

# **The Testament of Mary Study Guide**

## **The Testament of Mary**

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# Plot Summary

NOTE: All citations refer to the Kindle version of The Testament of Mary. As such, page numbers could vary on different devices.

Colm Tóibín's novel *The Testament of Mary* gives a gut-wrenching look at the crucifixion of Jesus from the fictional viewpoint of Mary, his mother. Mary's story is written in the months after the crucifixion when Jesus' followers are questioning her for information to write stories of Jesus' life and death. As Mary tries to come to terms with her own grief and regrets, she still lives with the fear that she will be killed because of her son's actions. When Mary learns that the men who followed Jesus believe that he died to redeem the world, she tells them that she believes the world is not worth the sacrifice.

Two of Jesus' followers visit Mary regularly to discuss the events of the crucifixion. She does not like the men, even though they do take care of her needs. She senses that they are suspicious of her and are impatient with her reluctance to cooperate. Mary remembers the cruelty, the viciousness, and the confusion of that day. She senses the men's frustration when she tells them only the details that she knows to be true.

As Mary thinks through her son's life, she wonders what she could have done differently to save him. She wishes she had paid more attention to the company he kept. She also wishes that he had paid more attention to her warnings when she tried to tell him at the wedding in Cana that he needed to come home.

Mary's narrative includes the stories of the raising of Lazarus from the dead and Jesus' act of changing water into wine. Mary describes an unnatural feel surrounding both instances. When Mary saw Lazarus return from the dead, he appeared to be someone who seemed to be steps from dying again. He was weak and kept to himself. Perhaps, he had experienced a frightening revelation that he was not comfortable sharing with anyone.

Mary's deepest regret from the day of her son's death is that she did not stay with him until he died. She had seen a man who was pointing her out to a man known as "the strangler." Frightened, she told her guide that they were in danger. Fearing for her life, Mary left Jerusalem before the crucifixion was finished. Later, Mary was angered by the men when they insisted that she had been at the site of the crucifixion when Jesus had been taken from the cross and that she had watched as the body was prepared for burial. She knows the versions of the stories the men are writing are based on what they want to be true, not the truth.



# Pages 1-12

## Summary

In The Testament of Mary, Mary begins her narration by describing the way two men approach and question her. The men are frustrated that Mary seems unable to answer their questions. In reality, she remembers everything. Mary senses their impatience with her. The men who question her are also the ones who take care of her. While she helps them as much as she can, Mary refuses to say anything that she does not know to be the truth.

One of the men, the one whom Mary says stayed with her to the end, has a slightly better attitude. He writes down the stories of what happened, but he refuses to read them to her. Mary knows that he is including things in his letters that he did not witness.

Mary remembers one of the men who had played dice near the crosses. He seemed to pay the most attention to her. She was afraid of this man because she felt he knew what had happened on that particular day and why it had happened. Mary believes this man, along with a man to whom she refers as the strangler, intended to stifle her voice. She says that there were rumors about the men wanting to round up Mary and the others and hold them as prisoners. It was possible that the men would kill them.

Mary describes the second man who visits her and asks for her memories as being easily irritated. She frustrates him by refusing to talk to him about “the day our son was lost and how we found him and what was said” (6). Mary felt her son had been foolish because he had gathered men who were misfits around him. She believed her son was very different from the men who followed him.

A neighbor, Farina, leaves food and things for Mary. At first, Mary would have nothing to do with her. The men who came warned Mary to be careful. When Mary began to pay attention to Farina, she decided she liked her. She began going with Farina just so she could get away from the men who stayed with her.

It was while visiting the Temple with Farina that Mary noticed the statue of Artemis. It was when she looked at that statue that she felt her grief leave her for a moment. Because this statue had lifted her spirits, Mary bought a small replica of it. It was to this statue that she felt she could tell her real story.

When Mary's son became a man, he was among those men who had gone to Jerusalem to find work. Mary was happy the parting was not more painful. Mary and her son had avoided getting too close to one another so that the pain of being apart would be bearable. Looking back on what has happened, Mary wishes that she had paid more attention to the men who kept her son company. She did not like to hear their voices or the way her son's voice sounded when he talked to them.



## Analysis

NOTE: The name Jesus will be used in analysis passages for ease of reference to Mary's son. Mary does not call the men who question her by their names. She refers only to the day of Jesus' crucifixion as "that day" (3).

The narrator of this story is Mary, a character also from the New Testament of the Bible. Mary is believed to be the mother of Jesus Christ, a man who died on a cross in order to redeem the people of the world from their sins, according to Christian tradition. For a reader unfamiliar with the Biblical story, he may feel lost since a good deal of Mary's references are veiled and vague. For instance, she does not call Jesus by his name and believes she may never be able to say his name. Instead, she and the men who visit her call Jesus "'him,' 'my son,' 'our son,' 'the one who was here,' 'your friend,' 'the one you are interested in'" (6). Those who know the story of the crucifixion realize Mary's son is Jesus..

The reader is overwhelmed right away by Mary's grief and fear. Even the men who are there to care for her she describes as having "a brutality boiling in their blood" (1). She fears that the men who were at the cross when her son died will come looking for her, wanting to kill her so that she will not be able to tell anything that she knows. She notes that she did not believe that "the cursed shadow of what had happened would ever lift" (8). Mary's life has been scarred and changed forever by what happened to her son.

Among the images Mary shares in this section is the image of a man she saw feeding rabbits to a bird on the day that her son was killed. The man symbolizes a need to cause pain, though there is no purpose for the pain. He feeds rabbits, creatures that are innocent, to a bird who is not even hungry. In its frustration with being locked in a cage, the bird plays with the rabbits torturing them and injuring without eating or killing them. The man, who symbolizes the part of human nature that gets some satisfaction from the pain of others, seems to enjoy allowing the bird to torture the rabbits. Although Mary is disturbed by this man and actions, she indicates that she is even more fearful of the man at the cross who watched her carefully and the strangler, whom she believes wants to kill her. These men make Mary feel as if she is in real danger even though she has done nothing wrong.

Mary discusses her relationship with her son. She was proud of him for going to Jerusalem to find work, but Mary did not like the men with whom he associated. She did not like what Jesus became when he spoke to the men he gathered around him. She indicates he would speak with "his voice all false, and his tone all stilted" (11). She would often leave her home in hopes the men would be gone when she returned.

An unusual symbol that appears in this section is the statue of Artemis. When Mary looks at this statue, she feels a relief from her grief for a short time. Ironic about this situation is that according to Christian belief, it was pagan gods like Artemis that Jesus came to replace. Mary's use of this statue as a source of comfort symbolizes her disbelief in her own son's purpose.



Endearing Mary to the reader is her habit of intentionally irritating the men who visit her. Even though they come to her pretending to be friendly, she senses their frustration with her and plays upon these hidden feelings. She knows they want information from her about her son's life, but does not plan to tell them anything that she does not know for a fact. She cannot read, and the men will not read to her the stories that they write about her son. She senses that they are writing things they did not experience and do not know for a fact.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the tone of the novel in this section. How does the author develop this tone?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why is Mary not more helpful to the men? Do you sense that she holds some animosity toward them?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is it significant that Mary finds such comfort in the statue of Artemis? What does this statue represent?

## **Vocabulary**

insinuates, vague, insatiable, exuding, menacing, ebbing, eradicate, reticence, dispersed



# Pages.12-27

## Summary

The men move things when they come to Mary's house. Even though Mary asks them to replace the things they have moved, they refuse to do so. She knows it is their way of asserting their power. She is not irritated by them. The only piece of furniture Mary refuses to allow the men to use is a chair on which no one has ever sat. This chair is reserved in her husband's memory. When one of the men goes against her wishes and sits there anyway, Mary threatens him with a sharp knife.

Mary remembers that before the crucifixion, Marcus from Cana, who called himself Mary's cousin, came to visit her in her house in Nazareth. She noticed he was different from his childhood days. There seemed to be a hardness in his heart. He told her how her son and his followers had made a fuss at a pool behind the sheep market in Jerusalem. The crippled believed this pool had healing powers. At a certain time, an angel would stir the waters. The first one in the pool after that stirring would be healed.

Even though they were being watched, Jesus and his followers went to a cripple who was complaining he had no one to help him into the water. Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be cured. The crowd was silent when Jesus told the cripple to "Take up thy bed and walk" (19). The man got up and walked through the crowd. The yelling, shouting and pointing crowd had breached the Sabbath and the rulers blamed Jesus for this breach. They did not care that the man was healed. Jesus was not arrested that day because he and his followers were being watched. Marcus advised Mary that she should try to convince Jesus to go back to Nazareth with her and disappear in order to avoid any sort of punishment.

Although Mary did not like weddings, she decided to go to Cana to attend the wedding of her cousin's daughter. Mary's intentions were to persuade her son, Jesus, to come home. When she arrived in Cana and heard the way people were talking about Jesus, she felt right away that her trip would not be successful.

Mary tells her reader about Lazarus, a man who lived near Cana. He had been a pleasant, smiling child. As an adult, Lazarus was always doing good works. Now, he was sick with an illness that caused him great pain. Mary wondered if she should visit Lazarus and his sisters on her way to the wedding.

It was not until she reached Cana that she learned of Lazarus' death. He had died a week before her son had arrived. Jesus had commanded that Lazarus be dug up from his grave. The men did not want to bother Lazarus and did not believe it was right to try to bring the dead back to life. Martha and Mary, Lazarus' sisters, had called for Jesus before Lazarus died, but he had not come. When he finally arrived, Martha told Jesus that if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died. She saw Jesus' sadness and



challenged him, telling him she knew he had the power to raise Lazarus from the dead that day. She told him also that she recognized him as the Son of God.

When Jesus commanded the grave be dug up, Martha had screamed because she was afraid of what she had asked Jesus to do. They watched as Lazarus came out of grave when Jesus commanded him to do so. When he realized he was back in Cana, Lazarus first whimpered, then wept. Finally, he howled as his sisters walked him to the their house.

## Analysis

Instead of seeing her son and his followers as men of any power, Mary describes them as small children and buffoons. She tells her reader she believes their habits of rearranging her furniture whenever they enter her house is an example of the way “they will wield power in the smallest ways” (13). Although she pretends to be irritated by their pettiness, she is actually amused by the way they respond to her. “I feel almost happy and I feel amused at how like small boys they are in their random search for ways of showing who is the biggest, who is in command” (14).

The only piece of furniture in her house for which Mary takes real offense when the disciples refuse to follow her wishes is a chair that she has reserved for her husband’s memory. It would be easy for the reader to think that this chair was reserved for her son when she says that it belongs to “memory, it belongs to a man who will not return” (14). When Mary later says of the man for whose memory the chair is reserved that she does not need to keep for him “a place in my bed” (14) it clarifies for the reader that she is indeed speaking of her husband and not her son.

When Mary confronts the disciple who tries to sit in the chair, notice his reference to her disbelief in Jesus as the Son of God. When she explains to the disciple that chair is set aside for a man who will not return, the disciple contradicts her by saying that he will return. Of course, the disciple has in his mind that Mary is speaking of Jesus, not her husband. Mary is able to use his confusion to make the disciple appear thoughtless when she corrects him and tells him the chair is indeed reserved for her husband, a man who is unlikely to return from the dead.

While Christian tradition describes the resurrection of Lazarus as a miracle, Mary’s recount puts a different spin on it. She speaks of the pain in which Lazarus was in before his death and describes his return to life in a way that makes it seem traumatic. While Lazarus’ sisters are happy to have him back, Lazarus cries and howls when he sees where he is. Mary arrives in Cana after Lazarus has already been raised and describes the strange stillness there. Birds acted as if they were in danger. “There was a hushed holding-in of things, no wind, no rustling in the leaves of trees, no animal sounds” (23). The description of the landscape suggests that something unnatural and unworldly has happened.





In convincing Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead, Martha makes her profession of faith that Jesus is the Son of God. Her words to him tell the reader who Jesus' followers believe him to be. They think he is the redeemer of the world that had been prophesized. They believe he is not mortal, but instead has been sent to be the ruler of the earth.

Besides those who follow him, the public opinion of Jesus seems to be that he is a troublemaker. Marcus warns Mary that Jesus broke the laws by healing a man on the Sabbath. The yelling, noisy crowds angered the temple leaders who did not arrest Jesus only because they hoped to build a bigger case against him and his followers. Meanwhile, Mary makes her opinion of her son's behavior clear. She describes him as having "high-flown talk" (23) and traveling with a crowd "like a carnival with every malcontent and half-crazed soothsayer following in its wake" (13). She sets her eyes on trying to persuade Jesus to come home to Nazareth with her. In Nazareth, he can hide from those wanting to arrest him

## Discussion Question 1

Compare the tone of the resurrection of Lazarus in Mary's story with the one in the Christian Bible. What differences do you see?

## Discussion Question 2

What is Mary's opinion of her son's behavior? Why does she try to stop him from being arrested?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Martha's proclamation that Jesus is the Son of God. How does her statement help the reader to understand what is at stake in this story?

## Vocabulary

relish, placid, defiled, insolent, consign, intoned, hysteria, imbecile, breach, exuded, aura, pestilence, cataclysm, divert, lamentation



## Pages. 27-40

### Summary

In this section of the novel, Mary describes the differences she senses in the typical atmosphere in Cana and the atmosphere of the town when she arrived for the wedding. The marketplace was full of shouting and laughing, instead of the usual businesslike crowds. While at the house of her cousin, Mary heard stories about the death of Lazarus and his resurrection. However, Mary noticed that neither of the women who told stories of Lazarus' resurrection had actually been there to witness the events. Mary questioned Miriam about her story. While Miriam admitted she was not there when he was resurrected, she knew that he was dead and that he had come back to life. Mary continues her narration, saying that Miriam also told Mary the crowds had come because everyone wanted to experience what would come next, such as more raisings from the dead or if there would be a revolt against the Romans.

Mary and Martha brought Lazarus to the house of Miriam to walk together with Mary, the mother of Jesus, to the wedding. Because Lazarus was such a novelty they did not want to go alone with him. Mary was surprised Lazarus' sisters seemed to think she was in some way to be credited for what had happened to their brother. Mary also tells her reader that while there seemed to be an opportunity when Lazarus first came into the room to ask about what his experience after death was like, it passed before any of the women questioned him.

When the group that includes Mary (the mother of Jesus) and Lazarus approached the wedding site, Mary noticed that the crowd grew silent. She was uncomfortable when she realized the silence was not just for Lazarus but also for her. She found the crowd's interest in her both funny and disturbing.

Mary was taken to Marcus who told her that he could not stay for the wedding. Then, he warned her to watch out for one particular man, the strangler, who was paid to transfer information between the Jewish and Roman leaders. Before he left her, Marcus warned Mary that she and the others needed to get away, if possible even before the feasting started.

As Mary waited, she observed Lazarus. It appeared to her that he was dying. He was weak and could eat only bread soaked in water. She felt that since he had come back from the dead he was in possession of knowledge that frightened him and caused him pain.

When her son and the crowd following him did arrive, Mary was frightened by him as well as the crowd. She describes him as wearing rich clothes in a color that was between blue and purple. When Mary hugged him and whispered to him she noticed he seemed oddly formal. He pulled away from her before she even got a chance to finish



her warning to him. He began to talk to the crowd and Mary heard him reference himself as the Son of God.

Mary noticed the strangler had stronger looking men with him who were pointing to different people in the crowd. When she happened to catch the strangler's eye, Mary realized that she had never had a chance to save her son, even if he had gone with her when she first asked. She thought about her son as a young boy and the difference she saw in him.

During a later part of the wedding celebration, there was a commotion because the wine had run out. Men came to the table where Mary was sitting with her son as if they were capable of doing something about the shortfall. Jesus ordered them to bring him six containers full of water. The containers were brought but Mary tells her reader that she did not know what was in any of the containers expect for the first, which did have water in it. There was sudden shouting that the water had been turned into wine. After this incident, Mary tried again to tell her son about the danger he faced but noticed he was not listening. She left the feast and went back to Nazareth. Even though she knew she had the opportunity to go back to Cana and plead with her son, but because Mary knew it would do not good, she did not turn around.

## Analysis

Despite what is happening to Jesus and around him, Mary makes it clear to the reader that Jesus is her son. Her relationship with him is more personal than his relationship with the throngs that surround him as they hope to see miracles and signs. His treatment of her seems almost disrespectful, as he does not listen to her when she tries to warn him about the danger he is in. She thinks about him as a small boy when he depended upon her for all of his needs. She also considers how much he has changed from that small boy. "He was so far from the child I remembered or the young boy who seemed happiest in the morning when I came to him and spoke to him as the day began" (37).

Even though she knows her hope is probably futile — Mary notes at several points in her narration that she sees signs in the actions of the men around her that her son's future is already sealed — Mary still holds out hope that she can save him. This hope comes from Mary's bond with her son and her natural desire to protect him from the world and from himself.

Mary's description of the crowds that surround her are telling of her opinion of the people as well as her opinion of the circumstances. The overwhelming emotion felt by Mary in this situation seems to be one of fear. She fears the man who she refers to as the strangler. She describes him as being like an animal with no sign of human intelligence. Mary's fear heightens when she hears her son refer to himself as the Son of God. She is also frightened by the way that the people seem to connect her with Jesus, as if she were somehow responsible for or an accomplice in his plans. She is



also frightened of the changes she sees in her son and does not understand his motivation for acting as he does.

Mary's insistence on sticking to the truth is another feature of her story to which the reader should pay special attention. For Mary, the truth has to be something that a person has witnessed himself. She questions Miriam's story of Lazarus' resurrection from the dead because Miriam did not see the resurrection first hand. Miriam reasons that her own knowledge — Lazarus was once dead and came back to life — as well as the recounts of other people are enough to prove the case to her.

Notice Mary does not even completely believe what she has seen with her own eyes. Even though it happened in front of her, Mary doubts the validity of the miracle of the water turned into wine. She tells her reader that she was not aware what kind of liquid was in the six containers that were brought to her son. She seems to be raising the question that, perhaps, the containers had wine in them already and that the crowd had been tricked by some sort of slight of hand.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the element of doubt that Mary brings to the miracles her son is performing. How does this compare with your former opinion of Mary and her opinion of her son?

## Discussion Question 2

How does one determine what is true? Is Mary right in demanding that one tell only what had personally witnessed for a situation to be deemed true?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the strangler and his role in this story. How does Mary's description of this man help to develop his personality?

## Vocabulary

levity, purveyors, protocol, impart, ominously, obliterating, innocuous, consignment, imploring



## Pages 40-50

### Summary

When Mary returned home from Cana, she went about her life as usual but she refused to talk to anyone, even the Elders of the Synagogue. She knew people were watching her. She thought of the way her son had grown into a man who was totally unfamiliar to her. Despite the power Jesus held, a power of which she did not understand the source, she loved her son because of that power. She wanted to protect him even more because of what he had become.

Mary had heard that Jesus had run away alone to the mountains. His followers had been on a ship on the sea, which had been caught in a storm. Jesus had appeared to them and had been walking on the water, calming the sea. Mary indicates that she really did not think much about this story.

At this point, Marcus was the only one to whom Mary would open her door. He told her that she needed to prepare herself for the worst, that it was planned for Jesus to be crucified. He explained that even though she claimed not to be one of Jesus' followers, she needed to leave because she was in danger. He gave her an address in Jerusalem at which he believed she would be kept safe.

Mary had seen a crucifixion before and knew little about it except that it had been extremely cruel and she had hoped not to have to witness another one. When she questioned Marcus about the workings of a crucifixion, she was told it would be better if she not ask.

Mary did not go immediately to the place in Jerusalem that Marcus had advised her to go. Instead she went to Miriam to ask for advice. Mary noticed how uneasy Miriam was with her. She not only did not invite Mary further into the house than the hallway but also left the door ajar. When Mary finally asked Miriam if she wanted her to leave, Miriam said that she did. Mary realized at that moment how much trouble she was actually facing.

Mary went next to visit Martha and her sister, who was also named Mary. The sisters said their house was being watched, but that the other Mary had planned to go with Mary (Jesus' mother) to Jerusalem. Martha told Mary that her son Jesus would be judged by Pilate. Then, the crowd would be given the opportunity to let him be released. Because both the Elders of the Temple and the Romans wanted Jesus dead, the crowd would call for a thief to be released instead of Mary's son.

Mary, Martha's sister, went on to explain how Jesus' death meant that there would be a new life in the world. Mary said even their brother believed that "the world as we know it is coming to an end" (50) as she encouraged Mary (Jesus' mother) to go to Jerusalem.



## Analysis

After Mary returns from Cana, there is a sort of calm during the storm for her until Marcus comes to tell her about the plans to crucify her son. During this time of waiting, Mary admits to herself that she senses a new form of power in her son that she admires. At the same time, she feels the need to protect Jesus. Although she recognizes his power, she still insists that she does not believe his claim that he is the Son of God nor is she one of his followers.

Now that plans have been finalized for Jesus to die, Mary describes the strange reactions that people have around her. Her friend, Miriam, for instance, will not even let Mary into her house because she is afraid to be seen with her. Martha and her sister who is also named Mary, however, send out a different vibe when Mary, the mother of Jesus, asks them for advice. They are both fearful and hopeful. They see Jesus' death as being a point at which things will begin to change in the world, even though they do not know what form these changes may take. Marcus also is fearful. He believes simply by being the mother of Jesus that Mary is in danger. He sends her to an address in Jerusalem where he believes that she will be protected.

Note that as Martha explains it, Jesus is killed almost by conspiracy. Both the Romans and the Elders of the Temple want him dead. To understand the mention made that Jesus would be offered to the crowd for release, the reader would need to understand that there was some custom, either of the Passover or Pilate, for a prisoner to be released to the people. Although the crowd would be offered the release of Jesus, they would instead call for the known thief Barabbas to be released.

Mary's mind must be filled with fear and grief as she allows herself to be persuaded to go to Jerusalem where she has been told that her son will die by crucifixion. She notes that she has seen only one crucifixion and remembered it only as being "the most foul and frightening image that had ever been conjured up by men" (45). Foreshadowing that the crucifixion may be worse even than Mary remembers Marcus advises her that it is best for her not to know when she asks him for details about what will happen.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences between the way Miriam responds to Mary's visit and the way Martha and Mary respond.

## Discussion Question 2

How do you think Marcus comes to have the information he does about Jesus' crucifixion? Why does he warn Mary?



## Discussion Question 3

When Mary returns to Cana after the wedding, why will she not open her door to anyone?

## Vocabulary

banished, conjured, insidiously, aura, perplexed



## Pages 50-62

### Summary

Mary was uneasy when she learned that she and her friend would be staying with her son's followers in Jerusalem. However, the other Mary (Martha's and Lazarus' sister) told Mary (Jesus' mother) that she would be safe. The people spoke as if Jesus' arrest, which he had allowed to happen, would lead to some sort of great redemption. Even though Mary wanted to ask if it meant her son would be saved, she was afraid that she would not get a straight answer.

The next morning, one of the men who continued to visit Mary after the crucifixion, was assigned to the two Marys as their minder. He went with them into the city. He told them that all of the people in the crowd had been paid by the Temple to ask for the release of Barabbas. He also talked about the redemption of the world that had been planned out, but Mary felt as if he did not really believe what he was telling them. She was also distracted by her poorly fitting shoes.

In the town square, Mary had trouble hearing what was being said when Pilate talked to the people. When they responded in harmony, it was clear to Mary that what was happening had been arranged. She sensed a thirst for blood among the crowd as if they would only be satisfied if they saw someone tortured and killed.

Pilate questioned Jesus and came back to the crowd saying he had found no fault with the man. When he asked them whom they wanted released to them, Barabbas or Jesus, the crowd called for the release of Barabbas.

When Jesus was brought before the people, Mary noted that the people gasped with delight. He was dressed as a king with thorns on his head and blood pouring down his face. Pilate told the crowd that he had found no fault in Jesus, but the chief priests said he must die because he had called himself the Son of God. Mary noticed Pilate looked at the crowd in a way that showed both fear and disbelief.

Mary notes in her narration that there was a venom that seemed to fill the blood of everyone there as they began to make their way toward the hill where the crucifixion would take place. As Mary and her companions moved in the same direction as the rest of the crowd, she wondered if they appeared as if they were also excited by the prospect of a crucifixion.

It was as Jesus struggled to move his cross to the top of the hill where he would be killed that Jesus' eyes caught Mary's. She sensed all of his pain and worry, and wanted to run toward him but Mary and the man held her back. She had never dreamed that her son, the one who was supposed to look after her in her old age, would come to this sort of an end.





On the hill, the atmosphere was like that of a market place with people preparing food, playing games, and talking and laughing. Mary describes the horror of seeing the spikes nailed through Jesus' wrists. She recognized his voice as he called out but did not recognize his bloody form. She knew that as efficient as the soldiers were in nailing him up, there was little hope he would be saved.

From the distance that time has allowed, Mary wonders how she had the ability to watch from a distance and do nothing. At the time, Mary remembers that the man with them told her that because Jesus had already lost so much blood, he might die quickly. However, if the soldiers decided to do so, they could make the death last as long as a day.

Mary searched the crowd, looking for something to distract her from the cruelty in front of her. She noticed that the Romans seemed to be in charge of the scene. Marcus was among the Romans, and Mary ran toward him without thinking. There was fear in his face for an instant before he told her to get away from him. She noticed he nodded to the man at the cross, one of the ones whom she believed was watching her. She believed that man intended to capture her once the death was final and the crowd was gone. Later, she learned that the followers of Jesus would remain on the hill to collect the body despite the danger to themselves.

## Analysis

Mary's ill-fitting shoes bring a glimpse of the mundane to Mary's rendering of the story of Jesus' crucifixion. Though the discomfort of Mary's shoes seems insignificant in the light of what is happening, it is at the forefront of Mary's mind. This common distraction makes her story seem real. As she and others make their way up the hill to watch the crucifixion, the shoes partially take her mind off what is being said about her son's anticipated death.

Although it appears that the men who were the closest of followers of Jesus would have taken special care with his mother, it appears from Mary's point of view that they were instead suspicious of her. She describes the man, whom she remembered as visiting the house where she and her son lived in Nazareth, as eyeing her "coldly and suspiciously" (51). During the talk that evening, Mary felt she was ignored by the men who seemed to be in control of the followers since Jesus' arrest. Mary also describes how one of the men "was given control of Mary and myself" (52). She calls him her "minder" (52) as if he were responsible for keeping her under control, keeping her from making a scene.

Mary's opinion of the leaders and the followers of Jesus is still very low. She tells her reader how she considers herself to be back in "the world of fools, twitchers, malcontents, stammerers, all of them hysterical now and almost out of breath with excitement even before they spoke" (51) as soon as she was inside the house in Jerusalem. The things that they said to one another made no sense to her even though Mary, the woman with whom she was traveling, seemed to understand what was



happening. Mary chooses not to ask any questions because she believes any question she might ask would be answered with riddles she could not understand.

Although Mary is Jesus mother and it seems she should be the one closest to him, she seems to know very little of what he is doing. She does not understand why he calls himself the Son of God or why people are trying to kill him. She also refers to the way the people in the house in Jerusalem speak about him as talking “in a maze of riddles” (51). Notice Mary describes their speech not only as coming in riddles, but a “maze of riddles” (51). The description makes it appear as if Mary feels lost in confusing speech. Even if she understood the riddles, she would still be confounded by the maze.

Notice the overwhelming picture of the cruelty that Mary sees in the hearts of the people around her as they call for the death of her son. She says she “sensed a thirst for blood among the crowd” (53). She felt they had been worked up to the point where they would not be satisfied unless they saw something cruel and vicious. Notice the way in which Mary compares the way the need for cruelty flowed through the crowd like the heart pumping blood. “I noticed this hunger spread like contagion until I believed that it had reached every single person there just as blood pumped from the heart makes its way inexorably to every part of the body” (54).

Marcus turns out to be a surprise to both Mary and the reader when Marcus refuses to acknowledge Mary at the crucifixion. It appears that Marcus risked his life to tell Mary what was happening to her son and that Marcus is somehow in charge of leaking information from the Romans to Jesus’ followers. Mary had realized Marcus was part of a group of Romans who appeared to be in charge of what was happening even before she ran to him. Her impulsive act of running to Marcus almost blows his cover.

An important symbol in this section of the novel is the cross, the method of Jesus death. It is a symbol of cruelty. Notice how the man tells Mary that a death by crucifixion could be manipulated to last as long and be as painful as the executioner deemed necessary. The length of time was based on the direction the cross faced, how much blood the executioner allowed to be lost, and whether or not the legs were broken during the process of the crucifixion.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss Marcus’ part in the crucifixion. What danger does Mary represent to him when she runs to him in the crowd?

## Discussion Question 2

What makes Mary realize that her son’s death has been prearranged?



## Discussion Question 3

How does the author go about setting the tone of cruelty and violence in this section of the novel? What is the purpose of the mention of Mary's painful shoes?

## Vocabulary

elicit, malefactor, inexorably, motley, dispersed



## Pages 62-72

### Summary

The two men who question Mary about her view of the crucifixion attempt to manipulate her story. They do not want her to talk about confusion, the crosses falling over, the man with the birds, or Marcus' attempt to have her arrested. She remembers that she and the others had stayed until nearly the end of Jesus' life. She knew Jesus had tried to speak from the cross but she could not understand what it was he said. The man who was minding her told her that once Jesus was dead, they would have to leave and let others take care of claiming, washing and preparing Jesus' body. She was surprised the man seemed neither grieved nor sorry.

As she looked around again she noticed Marcus, the strangler, and the man who had been following her were all standing together pointing toward Mary and the others. Although she told herself at the time it was for her friend Mary that she was afraid when she approached her guardian and told him they had to leave, she recognizes that she was afraid for her own life. She believes she was feeling only her own fear and pain at that moment when she left her suffering son and decided to save herself.

Since that time, Mary admits to her reader that she dreamed she stayed with her son until the end, that the men had allowed her to stay with him. She is ashamed that did not happen and still tries to imagine that it did. She feels she must tell the truth about what really happened that day. As they ran away from the hill, it was apparent to her that no escape route had been prepared. Even though the men try to get Mary to tell a story that is purposeful and has meaning she knows it was random and uncertain. She remembers that they did not kill anyone as they fled the city but that they did terrorize one family from whom they took food, clothes and three donkeys.

Mary also remembers a dream that she and Mary shared. They both had a dream that Jesus had come back to life. He was rising toward them up from a well of water. They could see the scars of his wounds from the crucifixion but the rest of his body was a pure, smooth white. In their dream, the women held him and he seemed to be alive even though he did not try to speak to them. The man walking with them overheard the story of their dreams and seemed happy. He explained it was part of the prophecy. Because their guardian seemed relieved, the two women also felt as if they were freer.

As time passed, Mary decided to go back home to her sister and Lazarus even though Mary, Jesus' mother, knew that she would never be able to go back to her old home. Her guide was finally met by other followers who helped him and set up a safe house for Mary in Ephesus. Although his spirits were lifted, Mary remained disturbed that she had left her son to be buried by others. That she took comfort from a dream. When Mary was left alone by her friend, she tried to take charge of her situation by telling her guide that she wanted what had happened on the day of her son's death to stay on that day,



and that what she had seen in her dream to stay in her dream. She indicates she hopes she has made a clear distinction between the two.

## Analysis

Mary continues to insist on being allowed to cling to the stark reality of what she has seen and witnessed. She is severe not only with Jesus' followers in sticking with reality but also with herself. There are two dreams that she admits to the reader that she has had. In one of those dreams she stayed with her son until after he died and helped prepare his body for burial. This dream is comforting to Mary because her religion had taught her so strongly the rules for treating a deceased person. Additionally, she is ashamed of herself for abandoning her son and thinking of herself and her own life during his time of need.

The second dream that Mary insists that Jesus' followers not put too much stock in is one that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the other Mary shared. They dreamed that Jesus had come back to life. It was obvious in the dream that he had gone through the crucifixion because they could see the scars where he had been wounded during his death. The man who was leading them was happy when he heard about their dream because it supported the followers' belief that Jesus would return from the dead.

The tone of the novel as Mary and the others flee Jerusalem is one of dreamlike confusion, as Mary does not seem to be quite sure of what was happening. She realized that her guide did not have any solid plan for getting them to safety. They even had to steal from people and terrorize them in order to get supplies they needed for their trip.

Mary also feels betrayed by Marcus when she sees him pointing her out to the strangler during the day of Jesus' crucifixion. She believes the man who claimed to be not only her friend but also her relative "had enticed me to the city and given me an address was so that I could be held when it was over, or indeed the day before" (63). At this point, Mary has no clear sense of who her enemies and friends really are.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the idea of dreams as presented in this section of the novel. Why did Mary insist that dreams not be counted as facts?

## Discussion Question 2

Are you surprised by Marcus' actions? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 3

Discuss the tone of the days that follow Jesus resurrection. How does the author use language to set this tone?

## Vocabulary

acrid, keeled, gaunt, conjure, pomposity



## Pages 73-82

### Summary

Mary indicates she has developed an appetite for catastrophe and death after watching her son's crucifixion. She does not leave her house in Ephesus often, but she has developed the habit of walking to the temple in the evening. One evening she stays at the temple too long and has to take a direct route back to her house. During her walk, she notices thin slabs of stone sticking up from the ground. These slabs had the figures of men carved into them. One of the men seemed young and innocent, while the other was older and weeping. Mary thought it was a picture of a young man who was dead and did not think of the world while his father lived a life of sorrow. She saw there were other stones with carvings on them as well and believed they had been put there for a reason.

Mary admits that she wishes time could be pushed back so she could live again before her son's death. She wants to enjoy the time while she still had him, and her husband, at home. Mary knows as much as she wishes she could have peace, she will never be at peace.

Meanwhile, the two men who question Mary tell her they are writing down her son's story so it can live forever. They tell her the story will change the world. The men realize she does not understand and try to explain what happened when she conceived Jesus, that he was the Son of God. Mary knew that time was special because she was preparing for a child. She smiled at them, an expression that encouraged them, because she believed the "light and grace" (78) they described was the natural response of a mother to a new child.

When they went on to say that her son had come to redeem the world, Mary walked away from them. She was incredulous when they told her that his death would save the people of the world for eternal life. She learns the disciples who prepared Jesus body for burial and saw him alive again were telling the story. When Mary reminds them that she was not there when her son's body was taken from the cross they told her that she was there.

The men moved away from Mary, as if they were unsure what she might do next. She had rage on her face as she told them that her son's sacrifice was not worth the redemption of the world. Although she had been there, she had run away from the crucifixion before it was finished. She would testify only that his death was not worth the redemption of the world.

The men left Mary that night, but Mary senses they would continue to protect her. She thinks about how easy it would have been for her son's death to be avoided.



## Analysis

While dying for the redemption of the world may be a grand thing in the larger scheme of things, Mary is perhaps the one person alive who is not impressed by grandiosity of the scheme. It is because of her love for her son as a mother that Mary believes the people of world, whom she sees as cruel and vicious, were not worthy of the sacrifice her son made.

Mary is shocked and angered by the way that the men who question her have manipulated the story to make it appear as they want it to. They tell untruths about things that Mary witnessed. They lie to her in an attempt to convince her that she was present when Jesus' body was prepared for burial. They tell her that he rose from the dead.

Significant among the objects introduced in this section is the one stone that Mary sees on her way home from the temple one evening. She must imagine that the adult and child carved into the rock represent her and her son. She believes the child, who appears innocent and happy, is dead, while the parent mourns the loss of the child. The parent's life is filled with unending grief, just like Mary's life is filled with unending grief without her son. She wonders if the dead child is happy because he has no idea what is happening in the world. In comparison, Mary must wonder if her son has any idea what his followers are doing and how they are representing him.

One aspect of Mary's life that is not mentioned until this point in the story is the Christian belief that she conceived Jesus through Immaculate Conception. Mary seems to know nothing about this. She believes Jesus' conception and birth were special because any baby's birth is special. She does not seem to understand what her handlers are talking about when they explain to her that "his father" (98) is God. If this recounting of Mary's life is to be believed, the followers of Christ made up not only a good deal of the details about his life, but also of his conception and birth.

## Discussion Question 1

What does it mean that Mary continues to seem confused by the followers' references to God as Jesus' father? Why is this significant?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do the two men lie to Mary and tell her that she was present at the crucifixion?

## Discussion Question 3

What does Mary mean when she indicates that she will testify that her son's life was worth more than the redemption of the world?



## Vocabulary

assuage, ambiguous, placid, conception, caravanserai, redolent



# Characters

## Mary

Mary is the main character in *The Testament of Mary* by Irish writer Colm Toibin.

She is the mother of Jesus, a man who is killed by crucifixion because he claimed to be the Son of God.

Mary lives with the horror of her son's crucifixion and the constant questions of his followers who are trying to write about his life. She senses that the men are trying to write a version of the events that is not quite true because they pressure her to answer their questions in a particular way or act as if they are frustrated when her answers do not fit their specifications.

Although Mary does not intentionally thwart the men's questions, she refuses to answer with anything but the truth. She believes the truth to be only what she has personally seen or experienced.

At the end of the novel, the men who question Mary try to convince her that she stayed with her son until he died and that she helped to prepare his body for burial. It is then that Mary realizes the stories the men are writing are not true. She tells the men that if her son had to die in order to redeem the world from its sins, her son's sacrifice was not worthwhile.

## Mary's Son

Although Mary's son is never referred to by name, most readers who are familiar with the Christian story of the crucifixion recognize this character as Jesus Christ.

Seen through the eyes of his mother, Jesus is a man who gathered around him misfits and malcontents. When Mary first saw him after he began his ministry, she barely recognized him.

The elders of the Jewish Temple think that Jesus desecrated the Sabbath when he healed a man in Cana and the crowd created a ruckus after the miracle. The elders want Jesus arrested. After hearing Jesus call himself the Son of God, the Romans join with the elders in calling for Jesus' death. Jesus' crucifixion is set.

Through the course of the novel several of Jesus' miracles are described. These include his raising of Lazarus from the dead and changing of water into wine at a wedding ceremony.



## Marcus from Cana

Marcus is a man who claims to be the cousin of Mary, mother of Jesus, because their mothers gave birth to them at the same time in adjoining houses.

At first, Marcus seems to be trying to help Mary save her son because Marcus tells her that if she takes Jesus home with her and keeps him quiet, perhaps, she can save him from death.

Later, Marcus visits Mary again to tell her that her son will be killed. He gives her an address in Jerusalem where she will be safe. When she arrives at that address, Mary learns that Marcus has sent her to stay with Jesus' followers.

At the crucifixion, Mary learns that Marcus is actually one of the Roman officials in charge of the crucifixion. She realizes that he lured her to Jerusalem with the idea of having her killed when she sees him pointing her out to the strangler.

## The Man Who was with Us Until the End

This first man whom Mary, mother of Jesus, describes as coming to her house to question her knowledge of the crucifixion is the one who was assigned to guide the two Marys through the day of the crucifixion and to safety afterward.

Mary senses in this man more softness and gentleness than in the other man who comes to question her.

Despite his softness, Mary senses the man is also impatient with her. Even though she asks him to do so, this man will not read to her the story of her son that he is writing.

## Martha

Martha is a sister of Lazarus, the man who was raised from the dead.

It was Martha who confronted Jesus when he finally arrived in Cana days after Lazarus was dead. She insisted that he had the power to raise Lazarus from the dead. Martha also acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God.

Martha believed the death of Jesus symbolized the end of the world as it was known. She encouraged Mary, Jesus' mother, to attend the crucifixion because it was uncertain what might happen.

## The Other Mary

This other Mary is the friend of Mary (mother of Jesus). The other Mary went with Mary to the crucifixion



Mary is one of Lazarus' sisters. She believes that Jesus is the Son of God. When she arrived in Jerusalem, Mary, mother of Jesus, noticed that Mary talked in riddles like the others gathered there.

The other Mary shared a dream with Mary, the mother of Jesus, in which they saw Jesus rising from a well, back from the dead.

## Lazarus

Lazarus is the man whom Jesus raised from the dead.

After he returned from the dead Lazarus whimpered and then howled when he realized where he was.

Mary, mother of Jesus, believed Lazarus was dying because he was very weak and could barely eat. He kept to himself and seemed to have some knowledge he had gained from his experience with death that frightened him.

## Miriam

Miriam is a cousin of Mary. Although Miriam had not been present at the resurrection of Lazarus, she told stories of the resurrection as if she had been. This bothers Mary because she believes things to be the truth only if she has seen them herself.

Mary goes to Miriam's house before she heads to Jerusalem for the crucifixion. Mary stops at Miriam's house for advice. Mary can tell that Miriam is afraid of her and that she does not want to be around her.

## The Man Who Played With Dice

Mary, mother of Jesus, gets a sense while she is watching the crucifixion that this man, one of those who play games with dice near the cross, knows why her son is being killed.

She believes he not only knows how it came to be decided that Jesus needed to die but also helped to arrange his death.

## Farina

Farina is the woman in Jerusalem who befriends Mary, mother of Jesus. Mary sometimes wonders if the men who are her guardians pay Farina to keep an eye on her.

There are times when Mary leaves the house with Farina when the men are there just so she can get away from them. She hopes they will be gone when she returns.



## **The Strangler**

The strangler is the man of whom Mary is most afraid. This man is present both at the wedding in Cana and at the crucifixion.

Even after her son was killed and Mary had escaped to Ephesus, she still lived in fear that the strangler was looking for her in order to kill her.

## **Pilate**

Pilate is a ruling official in Jerusalem. He was the one who questioned Jesus to determine if he were at any fault and deserved crucifixion. Pilate found no faults with Jesus.

Mary noticed that when Pilate considered the crowd that was so intent on Jesus' death that he looked at them with fear and confusion.

## **The Second One Who Comes**

This man, whom Mary refers to as the second one who comes, is one of the men who questions her memories of the crucifixion and writes down what she says.

Mary describes this man as being "impatient, bored and in control of things" (5).

## **Barabbas**

Barabbas is a thief also set for crucifixion the same day as Jesus. The crowd had the choice to have Barabbas or Jesus released to them. The crowd chose for Barabbas to be freed.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Rabbits

The rabbits in the image that Mary remembers from the day of Jesus' crucifixion symbolize the innocent people of the world.

## The Bird

The caged bird from the day of Jesus' crucifixion represents cruelty.

## The Man

The man with the caged bird represents human nature's strange obsession with violence and cruelty.

## Statue of Artemis

This statue of Artemis represents the opposite of the Christian religion that Mary's son came to fulfill. Artemis is a pagan god. It is ironic that the mother of the Son of God finds it easier to tell her experiences to a pagan statue than her to son's followers.

## A Chair

To Mary, this chair is a representation of her husband. She refuses to use the chair or let anyone else use it. As she says, "It belongs to memory, it belongs to a man who will not return" (14).

## A Sharp Knife

This sharp knife represents the spunk in Mary's personality. Even though she risks alienating the men who take care of her, she uses this sharp knife when they disregard he wishes and attempt to desecrate the way she remembers her son.

## The Cross

The cross on which Jesus died is a symbol of cruelty and shame.



## **Slabs of Thin Stone**

The slabs of thin stone that Mary discovers on her way home represent death and the dead.

## **Stone Canisters**

The stone canisters are a symbol of doubt for Mary. She is present at the wedding when Jesus turns the water into wine. However, she admits that she does not know what was in the canisters before wine was poured from them.

## **The Dice**

The dice which the men roll near Jesus' cross symbolize the lack of gravity in the atmosphere at the crucifixion. While Mary was devastated by what was happening, others were having fun and enjoying themselves.

## **Mary's Uncomfortable Shoes**

As Mary and others are climbing the hill to witness Jesus' crucifixion, Mary is distracted by her ill-fitting shoes. The uncomfortable shoes are symbolic of Jesus's painful steps as he carried his cross up the hill where he would be crucified. The shoes are also a symbol of life's journey and its painful events along the way.



# Settings

## Jerusalem

Jerusalem is the town in which Jesus' trial and crucifixion took place.

## The Temple

The temple is the place where Mary first noticed and was comforted by the statue of the pagan god Artemis.

## The House in Nazareth

The house in Nazareth is the place where Mary lived with her husband and raised their son.

## Cana

Cana is the place to which Mary travels to attend a wedding with her son. It is here that she learns about Lazarus being raised from the dead.

## Ephesus

Ephesus is the place where Mary is taken after the crucifixion. She is living in Ephesus at the time that she narrates this novel.





# Themes and Motifs

## Existence After Death

Questions about what comes after death are raised by the novel *The Testament of Mary*. Not only does Mary wonder in pair of places what her dead loved ones are experiencing she also wonders what sort of experience Lazarus had before he was brought back to life.

Early on in the novel Mary indicates that she spent some of her Sabbath time thinking about what happened to a person after death. She indicates that on these days “there was always time to wonder about what was beyond us in the sky or what world lay buried in the hollows of the earth” (17).

The images that Mary got of her mother were otherworldly as she imagined her mother “struggling” (17) to reach out from “somewhere very dark” (17). Mary imagines a dark cavern with “things flitting and flying and there was the sound of the rumbling earth beneath her” (17). Here, Mary gives the idea that the dead actually reside inside the bowels of the earth. The picture she provides does not seem restful. Instead, it is a dark place of captivity the person wishes to escape.

Mary again thinks about death at the end of the novel. These thoughts come to her when she notices the carvings on the slabs of stone standing along the path back to her house from the temple. She interprets the pictures on one of these stones as being a child who has died and his grieving parent. When she considers this image she wonders if the dead person has any thoughts of the world at all. She reasons the child is happy because he does not know what is happening in the world.

One man who could have helped Mary with her questions about what happens after death is Lazarus. Lazarus was raised from the dead by Mary’s son. His reaction to returning to life indicates he was not happy to find himself back on earth. “At first they noticed just the tears, but then his crying came in howls as his two sisters led him gently towards the house” (27). This sort of pain indicates that Lazarus had been called from a place of rest and peace. He is distraught that he has been called away from it. Mary later sees Lazarus and believes that he looks like he is both frightened and unnerved by some knowledge of which he is now in possession.

Meanwhile, people around Lazarus, including Mary, wondered what Lazarus could tell them about the afterlife. Even though they have dozens of questions, they cannot bring themselves to ask him. They want to know if he was reunited with anyone who had died before, if he was at peace there, and if he wanted to return there. They probably do not ask Lazarus about his experience after death because they feel that the knowledge would be too much for them to handle.



## Mary's Role

The name of Mary, the mother of Jesus, carries with it the idea of a holy woman who supported her son to the end of his life. This novel, *The Testament of Mary*, turns that idea on its head as it supposes that Mary had a much less active role in Jesus' life and ministry than is commonly believed in Christian tradition. It is suggested that the followers of Christ, in fact, doctored the story of Jesus' life in order to make it what they believed would be most moving.

One of the long held beliefs of the Christian faith is that Mary became pregnant with Jesus by Immaculate Conception. According to the Bible, she was visited by an angel who told her about the future of the son to whom she would give birth. The Mary the reader encounters in this novel seems to have had no such experience. She believes her son's birth was special because all births were special, and she sees no other reason.

Mary additionally does not seem to have any grasp of her son's ambitions. It is not until after he is dead that she is told by the disciples that they believed he was the Son of God or that his death would bring redemption of their sins to the people of the earth. Mary has trouble accepting the strange things that these men say about her son.

Mary is also angered when she realizes the men have lived about her role in Jesus' story. Because she did not stay until her son was dead and she could help prepare him for burial, Mary lives with guilt and disappointment in herself. She is shocked and angered when the disciples try to convince her that she did stay at the cross until Jesus died and that she did help to prepare his body for burial. She insists that the truth be told and that she knows she fled her son's death to save herself.

This alternate version of Mary's life is important because it depicts Mary as a person and not a saint. She is a person who was distracted by her hurting feet on the day her son was killed. She is a person who loved her son enough that she thought the redemption of the world was not a good enough reason for him to have to die. Mary is also given a chance in this narrative to be a person who doubts, who does not have the steadfast faith she is credited as having. She does not believe that men should be brought from the dead. Also, she is not sure if it was actually water her son changed to wine at the wedding. Most of all, Mary is pictured as a mother who grieves the loss of her son and wonders what she could have done differently to save him.

## Mary's Relationship with the Disciples

The workings of Mary's relationship with Jesus' closest followers is also put to question in this novel. Although it is indicated in the Bible that Mary was put into the care of one of the disciples after her son's death, Mary's relationship with these men is never really mentioned. In this novel, it appears as if no closeness between Mary and the disciples existed, either while Jesus was alive or afterward when the followers wrote their stories about Jesus.



The first indication that Mary was not close to the men who were followers of her son is that she refers to the man who was assigned to go with her to the crucifixion as her “minder” (52). He was not her friend or companion or supporter but one who was supposed to keep her under control and acting properly. This indicates the followers did not know Mary well enough to know if they could trust her under the circumstances.

Mary’s interactions with the followers, particularly the two who came to her house to question her, also indicate they were never close. First, she indicates the two men who came to her house felt they had to prove their power over her. They did this in childish ways, by moving Mary’s furniture and belongings and refusing to replace them when she asked. Mary responded by thinking of the men as boys who were still immature. She did not let their childishness bother her in those instances.

It is when Mary comes to realize that the disciples are making up details of her son's story that she truly becomes angry with them. Instead of respecting her wishes to let her testimony be that of what she had personally witnessed, these men try to make her believe that she had been at the cross when Jesus died and had been there to help prepare the body for burial. For Mary, this is the ultimate lack of respect and she lashes out at them in anger.

## Human Nature’s Fascination with Cruelty

An aspect of the human nature that is studied in this novel is that of a strange fascination with cruelty. Mary sees this senseless cruelty when she notices the man with the bird on the day of her son’s death. She sees the same need to witness pain on the faces of the people who call for Jesus death. Finally, when Mary and her companions are fleeing to Ephesus Mary indicates that she believes she has somehow become infected by some desire for calamity from which she fears she may never be free.

The first image of cruelty that the reader encounters is that of the man who is feeding rabbits to a caged bird. The bird is frustrated because it has been caged and is picking at the rabbits its owner offers it, torturing them instead of eating them. Mary is disturbed by this man because of the picture of senseless cruelty he presents.

The crowds at Jesus’ crucifixion are a different story. They call for the death of one person in particular whom they seem set upon seeing tortured and put to death. “I sensed a thirst for blood among the crowd,” (53) Mary says as she looks at the people gathered there. “There was a dark

vacancy in the faces of some, and they wanted this vacancy filled with cruelty, with pain and with the sound of someone crying out” (53).

The idea that so many people could be filled with such a desire for pain and suffering is terrifying to Mary.

Later, after her son has been killed as the mob wished, Mary fears the same desire for cruelty has infected her. As she and her companions make their way to safety in



Ephesus, Mary imagines she will not be satisfied unless something terrible were to happen to one of the people traveling with her. She writes “I desperately needed, as though for my peace of mind, our guide or one of our helpers to fall into the water and howl for help and disappear and rise again and then be found later floating away dead” (73).

## Comfort of Dreams

Mary, a realist, acknowledges the comfort that dreams can bring, but she refuses to live in that lack of reality. Mary tells about two dreams, in particular, during this novel. In one of the dreams she stays with her son until his death and holds his body in her arms. In another of her dreams she witnesses him raised from the dead. Though both of these dreams bring Mary comfort, she knows they are not what really happened and that she cannot exist in that reality.

The dream in which Mary sees herself as having stayed with her son until his death is one that comforts her because she feels so guilty for abandoning him. She knows that she left vigil at the cross because she was worried about saving her own life. Although she finds comfort in her dream and is able to imagine herself having done what she knew to be right, Mary knows that was not what happened. She will not allow herself the false comfort of believing something made up.

Another instance in which Mary will not allow herself false comfort relates to the dream that she and the other Mary had about her son’s resurrection. They both had a similar dream in which Jesus came back to life after his crucifixion. They saw him rise from the water of a well. Because they were able to see the scars left by the crucifixion wounds, they knew that he had died. While this dream comforted the two Marys, Mary the mother of Jesus felt their guide was too impressed by it. Believing that he intended to use it as something it was not, Mary told the man that dreams had to remain as dreams. She was not willing to even consider the idea that her son had come back to life.



# Styles

## Point of View

The Testament of Mary is told from the first person point of view of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary's narrative is significant because it offers an argument to the reader that, perhaps, Mary knew very little of her son's ambition and his plans for himself. Mary does not present herself as a sacred figure. Mary is very realistic in this novel. She is a grieving mother who wishes that she could have done more to save her son.

## Language and Meaning

Due to Mary's grief and her lack of knowledge, some parts of this story can be difficult to follow because the language is so veiled. In the beginning, for instance, Mary admits that she cannot bring herself to call her son by name. Those familiar with the Biblical story of the crucifixion know that her son's name is Jesus. She chooses instead to refer to him generally as "my son" (6). Mary also does not clearly state what happened to her son at first. She only makes reference to "that day," (3) as if it were too painful for her to remember exactly what happened. Mary's story is full of words and phrases that describe cruelty and grief. The tone is grief filled as Mary looks back at the things she wishes she had done.

## Structure

The story begins in a very muddled manner as two men visit Mary and question her about the events of a certain day in her son's life. Mary cannot bring herself to name her son or what happened to him on that day. She slowly incorporates more information about what is happening in the world and the miracle that are being credited to her son. Details include the healing of the cripple in the pool at Cana and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Most of the facts of the story come from people other than Mary, as Mary seems to doubt that what others say about her son are true.

The story is told with no chapter breaks, though there are breaks in the narration. Mary tells her story from a point in time after the crucifixion when she is hiding in Ephesus. What she says about her son's life and his death comes in the form of memories. The action rises to hit one plateau when Mary sees her son nailed to the cross and then flees before he is dead to save her own life. It then rises to a second climax when Mary realizes the men have made up portions of the story that they are writing about her son. She tells them in anger that her son's death was not worth the redemption of the world. The action falls when the two men leave Mary after her outburst. The denouement comes as Mary imagines herself dying.



## Quotes

If anyone knows what happened that day and why, then it is this man who played with dice.”

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** On the day that her son died, there was a man she noticed playing games who seemed to pay special attention to her. She believes that man has special information about what happened that day and why it happened.

My son gathered misfits, although he himself, despite everything, was not a misfit, he could have done anything, he could have been quiet even, he had that capacity also, the one that is the rarest, he could have spent time alone with ease, he could look at a woman as though she were his equal, and he was grateful, good-mannered, intelligent.”

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** Mary indicates that she did not like or trust the men with whom her son spent time. They had very different personalities from Jesus. She believed that the men were a bad influence on him.

I did not go with her because I wanted to. I went because my visitors, the men who come to oversee my final years, had overstayed their welcome and asked too many questions and I thought that if I disappeared on them, even for an hour or two, they might learn greater civility, or, even better, they might go.”

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** Mary befriends her neighbor Farina, not necessarily because she wants a friend. Mary hopes that when she returns from spending time with Farina lady, the men will have left her house.

Yes there is,’ Marcus said. ‘If he were to return home, return alone, and not even be seen on the street, not even work or have any visitors, just stay in these rooms, disappear, then that might save him, but even then he will be watched; but nothing else will work and if it happens, if he returns, then it must be soon.’”

-- Marcus (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** Mary’s cousin Marcus tells her that if she were to be able to convince Jesus to come home with her and keep to himself from that point on, she might be able to save him from the punishment being planned for him.

As they both came towards me I realized that I was associated in their minds with what had occurred and that they wished to touch me, embrace me, thank me, as if I had something to do with the fact that their brother was alive.”

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** After Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, Mary senses that Mary and



Martha, Lazarus' sisters, feel Mary is in some way responsible for Lazarus being raised from the dead. Mary feels uncomfortable with the way they associate her with what happened to Lazarus.

There was something supremely alone about him, and if indeed he had been dead for four days and come alive again, he was in possession of a knowledge that seemed to me to have unnerved him; he had tasted something or seen or heard something which had filled him with the purest pain, which had in some grim and unspeakable way frightened him beyond belief."

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** When Mary sees the resurrected Lazarus, she paints a very disturbing picture of the man who came back from the dead. She indicated he seemed to be pained and grieved to have had to return to earth.

In that second he caught my eye again and I became even more frightened than when I heard the words about the Son of God: I understood that I had not missed my chance to take my son away from here, I understood that I never had such a chance in the first place and that all of us were doomed."

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** It is at the wedding in Cana that Mary hears her son call himself the Son of God. When she hears these words from Jesus, she is aware that there is no hope for him to be saved. She realizes that he had made a statement that he cannot take back.

He had allowed himself to be taken, and in this house during the hours that I spent with his followers they all seemed to feel that this was planned, part of a great deliverance that would take place in the world."

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** Mary learns that her son did not fight his arrest. She is confused by the ideas shared by the men who followed him that Jesus' arrest and what was to follow were part of a plan for the world.

I sensed a thirst for blood among the crowd. I could see it in people's faces, how their jaws were set and their eyes were bright with excitement."

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** The cruelty of the human personality is illustrated in the faces of the people who attend Jesus' crucifixion. Those people seem to actually be excited about the pain and suffering they are about to witness.

We had moved ahead and suddenly I turned and I saw that once again he was trying to remove the thorns that were cutting into his forehead and the back of his head and, failing to do anything to help himself, he lifted his head for a moment and his eyes caught mine. All of the worry, all of the shock, seemed to focus on a point in my chest."

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)



**Importance:** It was at one point when Mary made eye contact with Jesus as he struggled to carry his cross to the hill that she was almost unable to contain herself. She saw the man as the child she had raised. His death was personal to her. She felt personally the pain that he felt.

I looked at him as he spoke and I saw something that I see still in him now — no grief, no sorrow, no fuss, something cold, as though life is a business to be managed, that our time on earth requires planning and regulation and careful foresight.”

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** After Mary and the others were fleeing after Jesus' crucifixion, one of the disciples shocked Mary because she got the feeling that he had no feelings of grief. He seemed to feel that things had been planned out and were happening for a reason.

Perhaps I was right to save myself when I could. But it does not feel like that now and it never has.”

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** Mary and the others had left before Jesus was even dead because they believed that the soldiers might try to capture and kill them as well. Even though Mary has been told she was right in leaving in order to save herself, she does not feel right about having left her son. She had not felt right about leaving him on the day of his death.

Because we could not contain ourselves, our guide heard every word. Something changed in him then, he began to smile and said that he had always known that this would happen, that it was part of what had been foretold.

-- Narrator (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** After his death, Mary the mother of Jesus and the other Mary had a similar dream in which Jesus had come back from the dead. The men who were escorting them overheard their conversation and used the meaning of the dream to support the belief that Jesus would rise from the dead.

I was there,' I said. 'I fled before it was over but if you want witnesses then I am one and I can tell you now, when you say that he redeemed the world, I will say that it was not worth it. It was not worth it.'”

-- Mary (Not Applicable)

**Importance:** When the men continue to push Mary to tell them her side of the story of her son's death, she finally tells them that if Jesus' death was intended to redeem the world, that the world as she sees it, was not worth being redeemed.