

The Third Policeman Study Guide

The Third Policeman by Brian O'Nolan

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Plot Summary

The unnamed narrator of *The Third Policeman* is obsessed with the bizarre philosopher de Selby, and in order to publish a book about de Selby, the narrator agrees to murder a man for his money. However, the narrator's partner in turn murders the narrator, who is thrust into a bizarre journey through the afterlife. The narrator tries to piece together what is happening and finally finds his way home, where he discovers that he's been murdered and must start his hellish journey over again.

The narrator is a farmer's son whose parents die when he is young. He is sent off to school, and the farm is left in John Divney's charge. The narrator discovers the words of de Selby at school, and when he returns, now sporting a wooden leg due to an accident, he allows the dishonest Divney to run the farm while the narrator studies and writes a book about de Selby.

Divney convinces the narrator to partner with him to murder a local man named Mathers. The two brutally murder and rob him, but Divney hides Mathers' moneybox and won't tell the narrator where it is. The narrator refuses to leave Divney's side out of fear that Divney will run off with the loot. Finally, Divney tells the narrator that the moneybox is hidden under the floorboards in Mathers' house. The narrator goes to retrieve it, and he is on the point of opening the box when it mysteriously vanishes.

The narrator meets Mathers himself in the house, who gives the narrator the idea to go down the road to the police barracks to get the policemen to lead him to the missing box. On the way, the narrator runs into another one-legged murderer, who promises to help him out if the narrator is ever in trouble. The narrator finds the police barracks, where he learns that the policemen are obsessed with bicycles. Sergeant Pluck's theory is that by riding bicycles, people become part bicycle and their bicycles become part human.

Mathers' body is discovered, seemingly killed by the murderer the narrator recently met, but the narrator himself is arrested for the crime and scheduled to be hanged. While he's waiting his execution, the policemen show the narrator 'eternity,' an underground facility where anything can be made from nothing, but nothing can be removed from it. Mathers finally escapes on Sergeant Pluck's bicycle and rides back toward his home.

When the narrator passes Mathers' house again, he meets the third policeman, Policeman Fox, who seems to have Mathers' face. Fox tells the narrator that he's found the missing moneybox, which can be found at the narrator's home. However, when the narrator reaches his farmhouse, he finds that it's sixteen years later. Divney collapses in shock at seeing the narrator's ghost, shouting out that he killed the narrator sixteen years ago with a bomb in the supposed moneybox. The narrator flees back down the road, finding himself again at the police barracks, without his memory, and about to start the same adventure over.



Chapter I

Chapter I Summary

The unnamed narrator of *The Third Policeman* is obsessed with the bizarre philosopher de Selby, and in order to publish a book about de Selby, the narrator agrees to murder a man for his money. However, the narrator's partner in turn murders the narrator, who is thrust into a bizarre journey through the afterlife. The narrator tries to piece together what is happening and finally finds his way home, where he discovers that he's been murdered and must start his hellish journey over again.

The narrator's father is a farmer, and his mother runs a pub. Both die when the narrator is a young boy who doesn't understand what is happening. The narrator is sent off to school, where he reads a book called *Golden Hours* by the philosopher de Selby. The narrator becomes obsessed with de Selby and steals the book. After leaving school, the narrator breaks his left leg, which is amputated and replaced with a wooden leg.

Meanwhile, the narrator's farm is being run by John Divney. When the narrator returns, Divney says he will leave in a few days but then keeps extending his stay. After a year, Divney starts saying "we" and "our," referring to the farm. The narrator lets Divney live with him and work the farm (however poorly) to give himself time to study de Selby. Divney claims to be losing money on the pub and goes off in search of a better wine to serve. He comes back with a strong drink that gets customers very drunk. After that, the customers' money and watches start going missing when they get drunk.

Divney wants to marry a girl called Pegeen Meers, and the narrator has written a de Selby Index, which he hopes to publish, so both want money. Divney suggests murdering and robbing Phillip Mathers, a local retired cattleman. Over a period of months, Divney convinces the narrator to go along with the scheme. They wait for Mathers along the roadside, and Divney hits him over the head with an iron pump. At Divney's urging, the narrator attacks the downed man with a spade. While the narrator beats Mathers to death, Divney hides the stolen moneybox. Divney insists the money is in a safe place but refuses to tell the narrator where, pretending that it's unsafe to spend the loot yet. For years, the narrator remains by Divney's side night and day to make sure Divney does not sneak off with the loot. Finally, Divney tells the narrator that the moneybox is hidden under the floorboards in Mathers' house and says that the narrator should go to retrieve it. Divney goes with the narrator to Mathers' house, but stays outside as the narrator goes in to get the moneybox.

Chapter I Analysis

The narrator tells his story non-sequentially. In the beginning of the chapter, the narrator explains that he, at the urging of Divney, murdered Mathers, and then starts on the story of his childhood, leaving the reader in suspense as to why and how the narrator ends up



a murderer. Later, the narrator explains how for a time, he and Divney were inseparable, held up by everyone as the epitome of friendship, only then going back and explaining that this "friendship" was the narrator's method of preventing Divney from running off with all the loot. The missing information puts a whole new twist on the reader's point of view of events, something that will continue on through O'Brien's storytelling.

The narrator blames his misdeeds on Divney's urging. The narrator seems completely passive towards Divney, allowing the man to run roughshod over him, mooching off of his farm and pub, likely stealing from the narrator as well as robbing the pub's customers. The narrator is to blame for his own passivity. He has no strong force of character. Intellectually, his weak character is completely overtaken by de Selby's philosophy; practically, his weak character is completely overtaken by Divney's crookedness.

The narrator and protagonist remains unnamed throughout the book. At the end of the first chapter, the narrator remarks that if anyone discovers him looking for the money, he won't even know his own name, and later the narrator will be unable to remember his name. This namelessness shows that the narrator lacks a sense of self and identity, and this lack of self is what allows him to be dominated by the stronger personalities of de Selby and Divney.



Chapter II

Chapter II Summary

The narrator relates some of de Selby's ideas about houses, of which de Selby disapproves, since they lead to vices like playing chess and marriage. He proposes roofless houses and houses without walls as healthier options. As the narrator arrives at Mathers' house to look for the moneybox, Divney stays outside, but Mathers can still see him. The narrator easily finds the loose floorboard, and upon opening it sees the black box. As he opens the box something strange happens, as if everything has shifted. The box disappears, and the narrator turns to see Phillip Mathers sitting in the corner.

The narrator is shocked, believing it to be Mathers' twin, but a voice inside him notes that the man's neck is bandaged. The narrator realizes that the voice is his soul and names his soul Joe. The narrator begins to question Mathers, believing that otherwise he will be driven mad. However, Mathers answers every query with "no." Mathers finally explains that he's been led into every evil deed in his life by agreeing to a suggestion, either from himself or someone else, so now he answers "no" to everything. At first Joe thinks this is a great idea. However, by rephrasing questions negatively, anyone can get Mathers to agree to something by disagreeing with the negative.

The narrator asks about the black box, and suddenly Mathers asks the narrator's name. The narrator cannot remember his own name or anything about his background. Mathers asks the narrator's color and then explains that different winds have different colors and that a person has the color of the wind at his birth. The lighter a person's color is, the longer he will live.

At Mathers' birth, a policeman who could see wind-colors detected Mathers' color as light yellow, and every year, Mathers receives a translucent gown of light yellow. When one's gowns, which are never taken off, finally darken to black from their many layers, the person will die. The number of gowns this will take is difficult to calculate. Mathers says that there are three policemen in charge of birth colors and gowns, called Pluck, MacCruiskeen, and Fox. Fox has been missing for twenty-five years, and the other two can be found in the police barracks. The narrator gets the idea that the policemen can help him find the black box and decides to go there the next morning.

Chapter II Analysis

After the narrator opens the box he finds under Mathers' floorboards, he is immediately confronted by Mathers, the man he killed. The reader might suspect at this point that the narrator has been killed by his partner, but O'Brien will not reveal this until much later. The whole world changes once the narrator crosses this barrier. He loses his identity

completely, becoming unable to remember his name. He perceives his soul as something separate from him, with its own identity.

Mathers talks about sin and has a "just say no" policy to suggestions from others, for fear they will lead to sins. This policy seems to be a simple and steadfast way to escape misdeeds, but it still allows Mathers to be manipulated into doing wrong. The implication is that there is no shortcut to avoid wrongdoing. A person must evaluate suggestions and ideas, deciding right from wrong. This is a commentary on the narrator's life. He has let himself be led into evil through inaction and inability to take control of his own life.

The narrator no longer remembers the significance of the black box or why he wants it, but retrieving the black box becomes his quest. The search for the black box is what drives the narrator forward in the story. In this way, the weakness of the narrator's character is reinforced. The narrator doesn't know his own name, what he wants, or why he is searching for his goal.



Chapter III

Chapter III Summary

The next morning the narrator sets off to find the policemen in high hopes of finding the black box. He mentions de Selby's theory that a road has a character and a specific direction that you should go on that road, and he feels that he's walking the right way along his road. As he's walking, the narrator remembers his background, though he still cannot remember his name. The seasons seem to have changed since he entered Mathers' house, and he doesn't recognize the territory.

The narrator, though, seems unconcerned with the strangeness of his situation. As he walks, he begins to make up names for himself. His soul mocks him and the important-sounding names he's attributing to himself. As he walks, the narrator becomes sleepy, until he finally lays down in the ditch at the edge of the road and goes to sleep. When he wakes, an untrustworthy-looking man is sitting nearby. The man is evasive, but finally reveals that he is a robber and murderer who hates life and threatens to murder the narrator. When the narrator reveals that he has a wooden leg, the murderer introduces himself as Martin Finnuccane. He is the head of a society of one-legged men and offers to help the narrator whenever he needs assistance. Finnuccane points the way to the police barracks.

Chapter III Analysis

During the narrator's journey in the afterlife, he is first confronted with his victim and then with himself. Martin Finnuccane is a reflection of the narrator himself. He has a wooden leg and is, like the narrator, a murderer. He appears after the narrator falls asleep and then awakens, as if he is an element of the narrator's subconscious mind. With all their similarities, the narrator is still appalled at Finnuccane. The narrator is, in fact, appalled and horrified at himself, although he does not connect Finnuccane with his own actions. Could the narrator's unknown name actually be Martin Finnuccane?



Chapter IV

Chapter IV Summary

The philosopher de Selby believes that movement is a hallucination and that life is a series of still moments, much like a film. At one point, he claims to have made a journey using photos, clocks, barometers, and a gaslight regulator. Meanwhile, the narrator's journey is coming to its next stop at the oddly one-dimensional looking police barracks. As the narrator approaches the building, it seems to have some strange depth, but it maintains the appearance of an optical illusion of some sort, as do the policemen inside.

The first policeman the narrator meets, Sergeant Pluck, assumes he is inquiring about a missing bicycle. The sergeant is dumbfounded to find that the narrator has no bicycle and further perplexed that the narrator has no name. Pluck assumes that the narrator is the son of another man he once knew who had no name and the narrator falls in with the suggestion, saying that the rest of the family has gone to America.

Policeman MacCruiskeen enters and the two policemen confer over some figures. MacCruiskeen goes into the back to eat while the narrator asks about the figures. Pluck refuses to explain, instead complaining of all the bicycle-related crime. The narrator tells Pluck his cover story, that he is missing a gold watch, and Pluck is dumbfounded that anyone would steal a watch instead of a bicycle. Although Pluck doesn't fully believe the narrator's story, he warns the narrator that a watch cannot belong to someone with no name. Legally, the nameless narrator does not exist, and he may never recover his watch. Then Michael Gilhaney, a local man, enters to report his missing bicycle.

Chapter IV Analysis

The police barracks seems flat like a photograph, much as de Selby believes that life is a series of still photographs from which people jump one to the next. The narrator's world is, in many ways, a world of his own mind instead of an external reality and it is heavily influenced by de Selby. Instead of being a building, the police barracks seem to be a de Selby-esque series of still photographs. Similarly, Sergeant Pluck's obsession with bicycles will turn out to be based on a de Selby-esque theory about the nature of reality. Neither people nor bicycles (any more than police barracks) are what they seem.



Chapter V

Chapter V Summary

De Selby claims to be able to use a series of mirrors to see back in time by virtue of the time it takes for light to be reflected in a mirror and then back at the viewer. The narrator is reminded of this by his first conversation with MacCruiskeen. MacCruiskeen is awed by the narrator's claim that he did not come on a bicycle, and to match the narrator's startling information, MacCruiskeen shows him a spear he made. Its point is so thin as to be invisible, stretching six inches in front of the visible point.

Then, MacCruiskeen shows the narrator an intricately carved miniature box that he made, about a foot tall. Once MacCruiskeen finished the box, he could not think of something appropriate to put in it, so he made a smaller version of the same box to put inside. MacCruiskeen opens the box and pulls out the tinier version and repeats the action again and again, pulling out over twenty-eight nesting boxes, identical except in size. The smallest ones cannot even be seen with a magnifying glass. MacCruiskeen also has a miniature piano-like instrument that makes music too high for the human ear to hear, and only MacCruiskeen can hear it.

Chapter V Analysis

MacCruiskeen's work takes ideas and continues them ad infinitum, until it reaches an absurd result. De Selby does something similar with mirrors. Since light takes time to travel to a mirror and back, a human's reflection is actually younger than the actual person. By extending this idea, de Selby comes to a faulty conclusion that a series of long enough mirrors will allow you to see back in time. However, it is impossible that you will see further in time than the point where the light originated; in other words, you must stand in front of the mirrors long enough for the light to strike you, travel to the succession of mirrors, and travel back. You will see yourself at the starting point and no farther back.

De Selby extends his idea to absurdity, ignoring factors that prevent the idea being extended. MacCruiskeen also extends his craftsmanship to an absurd level. What prevents a spear point or a richly crafted box from being smaller and smaller until it is invisible? MacCruiskeen ignores the idea that at a smaller level, physics is different, and so he creates maddeningly small things.



Chapter VI

Chapter VI Summary

The narrator returns to Sergeant Pluck and Gilhaney, and the three set out to look for Gilhaney's bicycle. Pluck informs the narrator that the third policeman, Policeman Fox, only comes to the barracks in the middle of the night and is never seen. He seems to have gone mad after talking with MacCruiskeen for an hour one day. The three walk along the road, and Pluck inexplicably knows in which bush and tree to locate parts of Gilhaney's bicycle, while Pluck and Gilhaney dispute different bicycle features. Finally, Pluck locates the bicycle in the underbrush, and Gilhaney rides off.

The narrator is amazed at the ease with which Pluck located the missing cycle, and Pluck explains that he stole it himself to slow Gilhaney's slow change into a bicycle. Pluck explains "Atomic Theory," which states that everything is made of atoms, small pieces of its substance. According to Pluck, bicycles are made of small atoms of bicycle, and people are made of small atoms of people.

By riding a bicycle, bicycle atoms are transferred into the rider, and human atoms are transferred into the bicycle. A bicycle rider eventually becomes mostly bicycle and a bicycle eventually becomes mostly human. Bicycles are found inside in bad weather when no one has put them there, leaning against the kitchen counter so as to be near the food. People become stiff and rigid and stand propped up against walls. Pluck relates how the lecherous Gilhaney tricked a female teacher into riding his bicycle while he rode hers.

Pluck explains that any mode of transportation is dangerous. By walking, a person gets atoms of the road inside of them, and by riding a horse, a person becomes part horse. Pluck says that his great-grandfather was a horse for a year before he died. Pluck blames everything on the County Council.

Chapter VI Analysis

The Atomic Theory twists something that is true into something that isn't true. Though things are made of atoms, there is no such thing as a "bicycle atom," and a person cannot become a bicycle by riding it. However, in the realm where the narrator finds himself, thinking something to be true makes it true. Even the wildest speculation becomes reality.

The transference of bicycle to person and vice versa can be read metaphorically, as the way our surroundings affect our actions. The narrator has become a murderer, and everything in the topsy-turvy world where he finds himself relates to his act of murder. The narrator lived in close association with Divney, a ruthless criminal, and during that association, Divney's criminality rubbed off on the narrator. He became more like the man he associated with, and this led to his downfall.



Chapter VII

Chapter VII Summary

One time, de Selby, instead of helping a boy sort out a simple girl problem, confuses him with insolvable problems, prompting the boy to first consider suicide and then turn to crime. De Selby believes that the world is sausage-shaped, and that the long dimension is impossible to travel on, except perhaps at death. Traveling along this dimension, though, would resolve all kinds of troubles.

The narrator and Sergeant Pluck arrive back at the barracks, where Inspector O'Corky announces Mathers has been murdered. It sounds like the work of Finnucane. Pluck, to appear diligent, informs the inspector that he's captured the murderer, the narrator. Pluck is reluctant to put the narrator in a cell, since he keeps his bicycle there. He says the narrator will soon be hanged. The narrator argues that Pluck can't hang a man with no name, but since the narrator is no one, Pluck feels he can hang him with impunity.

MacCruiskeen comes in, and the two policemen confer over more figures. Pluck informs MacCruiskeen that the narrator is to be hanged, and MacCruiskeen tells about the last hanging. They hanged the man's bicycle, since the bicycle was mostly murderer, while the murderer was mostly bicycle. Then, MacCruiskeen plays his instrument until dark, when he starts to put together a complex mangle. He runs light through the machine to lengthen the waves of energy, or "omnium," the stuff of everything. The light screams when it is run through the machine, and MacCruiskeen wants to understand what the screams say, so he can control omnium and thereby do anything he wants. The screams are unintelligible.

MacCruiskeen is working on another miniscule invisible chest when Michael Gilhaney comes in and stops too quickly. Since he is such a high percentage bicycle, he falls to the ground, taking MacCruiskeen with him and losing the invisible chest on the floor. MacCruiskeen orders Gilhaney and the narrator to look for the chest, and the narrator despairs at this impossible task. Gilhaney rises up with his hand clenched, telling MacCruiskeen that he's found it. MacCruiskeen knows that Gilhaney is lying, humoring him, but by complete coincidence Gilhaney actually has picked up the chest by accident. MacCruiskeen shows the narrator to his bed.

Chapter VII Analysis

The world the narrator finds himself in has mysterious physics which can be manipulated to seemingly do magic. MacCruiskeen is a kind of magician, and his mangle, which produces unintelligible screams from waves of light, is a magical instrument. While MacCruiskeen is a craftsman and experimenter who is more akin to a warlock, Sergeant Pluck is a policeman who is completely concerned with his own



welfare. He steals bicycles and is willing to arrest and hang the narrator for a crime neither knows anything about in order to appear on the ball to his superior.

The author is manipulating science and ethics in these two characters, turning each on its head in the mirror-world where the narrator is trapped. The irrational is manipulated and made to seem rational. This process brings the reader back to the instigating moment of the book, the narrator's rationalization of murdering Masters. Tellingly, the narrator is falsely accused of the crime he actually committed, murdering the old man.



Chapter VIII

Chapter VIII Summary

The narrator dreams that his soul takes offense at him and leaves him, and that he dies, but in the morning, he realizes that it's all a dream. Sergeant Pluck tells the narrator that he once dreamed that too much starch in his clothes gave him a slow leak, like a bicycle tire. The two policemen are still discussing their mysterious figures, and since the narrator is scheduled to be hanged in the morning, they consent to show him what the figures are for.

Pluck shows the narrator a map of the area in the plaster of MacCruiskeen's ceiling. Neither policeman made the map; it's always been there. The map shows a road to the left just past the police station that leads to eternity. Pluck leads the narrator to the hidden road and into a strange building, where he is weighed and brought down a frightening elevator. The place is called eternity because while you are there, you do not change. Your beard doesn't grow and your cigarettes don't burn down.

MacCruiskeen is there also. The policemen take readings off of mysterious instruments and can produce anything the narrator requests from behind doors in the place. The narrator asks for all kinds of riches, plus a weapon to destroy anyone who tries to kill him, and the policemen provide all of this. However, the narrator can't take them back up the elevator. Everyone must weigh exactly the same on the way up as on the way down. When they finally get back to the barrack, the narrator falls into a deep sleep.

Chapter VIII Analysis

Going down into eternity is much like going into de Selby's long dimension on the "sausage." It can only be accessed by a hidden route, and there are no troubles there, since no one ages there or changes in any way. Anything can be easily acquired from behind the mysterious door. When the narrator is headed there, he thinks he's going to heaven, and the bizarre eternity is a kind of heaven. All desires are fulfilled there, yet nothing can be taken back to the world.

The narrator is getting close to being hanged, and he wants to avoid his fate. At first he thinks the answer is the weapon that he asks for in eternity, but he cannot take it back with him. As the narrator's tension mounts, the policemen remain unconcerned, arguing over candies.



Chapter IX

Chapter IX Summary

The next morning, the narrator wakes to hammering and the sound of rain. De Selby's idea of heaven is bound up with water, and he underwent many lawsuits for excessive use of water, which mysteriously disappeared. De Selby's experiments also required much loud hammering. The narrator adds a lengthy commentary of de Selby's "Codex," an indecipherable handwritten document of which there are four different supposed originals.

The sounds the narrator hears come from a man out in the rain building the scaffold for the narrator's hanging. The narrator (or rather, his soul, Joe) notices that the builder drops a hammer on his foot but does not react. The builder turns out to have a wooden leg, and the narrator sends him off with a plea for help to Martin Finnucane, the captain of wooden-legged men who promised to help him.

Chapter IX Analysis

De Selby's Codex is an epitome of meaninglessness. The handwriting is indecipherable, so that no two interpreters find the same meaning in the same passage. Even if it were legible, there are four distinctly different but supposedly original copies. Where can the meaning be found? One writer even supposes that the whole thing is in code, so that indecipherability is piled upon indecipherability. The world that the narrator finds himself in seems as hard to understand as the Codex, and in fact, the questions of identity, morality, and the meaning of life that the narrator faces both before and after death are just as obscure.



Chapter X

Chapter X Summary

The next morning, the scaffold is finished. The narrator notices that someone else has slept in the second bed in his room, and Pluck says it must have been Fox. Pluck and MacCruiskeen sleep in eternity, so they don't age, but Fox wants to die. Fox is insane because one day he looked at a card in a box in MacCruiskeen's room and the color drove him mad. Another man, Andy Gara, was driven mad by feeling the texture of the same card.

On the breakfast table, Pluck finds a note from Fox saying that seven one-legged men are on their way to rescue the narrator. Pluck takes the narrator out to the scaffold to kill him right away, and while he's making preparations, he tells the story of a man who went up in a balloon and disappeared. Later, his neighbors sent up another balloon, and the man came down in it but refused to explain where he'd been. They formed a vigilante group to force him to tell, but when they got to his house, the man had disappeared again. They believed he'd gone up in the balloon.

The narrator says goodbye to his soul, but gets a reprieve when MacCruiskeen rides up to tell Pluck about a dangerous reading at eternity. The two ride off and MacCruiskeen comes back alone, saying that Pluck and his men are waiting in ambush for the one-legged men. There are actually fourteen men coming and they disguised their numbers by taking off their wooden legs and binding themselves in pairs. MacCruiskeen plans to defeat them by painting his bicycle the special patent color that drove Fox mad and riding out to the ambush, where Pluck and his men are blindfolded for their protection. He also blindfolds the narrator, so he isn't driven mad by MacCruiskeen's painted bicycle.

Chapter X Analysis

The story is approaching its climax, as the narrator comes closer and closer to being hanged. MacCruiskeen's mysterious powers will work against the narrator, since he will use the maddening color he's invented to stop the approaching rescuers. Typically, the reader is intended to root for an unjustly accused man about to be hanged, when his rescuers are approaching, but the issues of morality are obscured. The narrator is a murderer, as is his rescuer. The murder victim was killed both by the narrator and the rescuer. Although Pluck's actions are immoral, so are the narrator's. No one is innocent.



Chapter XI

Chapter XI Summary

The narrator awakes, still blindfolded. When he removes his blindfold, he finds that MacCruiskeen has left the holding cell unlocked with the keys in the lock, and Sergeant Pluck's bicycle has moved partway out in an attempt to escape. The narrator falls in love with the bicycle, which he perceives as female and to which he instantly forms a deep attachment. Riding the bicycle is a sensual act, as the narrator makes his escape on it, turning right instead of left outside the barracks to avoid the police. Soon, the narrator approaches Mathers' house and stops to look at it. The house seems empty, and the narrator's memory begins to become cloudy and vague.

As the narrator is about to leave, he sees a light from one of Mathers' windows. He goes in to investigate and finds nothing, but he can still see the light from outside. When he goes in one room and looks out the window, the light seems on the left, but in the next room, the light is on his right. Finally, the narrator throws a rock through the lighted window and sees a figure move inside.

Policeman Fox accosts the frightened narrator and leads him inside the lighted room, a narrow police station inside the walls of Mathers' house. Frighteningly, Fox has Mathers' face. The narrator lies that his bicycle lamp has been stolen and fills out a report, finally finding the courage to ask about the moneybox. Fox says that he found the box, which contains four ounces of omnium. Fox used the omnium to create 'eternity' as an elaborate joke on the other policemen, and now the moneybox is waiting for the narrator at his house. Fox confesses to having used the omnium to wallpaper his police station, as well, and he promises to find the narrator's missing bicycle lamp. The narrator is relieved as he makes his way back to his bicycle.

Chapter XI Analysis

The narrator finally makes his escape from the police barracks by following the road to the right instead of to the left. When the narrator first sets out on the road, he comments on de Selby's idea that roads have particular directions which ought to be traveled, and the narrator seems to be taking the natural direction of the road toward the police station. The right-hand turn out of the barracks is an unnatural turn, but it is the only way that the narrator escapes out of the dream world of his afterlife.

Policeman Fox is the last figure of the dream world that the narrator must confront. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator confronts his victim, Mathers, as the first figure he sees in the afterlife. Now, Policeman Fox appears as another incarnation of Mathers, reflecting the narrator's guilt over the murder. Fox (as Mathers) is also the gateway to the narrator's goal: the moneybox. The moneybox, containing omnium, becomes a symbol of everything desirable, a kind of heaven of material desire.



Chapter XII

Chapter XII Summary

The narrator finds his beloved bicycle and rides to his house, hardly believing that he is actually finding his way home. When he arrives, he sees Divney's girlfriend Pegeen Meers through the window, looking pregnant and much older. Ignoring this oddity for the moment, the narrator enters the house. Divney sits drinking by the fire, next to a young boy. He also looks much older. Divney starts at the sight of the narrator, beginning to convulse and rave that the narrator cannot be there and that Divney killed him with a bomb in the black box hidden in Mathers' house. No one else seems to see the narrator.

The narrator runs off, going past Mathers' house again, and finds himself on the road, having forgotten everything that happened. He approaches the police barracks just as he approached it before, with the same impressions and descriptions. He has arrived back at the beginning of his story. The only difference is that, before going in to the barracks, the narrator waits for Divney to join him from down the road.

Chapter XII Analysis

The narrator learns how ill-advised he was to ever trust Divney. Not only has Divney led the narrator to murder, but he has in turn murdered his partner. The narrator's story is circular, and the implication is that the narrator can never escape his afterlife. He will move through the same fears and dashed hopes again and again. There is no hope of redemption. The narrator's choices have been made in life, and in death, there are no new choices.



Characters

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator of the story is a boy who grows up on his father's farm. His mother runs a pub out of the house. When the narrator's parents die, he is sent away to school, where he becomes a follower of the philosopher de Selby, who is widely heckled for his bizarre ideas, such as believing that the Earth is sausage-shaped. In fact, the narrator steals one of de Selby's books, and on his return to the farm, instead of working the land, he allows the crooked John Divney to run the farm and the pub so that the narrator can spend his time writing an extensive review of de Selby's works and critiques.

The narrator cannot publish his book on de Selby because he has no money and is unknown, so he allows Divney to talk him into the scheme of murdering Phillip Mathers for his moneybox. After the murder, Divney hides Mathers' money, and the narrator spends all his time with Divney in sight to make sure that Divney does not run off with the money. Finally, Divney agrees to retrieve the moneybox and sends the narrator to its hiding place. The narrator is on the point of achieving his goal, retrieving the ill-gotten gains, when he dies and passes over into another dimension (very similar to de Selby's idea of learning to travel lengthwise along the sausage-shaped Earth).

The narrator is a weak character who allows himself to lose his identity to others, such as Divney and de Selby, and be led into murder. He is passive and makes few decisions and moral judgments on his own. The narrator must travel through his own hell, first facing his murder victim, then facing himself in the guise of another murderer, and finally facing his murderer and partner in crime. This hell repeats itself and is filled with the bizarre and irrational. The narrator's afterlife reflects his own hope of collecting an enormous prize in the moneybox and his fear of being hanged for his crime.

John Divney

John Divney is a crook. He has charge of the narrator's farm and pub while the narrator is at school, and when the narrator returns, Divney makes any excuse to stay on the farm and usurp everything the narrator has. Divney siphons money off the pub and shirks his duties around the farm. He robs the pub's patrons while they are drunk. The narrator lets Divney get away with his crookedness for the opportunity to be left alone and work on his review of the philosopher de Selby.

Divney continues to get more and more greedy, and finally, he comes up with the scheme of murdering Phillip Mathers for his money. Over time, he talks the narrator into participating in the murder, and then Divney hides the moneybox, intending to steal the ill-gotten gains for himself. When it becomes clear that the narrator will not give Divney the chance to get away with the cash, Divney decides to murder the narrator. He says



he will lead the narrator to the money, but instead leads him to a deadly trap, beginning the narrator's journey through a bizarre hell.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator finally makes his way home, where he finds Divney, grown sixteen years older and living with his pregnant wife and his son. Divney is the only one who sees the narrator, and the sight of his long-dead companion gives him a horrible attack. Divney dies and joins the narrator on his journey through the afterlife.

de Selby

De Selby is a philosopher. The narrator first reads his works while he is at school and falls in love with de Selby. All of the narrator's sins stem from his obsession with de Selby. The narrator first steals de Selby's book. Then, he allows Divney to take advantage of him and his farm to write his own book about de Selby. Finally, to get his book published, the narrator resorts to murder.

De Selby's work is full of bizarre ideas. De Selby believes that the earth is sausage-shaped instead of round and that accessing the lengthwise dimension of the world will free people from difficulties. He believes that much of existence is illusion. He also believes that people should not live in houses, and instead, he designed structures either without walls or without roofs.

De Selby was an experimenter who mysteriously used large quantities of water, which he felt was a positive force. He hated darkness, believing it to be darkened globes of air sullied by miniaturized volcanic explosions. His experiments also required great hammering, and de Selby contended that the noise of a hammer was the sound of sacs of air being burst.

Phillip Mathers

John Divney and the narrator murder Phillip Mathers for his moneybox. When the narrator is in turn murdered by Divney, Mathers is the first person he sees in his new existence. Mathers answers "no" to every question, believing that answering "yes" is taking the risk of being led into an immoral act.

Pegeen Meers

Divney has a girlfriend named Pegeen Meers, who he later marries after murdering the narrator.

Joe

After the narrator dies, his soul begins talking to him. The narrator names his soul Joe.



Martin Finnuccane

Martin Finnuccane is a robber and murderer that the narrator meets on the roadside. Finnuccane has no respect for life and plans to kill the narrator, even if he has no money. The two have a kinship because each has a wooden leg, and in many ways, Finnuccane is the narrator's doppelganger, a reflection of himself.

Sergeant Pluck

Sergeant Pluck is one of the three policemen that the narrator hopes will help him find the moneybox he seeks. Pluck is the first policeman the narrator meets, and he assumes the narrator has a missing bicycle. Pluck himself, it turns out, steals bicycles and hides them, hoping to minimize the amount of time people spend on their bicycles. According to Pluck's "Atomic Theory," over time, atoms from the bicycle and atoms from the rider are exchanged, until the person begins to turn into a bicycle and the bicycle begins to turn into a person. Pluck arrests the narrator for murder, as a convenient scapegoat.

Policeman MacCruiskeen

MacCruiskeen is a policeman, but he is also a craftsman who creates maddeningly absurd items. He has made a spear whose point extends six inches beyond its visible end, a musical instrument that plays frequencies beyond human hearing, and a series of identical nesting boxes that get smaller and smaller, until they are not visible even with a magnifying lens. Policeman Fox supposedly went insane after a lengthy visit with MacCruiskeen and his mind boggling creations.

Michael Gilhaney

Michael Gilhaney comes to the police station complaining of his missing bicycle, which Sergeant Pluck stole himself. Gilhaney is over fifty percent bicycle by riding it too long and exchanging atoms with the cycle. Pluck relates the story of how Gilhaney took advantage of a schoolteacher by tricking her into riding his bicycle while he rode hers.

Policeman Fox

Policeman Fox is the third policeman, and he does not appear until the end of the novel. Fox is supposed to have been driven insane by looking at the patent color that MacCruiskeen invented, and which is on a card inside a box in MacCruiskeen's room. Through a note, Fox warns the other policemen that a group of one-legged men is on its way to rescue the narrator from being hanged.



When the narrator finally meets Policeman Fox, the policeman is in a police station hidden inside the walls of Mathers' house. Fox has Mathers' face, reflecting the narrator's guilt and fear over the murder he committed. Fox tells the narrator that he found the moneybox the narrator has been searching for, that it is filled with omnium, and that it is waiting for the narrator at his house. Fox also admits to creating 'eternity' as a joke on the other two policemen.

Inspector O'Corky

O'Corky is Sergeant Pluck's superior. Sergeant Pluck arrests the narrator for murder to look good in front of O'Corky.

Andy Gara

Andy Gara was driven mad by feeling the texture of the card in MacCruiskeen's room. The same card's color drove Policeman Fox mad.



Objects/Places

The Farm

The narrator grows up on a farm. When he returns from school, he lets the crooked Divney run the farm, which Divney does poorly.

The Public House

The narrator's mother runs a public house in the family's home on the farm. When Divney takes over the pub, he complains that he cannot make it pay. In actuality, Divney is probably stealing the proceeds from the pub, and he also robs its patrons when they get drunk.

Golden Hours by de Selby

Golden Hours is a book by the philosopher de Selby. This is the first of de Selby's books that the narrator reads, and the narrator steals a copy of it from his school.

De Selby Index

The narrator writes a definitive review of de Selby and all his critics called the De Selby Index. For the chance to publish this book, the narrator gets involved in murder and robbery.

The Moneybox

The narrator and Divney murder Mathers for his moneybox, and then Divney hides the box. Finally, Divney tells the narrator that the moneybox is hidden in Mathers' house, but when the narrator goes to retrieve it, he is transported to a weird parallel world. Actually, the moneybox hidden under Mathers' floorboards is a bomb, planted by Divney to murder the narrator. It sends the narrator into a bizarre afterlife. Throughout the afterlife, the narrator looks for the moneybox, and Policeman Fox tells the narrator that the box contains omnium, a source of omnipotent power.

The Police Barracks

The narrator travels to the police barracks to find the policemen who he hopes will help him locate the moneybox he's searching for. The police barracks building is oddly one-dimensional looking, like a roadside sign instead of an actual building.



Atomic Theory

Sergeant Pluck explains the idea of "Atomic Theory" as meaning that everything is made up of small particles of itself, so that Pluck is made up of small Pluck particles, and sheep are made up of small sheep particles. If two things are constantly pounded together (like a person riding rough roads on his bicycle is pounded into his bike), their atoms are interchanged and each becomes partially made of the other.

Bicycles

In the narrator's afterlife, bicycles become partly human by being ridden by human beings, while the riders become partly bicycles. Humanized bicycles move on their own when they're not being looked at.

MacCruiskeen's Boxes

MacCruiskeen has crafted an intricately carved miniature box, and inside it there is another, smaller, duplicate miniature box. There are over twenty-nine boxes in all, and the smallest ones are so tiny that no one can see them, even with a magnifying glass.

Omnium

Omnium is the energy that makes up all matter. MacCruiskeen tries to find and understand omnium by interpreting the unintelligible screams of light waves that are being stretched out by a modified mangle. Policeman Fox claims to have made 'eternity' with omnium that was contained in the missing moneybox that the narrator is looking for.

The Map on MacCruiskeen's Ceiling

On MacCruiskeen's ceiling, the natural cracks make a map of the local area, and the policemen use this map to find the location of eternity on a hidden road not far away from the police barracks.

Eternity

Down a hidden left-hand turn a short distance from the police station there is an underground structure known as eternity, because while you are there time does not pass and you do not change. The policemen's beards do not grow while they are in 'eternity,' and their cigarettes do not get shorter as they smoke them. Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen take readings off of different meters while they are down in this structure, and when the readings look dangerous they must rush back to 'eternity' to make sure there is no explosion, which involves making some tricky calculations on



the spur of the moment. Inside 'eternity,' anything can be manufactured out of nothing, but you cannot bring anything out of the structure. Policeman Fox convinces to have created 'eternity' out of the omnium in the missing moneybox, as a trick on the other policemen.

The Card in a Box in MacCruiskeen's Room

MacCruiskeen has a box in his room that contains a card painted a unique, patented color. The sight of this color, which is unlike any other color, will drive a person mad, and this color drove Policeman Fox mad. The texture of the card is also unlike any other texture and can drive a person insane.



Themes

Identity

The theme of identity runs throughout *The Third Policeman*. The narrator lacks an identity and his lack of a name is indicative of his lack of identity. His very soul seems to be something separate from him, so who is he? What is he made of? Is he even responsible for his actions? The narrator seems passive instead of active, lured into murder by Divney and by his obsession with de Selby instead of being responsible for his own decisions. Mathers, in a similar way, gives up his identity by following a formula for avoiding sin instead of making decisions for himself. Choices and decisions make up the sum of your life, and if you fail to make your own choices, you lose your identity.

The strange union of people and bicycles show how easily people can lose their identities. People and bicycles rub off on each other, essentially, and so over time, people become bicycles while bicycles become people. Each loses its identity through association with the other. The narrator has lost his identity through his close association with Divney, but also through giving over his life to the study of de Selby. Because the narrator's personality is weak, others' personalities rub off on him, and soon his identity is lost.

The narrator meets a doppelganger of himself, a one-legged robber and murderer who he describes as "tricky." This man, Martin Finnucane, has all the characteristics of the narrator. He is a robber and murderer. He has a wooden leg. He murders Mathers. He has no respect for life. The narrator seems to be Martin Finnucane, but he has lost his identity so completely that he does not recognize himself and what he has become.

Sin and Punishment

The narrator is a sinner. His life and his death are both defined by the murder of Mathers, a ruthless and vicious murder committed for money. As he is waiting to be hanged, the narrator imagines that after death he will become part of the world and dissolve into the grand sky or into the water. However, the narrator is already in the afterlife, and he is living in his punishment. The narrator's punishment is defined by his crime and by his life. He lives in a constant, unfulfilled struggle to gain the moneybox that he hoped to gain through murder, while he lives in constant fear and danger of hanging. The narrator is caught in a repeating loop of his own sin.

Part of the narrator's punishment seems to be his loss of identity. He cannot remember his own name, and sometimes he forgets his actions and motivations. He makes up a lost American gold watch as a way of opening up conversation with the policemen, but then he keeps forgetting that there is no real gold watch. The narrator has lost his moral compass, and he has let himself become swayed by others. That is the core of his crime, and his punishment reflects this in his loss of identity.



Constructed Reality

The story of *The Third Policeman* takes place in an afterlife, and this afterlife reflects the life of the narrator. He meets himself, and he is scheduled to be hanged for his own crime. The strange things he witnesses, such as the transference of bicycleness to people and humanity to bicycles, reflect his own life (where he has lost his identity to those around him). The reality of the afterlife does not seem to be objective, a single reality where many people go when they die. Instead, the afterlife seems to have a subjective, constructed reality, like a dream. The world that the narrator inhabits comes from his own mind and his own failings.

The narrator is continually surprised at the oddities of the world he is traveling through, but many of the things in the world can be traced to his own mind. The narrator has sold his soul for the possession of money, murdering Mathers for his moneybox, and then he is constantly denied his loot. In the afterlife, the prize that the narrator seeks grows to mythical proportions, but it constantly remains unattainable.

In 'eternity,' the narrator finds enormous riches, but he cannot truly have them. He must leave them behind. When Policeman Fox tells the narrator he's found the moneybox, he says that the box contains omnium, the source of ultimate power. The box seems tantalizingly to be waiting for the narrator around the next corner, at his house, but this is, of course, an illusion. The narrator's struggle during life to finally acquire this box becomes an important element in the constructed reality of his afterlife. His greatest fear, too, follows the narrator into death. The narrator fears punishment and hanging, and soon he finds himself in danger of being hung for his crime of murder. All of the elements of the story stem, not from an external reality, but from the narrator's own hopes and fears.



Style

Point of View

The Third Policeman is told from the first person perspective of an unnamed narrator. The narrator goes through a very subjective experience: death. Everything in the afterlife refers back to the narrator's experiences in life and the narrator's defining sin, the murder of Mathers. However, the narrator does not seem to make the connections between what is happening and his own life. Instead, he tends to make connections between what happens and de Selby's writings. The narrative voice, in fact, takes on two characters during the novel. When the narrator writes about de Selby, he writes authoritatively and academically, but when he writes about his experiences, he shows a naive and even thoughtless approach to his surroundings.

The reader is able to follow along with the narrator, inside the narrator's head, through his journey into the afterlife. The narrator does not remember his own name, and so the reader never learns the narrator's name. The reader also experiences all of the narrator's confusion and awe at the strange events that he passes through.

At the end of the novel, the narrator begins his journey through the afterlife again. His memory is erased, and he must relive the same cycle of events. The reader, whose memory is intact, is privy to information that the narrator does not have, the character's history. As the same words are used to describe the appearance of the one-dimensional police station and the narrator's awe at his approach to it, the reader realizes that the narrator is fated to go through the same subjective events over and over.

Setting

The Third Policeman is set in rural Ireland, where the narrator grows up on a farm, which he later comes back to as an adult. The rural community is simple, giving the narrator everything he needs for survival. Although the narrator is not prosperous, it seems that he has the means for prosperity at his disposal, and the only things that hold him back are his poor decisions.

However, the main setting of The Third Policeman is the afterlife where the narrator finds himself destined to become embroiled with three strange policemen. The afterlife has many strange qualities. Its very physical nature is different from the normal world, as if the narrator has gone to a world where de Selby's bizarre physical theories were true. Atoms in bicycles transfer to humans, creating people that are mostly bicycles and bicycles that are mostly human. It is easier to turn to the left than to turn to the right. Buildings in the distance may appear one-dimensional, more like photographs than structures.

At the core, everything in the narrator's afterlife is made from "omnium," or energy, and an the possession of omnium allows Policeman Fox to create "eternity," a building



where anything may be had by opening a door, though it can't be taken with you. This oddity of eternity actually can be read as a metaphor for life, where you can acquire many things, but when you leave, as they say, you can't take it with you. The narrator's sorrow at leaving behind his loot before traveling up in the elevator can be read as him mourning the loss of his life.

Language and Meaning

The language of the narrator's afterlife is strange, and the characters use too many words—and not quite the right words—to say what they mean. When Sergeant Pluck asks Gilhaney to search the tree, he says, "put your hands in under its underneath and start feeling promiscuously the way you can ascertain factually..." The language obscures instead of enlightens. This strange mode of speech puts the reader off-kilter and adds to the impression of a world that's not quite right. The buildings look one dimensional until you are upon them, and the words are twisted around in bizarre ways.

The convoluted speech also seems to mock the narrator's academic language in his discussion of de Selby and de Selby's own way of twisting words to make logical arguments. De Selby twists language to argue that a person can really only travel one dimension on a sphere, since no matter which way you go, you'll eventually return to the same point. The Atomic Theory of bicycle transference that Sergeant Pluck outlines to the narrator similarly applies something inapplicable to make a logical-sounding argument.

Mathers' tactic to avoid sin is another example of the manipulation of language. Mathers has decided to answer "no" to any question or request. However, he uses this policy indiscriminately, and so he becomes easily manipulated. If the narrator wants to spend the night at Mathers' house, he can simply ask, "Do you refuse to let me spend the night?" Similarly, he might choose to ask, "Do you refuse to help me murder someone?" causing Mathers to agree to sin by means of his supposedly sin-proof method.

Structure

The novel begins with the narrator's life. The first chapter recounts the narrator's whole life and the commission of a murder, the thing that defines the narrator's afterlife. In the second chapter, the narrator dies, murdered by his partner in crime, but neither he nor the reader knows this. The narrator is confronted by the man he's murdered, and then in the following chapter, he is confronted by himself, in the murderer with the wooden leg he meets by the roadside.

The fourth chapter marks the narrator's full entry into the afterlife, and from this point forward, the novel has a circular story, coming back at the end to the beginning of this chapter, when the narrator first encounters the police barracks. The narrator delves further and further into the strange world of the afterlife, descending into the cavernous 'eternity,' only to reemerge into the world and find out that he's been dead sixteen years. This illumination is erased as the narrator returns to the afterlife to restart the cycle.



Throughout the novel, the story of the narrator's life and afterlife is interrupted by explanations of de Selby's theories and accounts of de Selby's critics. De Selby's works play a large role in defining the narrator's point of view and even the substance of his afterlife. De Selby believes that the world is sausage-shaped and that there is a long dimension across which people cannot yet travel; the narrator's afterlife is very much like that long dimension, as he travels a one-way road into a realm outside of (but nearby) normal existence.



Quotes

"Perhaps it is important in the story I am going to tell to remember that it was for de Selby I committed my first serious sin. It was for him that I committed my greatest sin."

—Chapter I, page 9

"I therefore decided to say No henceforth to every suggestion, request or inquiry whether inward or outward. It was the only simple formula which was sure and safe. It was difficult to practice at first and often called for heroism but I persevered and hardly ever broke down completely. It is now many years since I said Yes. I have refused more requests and negated more statements than any man living or dead. I have rejected, reneged, disagreed, refused and denied to an extent that is unbelievable." —Mathers, Chapter II, page 30

"He was tricky and smoked a tricky pipe and his hand was quavery. His eyes were tricky also, probably from watching policemen. They were very unusual eyes. There was no palpable divergence in their alignment but they seemed to be incapable of giving a direct glance at anything that was straight, whether or not their curious incompatibility was suitable for looking at crooked things." —Chapter III, page 43

"Human experience de Selby has defined as 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief', a conception which he is thought to have arrived at from examining some old cinematograph films which belonged probably to his nephew." —Chapter IV, page 50

"When I saw the table it was bare only for the twenty-nine chest articles but through the agency of the glass I was in a position to report that he had two more out beside the last ones, the smallest of all being nearly half a size smaller than ordinary invisibility. I gave him back the glass instrument and took to the chair without a word. In order to reassure myself and make a loud human noise I whistled the Corncrake Plays the Bagpipes." —Chapter V, page 74

"'It would not surprise me,' said the Sergeant, 'put your hands in under its underneath and start feeling promiscuously the way you can ascertain factually if there is anything there in addition to its own nothingness.'" —Chapter VI, page 80

"'The gross and net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles.'" —Chapter VI, page 85

"They have a heart-lifted effect more usually associated with spirituous liquors, reviving and quietly restoring the spiritual tissue. This benign property of his prose is not, one hopes, to be attributed to the reason noticed by the eccentric do Garbandier, who said 'the beauty of reading a page of de Selby is that it leads one inescapably to the happy



conviction that one is not, of all nincompoops, the greatest.' This is, I think, an overstatement of one of de Selby's most ingratiating qualities. The humanising urbanity of his work has always seemed to me to be enhanced rather than vitiated by the chance obtrusion here and there of his minor failings, all the more pathetic because he regarded some of them as pinnacles of his intellectual prowess rather than indications of his frailty as a human being." —Chapter VII, page 92

"I put the bag, clinking with its bottle and gold cubes, rather roughly on the floor. It was worth several million pounds. Standing there on the plate floor, I leaned on the plate wall and searched my wits for some reason and understanding and consolation-in-adversity. I understood little except that my plans were vanquished and my visit to eternity unavailing and calamitous." —Chapter VIII, page 140

"The reader will be familiar with the storms which have raged over this most tantalizing of holograph survivals. The 'Codex' (first so-called by Bassett in his monumental De Selby Compendium) is a collection of some two thousand sheets of foolscap closely hand-written on both sides. The signal distinction of the manuscript is that not one word of the writing is legible. Attempts made by different commentators to decipher certain passages which look less formidable than others have been characterized by fantastic divergences, not in the meaning of the passages (of which there is no question) but in the brand of nonsense which is evolved. One passage, described by Bassett as being 'a penetrating treatise on old age' is referred to by Henderson (biographer of Bassett) as 'a not unbeautiful description of lambing operations on an unspecified farm'." —Chapter IX, page 145

"Down into the earth where dead men go I would go soon and maybe come out of it again in some healthy way, free and innocent of all human perplexity. I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind, an essential part of some indomitable river or be personally concerned in the ageless perfection of some rank mountain bearing down upon the mind by occupying forever a position in the blue easy distance." —Chapter X, page 159

"How can I convey the perfection of my comfort on the bicycle, the completeness of my union with her, the sweet responses she gave me at every particle of her frame? I felt that I had known her for many years and that she had known me and that we understood each other utterly." —Chapter XI, page 173

"He sobbed convulsively where he lay and began to cry and mutter things disjointedly like a man raving at the door of death. It was about me. He told me to keep away. He said I was not there. He said I was dead. He said that what he had put under the boards in the big house was not the black box but a mine, a bomb. It had gone up when I touched it. He had watched the bursting of it from where I had left him. The house was blown to bits. I was dead. He screamed to me to keep away. I was dead for sixteen years." —Chapter XII, page 197



Topics for Discussion

Why does O'Brien never reveal the narrator's name?

At the end of the novel, the narrator returns to the police station to start his journey over. Why does the journey begin there and not in Mather's house or when the narrator meets Martin Finnucane?

Compare the narrator and Martin Finnucane. Are they, on some level, the same character?

Why are the policemen aghast that the narrator has no bicycle when he first arrives at the police station?

What is the significance of the narrator's wooden leg?

What is the significance of left and right in the novel? Note that the hidden road to eternity is on the left and that the narrator's left leg is wooden. Sergeant Pluck says that Policeman Fox is searching for a road that leads to the right, and the narrator takes the right-hand road to finally return to his home from the afterworld.

How do de Selby's bizarre theories provide a commentary on the events in the afterworld?

Why doesn't the narrator stay in 'eternity'?