. This aspect of his experience at The Cedars is defined further by his comments about feeling as though he's arrived at a long sought destination - after all, what is death (for people of the narrator's relatively advanced) but the end of a long journey? Is there an unrealized sense here in the narrator that he's come to his place of final spiritual, as well as physical, rest?

The references in the third segment to the robin and to Avril refer back to Section 1 parts 2 and 3 respectively, with the separate references coming together to form a single image, that of the fragility of life. It's also possible to see this combination of images as a reference to the fragility of memory - as was the case with Avril's farm and with the narrator's experience of arriving at The Cedars after so many years, precious memories are easily damaged and/or destroyed by present realities.

Section 2: Part 2 (pp. 109-136)

Section 2: Part 2 (pp. 109-136) Summary

The narrator here describes his experience with Chloe at the cafy after the film, last referred to at the end of Section 2: Part 1. As he describes in detail the cafy's proprietor, his and Chloe's sodas, and his sentimental pleasure at hearing Chloe hum the popular, romantic songs of the time, he realizes he's blending two visits to the cafy into one, but continues with his reminiscence anyway. He wonders how Mrs. Grace would feel if she were aware that he had transferred his affection for her to Chloe, and then comments that she probably wouldn't care, suggesting that love (for that is what he believes he feels for Chloe) is fickle by nature. He goes on to write at detailed length about Chloe's tendency towards cruel violence, how she accepted and manipulated his love for her without offering any indication that she loved him in return, and how he saw her as someone precious who needed to be protected.

He also writes of how, in the present, he sees her as the symbol of having become aware that human beings are all separate, from the world and from each other. He concludes his recollections of Chloe with a particular memory of how she tormented a boy from the nearby town, and how the boy looked at him with what seemed to be two kinds of troubling knowledge. He suggests, with some resentment, that the boy knew the narrator was a boy from the town just like he was, and that he (the narrator) was being abused by Chloe in just the same way. The narrator writes that he found intolerable the idea of being known better than he knew himself, an experience that leads him to recall an incident with Anna, in the final days of her illness.

The narrator describes how Anna, who in her younger days aspired to be a photographer, conspired with Claire to have her camera brought to her. After commenting on how he hated being photographed by Anna because she found truths in him that he was uncomfortable with, he describes how Claire took Anna's camera to her, which she used to take pictures of other patients in the hospital - amputation victims, other cancer sufferers, etc. He describes how she was forced to stop after receiving several complaints, although, as Anna points out, the complaints came from the patients' relatives, not the patients themselves. The narrator describes in detail his encounter with Anna's enigmatic, exotic friend Serge, who develops her pictures and tells the narrator they were quite impressive. The narrator then describes Anna's eagerness to see her pictures, commenting that he felt completely isolated from her and from her experience - a feeling he experienced again when, while out walking with Anna after she was discharged, they walked past another woman evidently going through the same treatment. He writes with evident resentment of the glance of mutual understanding and suffering. "I do not think," he writes, "I ever felt more distant from her than I did at that moment, elbowed aside by the sorority of the afflicted." His memory then returns to the moment when he and Anna looked at her photographs, and Anna calls them her "indictment ... of everything."

There follows, at this point in the narrator's recollections, a short sharp flash of Chloe, of memories that have both been referred to previously and have yet to surface. The narrator describes himself as tired and drunk and suggests that nothing matters any more.

Section 2: Part 2 (pp. 109-136) Analysis

Again, the narrator's experiences of Chloe and Anna are paralleled. The narrator seems to be suggesting with the juxtaposition of the stories of the photographs and of the town boy that the women are united in cruelty. Upon deeper consideration, it becomes clear that both these experiences are associated with the narrator's deep discomfort with himself; in other words, he seems to consider it cruel that both Chloe and Anna make him consider the self, the identity, he is so desperate to escape from. It must be noted that while there are hints that Chloe inherited her cruel streak from her father, the narrator is never entirely clear it comes from. Chloe, it seems, is simply sadistic. It's quite clear, however, that Anna's apparent cruelty is, in fact, honesty - clear eyed and unflinching, perhaps aggressive and insensitive (as demonstrated by her pictures), but not malicious. It's very telling that the narrator seems to believe that it is malicious - perhaps his insecurity about himself has a strong element of paranoia about it.

The narrator's concluding reference to being drunk foreshadows the revelation later in the novel that he has, in fact, been drinking both heavily and secretly since Anna's death. This again calls into question his credibility: Is what he's writing about truth, or alcohol-soaked and embittered?

Section 2: Part 3 (pp. 136-148)

Section 2: Part 3 (pp. 136-148) Summary

This segment of the book begins with the narrator describing the summer storm that passed in the night, his "outrageous" enjoyment of it, and the fact that he's never seen a storm of similar size or strength. "At last," he writes, "the elements have achieved a pitch of magnificence to match my inner turmoil." He then contemplates his wondering whether such an explosion of energy would herald, or is in fact heralding at the moment, his leaving this earth and moving into the next phase. He describes his belief not in heaven or an afterlife, but in the moment of death, his entire life being given meaning - being "said." He concludes his contemplations with a reference to how Miss Vavasour told him his bed has always been in the house, and with an uneasy wondering about whether the bed is the same one Carlo and Connie Grace slept in.

The narrator then recounts, in extensive detail, the daily routine of Colonel Blunden, whose dead end life seems, as the narrator himself suggests, the kind of bare, meaningless, empty inhabitation of life that he himself dreads. He describes the Colonel's deteriorating physical appearance and apparent emotional state of upset, referring to what seems to be his (the Colonel's) now-abandoned courtship of Miss Vavasour, and speculating again that he (the Colonel) is suffering from a deadly, deteriorating illness. At one point, after a reflection on the silent, awful meals he and the Colonel are fed by Miss Vavasour, he suddenly and violently spurts out a vitriolic reference, to a female who left him. "You fucking cunt," he writes, "how could you go and leave me like this, floundering in my own foulness, with no one to save me from myself."

His venting of rage spent, he suddenly realizes the true reason why he decided to come back to The Cedars: it reminds him, he says, of the succession of boarding houses he and his perpetually under-employed mother lived in after his father abandoned them. He describes in detail the squalid life they were forced to lead, his mother's frequent and often drunken rages, his despair when he goes to England (where his father went to) and sees the towns his father's labor helped build, and his mother's fury when she received a note from an unknown woman telling her of his death.

Section 2: Part 3 (pp. 136-148) Analysis

At the beginning of this segment the motif, or repeated image, of the storm again appears, with the narrator ascribing to it the characteristic that storms throughout the novel have had - as an outer, perhaps even cosmic, manifestation of his inner, microcosmic experience. In the middle of this segment, his reference to death meaning that his life has been "said" can be seen as a reference to what he is doing in writing/creating this "memoir." He is, in effect, "saying" his life himself—his writing, the book—is the embodiment of his life. His fear, of course, is that his ending will be similar

to that of the apparently pathetic Colonel Blunden, the emptiness of whose life becomes even more apparent and more troubling to the narrator later (Section 2: Part 6).

The element of this segment worthy of particular note is the sudden, searing, toxic rage that spurts out of the narrator in his reference to the woman who left him. As referenced in the "Style/Language and Meaning" section of this analysis, there are two key components here - the first is the use of the word *cunt*, one of the most vicious curse words. Its use here vividly and unforgettably defines the narrator's rage and bitterness. It's also possible that because the novel as a whole is for the most part free of the use of curse words, the appearance of such an extreme word here is a manifestation of the narrator's tendency to drunken-ness. He's the sort who would never use the sober - does its appearance here mean that the author intends us to perceive the narrator as drunk, in this moment of writing? If that's indeed the case, how does it color the reader's perception of the rest of this section? How, for example, might his writing about his mother be colored by drunkenness?

Section 2: Part 4 (pp. 148-163)

Section 2: Part 4 (pp. 148-163) Summary

The narrator's narrative attention then returns to life in The Cedars, to his uncomfortable, abortive attempts at friendship with Colonel Blunden, and his uneasy relationship with a physically and emotionally expansive guest of Miss Vavasour's - Bun, whose earnest sympathy reminds him uncomfortably of all the well-meaning but cloying sympathy he experienced after Anna's death. A rapidly intensifying argument between Bun and Miss Vavasour leads the narrator to realize they are, on some level, arguing over him - specifically, it seems, over who is to have more influence over him. This leads the narrator to reflect that he, born into lower class circumstances and raised in a deeply uncomfortable life, always sought to better himself - through association with the Graces, then with Anna and her money (in reality her father's money) and now through Bun, who has both money and an aristocratic name.

His narration, for a moment, slips back into recollections of his life with Anna and of the tense relationship they both had with his mother. In this recollection, the narrator reveals that one day when Anna was in the hospital, a day after a storm, she suddenly recalled a visit with his mother - a visit during which a conversation between the narrator and his mother reveals that his name isn't really Max - at least, that's not the name he was christened with. It turns out that Max is the name under which he's published his books. The recollection concludes with Anna musing upon his mother's death, the sudden absence of life it makes her think of in effect her own sudden, impending absence.

The narrator's attention is brought back to the present by Bun, who is preparing to leave. After she's gone, Miss Vavasour and the Colonel both withdraw, the entire household having been upset by her visit. The narrator settles down with a book on Bonnard but discovers he can't concentrate, and forces himself (as, he confesses, he has to do) to think about and remember Anna. He recalls how they both entered into, and maintained, the relationship without really wanting to know each other, how the narrator's intent with the relationship was always to improve his position in life, and his confession that throughout his entire life, he had (and has) no personality of his own. He says that on some level he and Anna agreed that at least one function of their marriage was to "relieve each other of the burden of being the people whom everyone else told us we were." He adds that they "fought in order to feel, and to feel real, being the self-made creatures that we were" and confesses that he had neither the inclination nor the integrity to live any other way. He suddenly becomes tired of these self-contemplations and tells himself "Leave yourself alone, Max, leave yourself alone." He is released from these contemplations by the arrival of Miss Vavasour, with whom he begins a brief conversation in which she reveals that Bun's family, and probably now Bun herself, own The Cedars, and seems to hint that she and Bun were, at one point, lesbian partners.

Section 2: Part 4 (pp. 148-163) Analysis

The key component of this segment is its exploration of the novel's key theme, the nature and function of identity. There are three key turning points here. The first is the revelation that Max is not the narrator's true name, an indication that he has taken significant steps towards concealing, and indeed removing himself, from his previous identity. The second is his admission that throughout his life, he's attempted to better himself through association with whom he perceives to be women of influence and higher status - Chloe, Anna, Bun, and possibly even Miss Vavasour who, as is revealed later, comes from an upper middle class family with money.

The third turning point in this examination of the question of identity is the narrator's admission that both he and Anna entered into their marriage with the hope that they would be able to escape their identities, submerging them in that new and mysterious entity called "a married couple." It's extremely significant that he tells himself to "leave himself alone." This is not, as it might seem, a reference to his present self, but to his past self, the unnamed "real" Max, the one whose desire for betterment led him to Chloe and Anna - the "self" he was so determined to leave behind. He is, in effect, saying, "Leave that self, or your old self, alone."

The hinting that Miss Vavasour and Bun are lesbians, or at least that Miss Vavasour had feelings for Bun, foreshadows the later revelation that Miss Vavasour (when she was known to the narrator as Rose) was romantically, and perhaps even physically, infatuated with Mrs. Grace.

Section 2: Part 5 (pp. 163-182)

Section 2: Part 5 (pp. 163-182) Summary

This section begins with the narrator's in-depth recollection of Rose - a detailed physical description of her sharp-featured physical appearance, her position in the Grace family as a kind of nanny/governess, and the way she was mercilessly taunted by Chloe and Myles. He recounts the circumstances of his surprised discovery that she was in love with Mr. Grace, a discovery gleaned when he overheard Rose confessing her feelings to Mrs. Grace. He recalls that the confession was made as a train was loudly, steamily passing, and wonders, "What are living beings, compared to the enduring intensity of mere things?"

The narrator then describes how he immediately shared his discovery with Chloe, who reacted not with amusement or with spite as he'd hoped, but with a strangely increased sense of obedience to Rose. The narrator writes, however, of how Chloe still managed to express her dislike for Rose, which begins a detailed recollection of a day at the beach, watching the tide come in with Chloe and Myles with Rose sunbathing nearby. Chloe, he writes, expresses the wish that the tide should come in and drown Rose, and then the three of them (Chloe, Myles, the narrator) break into a nearby shack, watching and waiting.

Suddenly a memory of Anna's last moments emerges. The narrator writes in stark detail of her final grasp of his wrist, her labored gasps for breath, and her last words. "They are stopping the clocks," she says. "I have stopped time." She then smiles.

The narrator then returns to his story of the day on the beach, telling how he managed a brief, fleeting caress of Chloe's pubic area beneath her bathing suit, and how Chloe undid the top of her bikini, insisting that he kiss her and touch her young breast. Myles still sat nearby, eyes closed, apparently asleep. In the middle of the kiss Rose appears, shouting at them both. Chloe runs out and Rose runs after her. The narrator follows, recalling that as he left, Myles seemed to laugh. The narrator then describes the shouting match between Rose and Chloe on the beach, how Chloe suddenly left the confrontation and sat down, how Myles came to comfort her, and how by some unspoken agreement they swam out to sea. He then describes how he and Rose watched them until they disappeared, suddenly becoming aware that they'd sunk beneath the surface and hadn't come up. They watch as a rescue attempt is made, without success. Finally, the narrator describes how he rushed back to The Cedars and found Mr. and Mrs. Grace, who seemed to understand what had happened without being told.

Section 2: Part 5 (pp. 163-182) Analysis

This segment of the book contains the novel's climax, the moment at which the deaths of the two key figures in the narrator's life (Chloe and Anna) are described. There are several important things to note here. The first is how the two deaths are closely juxtaposed on the page, suggesting the way that they are juxtaposed in the narrator's experience. They are, as previously discussed, separate experiences of physical death intertwined in parallel experiences of spiritual and/or emotional death, experiences disconnected by time but united in memory as sources of disappointment and suffering. It may not be going too far to suggest that they are also united in betrayal, of the narrator and his faith in them by Anna and Chloe, who when they died did, after all, leave him alone with his hated self.

The second noteworthy element here is the way Chloe's death is associated with the sea. Here is the reason that death in general is associated with the sea throughout the narrator's writing, and why he feels the presence of death so near when he's at The Cedars which is itself so near the sea.

The third noteworthy element is Anna's commentary on her experience of dying. I have stopped time, she says, a statement that can be seen as evocative of the narrator's own state of being in the present as he recalls these experiences. The forward movement of time has, for him, also stopped; he is stuck in the past, reliving it, recalling it, both fascinated and terrified of it. It's possible to see the entire novel, in fact, as an extension or stretching out of the moment of death. He is, in effect, going through the same experience as Anna, a long, drawn out leaving of existence. The difference is his death is spiritual - yes, he feels physical death is imminent, but for him it's being preceded by spiritual death, his "saying" of his life.

Other than the narration of the two moments of death, the key element in this section is the overheard conversation about Rose's feelings. This segment makes effective use of the tool of misdirection, preparing the way for a final plot twist (in this case, the revelation in the following section of Rose's passion for Mrs. Grace) by incorporating the suggestion that the truth lies in another direction (the suggestion that Rose has a passion for Mr. Grace).

Section 2: Part 6 (pp. 182-195)

Section 2: Part 6 (pp. 182-195) Summary

This part begins with a present-set narration of a frightening night in which the narrator can no longer hear the sound of the sea. He calls out to Anna's spirit, asking why she isn't haunting him. He concludes by calling for his bottle (presumably his brandy bottle), which he describes as his baby's bottle, his soother.

The narrator then describes a morning with Miss Vavasour by the window, an uncomfortable morning in which the narrator comments on his discomfort and a bump on his head. He then describes the circumstances of the day before which led to his current situation. Colonel Blunden had been led to expect a visit from his daughter and her family, and the entire household was excited for him. When the family doesn't turn up, the Colonel masks his disappointment by retiring to his room, Miss Vavasour retires to the kitchen, and the narrator goes and gets drunk. He describes a series of alcohol fueled confrontations in the local bar, his staggering trip back to The Cedars, a vaguely remembered encounter with Colonel Blunden on the stairs, his collection of his brandy bottle, and a trip to the beach which ended with his passing out in the low tide. He then describes the story told to him by the Colonel. On the stairs, the narrator apparently referred to drowning being the most peaceful form of suicide, and when the Colonel hadn't heard the narrator come in from his walk, he went in search of him, found him, walked him back to The Cedars and put him to bed.

The narrator then describes how he woke up the following morning to find a familiar looking young man at his bedside. The young man describes himself as a doctor, but with a shock the narrator realizes he is in fact Jerome, Claire's ex-beloved. Claire herself comes in, evidently having been told what happened to her father, announcing that she and Jerome are engaged, and revealing her determination to take the narrator home and take care of him. The narrator then returns his focus to the conversation with Miss Vavasour by the window, in which his narration reveals her to be Rose, Chloe and Myles' nanny. His narration also reveals that Rose was never blamed for what happened by Mr. or Mrs. Grace, that the Graces both passed away shortly after the twins died under circumstances which, Miss Vavasour asserts, were neither suicidal nor suspicious. She also confesses that for her the attraction was not to Mr. Grace, but to Mrs. Grace.

The narrator begins his final narration with the revelation that Anna died just before dawn, and that in the actual moment of her death he was gone—out for a walk, recalling as he walked a moment in his childhood when he went swimming without Chloe or Myles. The sea was still, he writes, utterly transparent; but suddenly, when he was standing still in water up to his waist, "the whole sea surged," an emergence of something from the depths that carried him "a little way toward the shore and then set down on [his] feet as before, as if nothing had happened." He then writes that truly, nothing had happened, that the surge was just another of "the great world's shrugs of

indifference." He concludes by saying that just as he experienced that memory, a nurse came out of the hospital to fetch him and he went in, "and it was as if [he was] walking into the sea."

Section 2: Part 6 (pp. 182-195) Analysis

The first segment of this concluding section is notable for two elements: the disappearance of the sea and the revelation of the narrator's alcoholism. The first is particularly important in that it portrays the narrator as feeling lonely and frightened when death is no longer, if only for a moment, the strong presence it has been throughout the novel. It's important to note that at the end of this section, the writing is full of the sea's presence. This suggests that the narrator's experience of impending death ebbs and flows—just like the sea. It doesn't mean it's gone, it just means that sometimes it's more "there" than others. The other revelation in this first segment is, as mentioned, of the narrator's dependence upon alcohol. This, as discussed throughout this analysis, calls into question the narrator's reliability - if, as he says, he's only able to cope with his experience by using alcohol, he (probably unwittingly) raises the question of just how much what he's written can be trusted as being clear and genuine truth.

Meanwhile, it's interesting that he refers to his brandy bottle as his soother. Since soothers are associated with childhood, and since the narrator makes it clear throughout the novel that he is desperate to escape his childhood, the reference seems to suggest that he is in fact, and on some level, returning to that childhood identity he was so determined to eliminate. That doesn't mean he's comfortable with it, not by any means; it is, however, perhaps as inevitable is the tide coming in, which is why he's so uncomfortable, which is why he needs to be "soothed," which is why he needs the bottle, and so on. In short, he is living and perpetuating a cycle of experiencing the past leading to behaviors to avoid the past which lead to deeper experiences of the past, leading to more extreme behavior - ultimately, the attempted suicide (Section 2: Part 6).

The extended middle segment of this section, the story of the Colonel's abandonment by his daughter and the narrator's subsequent, half hearted suicide attempt, is notable for a couple of reasons. First, the apparent attitude of the Colonel's daughter can be seen as being the same as Claire, the narrator's daughter. Yes, the Colonel's daughter physically abandons him, but it seems clear that Claire is also abandoning her father - hers, however, is spiritual and emotional. Claire throughout the novel is portrayed as being insensitive, selfish and perhaps even spoiled. Is it coincidence that her and the equally insensitive, equally selfish Chloe's names begin with the same combination of consonant sounds? While it's possible that the portrayal of Claire is colored by the narrator's bitterness and his alcoholism, the shared traits between the two women seem to be more than coincidence.

The second reason this section is important has to do with the narrator's so-called suicide attempt. On one level, it seems to be an attempt to physically complete the transition, death, that's already begun emotionally and spiritually. On another level, his

actions can be seen as a metaphor for what he's been doing throughout the novel - the sea has, after all, throughout the novel symbolized death.

On a third level, it's possible to perceive the narrator's actions as a subconscious effort to join his beloved Chloe, or perhaps complete the rescue that he was unable (unwilling?) to undertake when Chloe and Myles swam out to sea.

At the conclusion of the middle segment comes the revelation that Rose and Miss Vavasour are one and the same. Aside from being an effective, so-called "twist" ending, the juxtaposition of this revelation with the story of the narrator's surviving his suicide attempt develops and summarizes the novel's key theme, relating to identity. True identity, the novel seems to be suggesting, cannot be escaped - the narrator cannot escape his life, his true self. It will emerge, inevitably, in the same way as the true nature of Rose's identity. This theory is supported by the concluding revelation that at the moment of Anna's death, a "true" experience if ever there was one, the narrator wasn't in the room. He evaded the true experience in the same way as he's attempted to evade the truth of his identity all his life. The tide of truth, however—the tide of life, the tide of death, the tide of identity, has come in. By the end of the novel, at which point the sea is reasserting its presence and he is again becoming aware of it, he is, inevitably and invariably and reluctantly, himself, in death as in life, in life as in death, in memory as in the present, in the present as in his mind.

Characters

The Narrator (Max)

The novel's central character is a man of later years - his age is never specifically defined, but because his daughter is evidently in her late twenties or early thirties, it's reasonable to assume he's at least in his fifties. However, his perspectives, attitudes and in particular his sense of, and obsession with, impending death suggests he's significantly older, more likely in his seventies. He describes his own physical appearance in mostly negative terms, indicating that he perceives himself as being unusually tall, having overly large features, and a certain gangly-ness about his limbs. He also describes himself as having little talent, little skill, and little ambition. He writes disparagingly of the lower class, the father-abandoned family in which he grew up, and points out on at least one occasion that one of the goals of his few friendships or relationships was to improve his lot in life. Overall, then, there is the very clear sense that the narrator is deeply uncomfortable with himself. This is, perhaps, a reason why he has taken refuge in an artificial identity. Several times throughout the novel he refers to himself, or portrays other people referring to him, as Max, but as is revealed in a conversation with his mother reported in Section 2: Part 4, "Max" is part of his pseudonym (the name under which he publishes his books). His real name is never revealed, a technical aspect of the writing that perhaps has a resonance with character as well. He is, in a literal sense as well as in his own mind, nobody.

The Gods

Gods, of Greek and Eastern mythologies in particular, are referred to in passing several times throughout the novel as ideals - or rather, as one of the few ideals of the narrator's youth. The gods are portrayed as bestowing blessings, sexually and physically vital, and embodiments of all that is good and healthy and admirable about life. It's important to note that throughout the novel, the narrator doesn't consider himself to have been blessed. There is an "otherness" about the gods and their relationships with humanity; other people are blessed, other people have relationships with the gods, other people embody godly values, but he never does. This is perhaps another manifestation of the narrator's self-perception as nobody or nothing.

Bonnard

A French painter of intermediate skill and renown, Bonnard is the subject of the narrator's academic interest. There are clear parallels between the professional status of both men, but there are more significant parallels between the personal experiences of both men dealing with the illnesses of their wives. For details on these parallels see Section 2: Part 1.

Miss Vavasour (Rose)

Miss Vavsour is the elderly owner/proprietor of the boarding house where the Narrator makes his home. She is described as unpredictable in dress, emotional state, and in cooking habits. Very late in the book it's revealed that she is in fact Rose, the former nanny and governess of the Grace family, who figures largely in the narrator's memories of his childhood, and his beliefs about humanity and relationships. It's important to note that the past relationship between Rose and the narrator, touched on lightly throughout the book and in considerable detail in its final quarter, is never once hinted at in the relationship between Miss Vavasour and the narrator. In other words, they are, for most of the novel, portrayed as entirely unrelated characters. A key element of Rose/Miss Vavasour's character is her lesbianism - she tells the narrator that she had an unrequited love for Mrs. Grace, and that her ownership of The Cedars is at least in part the result of a lesbian relationship with Bun.

Colonel Blunden

The Colonel is a retired military man, living at The Cedars when the narrator moves in. The Colonel is portrayed as being physically and emotionally stiff, unchanging in his daily routine, perhaps romantically interested in Miss Vavasour, and as having some kind of secret past in Ireland that the narrator never really uncovers. He appears only briefly in the first three quarters of the novel, mostly as an occasional distraction from the narrator's more self-absorbed writing. At the novel's climax, however, he plays a key role, both triggering the narrator's final bout of drunken despair and rescuing him from potential death in the sea.

Chloe Grace

Chloe is the central character in the narrator's childhood memories. They are of similar age, but Chloe is portrayed as being much more adventurous and outgoing, in general of a much stronger personality than the narrator and therefore immensely attractive to him. Another reason for her attractiveness is that he perceives her to be of a higher social status than he is, meaning that at least part of their friendship, as he himself indicates, is his belief that he can advance himself by connecting with her. Chloe also has a cruel and selfish streak, as indicated by the way she manipulates and dominates the narrator who, it's important to note, is more than willing to be manipulated, for the reasons defined above. The final important aspect of Chloe's character is that she dies in the sea, apparently deliberately. This is important for two reasons: first, it establishes the symbolic value of the sea as a source of death, a value developed and maintained throughout the novel. Secondly, because Chloe's death was/is a traumatizing experience for the narrator, it establishes death as something frightening and out of his control. This aspect of his experience is important for two reasons. It defines his experience of the death of his wife Anna, and also defines his own impending death. In spite of his best efforts to convince himself that it's nothing to be afraid of, his experience of Chloe's death undermines him. It's quite clear that because of what

happened to Chloe, and subsequently to Anna, he's terrified about what's going to happen to himself.

Carlo, Connie and Myles Grace

These three characters are the other members of Chloe Grace's family. Carlo, the father, is described as being physically unattractive and mostly passive, but with a sly and sadistic streak that comes out at painful times for the rest of his family and for the narrator. Connie is an openhearted, free-spirited woman who is portrayed by the narrator as his first object of sexual attraction. The irony here, as he notes, is that she isn't particularly physically attractive. She is simply ordinary, and more obviously womanly than Chloe. Myles is the other child in the Grace family, Chloe's fraternal twin. He is mute (for reasons that are never explained), and extremely close with Chloe, dying with her at the novel's climax. They are portrayed as having a typical sibling relationship, often teasing, occasionally physically violent, but ultimately inseparable in death as in life.

Anna

Anna is Max's wife and the mother of his child, a woman portrayed as having a strong sense of self on a par with the narrator's, except where his is negative, hers is positive. The narrator describes their relationship as ultimately having a similar foundation, for him, as his relationship with Chloe - he perceives possibilities for self-improvement or advancement in their relationship. Anna is physically a match for the narrator, in that she is also tall; but again, where he is unhappy with his height and physical appearance, she is comfortable and secure in hers. The most important aspect of Anna's appearance in the novel is her death, the circumstances of which were/are clearly traumatic for the narrator. They are the reason for his moving out of his home and into The Cedars, but perhaps more importantly they are also the source and trigger for most, if not all of his reflections on his past and his death. It's essential to note that the cause of Anna's death is never explicitly identified, but there are a number of indications that it is cancer.

The Narrator's Father and Mother

The narrator's parents appear much less frequently, and are portrayed with significantly less depth, than the narrator's substitute parents, the Graces. This is perhaps partly because they represent, for the narrator, the lower-class, unfulfilled life he is so desperate to leave behind. His father appears even less than his mother, probably because the narrator portrays him as having left the family when he (the narrator) was very young. The narrator's mother is portrayed as bitter, cold and sarcastic, exactly the opposite of the warm, generous, welcoming Mrs. Grace. In this context, it's interesting to remember that a conversation with the mother is the source of the revelation that Max is not the narrator's true name. In other words, in technical, metaphorical, and literal terms, the narrator's mother is, for him, a reminder that he cannot ever escape his past. This is

perhaps, in turn, a secondary reason why death is so terrifying for him: he's afraid that even when leaving this life, this life can't be left.

Claire

Claire is the narrator's daughter, portrayed as being physically unattractive and emotionally under-developed, well meaning but shallow and ineffectual. The narrator's disappointment and lack of connection with her is evident. It's important to note, meanwhile, that rarely if ever throughout the narrative does he seem aware of any responsibility, as a parent, for how she's turned out.

Bun

This relatively minor character appears in only one sequence in the novel, but it is a key one. An old friend, and apparently ex-lover, of Rose / Miss Vavasour, tensions in their ongoing relationship trigger recollections in the narrator of a similarly tense relationship between Anna and his mother, which in turn leads to the revelation that Max is not the narrator's true name. In other words, Bun is an unwitting catalyst for the emergence of an important, novel-defining truth.

Objects/Places

The Sea

The sea appears throughout the novel as a powerful presence, threatening in the emotional sense (in that tides of emotion and memory often rush in and overwhelm the narrator) as well as in the physical sense (the sea, as described later in the novel overwhelms Chloe and she drowns). This latter aspect of the sea is particularly noteworthy, in that its physical dangers are, for the narrator, associated with death in general and his own impending death in particular. In this context, it's essential to note that images of the sea appear at both the beginning and the end of the novel - awareness of death, therefore, can be seen as the beginning and the end of the narrator's experience. Here also is the meaning of the novel's title - it is ultimately a study of death.

The Wrecked Boat

The wrecked boat described at the beginning of the novel can be seen as a symbol of the narrator himself. In the same way as the boat has been both wrecked and abandoned by the sea, the narrator's spirit has been wrecked and abandoned by death.

The Cedars

The Cedars is the guesthouse in which both the past and present action of the novel is set. The narrator states that in the past, it was rented as a summer guesthouse. During the summer in which the events of the past are set, the Grace family was one such renter. That being said, the novel never makes completely clear is what country it's in, stating only that it isn't in England or on Continental Europe - the narrator makes the point specifically but indirectly when he has the narrator write about how "people from England or the Continent" would stay at the guest house in the summer. The fact that most of the novel's names, the street names in the nearby town and the names of the inhabitants of the house and the village (Miss Vavasour excepted) are English-style suggests that The Cedars is somewhere in Great Britain. There is a clue to The Cedars' location, although it is by no means conclusive. It can be found in Section 1 Part 4, when the narrator visits a farm near The Cedars, and discovers that the first name of the man who ran the farm when he (the narrator) was a child was Christy - a common name for Irish men. There is the clear possibility, therefore, that The Cedars, and therefore the setting of the novel, is Ireland.

The Doctor's Office

This room, described in all its metallic, antiseptic detail by the narrator, is the setting for the scene in which Anna and the narrator receive confirmation of Anna's illness and the

discussion of her treatment. The narrator returns to the scene and the setting quite often, referring to it as the place where Anna's end began.

The Beach

The beach near The Cedars is the setting of much of the novel's action - in particular, the climactic scene in which Chloe and Rose argue over Chloe's aborted sexual encounter with the narrator, and Chloe and Myles appear to drown themselves.

The Field

This is the campground where the narrator holidayed as a child, and is described by him as being a place where lower class people stayed in tents, vans, or one of the few cheap "chalets" built by the field's owner. The field is, for the narrator, a vivid manifestation of the kind of life he is so desperate to leave behind.

The Farm

Near The Cedars (when the narrator was a child) there was a farm (which continues to exist when the narrator is an adult) which, for him, became as much of a refuge from his hated, lower class family life as The Cedars itself. His regular visits to get the family's supply of milk provided him with a sense of predictability and routine. His memories of the farm, however, are painfully disrupted when he returns as an adult and the atmosphere has changed, the farmer has died, the farmer's family has scattered, and the new farmer (Avril) is unwelcoming.

Eggs

Eggs appear as a symbol of the kind of life the narrator lives as an adult: a fragile shell of surface and perfection, concealing and protecting the genuine life within. That is, until the shell is broken by death and all the secrets, the vulnerabilities and the failings, of the life within spill forth.

Anna's Photographs

Late in the novel, as the narrator describes Anna's descent into death, she takes a series of photographs in which the physically ill and even the dying are revealed in unswerving, unsentimental clarity. The narrator has intense difficulty accepting the reality of these photographs, indicating that they are perhaps a symbolic representation of the kind of raw, unvarnished truth about himself and his life that he has such trouble accepting, and spends so much time and energy trying to escape.

Storms

Throughout the novel the narrator expresses a fondness for violent weather, describing himself as somehow feeling energized and powerful while they're going on. They are perhaps an externalization of his inner storms of emotion and self-loathing; he perhaps experiences a vicarious release of energy and power in the midst of a storm, as though the thunder and lightning and wind of his inner demons are being expelled.

Themes

The Relationship between Past and Present

The action of the novel, the string of events along its narrative through-line, is essentially an embodiment of this key theme. For the narrator, past and present are tightly and inescapably wound together; recollections of the past trigger actions in the present, the loneliness of the present triggers escape into the past, present feelings echo those experienced in the past and vice versa. Most importantly, the key aspect of his current spiritual condition, his awareness and fear of his approaching death, is a direct consequence of two elements in his past, one more recent, the other more distant - the deaths of Anna and Chloe. In this context, it might not be going too far to suggest that in some ways, while the past is safe, it's also as dangerous as the future. Only the present is safe, while neither the past nor the future is fully real, only looming.

Meanwhile, it's important to note that the theme also manifests in terms of style as well as content. Past tense and present tense intertwine frequently, and there is even one instance in which a character referred to only as "she" could be either of the important "shes" in the narrator's life, Chloe (in the past) or Anna (in the present). The key to understanding the relationship between past and present can be found on p. 9, "The past beats inside me like a second heart." The past, rather than being left behind or moved away from, lives deeply in the narrator, defining everything about his present and leaving him reflective rather than active, contemplative rather than moving forward into the future. It's interesting to consider that this sense of inescapable past can also be found in the character and experience of Rose / Miss Vavasour, who for whatever reason has chosen to live her life at the scene of what was probably her most traumatic experiences - her infatuation with Connie Grace, and the deaths of Myles and Chloe Grace.

Death

Death is everywhere in this book. First and foremost, it's the primary focus of the narrator's contemplations and writings - he is constantly aware of his own impending death, feeling it come upon him both physically and spiritually, and gives the impression that he's writing this (memoir? diary? journal?) as an attempt to understand his life before death takes him completely. Within this larger context, there is another key manifestation of death - the way he focuses, almost obsessively, on the deaths of two important females in his life - his youthful best friend/ crush, the volatile, capricious child/woman Chloe, and the adult love of his life, the beautiful, wealthy, secure Anna. The fear and unease that results from his experiences of their deaths leaves the narrator nervous and fearful, terrified to face his own.

There is one other important manifestation of death in *The Sea*, but a more metaphorical one - in particular, the death of fantasy. This occurs on several occasions -

when the narrator visits the fondly remembered farm of his childhood and discovers it's smaller and less well run, when he realizes that the much adored Mrs. Grace is an ordinary woman like any other, or when the Colonel's fantasies about his visiting daughter are dashed by the non-arrival. Other such deaths—metaphorical deaths—are perhaps even more important: The death of the narrator's illusions about Chloe's innocence and his belief that she cares for him, the death of his illusions about the heath, security and eternity of his marriage. All these contribute to the most significant death, taking place before the reader's eyes and within the range of one's perception as onereads: the death of the narrator's spirit.

Identity

The theme of identity develops on two key levels throughout the novel, one literal, one more spiritual. On the first level, there is the simple question of the narrator's real name. As previously discussed, he refers to himself, and is apparently referred to by other characters, as Max; but as is revealed in Section 2 Part 4, that is the name under which he publishes his books and the name under which he has come to be known. In other words, he has adopted a new identity. Yes, the book does make it clear why this took place; the narrator writes on several occasions of his intense desire to leave behind the poor, lower class environment of his childhood and improve his life. He never, however, indicates what his original, true name is - a fact that on one level suggests he's succeeded in re-defining himself, his life and his identity. On another level, however, the fact that the action of the novel is in effect a progression, for the narrator, from a life of delusion to a life of awareness and acceptance of reality, it seems somewhat surprising that a revelation of his true identity isn't included.

The revelation that *does* appear is that of the relationship between Rose and Miss Vavasour: that they are the same person. While there is certainly a value of surprise in this revelation when it occurs late in the action, there is some question as to what narrative and/or thematic value it has. Is referring to her as Miss Vavasour throughout most of the novel a manifestation of the narrator's desire to keep the past (i.e., Miss Vavasour's real identity) a secret? If this is the case, it would mean that the revelation of her identity is a manifestation of the completion of the narrator's progression towards truth - he's lost at least some of his illusions about his life, therefore he doesn't have to maintain the illusion of separation between Miss Vavasour and Rose. Ultimately, however, the Rose/Miss Vavasour element of the novel serves mainly as an echo of the narrator's own issues with identity - true identity being something necessary to hide, or hide from.

Style

Point of View

In purely technical terms, the novel is written in the first person from the perspective of the narrator - a middle-aged man having an intense experience of reliving his past. As the narrator himself writes, "The past beats inside [him] like a second heart." In other words, the past lives with him, is more alive to him, than the present is. What's particularly noteworthy in this context is the way in which past and present blend. There are frequent occasions in which the point of view shifts from first person past (narrating the stories) into first person present (living the stories). More often than not, this shift in tense occurs when the narrator's experience of the past is particularly emotionally powerful - but what's interesting to note is that these shifts don't necessarily occur at moments the reader might expect. Chloe's death, Anna's death, Anna's visit to the doctor's office—all of these events are written about in the past tense. Other moments, which some readers might suggest are of less overall importance, are written in first person present. These include moments like the narrator's encounter with Anna's friend Serge (Section 2: Part 2), whom the narrator utterly dislikes and sees as a kind of rival for Anna's attention and affection. Does the shift in narrative tense suggest that his feelings for, and about, Serge and Anna are perhaps more troubling than the narrator's prose itself seems to let on? It's difficult to say - in fact, it's difficult to say with any certainty what levels of deeper meaning can be found in these sudden shifts in point of view, except to say that they bring to vivid life the narrator's contention that the past is alive in him, and unpredictably so.

Setting

The narrator's experience of place is, in general, an important component of the novel, and specifically of how the narrator experiences his memories. Key moments in his life all take place in locations described in vivid, emotion-laden detail. The news about Anna's medical condition, for example, takes place in the carefully portrayed cold / clinical / metallic setting of a contemporary doctor's office. The narrator's first kiss with Chloe takes place in a darkened, ramshackle movie house. The farm he visited regularly and excitedly as a child, but only once and disappointingly as an adult, is quaint, rich in character and presence. In other words, high points in life take place at high points of physical, visual, and experiential sensation.

The most important component of the novel's setting is, for the most part, The Cedars - both its past and its present incarnations. In both contexts, The Cedars is a guesthouse (for its possible locations, see its entry in "Objects/Places"), inhabited by the (apparently) upper middle class Grace family in the past, and by the narrator and one other guest in the present. It provides a physical, tangible anchor for the narrator's memories and experiences - both past and present live in The Cedars, as they do in the narrator's mind and heart. It's important to note how, after his process of recollection

leads him to recall and relive the various deaths in his past (the literal deaths of Chloe and Anna, the spiritual deaths of his illusions about them), the narrator prepares to leave The Cedars, in much the same way as he prepares to leave life itself. Does this juxtaposition of action suggest that The Cedars has, on some level, the symbolic value of representing life? It's difficult to say; but if it does, then the narrative's view of life is a negative one, in that The Cedars in both past and present is a place where life comes to an end. In the past, Chloe and Myles' physical lives end while they're staying at The Cedars, Carlo and Connie Grace's family life ends, and so does Rose's emotional life (i.e., her attachment to Mrs. Grace). In the present, the spiritual life of all three of the residents of The Cedars (Miss Vavasour, the Colonel, the narrator) comes to an end. With that in mind, therefore, it's possible to see The Cedars as symbolic of the process of life, rather than the facts of either living or dying.

Language and Meaning

There are three main areas of language usage in *The Sea* that are worthy of consideration. The first relates to the novel's overall sense of movement back and forth between the past and present, with the tenses intertwining and interrelating in ways that have deeper resonance than simply "she says" or "she said." In other words, language is another reflection of the author's contention that "The past beats inside [him] like a second heart." Both past and present are described, lived, felt, reflected upon with equal intensity - language is equally rich, equally alive, equally vivid in both time frames. The second area of language usage worthy of consideration is its poeticism. Yes, there are times when the language used is matter of fact to the point of terseness, but more often than not events, characters, feelings and situations are described in language rich in imagery - the language of experience, as opposed to the language of mere event.

An interesting, ironic, and perhaps even thematically relevant aspect to this use of language is the fact that the narrator seems to himself have limited writing skills and talents; the ostensible writing of his journal is of higher quality than the writing in his actual published work (or at least what he believes to be the quality of that writing). There are two ways of looking at this. The first is that the author, as opposed to the narrator, is being ultimately hypocritical, indulging his own talent at the expense of exploring ultimate character truth. The second is that the author is indicating, in a subtle way, that the narrator is a better writer than he thinks he is - that he (the narrator) is so stuck in his negative self image that he cannot see that he is, in fact, a very good (if somewhat indulgent) writer. If this is the case, there is definite thematic resonance here. The narrator, as previously discussed, is trapped in/by a desperate lack of self-worth. Perhaps his negative view of his own writing, which in his journal (i.e., the novel) is for the most part quite good, is a manifestation of this view.

The third noteworthy use of language in the book is the way that it's occasionally shaped for jarring, sudden effect. The most significant manifestation of this is the narrator's use of the word *cunt* in Section 2 Part 3. The word is, in most English speaking cultures and circles, one of the least used and most vilified curse words. It is, in a word, toxic, and for the narrator to use it here, when there have been very few if any

of even the mildest curse words in the rest of the text, speaks in undeniable power of the depth of his rage, sense of betrayal, his pain. The toxicity of his feelings towards the woman of whom he's speaking is harshly, undeniably, vivid (as noted, it's not clear whether he's referring to Chloe or to Anna, although the smart money would be on Anna). There are other rare occasions in the novel where this technique is applied, and on these occasions it's quite effective. Never, however, is it more evocative of the narrator's searing, torturous despair, than it is in Section 2 Part 3. It is arguably the single most effective use of language in the book.

Structure

Like point of view, structure is a fluid, flexible component of *The Sea*. There is only one clear demarcation of structure - the break between Sections 1 and 2: marking the transition between the narrator's preparing to accept the end of both his life and his illusions, and the actual process of doing so. Otherwise, the various parts of the novel defined by this analysis don't actually exist in the book - they are purely arbitrary divisions in the line of action. The novel is, in short, almost entirely a stream of consciousness, with the narrative moving fluidly back and forth between memory and perception, between experience recalled and experienced lived. There are frequent breaks between facets of memory/experience, defined by breaks between paragraphs in this analysis. These breaks sometimes mark shifts in past/present perspective, sometimes define the focus of a memory or an experience, or sometimes indicate a new thought is about to be explored. It's important to note, however, that these uses of the break technique are rarely, if ever, consistent - again, the novel's narrative structure is as fluid as the narrator's memory—indeed, as changeable and as moody as the sea itself. Once again in this book, the technical (i.e., structure) serves as a manifestation of the emotional or spiritual.

Quotes

"How is it that in childhood everything new that caught my interest had an aura of the uncanny, since according to all the authorities the uncanny is not some new thing but a thing known returning in a different form ... so many unanswerables, this the least of them." p. 8

"The past beats inside me like a second heart." p. 9

"Henceforth I would have to address things as they are, not as I might imagine them, for this was a new version of reality." p. 15.

"... at what moment, of all our moments, is life not utterly, utterly changed, until the final, most momentous change of all?" p. 25

"There are moments when the past has a force so strong that it seems one might be annihilated by it." p. 35

"... last night in a dream, it has just come back to me, I was trying to write my will on a machine that was lacking the word I. The letter *I*, that is, small and large." p. 52

"Oh, Ma, how little I understood you, thinking how little you understood." p. 66

"... this is what I thought adulthood would be, a kind of long Indian summer, a state of tranquility, of calm incuriousness, with nothing left of the barely bearable raw immediacy of childhood, all the things solved that had puzzled me when I was small, all mysteries settled, all questions answered, and the moments dripping away, unnoticed almost, drip by golden drip, toward the final, almost unnoticed quietus." p. 69.

"Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it." p. 72

"Which is the more real, the woman reclining on the grassy bank of my recollections, or the strew of dust and dried marrow that is all the earth any longer retains of her?" p. 87.

"The little waves before me at the water's edge speak with an animate voice, whispering eagerly of some ancient catastrophe ... water beads break and fall in a silver string from the tip of an oar. I see the black ship in the distance, looming imperceptibly nearer at every instant. I am there. I hear your siren's song. I am there, almost there." p. 97.

"And yet people do go, do vanish. That is the greater mystery; the greatest. I too could go, oh yes, at a moment's notice I could go and be as though I had not been, except that the long habit of living indisposeth me for dying ..." p. 104-105.

"... memories are always eager to match themselves seamlessly to the things and places of a revisited past." p. 110.

"Another week done with. How quickly the time goes as the season advances, the earth hurtling along its groove into the year's sharply descending final arc." p. 138

"I drink like one recently widowed - widowered? - a person of scant talent and scanter ambition, greyed o'er by the years, uncertain and astray and in need of consolation and the brief respite of drink induced oblivion." p. 149.

"There are times, they occur with increasing frequency nowadays, when I seem to know nothing, when everything I did know seems to have fallen out of my mind like a shower of rain, and I am ... waiting for it all to come back but with no certainty that it will." p. 157

"I know so little of myself, how should I think to know another?" p. 159.

Topics for Discussion

Consider the quote from p. 52 - specifically, the reference to the missing "I". Discuss the symbolic and/or metaphorical and/or emotional meaning of the missing letter.

Consider the quotes from p. 72 and p. 104-105. Discuss how both relate to the story of the novel: In what ways are the narrator's contemplation of his past, and indeed that past itself, a preparation for the moment of his death? Debate the general philosophical value of the two quotes: Is life a preparation for death? What is the value and/or purpose of such a lengthy preparation? Is death a conclusion, or a beginning? On the other hand, does the habit of living indeed make dying harder?

Consider the revelation late in the novel, fifty pages from its conclusion (see "Quotes," p. 149) that the narrator drinks heavily. To what extent does this call into question his character? The truth of the stories he's written about before, and the stories he writes after? Discuss whether a drunken person speaks truths he can't speak while sober, or whether what's written about, recalled, and/or experienced takes on a degree of inflation and/or exaggeration and/or falseness.

Discuss the possible symbolic, metaphoric and thematic values of the name "Grace." What "grace" is brought into the narrator's life by the presence of the Grace family? In what sense is the name ironic? What curse, what trauma, what difficulty (as opposed to what grace or blessing) is brought into the narrator's life by their presence?

Discuss the thematic value of the narrator's concealment of identity. Why does he never reveal his own name? What does it say about him, the story he's telling and why? Why does he conceal the true identity of Rose/Miss Vavasour? Is there something more at work than simply a desire to bring the novel to a close with one final surprise?

Consider the novel's frequent references to the gods. Why does the narrator consider them and their influence so important? What, to him, do the gods represent? Why does he make the obviously deliberate reference to Myles Grace as "a godling?" What is it about Myles that would lead him (the narrator) to have this perspective of him? How do the narrator's feelings about the gods relate to the book's themes - are the gods immortal? Do they never die, like the narrator and other important human beings in his life? Or are they merely special, different, separate, removed from everyday life in some way - and therefore an ideal example of the life the narrator wants?

At the end of Section 1: Part 3, the narrator refers to never again seeing a dog chased through The Cedars by Myles Grace. Discuss possible symbolic/metaphoric meanings for the dog; specifically, what is it about that summer with the Graces, and indeed that particular encounter with the Grace family, that the narrator never experiences again?

Debate the question raised by the sudden, volcanic spewing of rage and bitterness by the narrator in Section 2: Part 3. Who is the female character he blames so much for leaving him? Is it Anna or Chloe? Support your answer with evidence from the text.