

The Wonder Study Guide

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Plot Summary

12 years after the Irish Famine ends in 1847, nurse Elizabeth (Lib) Wright has been hired by residents of a small village in the Irish Midlands to watch Anna O'Donnell, an 11-year-old Roman Catholic girl who—according to the newspapers and people who have met her—has not eaten for four months.

Many people are convinced that Anna's survival must be a true religious miracle, while others believe that her parents are somehow feeding her on the sly and that they are using her rapidly growing fame to make money. Although logic tells them that staying healthy without eating is impossible, thanks to an article that has appeared in the newly established newspaper *The Irish Times*, Anna has gained a certain notoriety. Many visitors, both from Ireland and elsewhere, come to see Anna for themselves. In order to determine once and for all whether or not Anna is truly "living on air" (and a few sips of water), prominent residents of the village, including the doctor and the priest, form a committee responsible for hiring nurses to watch over Anna 24/7, never leaving her alone. After a fortnight, each nurse—without any discussion with the other—is expected to report their findings to the committee. This way, the committee feels, Anna's survival will either be confirmed as a miracle or, alternatively, she will be revealed as a fraud.

Lib Wright, a British nurse who has trained under Florence Nightingale in the Crimea, shares the nursing duties with Sister Michael, a Roman Catholic nun. Motivated by a healthy dose of skepticism, disdain, and her own ego, Lib is sure that scientific knowledge, impartiality, and an inherent distrust of anything that she cannot see and quantify will allow her to make short work of the job at hand. She is positive that it will not be necessary for her to stay the full two weeks, that in this village of uneducated and devout people she will have no difficulty whatsoever proving that they are as gullible as she believes them to be.

Feeling under-appreciated at the hospital where she works and unencumbered by family or marital ties (she has been widowed after less than a year of marriage), Lib jumps at the chance for something new, but when she arrives she discovers that her only function is to keep watch over Anna, to somehow discover the truth about whether or not she is receiving some nourishment, and, if so, to find out the feeding is taking place. After speaking to the village doctor, Dr. McBrearty, and finding him to be old and—in her view—woefully incompetent, Lib is even more convinced that her training and superior knowledge will make short work of the problem at hand. She imagines newspapers reporting on her discovering the hoax and believes that this sort of fame might help her find a position where she is treated with the respect that her training deserves.

Lib's nationality, superior education, and religious upbringing set her off from the villagers. Consequently, she approaches her meeting with the Roman Catholic O'Donnells the morning after her arrival with a distinct sense of superiority that the meeting does very little to dispel.



Over the next days, Lib stops the visitors and establishes specific routines which must be followed: no one is to interact with Anna outside the nurses' presence and there is to be no physical contact between Anna and anyone, the sole exception being her mother's kisses in the morning and again in the evening before bed. Lib meets again with Dr. McBrearty, although she comes away from that meeting no more satisfied than before.

She also becomes acquainted with the journalist William Byrne who has been asked to write an article about Anna's case. At first Lib is hostile towards him, but as the days go by she begins to understand his point of view more clearly and is willing to acknowledge that perhaps he can be helpful in her quest to understand Anna. Working from his more objective perspective as someone outside the situation, Byrne points out to Lib that perhaps, rather than allowing her to find out where Anna may be getting food, the strictness of the watch may mean that Anna is now truly being denied all access to food. Ultimately, then, instead of helping Anna, Lib's conscientiousness may be unwittingly aiding in her demise. When Lib arranges for Byrne to meet Anna while she and Lib are out for a walk, it is clear to him that she is, in fact, starving. Taken aback, Lib realizes that science and training are not the way that she will find out the truth about Anna. She must get into Anna's mind and find out why she has been refusing food. Once Lib begins to delve deeply into the motivations behind the actions of Anna and her parents, she and Byrne formulate a plan to save Anna's life.



Chapter 1: Nurse

Summary

In this first chapter, readers are introduced to Lib Wright, who has just arrived in Ireland from England. A nurse who has trained under Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, she served at Scutari and, consequently, is confident that she is more than qualified to do the job for which she has been hired. After her long journey, which “was no worse than she expected”, Lib is met by a driver at the train station in Athlone and taken to the small village where she will be working. She is surprised to see dirty, malnourished people on the side of the road and later, when she asks for potatoes, she is told that they will not be harvested for another month. Although she does not give it any thought, this is the first time that she sees the effects of the Famine. Lib notices a cabin that has recently burned down. It appears that no one has made any effort at maintenance and she wonders “[whether it is] true that the Irish were impervious to improvement”. Wrapped up in her own thoughts, she does not consider the question further. She knows almost nothing about the job, only that she will be needed for two weeks and that she will be well-compensated for her trouble.

As she feels that her training is not properly respected at the hospital where she works, Lib is looking forward to a job more appropriate to her skills. It does not seem to occur to her, however, that her own attitude may be at least partly to blame for her unhappiness. When she arrives in the tiny village, she is unprepared for the almost utter lack of amenities that she finds. Her experience in private nursing has led her to assume that she will be staying with her employers so that she can be near her patient, but she is surprised to learn that she will be staying in town. Never having been to Ireland before and having very little knowledge of either the Irish people or their history, Lib is quick to assume that she has come to a near-savage place. As she eats her supper at the “spirit grocery” (so called because it sells liquor), the village doctor arrives to introduce himself and to discuss her work. Dr. McBrearty tells her that she and Sister Michael, the Roman Catholic nun she noticed at dinner have been hired to watch over a seemingly healthy 11-year-old girl who has not eaten or drunk anything except water for four months.

Because she is someone whose worldview is dictated almost exclusively by what she can see and quantify, Lib is skeptical. A Protestant, Lib is struck throughout the novel by how deeply religion permeates the culture here. From her first glimpse of the nun who is her fellow nurse (although at this point Lib does not know who she is)—“a nun whose face was almost invisible behind the starched layers of her headdress...in England religious sisters didn’t go about in such garb for fear of provoking anti-Romish sentiment”—to her assumption that Anna’s refusal to eat must be “a religious enthusiasm, perhaps, not a medical matter at all” when the doctor characterizes Anna O’Donnell as a “quiet, pious girl”, Lib’s disdain for the emotion which is central to Catholicism is clear. Lib is almost offended to have been brought across the ocean for what she believes to be nothing more than a temporary childish phase. She is even



more contemptuous of Dr. McBrearty's willingness to acknowledge the possibility that Anna's survival cannot be explained by science.

Although logic tells him that no one can live without any food whatsoever, the doctor has written to the Irish Times about Anna and now she has gained a certain fame. It has become a question of honor for the village and for Anna's parents, who are suspected by some people of feeding their daughter on the sly. However, there are others who believe that her survival is a bona fide miracle. To resolve the issue, several of the town's most prominent residents—including the doctor and the priest—have convened a committee who is responsible for hiring nurses to keep watch over Anna so that they can determine whether or not she is receiving food somehow, and, if so, how that food is being delivered.

Lib is conscious of her status as an outsider: not only is she British and better educated than the vast majority of the people she meets, but she is a Protestant. On the way to the O'Donnells' house with Sister Michael and Mr. Thaddeus, the village priest the next morning, Lib asks him about the role that fasting plays in Catholicism. He assures her that fasting should not be taken to extremes and that it can be used as means of expiating the sins of oneself or others. Incapable of thinking metaphorically, Lib looks at the question concretely, envisioning a big accounting book and wondering how Anna has managed to delude everyone, even the most educated people in town. This conversation is one of many that Lib misinterprets, although she does not realize it until much later.

Contrary to her assumptions, the O'Donnells are not well off. Their house needs of repair and, as in most Irish peasant cabins of the time, the animals live under the same roof as the people. Lib, Sister Michael, and the priest must be accommodated in the kitchen because there are visitors in the "good room" with Anna. Although Lib would prefer to meet Anna immediately, the two nurses and the priest are expected to have a cup of tea with Mrs. O'Donnell while Anna is seeing the visitors. So that the time before meeting Anna is not wasted, Lib asks Mrs. O'Donnell some questions about Anna's past history. At last the visitors leave, having given Anna some holy cards for her collection and, after Mrs. O'Donnell's refusal to accept it, putting a coin in the box for the poor. Lib is more than ever convinced that this "miracle" is no more than an attempt to make money.

While Mrs. O'Donnell is talking to the visitors, Lib looks at the daguerreotype on the mantel. The whole family is depicted: Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell, Anna, and their son Pat, who had "gone over" the year before. Something about the image strikes Lib as odd: Pat, an adolescent, lolls on his mother's lap like a much younger child.

Suspicious of Anna and convinced that Mrs. O'Donnell must somehow be the prime mover behind this "hoax" from the start, Lib spends her first shift with Anna noting down her physical characteristics and measurements. She also scours the room for hidden food and makes sure that there is no way for anyone to sneak food into the room. Lib, wanting to test Anna's stamina, takes her out for a walk. When Kitty, the maid, brings Lib her dinner—a bowl of "stirabout" or porridge—she tells Lib that she should put some salt



on it to “keep the little people off.” Once again Lib is amazed at what she interprets as the backwardness and superstition of the Irish, although Anna finds Kitty’s superstition comical. Earlier, a photographer had made a photograph of Anna for the newspaper and now he has given the family a copy as a gift. Mrs. O'Donnell's enthusiasm gets on Lib's nerves; she believes that her excitement is another manifestation of her lack of education. When Anna gets ready for bed, Lib notices that she is losing her hair. That night, after praying the Rosary with the O'Donnells, Sister Michael takes over the watch and Lib goes back to her room, realizing how little she knows about Anna and the Irish in general.

Analysis

This chapter introduces several major themes that are developed in the novel: the pervasiveness of Catholicism in the lives of the people of nineteenth-century Ireland, the importance of not giving into assumptions, and the conflict between what can be seen and quantified and what can only be felt and intuited. On a more individual level, many of Lib's difficulties are the result of an outsized ego. She is convinced that her education and training—and, although she would not admit it, her British nationality—make her superior to the people she meets in the village and to her fellow nurse, whom she believes to be a sort of dupe of Catholicism as a whole and of Anna’s family on a more local level.

Although Lib prides herself on her ability to see and analyze the information before her, this is the first instance of many where her snobbishness and belief in common stereotypes about the Irish stand in the way of finding out the truth. Examples of Lib’s inability to understand the place in which she finds herself abound in this chapter: for example, her ignorance of the Famine, her assumption that potatoes will be readily available, and her assumption that Sister Michael—because she does not have the same training that Lib does—is an inexperienced and incompetent nurse. Her attitude towards the people’s religious beliefs and superstitions (like Kitty’s belief that putting salt on the porridge will “keep the little people off” and her practice of leaving a saucer of milk out each night for the “little people” [the fairies, although they do not like that term]) ensure that she is treated with a barely veiled hostility that she cannot understand. Her constant requests for things that Anna’s family cannot afford or are find difficult to fulfill—like an oil lamp and a scale on which to weigh Anna—are met with delay and disapproval which Lib takes as a personal affront. She is quick to believe the worst stereotypes of the Irish, as when she is on her way to meet the O'Donnells and sees a cottage in desperate need of repair. She assumes that the cabin is another manifestation of the “shiftless” Irish. It does not occur to her that when people are starving they have no energy to do home repairs.

Another theme introduced here is Lib's view of nursing. Since the novel is set in 1859, soon after the Crimean War has ended, nursing is in its infancy. Lib is one of the group of nurses that were trained directly by Florence Nightingale and as such, she has taken almost everything that she has learned literally. For example, one of the central tenets of Lib's training is the necessity for keen observation. Because Lib has isolated herself



emotionally, she takes this injunction to mean that she should observe her physical surroundings with as little interaction as possible. In fact, she does observe every thing around her closely, but she misinterprets almost every one. Not only--ultimately--does she misinterpret Anna's physical state, but she misunderstands the cultural and emotional details of the village and of Anna's family. For example, when she discovers that the family leaves a saucer of milk out every night for the "little people," she is contemptuous of what she believes to be their superstitions. She complains to Dr. McBrearty about the "unscientific" conditions at the O'Donnells' cottage, but she has not yet learned that nursing is a profession whose less concrete details are just as important as the concrete details which can be seen and heard.

Although she may not intend to, Lib radiates the hostility that she feels is directed at her. When she first arrives at the "spirit grocery," not only is she taken aback at the lack of amenities she finds there, but she is offended at the idea that a family who could afford to hire someone with her background and experience has chosen not to have her stay with them: "Lib held her temper. If there was no proper inn, and if the O'Donnell family couldn't or wouldn't accommodate the nurse they'd hired, then complaining would be no use."

Lib's hostility colors the way that she views almost everything in the village. In the morning, when Mr. Thaddeus (the village priest) is taking her and Sister Michael to meet Anna, she looks for "any sign of the O'Donnells' estate," but when they arrive at the house, she realizes that they are not wealthy at all: "This couldn't be their destination, surely? The cabin was in need of a fresh coat of whitewash; pitched thatch brooded over three small squares of glass. At the far end, a cow byre stopped under the same roof. Lib saw all at once the foolishness of her assumptions. If the committee had hired the nurse, then Malachy O'Donnell was not necessarily prosperous. It seemed that all that marked the family out from the other peasants scratching a living around here was their claim that their little girl could live on air." At this point, she can no longer justify her anger at the accommodations, but she has turned it into condescension towards the family.

Whether or not she realizes it, she radiates the hostility that she assumes the Irish feel towards the British. Consequently, she approaches her meeting with the Roman Catholic family the morning after her arrival with a distinct sense of superiority that the meeting does very little to dispel. When Lib meets Anna and her family, she is contemptuous of their concern for reputation, believing that such concerns are out of place in such a humble environment, and she assumes that Mrs. O'Donnell is so ignorant that she does not know that the Crimean War has ended. Lib's errors multiply when, in trying to avoid the heat of the fire, she moves her seat and offends Mrs. O'Donnell: "'Creepies' had to mean the log stools the woman was shoving practically into the flames for her guests. Lib those one and tried to inch it farther away from the hearth. But the mother looks offended; clearly, right by the fire was the position of honor. So Lib sat, putting down her bag on the cooler side so her ointments wouldn't melt into puddles."



Lib feels superior, too, to Sister Michael, whom she assumes is not nearly as knowledgeable and experienced as she is. She also assumes that her religion will inhibit her ability to do her job as well as Lib believes she can do hers: "Just then Lib realized something else: if they worked twelve-hour shifts and she took the first, it would always be Sister Michael on duty during the night, when the girl would have more opportunity to steal food. How could Lib rely on a nun who'd spent most of her life in some provincial convent to be quite as attentive as herself?" Lib's refusal to acknowledge the value of Sister Michael's different background makes her quest for the truth more difficult than it has to be.

In addition, Lib is convinced that her superior intelligence will ensure that it will be she who solves the mystery of Anna's not eating, perhaps in as little as 24 hours: "The cabin couldn't have more than four rooms; she doubted it would take her more than one night here to catch the girl sneaking food, whether Anna was doing it alone or with help. (Mrs. O'Donnell? Her husband? The slavey, who seemed to be their only servant? Or all of them, of course.) That meant the whole trip would earn Lib just one day's wage. Of course, a less honest nurse wouldn't speak up till the fortnight was gone, to be sure of being paid for all fourteen. Whereas Lib's reward would be seeing it through, making sure sense prevailed over nonsense." At this point in the novel, Lib has not yet learned that there are many different types of "sense" and almost as many types of "nonsense."

Lib must keep reminding herself, too, that she believes that Anna is involved in the hoax; she often tells herself that Anna is a "cheat" and a "humbug." One important thing that readers will notice is the process by which Lib begins to realize that her first instincts about Anna were correct--that Anna truly is as sincere and accommodating as she appears to be, rather than the trickster that Lib has convinced herself she must be.

Discussion Question 1

What do we know of Lib's background when she arrives in the village?

Discussion Question 2

How does Lib's background influence her impressions of the village and the people who live there?

Discussion Question 3

How would you describe Anna's attitude with regard to her decision not to eat and the controversy it has begun?



Vocabulary

byre, Rosary, Angelus, cache, conciliatory, uncouth, daguerreotype, shammer, charlatan, saccharine, sacrilege, Confirmation, hygienic, candid, memorandum, anodyne, intermediaries, anomalies, concave, dropsy, spurious, noxious, effluvia, antiquated, dilated, fortnight, minx, vindicated, grandiloquence, ambiguous, blinkered



Chapter Two: Watch

Summary

Lib has asked to be woken at 4:15 a.m. for her next shift with Anna. When she arrives at the O'Donnells' house, she speculates that Anna has been sneaking out to drink from the saucer of milk that is under the dresser in the living room. When Kitty (the maid) informs her that the milk is for the "little ones"—the fairies, who would be offended if it were not there—Lib is once again amazed at the superstition and ignorance that she believes control the actions of the family. She is offended that Sister Michael leaves without reporting any facts that she believes to be important except that Anna has spent a peaceful night. Mr. O'Donnell comes in and detains Lib for a minute, during which time his wife goes into Anna's room. Lib is worried that, in such a short absence of herself and Sister Michael, Mrs. O'Donnell could have quickly snuck some food in to her daughter. She quickly establishes a rule by which no physical contact can take place without her or Sister Michael being present. Mrs. O'Donnell is angry and leaves the room.

On this second day, Lib learns more about Anna. A very devout and pious child, she prays many times a day, including one prayer that Lib thinks of as the "Dorothy prayer." She will not tell Lib anything about it, saying that it is "private." She and Anna go out for another walk and Lib teaches Anna some riddles. Anna quickly guesses the answers and Lib tells her that she should go back to school, although Anna says that she is happy at home. Some more visitors arrive, and Lib tells Mrs. O'Donnell that visitors should not be allowed as they might be able to sneak food into Anna. These visitors bring Anna a toy called a thaumatrope and a pair of gloves made from chicken skin. After praying with Anna, the visitors leave. The family says the Angelus at noon and Sister Michael arrives at 1:00 for her shift with Anna.

In the afternoon, Lib goes to see Dr. McBrearty. Although she is frustrated to find that he is unwilling to acknowledge her medical concerns about Anna, she is embarrassed to discover that Sister Michael, whom she had assumed to be inexperienced and ignorant, is, in fact, a more experienced nurse than Lib herself, although without the same training. She switches tacks and complains instead about the "unscientific conditions" at the O'Donnells' house and asks Dr. McBrearty to write a note supporting her decision to ban all visitors to Anna. He tells her about an article he has read about "fasting girls" in other places, in which there is speculation that these girls may somehow be reabsorbing blood shed during their menstrual cycles. Lib is appalled that he could take such an idea seriously and, rather than engage him in further conversation, she leaves.

When she gets back to Ryan's "spirit grocery," she meets William Byrne, a journalist from the Irish Times. Having been sent by the paper to write a profile of Anna, he has been delayed by an injury to his horse. He has been refused access to Anna and he is frustrated, although he is unaware of Lib's role in the situation.



After dinner, Lib returns to the O'Donnells' for her first night shift. While Anna sleeps, Lib spends much of the night speculating about ways in which Anna could be receiving food. Although Anna does not seem concerned about making money or her growing notoriety, Lib suspects that her parents are. She takes advantage of Anna being asleep to search her belongings for food, but succeeds only in breaking the candlestick figurine that Anna had been given as a confirmation present.

When her shift is over, Lib asks Sister Michael about "manna from heaven," which is what Anna said sustained her. Thinking it over, Lib is even more convinced that Anna must be getting food somehow, although she is increasingly frustrated by her own inability to catch her at it. She realizes that if Anna has been somehow receiving food that Sister Michael's and her own vigilance may have stopped it. If so, then Anna must truly be suffering.

While she is with Anna, Dr. Standish, an extremely arrogant British doctor who has been asked to examine Anna, arrives. During his examination, he treats both Anna and Lib with contempt, coming to the conclusion that Anna is a hysteric. He refuses to take any of Lib's comments seriously and suggests that Anna be force fed. Rattled, Lib does not get to speak to Sister Michael at the end of her shift and she is further discomfited to find William Byrne waiting for her at the spirit grocery. He has learned who she is and begins to question her about Anna. During their conversation he brings up the same idea that she has begun to fear—that, if Anna has somehow been getting food before the watch began, their vigilance has stopped it. If so, now she will be truly starving. As Lib is about to go to sleep, it occurs to her for the first time, that Anna may not be lying, that she really believes that she is surviving entirely without earthly food. If she is, in fact, as sincere as she appears to be, Lib realizes that Anna desperately needs her help.

Analysis

This chapter is once again dominated by instances of Lib's arrogance, an arrogance that leads to her continuing frustration with her inability to find out the truth about Anna. It is unfortunate because she does not intend to be arrogant and is motivated largely by her wish only to help Anna. Just as important, however, is her faith in science and her training. Rather than worship a religious deity like the O'Donnells and the other people in the village, Lib finds her religion in science and the work of Florence Nightingale. When she opens her copy of Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing*, which she treats with the same reverence that Christians treat the Bible, she finds a comment that women are "more exact and careful" than are men, traits which allow them to lessen their chances of making mistakes through neglect. In spite of her careful observation of Anna, Lib has been unable to find the source of Anna's nourishment, which she believes to be a fault in her own work.

Because Lib holds herself to almost impossibly high standards, her perfectionism functions as a foil to her arrogance. She is always willing to berate herself for not understanding what she sees in front of her. For example, when she finds the saucer of



milk under the dresser in the living room, she says to Mrs. O'Donnell that "I can only presume that your daughter's been sneaking out to drink it," only to be told that "You presume [*italics in the text*] too much, then" because leaving a saucer of milk out for the little people is a tradition. Although she is taken aback, she looks down on this tradition as nothing more than a manifestation of the family's ignorance rather than seeing her misunderstanding as a fault in herself.

Lib's frustration makes her project her hostile attitude onto the people surrounding her. For example, when visitors come, Lib again runs afoul of the unwritten laws of hospitality when she refuses to see Mrs. O'Donnell's welcoming attitude as sincere, instead trying to convince her that the people are only voyeurs. Although she finds her lack of success contemptible, Lib is nonetheless insulted when Dr. Standish, the British doctor, treats her with the same contempt with which she treats everyone else, as if somehow—thanks to her education—she should be immune to other people's condescension. After the doctor leaves, Lib wants to give Anna a hug, but she reminds herself of her training, her belief that there is no place in her conception of nursing for emotions.

This experience represents the first time in the book that Lib begins to truly acknowledge that Anna is a person, not simply a patient, and that perhaps her job as a nurse reaches beyond the quantifiable. Her encounter with William Byrne that evening serves to cement this idea for her when he points out that what the vigilance of the watch—the result of the procedures that Lib herself has been so adamant about introducing—ultimately means is that now Anna is truly being starved because her unknown source of food has been blocked. Lib is forced to come to a central conclusion—that, if she truly wants to fulfill her responsibility to her patient, she must look at what cannot be seen in addition to what can. Even more disconcerting to Lib, she realizes that what she cannot see may be the key to solving the mystery and to saving Anna.

Discussion Question 1

How does Anna's attitude towards her visitors differ from her mother's and from Lib's?

Discussion Question 2

What role does Sister Michael play for Lib? How would you describe their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

How would Dr. Standish describe the mystery surrounding Anna? Would it differ from Lib's description? If so, how?



Vocabulary

hysteria, famishing, zealots, scrupulously, barbaric, miscellaneous, pantheon, disconcerted, badgering, unwarranted, jangling, carousing, grievous, fumigation, tics, indulge, convulsions, boreens, barrage, banished, renunciation, petitioners, superstition, minuscule, reabsorption, surveillance, tedious, manna, suspend, venerating, icon, preceding



Chapter 3: Fast

Summary

When Lib arrives at the O'Donnells' house, Anna is still sleeping. Watching her, Lib is once again struck by her seeming innocence. She wonders whether it is possible to consider children—even though the Church says that seven is the age of reason—in the same way as reasonable adults. Looking again at Florence Nightingale's Notes on Nursing, Lib reads a sentence that serves as a rebuke: was it truly her place to have spoken to William Byrne about Anna the night before? When Anna wakes up, she and Lib go out for a walk, even though it is barely day. While they are out, they meet Dr. McBrearty, who is solicitous for Anna's welfare. He and Lib agree that Anna looks very well for someone who does not appear to be eating. When they have almost reached home, they run into a flock of potential visitors, who seem to believe that Anna has the power to heal them. Lib interposes herself between Anna and the outsiders and manages to get her inside the house.

While Anna warms herself by the fire, Lib looks at the original photograph of the family, placed next to the new one from the other day. During the conversation, she learns that Pat has died, as "gone over" is a euphemism for having died rather than a reference to emigration, as she had thought earlier. The reason that he looks strange in the photograph is that the image was made after he had died and that, since his eyes were closed, eyes had been painted on the closed lids. Mr. and Mrs. O'Donnell tell her—in great detail—about their son Pat's death and that Anna had been placed in the bed with him to warm him up just before he died. She is annoyed at the O'Donnells for not taking Anna's feelings into consideration as they tell the story. When they are back in the bedroom, Anna tells Lib that she is afraid that Pat is burning in purgatory because he died before he could be absolved of his sins. Lib tries to reassure her, but her logic is helpless before the emotion of Anna's religious fervor.

Later, back at the spirit grocery, she meets William Byrne again, who tells her some of the other theories that people have about Anna—that the fairies are responsible or that she is not human at all, but rather a sort of changeling who is masquerading as a human child. Byrne speculates that the truth is that Anna's situation is a money-maker for the church and that Mr. Thaddeus, the village priest, is the true mastermind behind it.

Lib goes to her room and tries to nap, but fails. When she arrives at nine o'clock for her shift, she and Sister Michael have a minute to talk, but Lib feels uncomfortable telling Sister Michael about her speculations. She does say that she thinks that Anna is inordinately concerned about Pat's posthumous welfare and that she thinks that there is something amiss with Anna's mind, but Sister Michael points out that Anna's mind is outside their purview. Watching Anna sleep, Lib realizes that William Byrne seems to know enough about her that she can assume that he has made enquiries about her and she wonders why. She also looks through Anna's belongings again, this time to see what she reads, and discovers several religious texts. Reading them in the context of



her concerns about Anna's mind, she finds them very troubling. She wonders whether Kitty—Anna's cousin—might be able to tell her anything about Anna, if Anna has ever confided in her. When, after her shift, Lib sees Kitty and tries to sound her out, Kitty's hostility stops her from probing further.

After a short night's sleep, Lib goes out for a walk and meets a man taking a rest in the bog. Cutting turf, he looks to Lib as though he is stuck in the bog and she berates herself for once again misunderstanding. On her walk back to Ryan's, she slips into the bog while trying to pick a flower for Anna. When she arrives at the O'Donnell's house—20 minutes late—she finds Sister Michael sitting with Mr. Thaddeus and Anna as they discuss Pat and purgatory. Anna and Mr. Thaddeus pray. Then Mr. Thaddeus leaves and Lib and Anna return to the bedroom.

More speculation ensues, and Lib is no closer to any sort of answer. That night, she is troubled by disturbing dreams, and when she arrives in the morning she is surprised to see Anna refuse her mother's hug and kiss of greeting. Mrs. O'Donnell glares at Lib, clearly believing that Anna's refusal is her fault.

When she leaves the O'Donnells' house after her shift, Lib goes to the cemetery to see Pat's grave. She is surprised to discover that it is a relatively new cemetery. There are many children's graves there as well, children who were victims of the Famine. She also finds what she assumes is a mass grave before finally finding Pat's. Seeing Pat's grave encourages her to speculate about Mrs. O'Donnell, realizing that it is likely that the fact that the O'Donnells only had two children means that Mrs. O'Donnell had had several miscarriages and/or stillbirths. These thoughts make Lib wonder whether a "frost-burnt" heart had made Mrs. O'Donnell expect her remaining child to be almost saint-like, as if being merely human were no longer acceptable.

As she is heading back towards the spirit grocery she runs into William Byrne, who is out for a ride. Their conversation is more personal than previously, and he explains what he sees the British role in the Famine to have been. Religion comes up and he, a Catholic, admits that he is still a believer, in spite of the horrors he has seen, and she tells him that what she saw at Scutari during the Crimean War has convinced her that only what can be seen and concretely proven has validity. He asks her to allow him to see Anna and she takes offense, believing that what she thought was a personal conversation--that he wanted to talk to her because he likes her--was in fact only a means to an end. She leaves him without a word.

Analysis

This chapter marks a crucial change in Anna's and Lib's relationship. Instead of seeing Anna only as a patient, Lib begins to consider her as a person, someone whose thoughts and perceptions may have something to do with her current illness. This new way of thinking is a leap of faith for Lib because it forces her out of her comfort zone, forcing her to acknowledge her own capacity for emotion--something she has tried very hard to bury.



When she speculates on possible diagnoses which might fit Anna's physical symptoms, Dr. McBrearty reminds her that her job is "simply to observe." Although Dr. McBrearty's perception of observation is strictly objective--he wants to know whether or not Anna is living without food--Lib realizes that it is also necessary to observe less concrete aspects of Anna's life: her family, her environment, and the culture in which she finds herself—in short, that she must try and understand the development of Anna's thought processes and her emotions as well as her physical state of health.

Lib's realization that she is beginning to like Anna and to feel more sympathy for her than her training has led to her to believe is appropriate makes her uncomfortable, largely because she is now beginning to question Miss Nightingale's teachings. In the second chapter, when Dr. Standish is contemptuous of Anna in her presence, Lib wants to hug her, but she decides against it, remembering what Miss Nightingale had said in response to one of the nurses at Scutari who wanted to comfort dying patients in the form of conversation or touch: "You know what would comfort that man, if anything could? A stump pillow to rest his mangled knee on. So don't listen to your heart, listen to me and get on with your work." It seems that, for Lib, questioning her teacher is tantamount to questioning her own worth as a nurse.

Similar instances of Anna's disconcerting effect on Lib can be found in the third chapter as well. For example, when Anna wakes up in the morning, she says to Lib, "Good morning, Mrs. Whatever-Your-Name-Is.' That was impudence, but Lib found herself laughing." Laughing seems to Lib to imply a lack of detachment, a loss of objectivity. Later, when Dr. McBrearty asks Anna how she and Lib are getting along, Anna answers, "Very well." Lib wonders whether Anna is just being polite, because "[a]ll Lib could remember were moments in which she'd been snappish or stern with the girl." She feels vaguely ashamed of this, although, within the parameters of the job she has been hired for, there is no need for her to feel this way. Numerous times throughout the novel, Lib must remind herself that, regardless of how appealing and winsome Anna is, that Lib has already decided that she is a liar—that it is impossible for her to be living without any food whatsoever.

Even more difficult for Lib, rather than dismissing everything that she cannot see and/or quantify as untrue for lack of evidence, she must take the emotional risk of acknowledging her sympathy for Anna. After the discussion of Pat's death, Anna tells Lib that she is afraid that Pat will be stuck in Purgatory forever because he died so quickly that he was not absolved of his sins before he death. Anna tells her that Pat will be cleaned but Anna does not believe her, saying that it will be an infernal cleansing: "By fire, only by fire! [Anna says.] "Oh, child...' This was an alien language and, frankly, one she didn't want to learn. [Lib] patted the girl on the shoulder, awkwardly felt the knob of bone." It is a measure of how much her attitude has changed, both towards Anna and to the watch itself, that her first reaction is not appreciation for the new information, but concern for Anna.

Now that Lib has allowed her emotions to come into her relationship with Anna, she has attempted to open a door into Anna's psyche. Significantly, she is not sure how to deal with what she learns. Perhaps this confusion is what leads her to unburden herself to



the journalist William Byrne, who surprises Lib by not seeing Anna's grief as anything out of the ordinary: "My whole country could be said to be in mourning, Mrs. Wright. After seven years of dearth and pestilence, what family was left unbroken?" During the conversation, Lib takes some of Byrne's remarks as mocking and tells him that, if he knew Anna, he would not find her someone to be made fun of. Byrne makes the point that she seems to like Anna and Lib pushes that thought away: "This is my job.[...]Your question is irrelevant." The idea that her actions could be motivated by human feeling rather than simply following the parameters of her job almost seems to offend her, although it seems more likely, given the fact that she is a widow.

Almost in spite of herself, though, Lib cannot stop thinking about how Anna views things. She speculates that Anna, having been born during the Famine, had learned to make do with less and that, although that fact did not explain why she is not eating now, those circumstances had been central to the formation of Anna's thought processes and of how she views the world. Her journey into Anna's mind forces her to think about the losses in her life—her family and her husband. She is still not capable of truly interpreting what she sees around her, though: when Anna refuses to be kissed by her mother in the morning, Lib writes it down but immediately regrets it because her notes should contain only "medical facts." It has not yet occurred to her to question WHY Anna will no longer allow her mother to kiss her.

Byrne's questioning whether she is "altered from gaoler to bodyguard" forces her to think about why she is beginning to care so much about Anna in particular, although, to save herself from admitting her true emotional involvement, she couches her answer in general terms, telling him about Miss Nightingale's discouraging her students' involvement in individual cases and saying that for nurses, it is natural to care more about individuals than generality. Answering him this way allows her to continue to think of herself more centrally as a nurse rather than as a woman.

Discussion Question 1

What is Anna's attitude towards her brother?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lib try so hard not to let herself begin to care about Anna as a person?

Discussion Question 3

How does Lib's perception of Anna's family change in this chapter?



Vocabulary

fast, reeking, hysteric, mania, lunatic, impudence, disconcerted, scurvy, pellagra, indulgent, implausible, besieged, fawning, slapdash, chafed, indomitable, mesmerized, crocodilian, presumed, purgatory, confession, dearth, pestilence, delusional, subterfuge, tantalize, benevolent, changeling, brogue, hypochondriac, bamboozle, cynical, libel, abstinence, inference, stimulus, peckish, sententious, bilious, constitutional, expiate, novena, amulet, kaleidoscopic, inchoate, benighted, erudition, surreptitious, commissariat, provocateur



Chapter Four: Vigil

Summary

Upon arriving at the O'Donnells' for a night shift, Lib tries once again to talk to Kitty. She learns that the last food Anna has eaten was the Communion wafer at her First Communion. Mr. O'Donnell is sitting by the fire and Lib wonders whether he could be involved in feeding Anna, or, at the very least, allowing the hoax to continue. Lib speculates again on all of Anna's physical symptoms but cannot come to any conclusions.

When she returns to the O'Donnells' house in the afternoon, Sister Michael tells her that Anna was unhappy because she was not allowed to go to Mass that morning. However, Sister Michael recited the litany for the day with her and that made her feel somewhat better.

Lib takes Anna out for a walk and Anna tells her about the "rag tree," near a small pond. People dip the rags in the water, rub them on wounds, and then tie the rags to the tree, believing that the badness will stay there and rot. Once the rag rots, the ailment or illness goes away too. They see some red currants and Lib asks Anna whether she remembers how they taste. Anna says she does and Lib eats one and offers one to Anna. For a moment, Lib thinks that Anna is going to eat it, but she only holds it out for the birds to eat.

That night, Lib is exhausted and wants to sleep, but her mind won't let her. She wonders if she has been fair to Byrne, and decides that he had not insulted her the afternoon before. In asking for an interview with Anna, he was only doing his job as a journalist. She thinks about his room being just across the hall and wants to discuss what she has learned about Anna's last food having been the Host at her First Communion. She begins to think of him as a person rather than simply as a journalist—i.e. although he is doing a job, it is also possible that he truly wants to help Anna.

Lib realizes that it has only been a week since she arrived and she berates herself for her confidence (arrogance?) in believing that it would be so easy to discover exactly what is happening here. She had certainly not expected to feel herself implicated in the possible starvation of an eleven-year-old child. Desperately wanting his opinion about Anna, she decides to leave William Byrne a note under his door telling him that she and Anna will meet him later today.

When she arrives back at the O'Donnells' house for her 5:00AM shift, she finds Kitty resting. Kitty explains that, since it is a Holy Day of Obligation, no work except what is absolutely necessary will be done. Lib seizes the chance to ask her if she has ever urged Anna to eat, but Kitty takes her question as an accusation and is frightened. Once again Lib is angry with herself for mishandling the situation and goes into the bedroom, where Anna is still asleep.



After Sister Michael leaves, Lib looks again at her notes and is unable to come to any sort of conclusion. Logic tells her that what she sees is impossible. Even though she is not eating, Anna continues to live her life. Although Lib refuses to call it a miracle, she is beginning to see why some people do.

When Anna wakes up, she is even happier than usual because today is the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption, the day that the Virgin Mary ascended into Heaven. Anna's family come into the room to tell her that they are going to church to make the customary offerings of the day and she and Lib watch them go. Lib wonders whether their seemingly carefree attitude means that they are completely callous towards Anna's situation or whether they are truly innocent and have nothing on their consciences.

At ten o'clock, she and Anna go for a walk and meet William Byrne. Anna asks whether he is a visitor and Lib says no, he is just out seeing the sights. Lib is embarrassed because Anna asks him personal questions but Byrne does not mind. Anna and Byrne discuss flowers and Lib thinks that he is getting a much more nuanced impression of Anna than what he had gotten from her discussion with him. Now, rather than simply writing based on second-hand information from her, he will be able to think for himself. He mentions to Anna that he has been thinking of emigrating, perhaps to Australia or New Zealand or Canada. Lib asks whether he doesn't think that emigration and the severing of all ties that comes with it isn't similar to death and he agrees, calling it "the price of a new life." Anna quizzes him on all the riddles that Lib has taught her and is delighted when he fails to guess the answers.

Finally admitting that she is a bit tired, Anna rests on a rock while Lib and Byrne walk a little way off. Lib asks Byrne what he thinks of Anna and is surprised when Byrne informs her that she is dying of starvation. Lib points out that physically Anna does not look like it, but Byrne tells her that he has studied starving people, having reported on the Irish Famine when he was only 16 years old. He tells Lib that she is too close to see it but that it is obvious to others, especially in her breath, which smells like vinegar, the result of the body turning in on itself.

Looking back at Anna, Lib sees that Anna has fainted, although she says she is only resting. Byrne carries her home and Lib tells him to leave. When he is gone, she smells Anna's breath and realizes that he is correct. Anna is dying.

When she wakes up the next morning (Monday), Lib finds a draft of Byrne's article under her door. In it, he lists details about Anna's physical state and says unequivocally that Anna is starving, that reports of her continuing good health are all lies. Reading it, Lib realizes not only that he is correct, but that she has almost wilfully ignored the fact everything she has written in her notes points to the same conclusion. Even more painful for her is the realization that the truth is exactly what she feared: that, in spite of—or perhaps because of—Sister Michael's and her very strict vigilance over Anna, Anna is now truly starving.

True to form, Lib takes her realizations about Anna's true state of health as a judgment on herself. She realizes that she has been arrogant and overestimated her own



knowledge and abilities. She also acknowledges that she had bowed to what she wished were the case—i.e., she wishes that there had been some sort of night feedings that no one could see or, alternatively, that Anna's strength of mind or faith had been sustaining her—rather than Anna's clear physical decline.

When Lib arrives for her shift, she has no opportunity to tell Sister Michael about her new understanding, although now as she looks at Anna she is amazed that no one else seems to see it. The evidence seems to be almost too clear. Mrs. O'Donnell comes to say good night, but Anna will not hug or kiss her. Mrs. O'Donnell is angry, Lib realizes, not only at being denied by Anna, but she is angry at Lib because she has seen it.

After the Rosary, Sister Michael returns to the bedroom to explain about the story she had been telling Anna when Lib arrived. Lib has misunderstood it, but Sister Michael explains to Lib that the theme of the story was the danger of keeping dangerous secrets, of what can happen if they are not shared. Lib realizes that she has completely misinterpreted Sister Michael and that the nun, in her own way, may have seen Anna more clearly than she has. Lib tells her that the two of them must help Anna, that they both know that she is starving. Sister Michael says that the two of them don't "know" anything definitively and leaves. Lib waits, knowing that she will have her arguments prepared in the morning. When Sister Michael comes back for her shift the next day, Lib tells her that it is time to stop the watch, that they must tell Dr. McBrearty that Anna is dying.

When Lib goes to Dr. McBrearty's house, she finds that he is out, attending the resident magistrate. When he returns, she tells him that Anna is dying, that they must end the watch. Lib is frustrated that Dr. McBrearty still refuses to understand the physical evidence in front of him, preferring to look to history and the lives of saints for an explanation. He truly wants to believe that Anna's continuing survival is some sort of sign from God. Not having succeeded in having the watch called off, Lib leaves.

When she returns to Anna, she finds her in bed. Sister Michael explains that Anna needed a nap after their walk around the yard. It is becoming clearer and clearer that Anna is dying: she has lost an adult molar and her vision is deteriorating. Dr. McBrearty comes to see Anna and will not acknowledge that anything has changed. He thinks she will be better by the end of the week. Lib asks him again to stop the watch and he tells her that the committee must decide unanimously.

When she gets back to the spirit grocery that night, Lib tells Byrne that he was right. Talking with him, she realizes that, regardless of the parameters of her job, she must try and persuade Anna to eat. At the O'Donnells' in the morning, Lib is amazed to see that Anna's parents seem oblivious to her worsening condition. While she is alone with Anna, Lib shows her Biblical passages that instruct people to eat. When Anna is not convinced, she tries to explain it more scientifically. Anna still refuses to eat.

While she and Anna are talking, Mrs. O'Donnell summons Lib to the kitchen. She has seen Byrne's article. Lib accuses her of being blind to Anna's plight, but she cries that



she fed Anna for as long as Anna would let her. She seems truly distressed and Lib is surprised to find that she feels sorry for Rosaleen O'Donnell.

At noon, using the wheelchair that the O'Donnells have been lent, Lib takes Anna out for a walk. They meet Byrne and she and brings him up to date. He tells her that he has found out more about religious events which took place in the village just before Anna stopped eating. He also tells her about the building of the "green roads"—"Famine roads"—roads that go nowhere built during the Famine—, that they were a means to make work for starving people. As an Englishwoman, she feels guilty about her nation's role in the Famine.

Lib tries to take a nap at the spirit grocery, but finds that she cannot sleep. When she is with Anna that night, she wonders whether Anna's refusal to eat might be the result of her thoughts being confused by hunger. Lib considers what might happen if she tube-fed her, that being force fed might allow Anna's mind to once again work normally. Would she be doing the right thing if she forced Anna to eat? Would tube-feeding be an instance of being cruel to—ultimately—be kind? She realizes, though, that psychologically it would be a mistake.

Thinking over what Anna has said to her, Lib suddenly understands how Anna had been fed before she arrived, that what Anna called "manna from heaven" was in fact food transferred from Rosaleen's mouth to Anna's under cover of kisses and hugs in the morning and the evening. Now that Anna has refused all physical contact with her mother, she is no longer getting any food at all. Waking Anna, she asks her and Anna's answer confirms that Lib is correct. Lib reiterates to Anna that, if she doesn't eat, she will die. Anna simply nods her head.

Analysis

Chapter Four functions in many ways as a sort of parallel to the third chapter, in that the process that Lib experiences here is in many ways similar to the process that she undergoes in the third chapter. In the third chapter, Lib begins to understand the wider culture in which she finds herself, but here, she begins to understand herself. In this chapter Lib changes from a cold and calculating "nurse" governed entirely by science, her own pride, and her intellect to someone who can allow herself to be a sensitive, feeling person--someone who embodies the true sense of the term "nurse." Rather than considering her patient strictly as a case, she finally not only allows herself to see Anna as a person, but she embraces that knowledge. Although she has realized in Chapter Three that such a reconsideration was necessary, she did not understand how to go about it. Here, she does, and she realizes that the actual process of transforming her way of thinking is much more difficult than she thinks. It is not simply a question of understanding how Anna's mind works, but of understanding herself.

At first, her hostility to Catholicism is once again the lens through which she considers the family but, significantly, it is also the means by which she realizes she can reach Anna. When Mr. O'Donnell and Kitty tell her that Anna's last meal was her First



Communion wafer, Lib wonders if somehow Anna had gotten the doctrine wrong: “Had Anna somehow picked up the notion that now she’d been granted divine nourishment, she’d no further need for the earthly kind?” The next day while she and Anna are walking, Anna tells her about the “rag tree at our holy well.” Lib thinks that the story behind it is “cunning.” That word seems significant because it implies an intent to deceive. Lib is still very suspicious of Anna’s devotion to her religion; not only is she convinced that it is this devotion which is behind Anna’s attempt to starve herself, but she also resents what she views as everyone else’s complacent acceptance of Anna’s actions. Even more importantly, she is frustrated that her intelligence and belief in science cannot come up with an answer either: “[Lib] could think of nothing to say, no way to refer to the conversation [with Mr. Thaddeus] without insulting the child’s faith. All across the world, she told herself, people placed their trust in amulets or idols or magic words. Anna could believe whatever she liked for all Lib cared if only she’d eat.” Here, Lib is beginning to accept the fact that she will not be able to change Anna’s thought processes, that only by using her faith as a means of persuasion will she be able to help Anna.

Lib’s increased self-knowledge is further represented by her disturbance at what she sees as her own involvement in Anna’s continuing hunger; she berates herself for her arrogance, her assumption that her superior intelligence and training would ensure that she would not need the whole two weeks to answer the question of how Anna was being fed. This is the first time that Lib truly begins to understand how little she knows about the actual state of Anna’s health: she is not sure what the increasingly high measurements in her notes mean because doctors are the ones who are trained to interpret them, but her instinct tells her that these increases might be dangerous. Even 24 hours before, it does not seem that Lib could have believed that her own feelings--as opposed to concrete, quantifiable evidence--are a viable means of considering the problem she is trying to solve.

With this new emotional intelligence, Lib begins to question almost everything she sees about Anna—the way she moves on their walk, her excitement at the scents of the flowers and the air—while at the same time continuing to open her mind to other, more subtle view points. Rather than dismissing Anna’s comment that “Our Lady’s pouring such a great deal of light on everything, I can nearly smell it”, Lib wonders whether “eating little or nothing [could] open the pores...[and/or] open the senses.”

Lib allows herself to enjoy the interview with William Byrne, not only because she believes that his opinion will help her get to the bottom of the mystery, but because it’s obvious that Anna likes him. This newfound emotional openness makes it doubly difficult for her when Byrne, angry that professionals have allowed Anna to starve herself, tells her that Anna is “[a] delightful dying child” and that one reason he is sure of this is that Anna’s breath smells like vinegar. “Lib tried to remember [whether she had ever noticed Anna’s breath]. That wasn’t one of the measurements she had been taught to record.” At this point, she is still relying on her intellect, although her conversation with Byrne has sown the seeds for new knowledge.



Although in this chapter Lib continues to berate herself for her mistakes, they are no longer simple misunderstanding of what people have said or done. Now she realizes that the mistakes she has made are much farther-reaching than misinterpreting people's words. Those missteps had all been within the realm of intellect; but now she has entered into emotional complexity. Not only has Byrne pointed out her intellectual mistakes, but he has forced her to realize that she is now as complicit in Anna's situation as her parents, the priest, the visitors, and anyone else that Lib has—even briefly—blamed in her mind. The last line of the draft of the newspaper article that Byrne leaves under her door reads: “[Anna’s] watchers must beware.” This line forces Lib to think about her own blindness. Since she has spent hours of every day with Anna, she has come to truly care about her. She realizes that she may have been so afraid to face the implications of Anna's hunger that she has convinced herself that someone must have been feeding Anna, or, alternatively, that the strength of Anna's faith or the strength of her mind has been sustaining her. Byrne, as an outsider, has done what Lib was hired to do; he has determined that she is not surviving without food. In fact, she has had no nourishment at all and she is starving. Lib is repulsed by what she perceives as her own negligence.

Lib's new perspective extends to her view of Sister Michael as well. Lib is forced to think more clearly of Sister Michael; she realizes that the nun had never said that she believed Anna to be living without food and that it was her own prejudices which had led her to believe in Sister Michael's ignorance. The story that Sister Michael tells Anna--with its theme of the danger of keeping secrets--also helps Lib on her journey towards understanding. The story can be seen--at least to an extent--as a metaphor for Lib's own journey towards more emotional accessibility.

As Lib formulates a plan by which she hopes to save Anna, she tells herself that she must be careful, that as an outsider, she must not lose her temper or be arrogant. It is difficult for her to persuade Sister Michael that ethically they must put an end to the watch, as Sister Michael is concerned about her vows of obedience to her superiors, including Dr. McBrearty. She tells Lib that she cannot act because she is “only a nurse.” Lib has realized, though, that being a nurse encompasses much more than hierarchies and obedience, that not only is it within her power as a nurse to save Anna, but that her integrity as a human being impels her to do so.

When Lib meets with Dr. McBrearty, she is much more conscious of how she presents herself than she has ever been before, telling herself not to be strident with him and that in this village she must ask after the welfare of the resident magistrate, whom the doctor has been attending. Even in the face of Dr. McBrearty's wildest religious speculations, she manages to answer him in his own language: “Without the food [that God]’s provided for us, we die.”

Although she tries as gently as she can to persuade him, he refuses to acknowledge any complicity. This time, rather than being angry at him for his ignorance or blaming the culture and/or religion, she blames herself. As she leaves his house, she can see very clearly what she should have done, how she should have acted: “She’d botched this interview. She should have brought McBrearty around gradually to the point where he



thought it was his idea—and his duty—to abort the watch, just as he'd begun it. Since she'd come to this country eight days ago, Lib had made one blunder after the other. How ashamed of her Miss N. would have been."

The newspaper article, Dr. McBrearty's refusal to face facts, and her own recently acknowledged feelings for William Byrne give Lib the courage to act, to try to persuade Anna to eat, even though she knows that she will be fired if she is caught. It is not only the action here which is significant, but the fact that Lib realizes that the only way she might be able to convince Anna to eat is through religion. She must make her argument using terms of the religion and the culture which is so foreign to her. This realization also means that she can see Anna's parents through a more charitable lens: "The poor lived for the day, was that it? Lib wondered. Lacking control over their circumstances, they learned not to borrow trouble by looking any farther down the road?"

Significantly, it is through Lib's new understanding of Rosaleen O'Donnell that allows her to see clearly for the first time, an understanding which comes because, through William Byrne's and Dr. McBrearty's references to her own past, she has found new empathy with Mrs. O'Donnell's position. It is this empathy which reveals the answer to the mystery, and it is Anna's clear understanding of the consequences of her decision which allow Lib to make a plan to save Anna.

Discussion Question 1

How does Lib's definition of the word "nurse" change in this chapter?"

Discussion Question 2

How would you characterise Sister Michael's approach to her job? What does Lib realise about her in this chapter?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Dr. McBrearty refuse to acknowledge the evidence before him? Why does he seem to ignore Anna's deterioration?

Vocabulary

vigil, sodality, obligation, recalcitrant, condemned, communion, divine, hoax, affable, missal, cunning, implicated, intimidated, miracle, constricted, simian, anodyne, strident, illumination, physiological, reptilian, mammalian, inexplicable, deduce, thwart, self-aggrandizement, botched, mollifying, pallor, tantamount, repository, indelible, cataclysm, dispatch



Chapter Five: Shift

Summary

William Byrne finds Lib while she is eating her lunch at the spirit grocery and she brings him up to date on Anna's condition. She also tells him how Anna has been being fed and asks him not to publish any of the information. He argues that perhaps the publicity would encourage Anna to eat, but Lib disagrees, explaining that Anna's decision not to eat has a religious motive, that she is trying to get her brother out of Purgatory. Byrne tells her that Dr. McBrearty has convened a meeting of the committee tonight at 10:00 and says that she and Sister Michael should report their findings to the committee, even though Lib tells him that the nurses had not been invited.

When Lib arrives at the O'Donnells' house, she finds that Anna's condition has deteriorated. Sister Michael is not convinced that they should go to the meeting without having been asked by Dr. McBrearty. She points out that the watch only has three days to go before they are supposed to report their findings anyway, but Lib tells her that Anna may die before that long. Sister Michael leaves without another word.

Anna is too weak even to go out in the wheelchair. Lib tries to convince her to eat, using arguments from Scripture, but Anna refuses to consider it, even when Lib reminds her that, as a suicide, she would be buried outside consecrated ground. Anna remains unmoved. While she sleeps, Lib looks through her books again and, after reading one of the prayers again, realizes that Anna is hoping that, if she sacrifices herself, her brother will be allowed to leave Purgatory and go to Heaven. When Mr. O'Donnell comes in to see Anna, Lib asks him to intercede with Anna but he says that she has already made up her mind, that she will not listen to him.

That night, Lib is worried that if she tells the committee the truth about Anna, that they will fire her and she will have no chance even to say goodbye to Anna. Although she would not mind losing this job, she does not want to be forced out without seeing Anna again. She believes, albeit without any concrete evidence, that she is the only one who can convince Anna to stop her fast.

When she arrives at the meeting, she is surprised to find Anna's parents there. Although Dr. McBrearty has already reported his findings, Lib provides a detailed description of Anna's physical state, setting off a quarrel among the committee members. As she is about to tell them how Anna has been fed, Sister Michael arrives at the meeting with Anna in the wheelchair. Even though Anna's condition is clearly dire, the committee chooses to allow the watch to continue. Lib leaves the meeting in a desperate fury.

Later that night, Byrne's knock on the door wakes Lib from a nightmare. She tells him about what she saw at the meeting and he tells her that she needs to act without them, that she is the only person that Anna might listen to. When she arrives for her shift in the morning, she begs Anna to eat and once again Anna refuses. Mr. Thaddeus arrives but



Anna says she is not yet ready to make her final confession. Anna, Mr. Thaddeus, the O'Donnells, and Kitty sing a hymn and Mr. Thaddeus leaves.

When Lib returns for her next shift, Sister Michael tells her that there will be a votive mass—a mass said for a specific intention—said for Anna the next night. Anna is pleased, but she admits to Lib that she is afraid of dying. Lib holds her hand until she falls asleep. Lib thinks to herself how easy it would be to help Anna out of her misery by smothering her with a pillow and is appalled at herself.

When Anna wakes up, in answer to Lib's questions, she explains the sin she is trying to expiate. Convinced that Anna's family will not help their daughter live, Lib tells Byrne that she wants to take Anna away, but only if Anna herself will go.

That afternoon when Lib arrives for her shift, she finds Anna receiving the Last Rites, although Sister Michael tells her that the Last Rites are also believed to have the power of restoring health. The family are all looking forward to the Mass that night, and Lib suggests that Sister Michael go with them, which Mrs. O'Donnell enthusiastically supports.

That night, Lib tries one more time to get Mr. O'Donnell to intercede with Anna, but he refuses, saying that he has promised her that he never would. The O'Donnells and Kitty leave for the mass, and Lib begins to put her plan into action. She tells Anna that God has given her a message for her, that if she eats the milk and oatcake that Lib has brought her, that Anna will die and Nan—eight years old, from somewhere far away—will be born and that Anna's sins will all be forgiven. Anna believes her and, after saying grace, breaks her fast.

Lib takes Anna outside to where Byrne is waiting. Lib promises to join them soon and the two of them leave and Lib returns to the cabin. She sets it on fire and hides in the bog, where Sister Michael finds her in the morning. Because there is no body—Anna's body having apparently been incinerated in the fire--Anna is declared dead in absentia. Lib's notes tell the committee that she died at 9:07PM. Lib is dismissed without pay.

In the epilogue that follows, Lib, Byrne, and Anna have assumed new identities and are on their way to begin new lives in Australia.

Analysis

In this chapter, Lib's newfound understanding of Anna and of herself allows her to embrace her personal transformation. Not only does she admit her feelings for William Byrne and he for her, but she decides to jettison any semblance of remaining within the parameters of her job. She is no longer concerned with whether or not she satisfies the committee; rather, she must satisfy herself that she has done the best she could for her patient, even though doing so requires great emotional risk on her part.

Although she is convinced of the O'Donnells' criminal complicity in Anna's approaching death, she realizes that she must be very careful in her tactics if she is to save Anna. It



is critical that no one know what she is doing, but to be able to carry out her plan she must read the people around her more subtly than she ever has before. The first instance of this more complex interpretation is during the committee meeting after Sister Michael arrives with Anna. She is tempted to tell the committee members about Mrs. O'Donnell's role in feeding Anna. She realizes, however, that "[for her] to force the girl to choose between her nurse and Rosaleen [Anna's mother] was too risky; what child wouldn't side with her own mother? Besides, it would be unconscionably cruel." Not only do her thoughts here show a much more sophisticated understanding of Anna than she has demonstrated before, but this is the first time she has ever acted on her empathy for Rosaleen. Lib's assumption that the physical evidence of Anna's deterioration will convince the committee to stop the watch functions as a springboard for her later decision to take Anna away. It is significant that Lib's emotional investment in saving Anna functions in the same way that the committee members are blinded by their own agendas; whereas each of the committee members has too much personally invested in their belief that Anna is being sustained solely by God, Lib is staking the rest of her life on the belief that Anna will transcend the emotionalism of religion and succumb to logic.

A second example of Lib's newfound subtlety in approaching her surroundings is later in the same chapter when Mr. O'Donnell comes into see Anna. Lib is hoping that he will intercede with his daughter, but she hesitates to tell him this directly at first. When he comes in to say goodnight to Anna, Lib wants to tell him the whole story of how Rosaleen has been feeding Anna, but she decides against it: "It was a grave thing to come between a man and his wife, and risky because how could Malachy possibly take the Englishwoman's word against Rosaleen's?...No, what mattered was not the truth, but Anna." Whereas earlier Lib would have insisted on the importance of literal, concrete truth, here she is beginning to see the need to prioritize facts, to tell an experiential truth rather than a truth that can only be documented literally.

Because of this new understanding, Lib's relationship with Sister Michael changes as well. Although she is still frustrated with Sister Michael's willingness to follow the rules of the watch, Lib realizes that Sister Michael, in bringing Anna to the committee meeting, has gone out of her way to help her. At the end of the novel, Sister Michael is the only one who knows the truth. Technically, she should have told the committee about Lib's actions in burning the cabin down and saving Anna, but she does not. Instead, she tells Lib that, having left the mass early because she was afraid that Anna had died, she had a vision of an angel taking Anna away. Lib realizes that not only does Sister Michael know the truth, but she will not share this truth with anyone. Lib is free to go.

By the time of the epilogue, Lib's transformation is complete both literally and emotionally. She, Byrne, and Anna are on board a ship bound for Australia, having all assumed new identities. Now that Lib has decided to marry Byrne and become Anna's mother, her transformation is complete.

Discussion Question 1

How has Lib's definition of the word "nurse" changed by the end of the novel?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Sister Michael not tell the committee the truth? Is she right in her decision?

Discussion Question 3

Are Anna's parents responsible for their daughter's decision to die? Why/why not?

Vocabulary

deferential, baronet, peevish, mummified, postmortem, martyr, imbecile, combustible, apotheosis, qualm, behest, imposture, whimsical, credence, ludicrous, zealot, ambivalence, heretic, euphemism, grotesque, combustible, indignation, wan, catarrhal, inexorable, exile, perpetual, votive, fatalism, pomposity, apathetic, treachery, arbitrary, compel, penance, anointing, bruited, calamities, redemption, mortification, muster, fettered, incongruously, impeccable, malignity, writhed



Characters

Elizabeth (Lib) Wright

As the main character in the book, Lib is the lynchpin on which the entire plot depends. A nurse who has trained with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean War, Lib is very proud of her training. She views the world through its lens—both as a reason to feel superior to the people around her and as a protective mechanism, as when she first realizes that she is beginning to be concerned for Anna’s welfare on a personal level rather than simply a medical one.

As an Englishwoman and a Protestant, Lib is an outsider in the village where she is working. She passes herself off as a widow, but in fact she was deserted by her husband only a little more than a year after their marriage, following the death of their infant daughter. Without familial or marital ties, Lib decided to go to the Crimea and learn to be a nurse. The horror and devastation she saw there cements her faith in what she can see and touch, rather than in any sort of religion. This lack of faith means that she has a very difficult time understanding the people in the village, whose lives seem to her to be completely controlled by their faith in the Catholic Church.

Lib’s absorption in her nursing career has not allowed her much time to follow current events, so she has only the most cursory knowledge of the Irish Famine, which has ended only 12 years before her arrival in the village. She is unaware of the role that England played in the Famine and she has only the most basic understanding of the historical conflicts between Ireland and England. Consequently, she cannot help making many mistakes in the way that she approaches the people of the village; her remarks and actions are often misinterpreted, which makes it more difficult than it has to be for her to do the job for which she has been hired.

Lib is not truly an arrogant or unapproachable person, but in the face of her personal losses she seems to find it easier to cut herself off emotionally from everyone she meets. Consequently, she presents herself as an arrogant, cold, suspicious person whose only concern is maintaining the integrity of the watch she has been entrusted with, in spite of her growing attachment to Anna. This suspicion sets the tone for her relationships with Anna’s family in particular.

Anna O'Donnell

Anna is 11 years old. Devoutly religious, it seems that she has somehow survived without food for more four months. Although she is not technically ill, at the behest of a committee made of prominent residents of the village, Lib and Sister Michael are hired to watch over her so that it can be determined whether or not she is truly not eating and, if not, how she is being fed.



Anna is very polite and she seems to be completely sincere, both in her devotion to God and in her choice not to eat. “I don’t need [food],” she tells Lib at one point; she believes that she has lived on “manna from Heaven.” She seems to be oblivious to the controversy that surrounds her—uninterested in her potential as a moneymaker either for her parents or for the Church—preferring to devote her energies to prayer and to her daily concerns of knitting, sewing, her collection of holy cards, and her love of flowers and nature. She is quiescent and accommodating, allowing Lib and the others to poke, prod, measure, etc. her without question.

She seems to believe that she is healthy, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary: her limbs are so swollen that she must use her older brother’s discarded boots, her hair is falling out, she is covered with a sort of downy fuzz, she bruises easily, and she has many other symptoms of starvation.

Sister Michael

The second nurse hired to watch over Anna, Sister Michael is a mystery to Lib. A “walking nun”—meaning that they go out into the world—Sister Michael has taken vows “to be of use.” She is an experienced nurse, although without the same training that Lib has. Because she knows very little about Catholicism, Lib often misunderstands Sister Michael’s stories and her actions. However, as the novel continues, Lib realizes that there is much more to Sister Michael than she first believes. In spite of her concern for hierarchies, rules, and what seems to Lib to be a blind willingness to follow the instructions she has been given, Sister Michael sees Anna’s situation clearly and even facilitates the success of Lib’s plan at the end of the novel.

Rosaleen O'Donnell

Anna’s mother, Rosaleen is the person of whom Lib is the most suspicious. Her concern for Anna’s welfare is almost overdone, and she seems very concerned with outward appearances. She is very involved with the church and is very proud of Anna and the notoriety she has achieved. She seems to love Anna very much, although Lib believes that her solicitousness masks a certain greed and that Rosaleen is the person behind the hoax of Anna’s survival (supposedly) without food. It strikes Lib that Rosaleen is a little bit too excited about Anna’s lack of appetite. She appears not to notice that Anna is ill, instead appearing to truly believe that Anna is being sustained spiritually.

Malachy O'Donnell

A teetotaller, Anna’s father is a farmer who keeps cattle and sells the manure for fertilizer. Reserved and taciturn, he also seems to love his daughter very much and is as oblivious as his wife to her lack of health. He does not appear to Lib to be as calculating as his wife, although he is as religious as she. Neither he nor Rosaleen have any real education and Malachy tells Lib at one point that Anna has “twice the wits” that he does.



Kitty

Anna's cousin, Kitty is the O'Donnells' only servant. Lib speculates that the rest of her family died in the Famine and that she has been forced to earn her keep in this way. Kitty is uneducated, yet she seems to love Anna and to believe that Anna is a true miracle. She is very religious, yet at the same time she is very gullible, believing wholeheartedly in fairies and other superstitions.

William Byrne

A journalist, Byrne is outwardly cynical and inclined to scoff at the gullibility of the people who believe that Anna is a miracle. Even though he is not overtly religious in the same way that the O'Donnells are, he is a Catholic. Significantly, though, he is a Catholic who does not take everything that the Church says as the gospel truth. Even more than his religion, his past experiences reporting on the Famine have shaped not only his worldview, but his attitude towards Anna. Through the course of the novel, he is more and more drawn to Anna and, by the end of the novel, he is willing to help Lib in her plan to save Anna. His early relationship to Lib is antagonistic, as she sees him strictly as a journalist who is hoping to enhance his reputation by writing about Anna, but after he meets Anna, he allows himself to acknowledge his growing feelings for Lib as well, even though she is reluctant to let herself reciprocate in light of her own difficult past.

Dr. McBrearty

Dr. McBrearty is the medical authority in Anna's case, but he is incompetent. Even though he is a trained physician, he does not seem to have any interest in medical facts. He is the person who has written to the Irish Times about Anna and he wholeheartedly supports the formation of a committee to determine whether or not Anna has really been living without food. He refuses to take anything that Lib tells him seriously and he—apparently willfully—ignores Anna's deterioration. When Anna is so weak that she cannot get out of bed, he comments that a few days of rest will be good for her, in spite of the fact that it is obvious to everyone else that she is near death.

Rather than consider the evidence that he has before him, he prefers to look to history—to the lives of the saints—and to crazy theories as means to explain Anna's refusal to eat. At one point he suggests that she might be reabsorbing menstrual blood—even though she has not yet reached puberty—and at another time he speculates that perhaps her metabolism is changing in such a way that she is becoming reptilian. When Lib tells him that the watch must be stopped in order to save Anna's life, he says, "You've not been called upon to deduce anything" and implies that it is her past—her personal concerns—which are blinding her to the reality that he sees.



Symbols and Symbolism

The "Dorothy Prayer"

The "Dorothy Prayer" symbolizes what Anna believes is necessary to get Pat out of Purgatory. Anna believes that she must say the prayer 33 times every day in order to cleanse Pat of his sins so that God will take him into Heaven. When Anna says this prayer, she says it so softly that Lib cannot understand it. When she asks Anna about it, all she will say is that it is "private," but on the fifth day of the watch, Anna prays the prayer with Mr. Thaddeus and Lib hears the prayer for the first time. Later, Lib looks into Anna's missal and finds a passage explaining this prayer's function as a means of getting souls out of Purgatory. This realization represents the beginning of Lib's understanding of Anna and her actions.

"Nan"

"Nan" symbolizes Anna's new identity; it is the name that Anna assumes at the end of the novel, after Lib takes her away and sets fire to the O'Donnells' cabin. It was first discussed on the fifth day of the watch, after Mr. Thaddeus has left and Anna and Lib have returned to the bedroom. Lib and Anna are discussing how people can change their identities and Lib suggests to Anna that she could have a nickname. "'But she wouldn't be me.' [Anna said.]" This discussion foreshadows Lib's later plan, even though she does not realize it at this point.

Potatoes

Potatoes symbolize food in all its aspects, both physical and spiritual. When Lib first arrives in the village, she expects potatoes to be served, but she is surprised to learn that they have not been harvested yet. Anna was born just after the Irish Famine ended, which Lib speculates may have contributed to her decision to stop eating. Potatoes also symbolize everything that Lib does not understand: not only does she not understand the true circumstances behind the Famine, but at first she does not understand Anna's reasons for fasting, and she realizes that she understands almost nothing about the culture in the village. Because Anna's spiritual dilemma is not being properly addressed--i.e., she is being spiritually starved, even though she would not put it that way-- she stops eating so that she can die and be closer to God.

The daguerreotype of the O'Donnell family

The daguerreotype symbolizes the dysfunction in Anna's family and their willingness to gloss over the truth. Not only have they included Pat's corpse in it, but pupils have been painted on his closed eyelids in the hope that anyone looking at the image will think that he is alive. When she first sees it, the daguerreotype strikes Lib as odd but she cannot



figure out what it is about it that is so disconcerting. Although the O'Donnells take great pains to appear as a loving family, in fact they are willing to sacrifice Anna's life rather than believe that Pat sexually molested his younger sister.

The "little people"

The "little people" symbolize much of what cannot be known. Many of the rituals that the O'Donnells--particularly Kitty--follow are intended to pacify them. Each evening Kitty leaves a saucer of milk in the living room so that they will not be offended and Kitty tells Lib that she should put salt on her porridge so that the little people will stay away from it.

"Buying the damn spoons"

William Byrne's comment that Lib is "buying the damn spoons" symbolizes Anna's trust in her. Byrne believes that Lib is the only person Anna might allow to persuade her to eat. The trust that Anna feels in Lib mirrors the trust that Miss Nightingale placed in Lib when she asked Lib to take Miss N's purse and go to the market to buy enough spoons to feed the patients.

The "green road"

The "green road" symbolizes the futility of the Famine. During the Famine, the government created these roads that went nowhere as a sort of make-work project to keep people busy. The reasoning was that if people were busy they could not agitate. Countless people died building these roads which still exist in Ireland today.

Rosaleen's kiss

Rosaleen's kisses for Anna in the morning and the evening symbolize Anna's willingness to live. In kissing Anna, Rosaleen transfers food from her mouth to her daughter's. It is this food which keeps Anna alive. Once Anna decides definitively that she wants to die, she stops allowing Rosaleen to feed her by refusing her kisses.

Lib's memorandum book

Lib's memorandum book symbolizes the evidence of the crime Lib believes is being perpetrated on Anna. In it, she meticulously charts the physical evidence of Anna's decline. At the end of the novel, Lib throws it into the fire after making sure that she has included the time and manner of Anna's "death."

"Holy milk"

The "holy milk" which Anna drinks at the end of the novel symbolizes Anna's rebirth. Like babies who survive by being fed on their mothers' milk, Anna will survive in her new life as Nan because she drinks this milk that Lib feeds her.



Settings

Anna's bedroom

Anna's bedroom is where she and her nurses spend most of their time. In a cabin with very little personal space, Anna is the only person in the family who has a private room. Her parents sleep in what is basically a lean-to off the main part of the house and Kitty (the maid) sleeps on a pallet in the kitchen.

Ryan's Spirit Grocery

Ryan's Spirit Grocery is where Lib stays when she is not with Anna. It is also where she meets William Byrne and where the committee hold their meetings. The Spirit Grocery seems to be the place--apart from the church--where people in town gather for news, to have a drink, etc.

The Main Room of the O'Donnells' Cabin

The main room is the other place in the cabin where Lib and Anna spend time. It is where the dagguereotypes--one of the family which includes Pat's corpse and one of Anna alone--are kept on the mantel.

The "Good Room" of the O'Donnells' Cabin

This is the room where Anna receives her visitors before Lib forbids their coming, on grounds that they could interfere with the integrity of the watch.

Fields Near the O'Donnells' Cabin

Lib takes Anna for walks here, both so she can get fresh air and to test her stamina. It is in these fields where Anna and Lib meet William Byrne. On another day, they run into Dr. McBrearty here.



Themes and Motifs

Preconceptions and Misconceptions

Although she may not realize it, the preconceptions and misperceptions of Lib's stereotypical views of the Irish, of Catholics, and of people less fortunate that she is lead to many of the protagonist Lib's problems in the novel. It is ironic that, although Lib prides herself on her ability to analyze facts, through much of the novel she misinterprets almost everything. For example, when she sees rundown cabins she assumes that the Irish are too shiftless to bother with maintenance when in fact, it is because people who lived there were victims of the Famine. The cabins are rundown because their occupants have either died or have been too weak to take care of them.

As an English Protestant, Lib falls victim to many preconceptions about Catholics and Catholicism. When she first sees Sister Michael in the spirit grocery, she assumes that Sister Michael does not speak to her because her vows forbid speaking to non-Catholics when the more logical conclusion is that she may be tired or uncomfortable making small talk. Lib also assumes that, because Sister Michael does not have the same training that Lib received serving with Florence Nightingale in the Crimea, she could not possibly be a good nurse. In her own mind, Lib places herself above Sister Michael and she is offended when Sister Michael does not treat her as a superior. In fact, Sister Michael is a more experienced nurse than Lib is and there are several instances in the novel when Lib is embarrassed to find that she has misjudged Sister Michael.

At the beginning of the novel, Lib believes that Anna herself is, if not the main instigator, at least fully complicit in the feeding that Lib is sure is taking place. However, as the novel continues and she begins to know Anna, Lib realizes that this is not the case, that Anna is, in fact, exactly what she appears to be--a pious and sincere 11-year-old girl, a girl who is acting from the purest of motives, even though she does not fully understand the reasons behind what she is doing.

Lib's quest to understand Anna is hindered by her own misperceptions of Catholicism. At first, rather than seeing it as a religion whose tenets Anna misunderstands in her belief that her fasting will get her brother out of Purgatory, Lib assumes that Catholicism itself is at fault. Lib believes that Catholics--particularly the people in the village--are motivated solely by greed in their support of Anna's fast rather than questioning Anna's perceptions of her religion. Lib's misperception is in believing that it is the religion itself that is a malignant force rather than considering the ulterior motives of the individual people who practice it.



Motherhood

Both the presence and absence of motherhood catalyze Lib's emotional transformation in this novel. There is the seemingly overwhelming love of Rosaleen O'Donnell for her daughter, in which Rosaleen continually parrots clichés and pat sayings: "The nest is enough for the wren," she says, in response to Lib's question about whether Anna goes to school. Many parents believe that their children are miracles, but Rosaleen seems to believe sincerely that Anna's survival without food truly does give her miraculous status. When she is allowed to kiss Anna in the morning and the evening, she makes an almost theatrical show of it, hiding Anna from Lib's view and physically overwhelming her tiny daughter. Later on in the novel, when Anna refuses Rosaleen's kiss, Rosaleen is angry--not only that Anna will not kiss her, but that Lib has seen Anna's rejection of her mother. Lib believes that Rosaleen is blaming her for finally rooting out the hypocrisy in her relationship with her daughter:

"As Rosaleen leaned over to engulf the child in her usual embrace, Anna put her hand up flat against her mother's expanse of bony chest.

Rosaleen O'Donnell froze.

Anna shook her head, wordless.

Rosaleen O'Donnell straightened up and put her fingers to the girl's cheek. On the way out, she gave Lib a venomous look."

When Lib leaves the O'Donnells' house after her shift that afternoon, she goes to the cemetery to see Pat's grave. Her trip to the cemetery makes her realize that, although she still believes that Rosaleen's overly dramatic expressions of love are hypocritical, she and Rosaleen share the experience of having lost a child. The difference between them is that, while Lib has thrown herself into her work and isolated herself emotionally as much as she can, Rosaleen has invested so much emotion into controlling Anna's life that she risks losing her second child as well.

The death of her daughter who was less than a year old and her husband's subsequent abandonment make Lib question her self-worth: if she cannot do what for most women seems to be instinctive--to marry and mother a child--then what could her purpose possibly be? Lib remembers a discussion with Miss Nightingale at the beginning of her training, in which Miss N. implies that her bereavement will make her a better nurse. Later on, in talking with William Byrne, she thinks that "[s]he hadn't deserved to lose her daughter; Lib knew that even on her bleakest days. She's done nothing that she shouldn't have...had left nothing undone that she should have done. Fate was faceless, life arbitrary..."

It is ultimately the memory of her own short experience of motherhood that brings Lib to the conclusion that she must take Anna away. Later on, after she and Byrne have taken Anna away from the cabin and Lib is waiting to testify before the committee, the narrator says, "For the first time, Lib understood the wolfishness of mothers. It occurred to her



that if by some miracle she came through today's trials and go away to that room in Athlone where William Byrne was waiting, she'd become the girl's mother, or the nearest thing to it....In times to come, when Nan-who-was-once-Anna blamed someone, it would be Lib. That was part of motherhood, she supposed, bearing responsibility for pushing the child out of warm darkness into the dreadful brightness of new life." The end of the novel implies that Lib's new status as Nan's mother is central to Lib's transformation.

Religion

The characters' various ways of approaching the question of religious faith determine their abilities to understand Anna's actions and, consequently, the extent to which they can help her. The O'Donnells--especially Anna--and Kitty are fervently devout Roman Catholics, as are the other residents of the village. As such, their faith in God seems absolute and, to them, it does not seem beyond the realm of possibility that Anna could be living without food, even though logic tells them that such a thing is impossible. Anna's belief not only in God's power but in the literalness of the Scriptures is so unconditional that Sister Michael and Mr. Thaddeus have a difficult time explaining the more complex parts of the Bible. Anna's choice near the end of the novel not to confess to Mr. Thaddeus seems to imply that, unconsciously, she wants to give Lib one last chance to rescue her--to discover Pat's sin, that maybe there is a way out for her after all. Although Lib does not have religious faith herself, she is beginning to understand how Anna's faith works and the best way to counteract it.

Lib's worldview is dictated by what she can see and analyse, so she is distrustful of the emotionalism inherent in Catholicism. When she first discovers that Anna is fasting in hopes of helping her brother get out of Purgatory and into heaven, she feels powerless in the face of this alien viewpoint: "'Oh, child...'" This was an alien language and, frankly, one she didn't want to learn. She patted the girl on the shoulder, awkwardly. Felt the knob of bone." Later in the novel, when Anna tells her that, although her brother sexually abused her, she believes that she is the one who sinned, Lib is distraught: "'If God grants it, we can be together soon, but no bodies this time. No marrying,'" Anna pleads. "'just brother and sister again.'" 'Anna, I can't bear this, I--' Lib was crouching on the edge of the bed now, blinded, as the room turned to water."

She is even more distrustful of Christianity's assumption that human beings are naturally fallen creatures and that in order to make a "good death," they must be absolved of their sins. When Lib arrives at the cabin to find that Anna is receiving the Last Rites, Sister Michael explains that this sacrament is to wipe away Anna's sins, Lib thinks: "What about sins committed against Anna?" She is offended when, in discussing the abuse with Mr. Thaddeus, she realises that the only comfort he was able to offer Anna was that her sins were forgiven; he does not seem to realise that sins have been committed against her. Again Lib, blames Catholicism itself rather than the people who practice it. She has not yet learned that secrets can determine the way that people interpret the tenets of religion.



Loss and Absence

In this novel, loss and absence function as opposite sides of the same coin. For example, many of Lib's actions are dictated by the absence of her daughter, although she does not want to admit this, even to herself. The reason that Dr. McBrearty's speculation that Lib's concern for Anna is the result of her maternal instincts having been thwarted by the death of her infant daughter upsets Lib so much is that he is correct. With this one comment, Dr. McBrearty has breached the walls that Lib has worked so hard to erect and she feels as if she has been caught out: "It was an old wound the doctor has prodded, but he'd one it without warning, and she was dizzy with pain. With outrage too; had Matron really been obligated to share Lib's history with the man?"

However, when William Byrne mentions the same thing, albeit unconsciously, Lib's reaction is very different because he realizes that he has made a mistake: "'Forgive me. Talk's my trade,' he said. 'But I should learn to shut my mouth.' Lib tried to smile. She feared the effect was grotesque....'I'm not myself,' Lib said hoarsely at last. 'This case has...unsettled me.'" Because Byrne does not condescend to her when she expresses emotion, Lib can forgive him for touching on such an emotionally difficult issue and she can even imply that her reaction to Anna may be at least partially dictated by her own experience of loss and absence.

Although Lib is suspicious of Rosaleen O'Donnell throughout the entire novel, the loss of her daughter allows her to empathize with Rosaleen, to begin to understand her actions. When she is looking for Pat's grave in the cemetery, Lib speculates that Pat's death in addition to (although she cannot be certain) several miscarriages may have made Rosaleen's heart "frost-burnt," that—emotionally—Rosaleen may have nothing more to give to anyone and that therefore it is less emotionally risky for her to think of Anna as saintly rather than watching her go through the trials and tribulations of being a normal human child? Lib realizes here that she and Rosaleen do share certain commonalities, although those commonalities are not enough for her to condone what Rosaleen has done.

Nursing

Although Lib has nursed professionally for several years, she does not truly become a nurse until the end of the novel. Having been trained by Florence Nightingale in the wartime conditions of Scutari during the Crimean War, Lib views almost all nursing simply as a means to either help a patient recover physically or, alternatively, to make death as physically painless as possible. Because nurses at Scutari were responsible for so many patients, Lib's perspective on nursing does not allow for any sort of personal or emotional relationship with her patients. When Lib first meets Anna she is concerned almost exclusively with her physical health, and one of the first things that she does upon meeting Anna is write down her measurements because those numbers are a concrete representation of Anna's physical state. Significantly, Lib is acutely



distrustful of anything having to do with emotions; each time she thinks something positive about Anna, she forces herself to think of something negative as well. On Lib's second day with Anna, the narrator says, "The girl was charming, in her unworldly way. Lib found it hard to keep in mind that Anna was a trickster, a great liar in a country famous for them."

Significantly, as the novel continues, Lib realizes that if she is to arrive at the truth behind Anna's decision to stop eating she must also learn to understand Anna's emotional needs. This realization catalyzes her quest to understand the motivations behind Anna's decision not to eat. During her first night shift, while Anna sleeps, Lib thinks about Anna's comment that she was living on "manna from Heaven": "It came to Lib then that the question to ask was not HOW a child might commit such a fraud, but WHY." In thinking about Anna, Lib speculates that she does not seem like someone who is being forced to do anything, so in order to find the truth about Anna, she must find out how her mind works. After this realization, Lib Over the course of the novel, Lib gains a much deeper understanding of Anna's thought processes and of the events behind her refusal to eat. Only then can Lib move beyond the physical to care for Anna as a whole person rather than simply as a body.

When Sister Michael refuses to join her in asking Dr. McBrearty to call off the watch because she is "only a nurse," Lib snaps at her, "I was taught the full meaning of that word, '...'[w]eren't you?" Lib realizes that in order to truly be a nurse in the fullest sense of the word, she must go beyond the parameters of the job for which she was hired and find a way to save Anna.



Styles

Point of View

The novel is told from the third-person limited omniscient point of view with very limited authorial intrusion. Consequently, readers see everything through Lib's eyes. She is a reliable narrator in the sense that her perspective is true as she sees it (the narrator does not willfully lie about anything she sees or thinks, although there are many things about which her thoughts change through the novel) However, her perspective is subjective. Further, it is informed first by her outsider status--British and Protestant--and secondly by her suspicion of Anna and her family. As the novel continues and Lib learns more about Anna and the culture of the village, her interpretations become more accurate. For example, throughout most of the novel, Lib is very clear that she has no patience for God or religion, but when Anna tells her what Pat did to her, "Lib found herself praying to the God tat she didn't believe in." A second example is that, although she is suspicious of Rosaleen O'Donnell throughout the novel, Lib does come to feel sympathy for her when she realizes that Rosaleen must have gone through losing her son and only have the one child left in a culture that prized large families.

Language and Meaning

The language of the book is very straightforward without any complicated sentence structure. The vocabulary of the novel is not difficult, although there are a few words that readers unfamiliar with nineteenth-century Ireland and/or Roman Catholicism may not know. Donahue explains the few dialect terms that she uses, as in when Lib first goes to the O'Donnells' cabin and Rosaleen tells them that they will have to sit on "creepies" because the chairs are in the good room with Anna and the visitors: "'Creepies' had to mean the log stools the woman was shoving practically into the flames for her guests." Significantly, here as in other places, the narrator's language mirrors Lib's hostility. From the beginning, Lib is suspicious of Rosaleen and the narrator makes Lib's hostility very clear throughout the novel. Other examples include Lib's attitude towards Rosaleen's apparent refusal to worry about Anna's not eating: "There were only two possible explanations for the Irishwoman's serenity, Lib decided: either Rosaleen was so convinced of divine intervention that she had no anxiety for her daughter, or, more likely she had reason to believe the girl was getting plenty to eat on the sly."

Structure

The novel is made up of five chapters and an epilogue. Each chapter has a one-word title with all its dictionary definitions after it. For example, the first chapter is called "Nurse." Then there is a list:

nurse:



to suckle an infant

to bring up a child

to take care of the sick

Each chapter is roughly the same length, comprising approximately 20% of the novel each. Each chapter covers between 24 and 48 hours. In reading each chapter, all the definitions of the title word can be found within it.



Quotes

Lib's three-year tenure at the hospital where she had worked was "[r]emarkable in itself, as most of the nurses stayed no more than a matter of months; irresponsible scrubbers, Mrs. Gamps in the old mould, whining for their rations of porter. Not that Lib was particularly appreciated there. She'd heard Matron describe veterans of Miss N.'s Crimean campaign as 'uppish.'"

-- Lib (One paragraph Location 113 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This comment is important because it establishes Lib's view of herself as someone who believes that she is superior to others. In Lib's case, Matron has described her perfectly. This comment foreshadows Lib's attitude towards everyone that she meets in the village. This quote is found near the very beginning of the book, which is significant because her training is almost the first thing that readers discover about Lib.

But observation was only the first piece of the puzzle. Miss N. had taught her nurses to watch carefully in order to understand what the ill required and provide it. Not medicine--that was the doctors' domain--but the things she argued were equally crucial to recovery: light, air, warmth, cleanliness, rest, comfort, nourishment, and conversation.

-- The narrator (One paragraph Location 124 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Here, the narrator is describing Lib's thoughts as she is discussing her new job with Dr. McBrearty. This comment is ironic because, on the one hand, Lib is very observant of the concrete things around her, but she misses, ignores, or misinterprets all of the emotional clues and less concrete details of the environment and the people in it.

What's more, if newspapers across the kingdom were to give Nurse Elizabeth Wright the credit for exposing the hoax, the whole staff of the hospital would have to sit up and take notice. Who'd call her 'uppish' then? Perhaps better things might come of it; a position more suited to Lib's talents, more interesting. A less narrow life.

-- Lib (One paragraph Location 224 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Again, these are Lib's thoughts. Her thought here foreshadows what does eventually happen, although she is never given credit for "exposing the hoax" and it does not happen even remotely in the way that she envisions.

Why couldn't McBrearty have sent for two Nightingales while he was at it? It occurred to Lib now that perhaps none of the fifty-odd others--lay or religious--had been available at such short notice. Was Lib the only Crimean nurse who'd failed to find her niche half a decade on? The only one sufficiently at loose ends to take the poisoned bait of this job?

-- Lib (One paragraph Location 252 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This comment is another nod to Lib's outsider status, although it is clear that it is not only in Ireland that she is an outsider, but everywhere else too. She does



not understand how to relate to people without being condescending and superior, although at this point in the novel, readers do not know what has caused her to be this way.

Women, she read, were often 'more exact and careful' than the stronger sex, which enabled them to avoid 'mistakes of inadvertence.

-- Lib (Two paragraph Location 863 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Here, Lib is reading through her copy of Florence Nightingale's "Notes on Nursing" and is struck by this comment. The comment is ironic, however, because although Lib follows all procedures as strictly as she can, she is nonetheless blindsided by anything requiring any emotional engagement, at least at the beginning of the novel.

The children that are strangers have lied to me, strange children have faded away, and have halted from their paths."

-- The Bible (Psalms) (Two paragraph Location 1280 (Kindle edition))

Importance: While Anna sleeps, Lib looks through her things in an attempt to understand Anna and finds this quotation. Reading it, she realizes that it is even more important to find out why Anna has stopped eating than it is to find out who might be feeding her--because only by finding out Anna's motivation will she be able to try to persuade her to eat again. Even though it is still early in the novel, Lib is beginning to realize that she is more emotionally involved in this job than she thinks she should be.

Lib's pulse began to thump because it struck her that if the strict surveillance was preventing Anna from getting food by her previous methods, the girl might be starting to suffer in earnest. Could the watch be having the perverse effect of turning the O'Donnells' lie to truth?

-- Lib (Two paragraph Location 1388 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This comment represents the first time that Lib realizes the ultimate implications of what they are doing. Earlier, she has thought about the watch simply as a means to find out whether Anna has been eating, but now she realizes that the vigilance that she in particular has imposed on the watch means that there is no way that Anna COULD be getting food. Therefore, she is part of the reason that Anna truly could starve.

Lib felt her shoulders drop. No enemy, then, this soft-faced child; no hardened prisoner. Only a girl caught up in a sort of waking dream, walking towards the edge of a cliff without knowing it. Only a patient who needed her nurse's help, and fast.

-- Lib (Two paragraph Location 1574 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Here, Lib has realized that the situation is different than she thought it was. Whereas earlier, she assumed that she could simply do her job as written and leave, but now she has been drawn in emotionally. She has realized that nursing is not simply a question of watching and easing the course of a disease, but sometimes it is necessary to act in order to save a patient's life.



I think there's something wrong with Anna's mind," [Lib] pressed on in a whisper. The whites of Sister Michael's eyes caught the lamplight. "We weren't asked to look into her mind." "I'm charting symptoms," Lib insisted. "This brooding over her brother is one." "You're drawing an inference, Mrs. Wright." The nun held up one rigid finger. "We're not to engage in this kind of discussion." "That's impossible. Every word we say is about Anna, and how could it not be?" The nun shook her head violently. "Is she eating or not? That's the only question." "It's not MY only question. And if you call yourself a nurse, it can't be yours either.

-- Lib (Three paragraph Location 1906 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This comment is important for two reasons: first, Lib has begun to consider the watch in different terms. Rather than seeing herself as someone there simply to determine whether or not Anna is eating, the terms for Lib are now different. Now she sees herself as someone who might be able to help Anna rather than simply as a detached observer.; she has allowed herself to get emotionally involved. Partly as a result of this new involvement, she seems also to be slowly moving towards a redefinition of nursing as a whole.

What about you, have you ever had a nickname?" Anna shook her head. "You could be Annie, perhaps. Hanna, Nancy, Nan..." "Nan," said, the girl, sounding out the syllable. "You like Nan best?" "But she wouldn't be me." Lib shrugged. "A woman change changer her name. On marriage, for instance.

-- Lib and Anna (Three paragraph Location 2146 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Anna is very curious about Lib's full name and then, once she finds that out, she wants to know what Lib's nickname is. It takes a long time for Lib to tell her, but when she does, she and Anna discuss how names can change identities. This remark foreshadows the end of the novel, when Anna, Byrne, and Lib all change their names. For Anna, that change is the most significant because it allows "Anna" (whom she perceives as sinful) to die and "Nan" to be born.

What do you make of her?" "She's delightful." Byrne spoke so quietly that she had to lean in to make it out. "Isn't she?" "A delightful dying child." Lib was suddenly winded. She looked over her shoulder at Anna, a tidy figure on one edge of the man's long jacket. "Are you blind?" asked Byrne, still as softly as if he were saying something kind. "The girl's wasting away in front of you.

-- Lib and Byrne (Four paragraph Location 2542 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This scene is a crucial one in the book because Byrne's comments make Lib realize that what she has feared has come to pass: that, whether or not Anna was being fed surreptitiously earlier, now she is receiving no food whatsoever and that she is, in fact, starving.

In her memorandum book, she's logged so many warning signs--why had she resisted the obvious conclusion that the girl's health was in decline? Arrogance, Lib supposed; she'd held firmly to her own judgement and overestimated her knowledge. Wishful thinking, too, as bad as what she'd seen in the families of those she'd nursed. Because



Lib wanted the girl kept from harm, all week she'd indulged in fantasies about unconscious night-feedings or inexplicable powers of mind that bore the girl up. But to an outsider such as William Byrne, it was clear as day that Anna was just starving.

-- Lib (Four paragraph Location 2572 (Kindle edition))

Importance: These comments represent the first time that Lib has truly analyzed her own point of view. Throughout the novel, readers see Lib's arrogance and blindness, but now she sees it too.

Then for you it [saving Anna's life]'s a matter of conscience.' 'Yes,' said Lib. Only now did it sink in. Never mind ORDERS; there was a deeper duty.

-- Lib and Byrne (Four paragraph Location 2817 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Here, Lib tells Byrne that she is worried about Anna and is trying to have the watch called off. She explains that Sister Michael will not disobey her orders, but Byrne realizes that Lib is very attached to Anna. Realizing that nursing is not bound by an official code of ethics as is medicine, Byrne encourages Lib to act in accordance with her own conscience and to believe that her own ethics transcend the parameters of the job she was hired to do.

Rosaleen O'Donnell did the last thing Lib was expecting: she burst into tears. Lib stared at her. 'Didn't I try my best?' the woman wailed, water scudding down the lines of her face. 'Sure isn't she flesh of my flesh, my last hope? Didn't I bring her into the world and rear her tenderly, and didn't I feed her as long as she'd let me?

-- Rosaleen O'Donnell (Four paragraph Location 2961 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This exchange is important because it is the first time that Lib sees the effect that Anna's choice has on her mother. This is one of the only times that Lib feels sympathy and compassion for Rosaleen, even though she still believes her to be the most guilty in Anna's starvation. Further, although Lib does not realize it yet, it can be seen as Rosaleen's confession--i.e., that she was feeding Anna on the sly. The "manna from Heaven" that Anna said she was sustained for was, in fact, food from Rosaleen's own mouth.

Lib flicked back through her memorandum book now, a series of telegraphic dispatches from a distant battlefield. Every day during the first week had been much the same until-- [itals.] Refused mother's greeting. [end vtals.] She stared at the neat words. Saturday morning, six days into the watch. not a medical notation at all; Lib had jotted it down simply because it was an unexplained change in the child's behavior. How could she have been so blind?"

-- Lib (Four paragraph Location 3063 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This is Lib's realization of how Anna had been being fed. Even more importantly, she realizes that now that Anna is no longer allowing her mother to kiss her, she is truly starving.



If you won't eat, child, you'll die.' Anna looked right at her, then nodded and smiled.
-- Lib and Anna (Four paragraph Location 3093 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Lib realizes here that Anna knows exactly what she is doing and what the consequences are. However, she doesn't yet understand all the reasons behind Anna's decision.

Lib looked at Rosaleen O'Donnell's long back and thought, 'I've found you out, you fiend.' There was almost a sweetness to it, this sense of holding her hand the one weapon that could demolish the woman's shoddy imposture.
-- Lib (Five paragraph Location 3139 (Kindle edition))

Importance: When Lib arrives at the O'Donnell's house the day after she learns how Anna has been fed, her hostility to Rosaleen is even stronger than before. She feels vindicated, but at this point Lib is still taking everything on a very personal level; she has not yet gained the greater understanding of why Anna is doing what she is. Even more significantly, though, she has not yet realized the extent to which Rosaleen is implicated in Anna's motivation to die.

It occurred to Lib that she was the only one in the world who knew for sure that this child meant to die. It was like a leaden cape on Lib's shoulders.
-- Lib (Five paragraph Location 3243 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Lib realizes that if Anna is to be saved, that she is the only one who can do it. She suddenly realizes that her responsibilities go far beyond the parameters of the job she was hired for. Earlier, in talking with William Byrne, she realized that she is the only who may be able to save Anna, but here she realizes that she is obligated to do it. No one is responsible.

He asked, 'Whatever could possess a man to leave YOU?' Now her tears brimmed. It was the note of indignation on her behalf that took her unawares.
-- William Byrne and Lib (Five paragraph Location 3394 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This comment is the first time that anyone has show sympathy for what happened to Lib before she came to the village--her husband's abandonment and the loss of her daughter. This is the first time that Lib has felt attractive, that she could allow herself to be attracted to a man again. It is Byrne's sympathy that ultimately gives her the courage to take Anna away.

I was [Pat's] sister and his bride too,' the girl whispered. 'Double.'
-- Anna (Five paragraph Location 3560 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Anna tells Lib what Pat has done; she hopes that her death will get Pat out of Purgatory and into Heaven.

She couldn't tell anyone else [Anna's secret] either. If Anna's own mother had called her liar, most likely so would the rest of the world. Lib couldn't put Anna through the violation



of a medical examination; that body had endured so much probing already. Besides, even if the fact could be proved, what Lib saw as incestuous rape, others would call seduction. Wasn't it so often the girl--no matter how young--who got blamed for having incited her molester with a look? 'I've come to a dreadful conclusion,' she said to Byrne. 'Anna can't live in this family.'

-- Lib (Five paragraph Location 3645 (Kindle edition))

Importance: Lib realizes that everyone would react to the truth about why Anna has stopped eating in the same way that Rosaleen has, so she comes to the conclusion that, since she cannot share Anna's secret with anyone, the only thing that will save her is to take her away. At this point, however, she has not yet figured out how she will do that.

If you drink this,' she went on, 'you won't be Anna O'Donnell anymore. Anna will die tonight, and God will accept her sacrifice and welcome her and Pat into heaven.' The girl didn't move a muscle. Her face a blank. 'You'll be another little girl. A new one. The moment you take a spoonful of this holy mild--it has such power that your life will start all over again,' said Lib. She was rushing so fast now that she stumbled over the words. 'You're going to be a girl called Nan who's only eight years old and lives far, far away from here.'

-- Lib (Five paragraph Location 3826 (Kindle edition))

Importance: This is Lib's last hope of making Anna eat; she knows that Anna believes that her death is the only way out of her dilemma, but she hopes that her desire to live has not been completely snuffed out. Presenting her plan as a message from God as she does a few paragraphs earlier is the only way that she can think of to persuade Anna to eat again.

Was it a true vision, would you say?' asked the nun, her gaze burning into Lib. All she could do was nod. A terrible silence. Then: 'His ways are mysterious.' 'They are,' said Lib hoarsely. 'Has the child gone to a better place--can you promise me that much?' One more nod.

-- Lib and Sister Michael (Five paragraph Location 4098)

Importance: Sister Michael has just told Lib that she saw Byrne riding off with Anna the night before and Lib realizes not only that Sister Michael knows what she has done but that she could give her away, but she does not.