Guests of the Nation

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRANK O'CONNOR

Michael O'Donovan, known primarily as Frank O'Connor, was born to a poor family in Ireland at a time when the movement for Irish independence from the United Kingdom was gaining steam. His family was mostly supported by his mother, who worked as a house cleaner, while his father sank into alcoholism and debt. The young O'Connor was an ardent supporter of Irish independence, and he joined the Irish Republican Army in 1918 to fight occupying British forces, for which he was later imprisoned in 1922. In the early years of what was called the Irish Free State, O'Connor launched his literary career and became a prolific writer of short stories, poems, plays, biographies, and travelogues. He also worked as a translator of Irish poetry and ran a Dublin theater in the 1930s. During World War II, O'Connor's former resentment of Britain cooled and he worked as a broadcaster for the British Ministry of Information. Following the war, he lived in the United States and worked as a visiting professor. He died of a heart attack in Dublin in 1966 at the age of 63.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Frank O'Connor was born, Ireland was a part of the United Kingdom, which included Scotland, Wales, and England. At this time, Ireland had little political independence. In 1916, however, Irish militias confronted British authorities in what was called the Easter Rising, resulting in a bloody crackdown. Shortly afterwards, Ireland formally declared independence, leading to war with the British between 1919 and 1921. "Guests of the Nation" is set during this war, when young Irish soldiers were realizing the sacrifices that would need to be made to win independence, as well as witnessing the emergence of a new country with an uncertain future.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Frank O'Connor was heavily influenced by his teacher Daniel Corkery, whose literary history of Ireland *The Hidden Ireland* influenced a number of Irish writers coming of age during the independence movement. O'Connor wrote "Guests of the Nation" during a renaissance of the short story form in Ireland. Contemporaries of his include Sean O'Faolain, who wrote naturalist stories focusing on the Irish lower classes, and Liam O'Flaherty, whose novel *The Informer* shared O'Connor's preoccupation with the Irish revolutionary period. Additionally, O'Connor couldn't help but be influenced by W.B. Yeats' plays and poems that revived and reinterpreted Irish folklore.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Guests of the Nation
- **When Written:** 1928-1930
- **Where Written:** Dublin, Ireland
- **When Published:** 1931
- **Literary Period:** Irish Nationalism / Modernism
- **Genre:** Realist Short Fiction
- **Setting:** Ireland circa 1920
- **Climax:** The execution of Awkins and Belcher
- **Antagonist:** Jeremiah Donovan
- **Point of View:** 1st person

EXTRA CREDIT

Film Inspiration. "Guests of the Nation" heavily influenced the 1992 movie *The Crying Game*, which partially adapted the story for another period of Irish revolutionary violence called the Troubles in the 1970s and 80s.

Namesake. The name of the character Jeremiah O'Donovan is a reference to Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. O'Donovan Rossa was an Irishman imprisoned for years after plotting a nationalist uprising in 1865 to establish an independent Irish Republic.

PLOT SUMMARY

In "Guests of the Nation," an Irish soldier named Bonaparte recalls his time guarding two British prisoners of war.

Bonaparte remembers how, in the early evening, Belcher (one of the British prisoners) would warm his legs by the fireplace. Afterward, he would suggest a game of cards and 'Awkins (the other British prisoner), as well as Bonaparte and Noble (another Irish soldier), would agree. Jeremiah Donovan, the Irish superior officer, would often come by to observe and chide 'Awkins on his poor play.

Bonaparte notes that the two prisoners were handed over to their care by the Second Battalion because British authorities were searching for them. He thinks that it's pointless to even guard the prisoners, as they seem to have taken so well to the country that they're perfectly happy to stay put wherever they're placed.

Bonaparte, Noble, Belcher, and 'Awkins are all staying in the home of someone referred to only as the old woman. The old women is normally surly, but Belcher gets along well with her, as he's unfailingly polite and assists her with all her household chores. 'Awkins, by contrast, argues endlessly with Noble and

prods the old woman on the subject of religion, but she shuts him down by expressing certainty in strange beliefs about gods who control the rain and thefts from Japanese temples.

One evening, the five soldiers are playing cards while 'Awkins is railing against religion, which he believes is a tool of the capitalist class to control the masses. When Noble disagrees, 'Awkins becomes even more fiery in his condemnation, which rises to the level of a sermon.

Bonaparte leaves to walk into town with Jeremiah to avoid the argument. On their walk, they discuss the prisoners, and Bonaparte wonders why they keep them at all. Jeremiah explains that Belcher and 'Awkins are actually hostages, and the Irish plan to shoot them unless the English release their Irish prisoners. Bonaparte expresses dismay that he wasn't informed of this sooner.

When Bonaparte returns to the house, the argument about religion is still raging between Noble and 'Awkins. After the Englishmen are locked up for the night, Bonaparte tells Noble what Jeremiah told him, and they resolve that it would be kinder not to tell the British prisoners that they might be killed. Bonaparte spends a restless night worrying about whether he could defy his own countrymen to save Belcher and 'Awkins. The next morning, Bonaparte and Noble find it difficult to interact with the British prisoners because they know they may have to die.

That day, Belcher suggests a card game in his usual way, but Bonaparte has an ominous feeling. Jeremiah appears at the door asking for the two prisoners, and Bonaparte immediately understands that they are to be executed. Four Irish soldiers were killed by the British, so Belcher and 'Awkins will be killed in retaliation. Feeny, an Irish intelligence officer, accompanies to assist with the execution.

Jeremiah tells Belcher and 'Awkins that they're being returned to the Second Battalion. 'Akwins complains loudly and the old woman also protests, wanting the two to stay. Belcher cooperates and thanks the old woman profusely before they leave.

Noble and Feeney leave for the bog to dig graves for the British prisoners. Meanwhile, Jeremiah, Bonaparte, Belcher, and 'Awkins march to the edge of the bog. On the way, Jeremiah informs them that they'll be killed because the British killed their Irish prisoners. 'Awkins doesn't believe him at first, thinking it's some cruel joke. He continues to complain and appeal to Bonaparte as his friend as they walk down to the bog. All the while, the finality of the execution is dawning on Bonaparte, and he silently resolves not to shoot the prisoners if they try to escape.

The groups meets Noble and Feeny, and 'Awkins tries to appeal to Noble as well. Jeremiah asks 'Awkins if he has any last words to share. 'Awkins responds by offering to desert the British army and join up with the Irish. He doesn't much care about which side he's on as long as he can be with his friends. But Jeremiah ignores this and shoots him.

Belcher begins to tie a handkerchief around his eyes so that he won't witness his own execution. He notes that 'Awkins isn't dead yet and requests that 'Awkins be shot again to release him from pain. Bonaparte reluctantly agrees, shooting 'Awkins and killing him.

Belcher begins to laugh, remarking that 'Awkins was just recently arguing about the afterlife, and now he's in a position to know whether it's real. As Jeremiah helps him secure the handkerchief around his eyes, Belcher asks Bonaparte and Jeremiah to find a letter on 'Awkins's body and deliver it to his mother. He notes that he doesn't have a family anymore, as his wife left him years ago and took his child. Beginning to babble, he talks about how he likes to feel at home and that explains why he was always helping around the house.

When Jeremiah prompts him for a last prayer, Belcher refuses because he doesn't see the point of it. Jeremiah tries to excuse himself from responsibility for the killing by claiming that he's only doing his duty, but Belcher says he doesn't understand what duty means. Belcher says he doesn't blame them, though, and calls them "good lads." Then, Jeremiah shoots Belcher once and kills him.

Noble finds the letter on 'Awkins's body and the four carry the corpses to the bog and bury them. Afterwards, Noble and Bonaparte return the tools they used and go back to the old woman's house.

The old woman had waited up for them, and, clearly distressed, presses Noble about what they did with the two prisoners. Noble doesn't answer her directly, but she gathers that they were killed all the same.

Both the old woman and Noble sink to their knees, but Bonaparte is overwhelmed and runs out of the house. Outside, he describes feeling estranged from everything, as the bog, the prisoners, Noble, and the old woman feel very far away. The story closes with Bonaparte in the present noting that he was forever changed by the experience.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bonaparte – Bonaparte is the thoughtful, sensitive first-person narrator, telling the story in past tense from some unspecified point in the future. He's a young soldier in the Irish Republican Army who, along with Noble and Jeremiah, is responsible for guarding two British prisoners behind the frontlines. Bonaparte grows attached to Belcher and Awkins, and he protests the decision to execute the prisoners, even daydreaming about confronting his fellow soldiers to protect them. At the critical moment, Bonaparte fails to intervene as

Jerimiah kills the British prisoners, and the memory of the execution haunts him for long afterward.

Noble – Noble is a young soldier of comparable rank to Bonaparte who also takes a liking to the British prisoners. His brother is a priest, so he's a religious believer. This puts him at odds with Awkins, who needles him constantly about his belief in god and the afterlife, which he's unable to fully defend.

Belcher – Belcher is a British prisoner of war. He's a tall, quiet, and kind man whose wife and children left him years ago. As a result, he's eager to make a home even out of his stint as a prisoner, helping the old woman with chores, suggesting card games to bring the group together, and warming himself by **the fireplace**. He's calm and bemused even in the face of death, and he seems not to blame his captors for their actions.

'Awkins 'Awkins is a British prisoner of war, who, unlike Belcher, is outspoken and quick-tempered. He is constantly sparring with the old woman and Noble over religion or global capitalism. He doesn't put much faith in ideas of patriotism or even the justness of the war he's fighting, as he thinks faraway elites are the main drivers of war.

Jeremiah Donovan Jeremiah is Bonaparte and Noble's superior officer in the Irish army. Jeremiah is stern, quiet, and awkward, and Bonaparte privately looks down on him for his rural manners and accent. He avoids getting too friendly with the British prisoners, knowing that they're hostages who may have to be killed at any moment. Jeremiah is more in touch with the stakes of the war and his duty than either Bonaparte or Noble.

The Old Woman The woman Bonaparte refers to as "the old woman" is never named. She opens up her home to the Irish soldiers and their British prisoners but doesn't seem happy about the arrangement. Her religious beliefs are a mix of Catholic and pagan, and she blames events on obscure deities or the desecration of temples. She's surly towards all except Belcher, who is keen to help her with housework.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Feeney Feeney is a minor figure whose presence is noted but who doesn't speak in the story. He's an Irish intelligence agent who, it is implied, orders and oversees the execution of the British prisoners.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

NATIONAL IDENTITY

"Guests of the Nation" is set during the Irish War for Independence in the early 20th century, during which Ireland attempted to secede from the United Kingdom and form a sovereign country. As such, the story is concerned with what it means for people to be from different countries, even if that difference in national identity springs from a border that was drawn only recently. The story dramatizes this distinction in identity by putting a pair of British prisoners in the charge of two members of the Irish army—this group of men were, until recently, countrymen, but they are now at war. The men's difference in national identity becomes blurred by the camaraderie between them until the Irish soldiers carry out orders to execute the British prisoners who have become their friends. "Guests of the Nation" therefore suggests that while national identity is a somewhat arbitrary construction, its effects are real and important.

Throughout the story, O'Connor foregrounds the camaraderie between the men, obscuring the fact that they are on opposing sides of a war. The group appears at first as four fellow soldiers on an uneventful posting, playing a friendly game of cards with Irish Jeremiah Donovan berating English 'Awkins "as if he was one of our own." Awkins even has friends and acquaintances in common with Bonaparte, who is Irish. O'Connor thus misleads readers about the nature of their relationship, presenting them as friends rather than as captors and captives.

This friendly dynamic often seems more important than the facts of war. At multiple points, for example, Bonaparte wonders about the need to guard Belcher and Awkins and it isn't long before the captors "gave up all pretense of keeping a close eye on their behavior." Furthermore, the revelation that the Englishmen aren't guests but hostages horrifies Bonaparte, and he even contemplates trying to prevent his own army from shooting them. He puts these personal relationships on the same plane as his relationship with his new nation. Even to the last, Belcher punctuates his sentences with "chum," almost showing sympathy towards his friends who have to execute him, and Awkins offers to desert and join the other side as long as he can be with his "chums." The friendships between the men, then, overwhelm the terms of the larger conflict at times.

Just as O'Connor confuses the terms of the national conflict in his description of the men's friendship, he also creates ambiguity about national identity (and therefore the stakes of the war) by suggesting that national identity is not particularly significant to the personal identities of the British prisoners and their Irish guards. For example, the men's affection for one another does not break down on national lines: Bonaparte and Noble are colder towards Jeremiah, their own countryman, than they are to their British enemies, and Bonaparte looks down on Jeremiah for his rough country manners, suggesting that, in everyday life, regional differences are more important than national ones. The British prisoners also seem to adapt

naturally to life in Ireland, which undermines the significance of their nationality. Bonaparte notes, for instance, that Awkins and Belcher seem so comfortable in their country that they take to it like a "native weed. Furthermore, the Irish soldiers take on some aspects of British speech, while Awkins demonstrates his knowledge of Irish dance. Overall, this mixing of cultures suggests that the difference in nationality between British and Irish men is trivial and even arbitrary, despite that they are fighting a war to reify this difference.

Once Jeremiah delivers the news that Belcher and Awkins must be executed in retaliation for the execution of Irish hostages, however, the easy dynamic between the men changes and their national origins begin to seem more important. Bonaparte imagines defying his fellow soldiers but recoils from it, recalling that "in those days disunion among brothers seemed to me an awful crime." As the execution draws closer, O'Connor foregrounds details of Irish names and landscapes, further suggesting the increasing importance of nationality. The arrival of the intelligence agent Feeny introduces the first unequivocally Irish name, as contrasted to the ambiguous nationality suggested by names like Noble and Bonaparte. Furthermore, Jeremiah, once referred to only by his first name, is increasingly identified simply by his Irish-sounding surname Donovan, suggesting that the decision to execute the prisoners and participate in the larger war roots him more firmly in his Irish identity. Finally, **the bog**, a beloved feature of Irish landscape and a romantic symbol of national greatness, becomes a grim symbol of the atrocities committed in the name of nationalism when the prisoners are buried there.

While the Irish characters keenly feel these national obligations, the British characters grow, if anything, more committed to their friends over their country. Facing execution, 'Awkins offers to switch sides and fight for the Irish, and it's clear that he offers this not just to save his own life, but also out of genuine affection for Noble and Bonaparte. In contrast, while Bonaparte may secretly wish to let his friends escape into the countryside, he does nothing to make that happen. O'Connor implies that by fighting for their country, Bonaparte and Noble have lost true friends and even essential traits of mercy and compassion that transcend nationhood.

RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND MATERIALISM

'Awkins is a strident atheist and materialist (someone who believes that economic structures drive world events). He thinks that the capitalist class predates the priesthood, and that capitalists use priests as a method of social control. The old Irish woman who houses the prisoners, however, has more spiritual beliefs. With a blend of Catholicism and paganism, she explains momentous world events, such as the First World War, as a consequence of disturbing "hidden powers." While 'Awkins and the woman fiercely debate their beliefs, O'Connor suggests that neither prayer nor atheism is up to the task of grappling with death or the realities of wartime, as both spirituality and materialism seem meaningless in the face of the executions at the end of the story. Instead of a fatalistic ending in which meaning and belief are shown to be absurd, however, O'Connor leaves room for a more ambiguous spiritual truth, one that can only be grasped by those who have passed on to the "next world."

'Awkins makes a sport of arguing with Noble and the old woman that there is no life after death, a belief he holds with a religious intensity. O'Connor, in fact, is clear that 'Awkins' commitment to materialism is essentially religious in nature; 'Awkins argues for his beliefs "as if he was preaching a sermon." The parallel between 'Awkins' nonbelief and traditional religion is made stronger by the fact that 'Awkins explains both his individual fate and global conflict through the lens of the afterlife: he believes that the capitalist class that backs religion and encourages belief in heaven also instigates international wars like the one that has taken him prisoner. Presumably, belief in the afterlife makes better soldiers—for religious men who believe that they won't lose everything in death, the stakes of fighting are lower. Therefore, 'Awkins thinks that religion manipulates men into fighting harder, and that his own life has become collateral damage.

'Awkins's extreme and somewhat nonsensical belief that both heaven and war are capitalist conspiracies mirrors, in a way, the old woman's belief that World War I began when a Japanese temple was plundered. However, O'Connor shows that neither explanation of war is satisfying when the real horrors of war come to them in the form of the executions. While arguing for his life, for example, 'Awkins seems to utterly disregard his beliefs about class warfare, making individual appeals to personal friendship instead. In the face of death, the appeal of materialism vanishes, its ideas seeming suddenly irrelevant. Likewise, spirituality doesn't seem to provide much comfort. Belcher and 'Awkins both refuse the invitation to say a final prayer, with Belcher specifically noting that he doesn't see the point of prayer in this moment. Bonaparte "tries to say a prayer" while witnessing 'Awkins' death, though it doesn't seem to do much good. In the end, the men are killed and they transform from human beings to objects that fall "like a sack of meal."

With both religion and politics failing to provide meaning for the characters, O'Connor acknowledges that people can never fully make sense of tragic events. Belcher seems to support this view when he describes the dead 'Awkins as possessing knowledge he could never have gained while alive. He muses that "'e knows as much about it as they'll ever let 'im know, and last night 'e was all in the dark.'" After Belcher is killed, Bonaparte remains in the dark, as well, and images of darkness and obscurity accumulate as they return through "pitch blackness" to the old woman's kitchen, which is also cold and dark. This emphasizes that, if there's certainty to be had about

this world, it's not to be found until the next one, if at all.

WAR AND DUTY

The Irish War for Independence is only one conflict in a long and bitter struggle for Irish independence which would last for decades to come. Despite that, Bonaparte, Noble, Belcher, and 'Awkins have to be reminded that there's a war on when Jeremiah darkens their door. The battlefield seems very distant from the old woman's house, and the only thing O'Connor depicts that resembles armed conflict is the quick flash of violence against the unarmed prisoners at the close of the story. This act, instead of invoking patriotism, seems to be a fulfillment of an immoral duty mandated by unseen authorities, which casts doubt on the morality of war and its ability to achieve justice.

The war doesn't seem to reach the old woman's house where the two British prisoners are kept, and everyone involved seems just fine with that. The early parts of the story focus on recreation, including card games and stories about trips into town where "seeing they were such decent fellows, our lads couldn't well ignore the two Englishmen." Awkins and Belcher have even reverted to civilian dress, as they "wore khaki tunics and overcoats with civilian pants and boots…" Although O'Connor does briefly mention that the English are searching for Belcher and Awkins, "Guests of the Nation" is a war story without much talk of battles or maneuvers. The relative peacefulness sharpens the moral dilemma of the executions at the end, which might seem less violent or immoral in the context of an active battlefield, but is especially grotesque in a civilian environment.

In addition to the story's peaceful setting, O'Connor downplays the conflict at the story's heart through his language. Characters rarely mention the war, and when they do speak of war or violence, it's through terms that soften the reality of it. For instance, when Jeremiah reports that the British have killed four Irish prisoners, he says that the prisoners "went west," a euphemism for death that makes their fates abstract. Jeremiah also softens the truth when arranging for the execution of the prisoners. Instead of acknowledging that they're being led to their death, Jeremiah says to "tell [Awkins and Belcher] they're being shifted again." It's not clear whether this is out of expediency or sympathy for the prisoners, but it speaks to Jeremiah's discomfort with the morality of the executions. Even the title of the story is a soothing euphemism for what Belcher and Awkins really are: prisoners of war. In this way, O'Connor drives home the way soldiers use language to distance themselves from the real acts of violence in which they participate. Until ideas of patriotism can fully take hold and prepare them to kill for their country, these soldiers comfort themselves by trying to depict the war as abstract or far away.

Doing one's duty or serving the country in war is one of the noblest callings for a young man in the popular imagination. Earlier on in the story, Bonaparte tells Jeremiah he "would rather be out with a column," or fighting directly on the frontlines, but this is his sole reference to actual fighting and it seems halfhearted from someone so comfortable with civilian life. The Irish make multiple references to duty and revenge, but they can't even convince themselves, much less the condemned British prisoners, that they mean it. 'Awkins, for instance, initially doesn't believe they'll go through with the execution and accuses them of "pl[a]ying at soldiers." In doing so, he denies them the dignity and self-seriousness associated with soldiers at war. When Jeremiah first refers to duty, 'Awkins says only "cut it out," forestalling any speeches on the subject. Similarly, when Jeremiah insists that the execution is "not so much our doing. It's our duty, so to speak," Belcher rejects that out of hand. He says, "I never could make out what duty was myself…but I think you're all good lads, if that's what you mean…" Belcher forces the Irish soldiers to acknowledge how little they understand duty and how inadequately it justifies their actions, and still further, how much they took the morality of the larger war for granted. Instead, he appeals to simple civilian morality, claiming they're "good lads" despite what they're doing. But "good lads" can do awful things. The traumatized reactions of Bonaparte and Noble to the executions show that this violence was a duty tragedy forced them into, rather than a grim but necessary service to their country, as wartime violence is depicted in many other war stories.

HOME

Despite being set in wartime, much of the story focuses on domestic simplicity, if not bliss. Belcher is the focal point for this theme, as he reveals his shattered domestic situation and his desire to cobble together a new one. "Guests of the Nation" suggests that home is not merely one's birthplace, but rather a feeling that can be found or built in unlikely places. Here, even a stint as a prisoner in a foreign land can be a sort of home. But that can also work in the other direction, as it does for Bonaparte, when the trauma of the executions makes him feel like a stranger in his homeland.

The image of the **hearth**, or fireplace, is threaded throughout the story to symbolize the pull of home and domestic life. It also emphasizes how successful this hodgepodge of soldiers, prisoners, and a civilian have been in creating a home. Belcher, the character most drawn to domestic life, always has his legs in the "ashes," meaning he's trying to warm himself by the hearth. Furthermore, the religious argument between 'Awkins, Noble, and the old woman is a feature of a family gathering, rather than an assembly of strangers. The power of this domestic imagery is especially felt when it's taken away. After the execution, the old woman's house is cold and dark in contrast to its earlier liveliness. Noble even kneels by the fireplace, drawn to that symbol of the home that was lost.

Additionally, the Irish find it strange that Belcher is so eager to assist the old woman with her chores, anticipating her movements to ease her burdens. They don't know then that Belcher's wife and child left him eight years ago, and that his time at the old woman's house is a chance for him to "start again." 'Awkins has a similar longing, revealed when he complains that he's being moved "just as a man mikes a 'ome of a bleeding place." But while 'Awkins loafs and squabbles and expects a home to spring up around him, Belcher is willing to build one. When Jeremiah informs him that he's moving back to the Second Battalion, Belcher expresses his gratitude to the old woman for the opportunity to create a home with her, behaving like a grateful son to an elderly mother. Even at the brink of execution, Belcher, who's normally so quiet, babbles about "being so 'andy abaout a 'ouse." His last thoughts turn to simple household chores and the "feeling of a 'ome" they bring.

As the execution approaches, images of domesticity are twisted in Bonaparte's mind, as he thinks "I began to perceive in the dusk the desolate edges of **the bog** that was to be their last earthly bed." The word choice of "bed" marks a haunting contrast between the bed—a core feature of home—and the lonely swamp they'll rest in. The idea of that final resting place for two former friends haunts Bonaparte, and he becomes estranged from the land he thought he knew. Bonaparte describes the aftermath of the execution as "mad lonely" and the bog as the "treacherous bog," as if the landscape not only betrays his footing but also his trust. When the old woman and Noble fall to their knees by the fire, Noble pushes past them as if sickened by the effort to recreate a lost home. He describes a feeling of receding from his homeland, "as though the patch of bog where the two Englishmen were was a thousand miles away…" Instead of twittering, the birds shriek and even the stars seem alone. O'Connor emphasizes that just as home can be built anywhere, it can be lost anywhere.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE FIREPLACE

The fireplace is a central component of the home, especially in the time before central heating. As such, it comes to symbolize home and domesticity in the story, and furthermore, it represents the opportunity to create a home in unlikely places. The British prisoner Belcher, whose own home fell apart after the departure of his wife and children, constantly has his legs in the "ashes" of the fireplace. This suggests that he has begun to feel at home, even as a prisoner in Ireland. Likewise, Noble kneels near the fireplace after Belcher and Awkins are executed, but this time, the effort to feel at home in spite of his despair is fruitless. Here, the fireplace implies that home cannot be created by domestic objects or structures (such as fireplaces) alone: home is really about the people who inhabit it.

THE BOG

In "Guests of the Nation," the Irish soldiers unceremoniously bury the bodies of their English friends and captives, Belcher and 'Awkins, in the bog—an ecosystem known for preserving bodies intact for thousands of years. As the image of the bog haunts Bonaparte's mind, he always sees the "Englishmen stiffening into it." As a result, the bog comes to symbolize the indelibility of the trauma, almost as if the bog is his mind perfectly preserving the two murdered Englishmen. This memory, like the bodies in the bog, does not fade, as Bonaparte notes that "anything that ever happened to me after I never felt the same about again." Additionally, the status of the bog as a national symbol of Ireland comes to have extra resonance, since the story is set during a war for Irish independence. Here, O'Connor emphasizes the disillusionment of Irish independence; he twists the bog of Irish folklore into a bleak resting place for their dead friends, evoking the fact that the Irish won a sovereign country only through bloody sacrifice.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1982.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ At dusk the big Englishman Belcher would shift his long legs out of the ashes and ask, "Well, chums, what about it?" and Noble or me would say, "As you please, chum" (for we had picked up some of their curious expressions), and the little Englishman 'Awkins would light the lamp and produce the cards.

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, Belcher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Bonaparte describes the tenor of daily life in the old woman's home. Immediately, the verb tense in the phrase "Belcher would" establishes that these events are a regular

occurrence, which implies that the characters have an easy familiarity with each other. Additionally, the characters have been together long enough to pick up each other's slang, which illustrates that the characters are from different backgrounds, while at the same time blurring that difference through their merging speech patterns. Further, Belcher's position at the fireplace orients him at the center of domestic life. He decides when it's time to come together for a game of cards, and he's generally the one responsible for maintaining the rhythms of life there.

❝ I couldn't at the time see the point of me and Noble being with Belcher and 'Awkins at all, for it was and is my fixed belief you could have planted that pair in any untended spot from this to Claregalway and they'd have stayed put and flourished like a native weed.

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, Belcher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Slowly, the essential difference between the Englishmen and Bonaparte and Noble is revealed. The reference to Claregalway puts them in Ireland, and the depiction of the Englishmen as a native weed further weakens the reality that they're from a different country and culture. The use of the term "native weed" paints Belcher and 'Awkins as extremely adaptable, absorbing and taking sustenance for the local culture and people everywhere they go in Ireland. Here, as elsewhere in the story, there are many things unsaid, as the ambiguous words "being with" hint at. O'Connor delays informing readers of the reason for these Englishmen being in Ireland at the same time as he describes them as almost as Irish as the Irish themselves.

❝ And another day the same 'Awkins was swearing at the capitalists for starting the German war, when the old dame laid down her iron, puckered up her little crab's mouth and said, "Mr 'Awkins, you can say what you please about the war, thinking to deceive me because I'm an ignorant old woman, but I know well what started the war. It was that Italian count that stole the heathen divinity out of the temple in Japan, for believe me, Mr 'Awkins, nothing but sorrow and want follows them that disturbs the hidden powers!"

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, The Old Woman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

'Awkins and the old woman are relying on their own articles of faith for explaining the war. 'Awkins claims that it resulted from the scheming of capitalist elites while the old woman rebuts him by attributing it to the burglary of a holy place. Each one is struggling to make meaning out of a world-historical tragedy in different ways, but they both appear incomplete and absurd. The revelation that England and Ireland are currently at war lends a special urgency to this debate, as they try to puzzle out the reason for their situation but only succeed in confusing each other.

Part 2 Quotes

❝ He looked at me for a spell and said, "I thought you knew we were keeping them as hostages." "Hostages — ?" says I, not quite understanding. "The enemy," he says in his heavy way, "have prisoners belong to us, and now they talk of shooting them. If they shoot our prisoners we'll shoot theirs, and serve them right."

Related Characters: Jeremiah Donovan , Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, Belcher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first time Bonaparte grapples with the idea that Belcher and 'Awkins truly are their prisoners, and that they have the power of life and death over them. His failure to understand the word "hostages" applied to the prisoners illustrates how deeply he's distanced himself from the war and the reality of violence, and at the same time, how invested he is in Belcher and 'Awkins as friends. Jeremiah, by contrast, has no such illusions and his desire to "serve them right" shows that he's comfortable using Belcher and 'Awkins as tools to fight the larger war. Similarly, his reference to "the enemy" reveals that he's keeping the war in mind while Bonaparte has mostly convinced himself it has nothing to with him.

Because there were men on the Brigade you daren't let nor hinder without a gun in your hand, and at any rate, in those days disunion between brothers seemed to me an awful crime. I knew better after.

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

When Bonaparte reflects on the plan to free Belcher and 'Awkins, he realizes that he would have to confront, maybe violently, soldiers of his own country. Bonaparte's claim that you couldn't cross members of the Brigade unless you were armed implies there are violent or dishonorable men on the Irish side. Nevertheless, he papers over this conflict by referring to them as his "brothers" because they're from the same place and fighting on the same side. His ominous remark that he "knew better after" is a rare reminder that Bonaparte is telling this story from some point in the future and has knowledge his younger, more naïve self might not have had. He implies that afterward he realized there are more awful crimes than defying your country.

Part 3 Quotes

I rose quietly from the table and laid my hand on him before he reached the door. "What do you want?" I asked him. "I want those two soldier friends of yours," he says reddening. "Is that the way it is, Jeremiah Donovan?" I ask. "That's the way. There were four of our lads went west this morning, one of them a boy of sixteen." "That's bad, Jeremiah," says I.

Related Characters: Jeremiah Donovan , Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, Belcher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

As soon as Bonaparte hears Jeremiah's footsteps, he has a "dark presentiment," which is especially ominous considering that he now knows the purpose of holding the prisoners. Bonaparte serves as a protector of the old woman's house and those who live there, as he places a hand on Jeremiah to keep him from reaching the door. And when Jeremiah refers to the prisoners, he calls them "those two soldier friends of yours," implying that Bonaparte has become too comfortable with the prisoners. But even Jeremiah can't state outright what happened to the Irish prisoners and what will happen to the British prisoners. He talks in code and implication, which Bonaparte understands but which frees both men from vocalizing what actually will be done: executing Belcher and 'Awkins.

"Just as a man mikes a 'ome of a bleedin' place," mumbles 'Awkins shaking her by the hand, "some bastard at headquarters thinks you're too cushy and shunts you off." Belcher shakes her hand very hearty. "A thousand thanks, madam," he says, "a thousand thanks for everything . . ." as though he'd made it all up.

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, Belcher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The British prisoners are reacting to the lie that they'll be moved backed to the Second Battalion, and therefore will have to leave the old woman's house immediately. Each one acknowledges that the old woman's house was a true home in their own ways. 'Awkins complains about them leaving and locates fault in a distant higher-up making all the decisions, a complaint that's consistent with the worldview he's expressed railing against capitalist elites. Belcher instead expresses gratitude that he was allowed to make a home of the place even for this short time, and he does so with his customary politeness. Each one has found home, but 'Awkins found it by default and Belcher found it through effort.

We walked along the edge of it in the darkness, and every now and then 'Awkins would call a halt and begin again, just as if he was wound up, about us being chums, and I was in despair that nothing but the cold and open grave made ready for his presence would convince him that we meant it all. But all the same, if you can understand, I didn't want him to be bumped off.

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker), 'Awkins, Belcher, Jeremiah Donovan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

As 'Awkins and Belcher are marched to their deaths, Bonaparte begins to sense the edge of the bog that the Englishmen will be buried in. The way the soldiers walk along the edge of the bog without venturing into it mirrors how carefully Bonaparte is avoiding talking about the execution. Bonaparte continues this evasion, using the euphemism "bumped off" and the passive voice to cloak that the Englishmen will be killed quite violently, and that it's he who will be committing this act. 'Awkins participates in this general refusal to acknowledge what they're all out here to do, and Bonaparte notes that it might take being killed to convince him that it's truly happening.

Part 4 Quotes

"Listen to me, Noble," he said. "You and me are chums. You won't come over to my side, so I'll come over to your side. Is that fair? Just you give me a rifle and I'll go with you wherever you want."

Related Characters: 'Awkins (speaker), Noble

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

'Awkins, bargaining for his life, makes the ultimate concession: he offers to forsake his own country and army and fight for the enemy. Duty and patriotism clearly don't mean much to 'Awkins, not when matched against the people that he thought were true friends. His promise that "I'll go with you wherever you want" is a total abandonment of national identity and service, ideals by which many organize their lives. Furthermore, the repetition of the word "chums," a quirk of British dialect that even Bonaparte and Noble started to adopt, attempt to remind them of their obligations as friends, as opposed to their obligations as soldiers. It also closes the distance between them, as the Irish soldiers had taken the word for their own.

"Poor blighter," he says quietly, "and last night he was so curious abaout it all. It's very queer, chums, I always think. Naow, 'e knows as much abaout it as they'll ever let 'im know, and last night 'e was all in the dark."

Related Characters: Belcher (speaker), 'Awkins

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

In a bemused aside, Belcher quickly disposes with the story's concern with religion and spirituality and places the afterlife finally behind human knowledge, or at least living human knowledge. He observes the irony that 'Awkins knows more about the afterlife in death than he did in life. This aside is partially a wish for his friend to learn for good what he was always so certain about but could never know. At the same time, he minimizes the importance of spiritual speculation, calling it "queer"—a curiosity rather than an essential human pursuit. Of course, Belcher is also darkly presaging that he will know soon what 'Awkins knows, as he's next to be executed.

"But my missus left me eight years ago. Went away with another fellow and took the kid with her. I likes the feelin' of a 'ome (as you may 'ave noticed) but I couldn't start again after that."

Related Characters: Belcher (speaker), The Old Woman

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Just before he's to be killed, Belcher shares a pivotal aspect of his history and character. He was robbed of a family in civilian life, so he's done what he can to make one out of his military life. His aside ("as you may 'ave noticed") refers to the huge efforts he made to help the old woman with housework and treat her with an almost familial respect and kindness. Belcher's assertion that "he couldn't' start again" doesn't align with what readers know of him, as he more than any other was responsible for the group of five coming together as a type of family. It's appropriate that a character so devoted to recapturing home life would return to

thoughts of it on the brink of death.

"I never could make out what duty was myself," he said, "but I think you're all good lads, if that's what you mean. I'm not complaining."

Related Characters: Belcher (speaker), Jeremiah Donovan , Bonaparte

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

Belcher says this in response to Jeremiah citing "duty" as a reason for executing the Englishmen. Duty is such a common justification for inhuman conduct that it's become almost a cliché, but Belcher rejects this justification almost casually. However many times Jeremiah may justify himself by referring to his duty, he's still killing an unarmed man. Instead, Belcher insists that being a good person is more important and gives them a final blessing as "good lads," which requires a considerable effort of generosity on the part of someone about to be executed. When he says, "I'm not complaining," it seems almost absurd, but it matches what readers know of his personality. He's a quiet man who bears each change in fortunes without complaint.

...but with me it was the other way, as though the patch of bog where the two Englishmen were was a thousand miles away from me, and even Noble mumbling just behind me and the old woman and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lonely. And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again.

Related Characters: Bonaparte (speaker), The Old Woman, Belcher

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

As the story ends, the trauma of participating in the murder of his friends has completely upended Bonaparte's sense of self. He imagines the two Englishmen in the bog, a swamp that preserves things rather than destroying them, in a way that makes clear that this crime will stay with him for the rest of his life. The distance he describes speaks to to a common effect of an enduring trauma, in which his mind recoils from his immediate actions and circumstance. But the feeling of being thousands of miles away from his environment also reflects a new alienation from the country and people he's known since birth.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

Describing an evening routine, the narrator (whose name is later revealed to be Bonaparte) describes how Belcher would pull his legs out of the ashes of the fireplace and ask, "Well chums, what about it?" An Englishman named 'Awkins would then bring out a deck of cards. Bonaparte mentions that "we" had picked up some of "their" expressions, answering them with the same word "chums."

The story opens ambiguously by suggesting that the "we" Bonaparte mentions are different from "them," the Englishmen. However, their relationships and the reasons for their being together in this place aren't clarified, giving the sense that the two sides are meeting in friendship. The mere fact that they have a routine implies that all are friendly enough to have an established rhythm. Further, the borrowing of the word "chums" suggests cultural exchange and blending.

Bonaparte introduces another man named Jeremiah Donovan, who would occasionally come to watch the card game rather than play. He often looked over 'Awkins's shoulder, chastising him like "one of our own" for playing the wrong cards.

Jeremiah is quickly established as an outsider because he's only occasionally a presence at the card games. Also, he holds himself apart by not participating in the game. But Jeremiah's banter with 'Awkins makes clear that the Englishmen have integrated into the group.

Jeremiah is an awkward man with several eccentric tics that make him difficult to talk to. Bonaparte notes that he has "big farmers feet" and a "broad accent" that the narrator finds amusing and that marks Jeremiah as being from the country. The narrator notes that he himself is from the "town," as the reader may already have realized.

After he downplays the foreignness of the two Englishmen, Bonaparte emphasizes that Jeremiah has qualities he considers strange and amusing. Bonaparte clearly looks down on Jeremiah for his rural upbringing, even though it seems they're from the same country.

Bonaparte wonders why he and Noble are there with Belcher and 'Awkins at all. He describes how the two Englishmen are strangely at home in what he reveals is Ireland, and he mentions that these men were put into his and Noble's care by the Second Battalion once the manhunt for them got "too hot." He adds that he feels responsible for them, but that the two Englishmen seem to be just as familiar with the country as he is.

Only now does Bonaparte reveal that Belcher and 'Awkins are their prisoners, put into their care by another military unit. By suspending the details of the conflict, O'Connor makes it difficult to see them as anything other than friends of the Irish. In addition, their familiarity with Ireland and their comparison to a "native weed" blurs their identity as British soldiers.

By quoting a bit of conversation with 'Awkins, the narrator finally reveals that his name is Bonaparte. Bonaparte relates that he and 'Awkins seem to even have acquaintances in common, and 'Awkins knows Irish songs and dances from his time with the Second Battalion.

Here, 'Awkins further displays his Irish bona fides by professing his knowledge of Irish song and dance, which he gained during outings to town with the Second Battalion. He seems to be someone eager to absorb as much of Irish culture as possible, regardless of the war between their countries.

Bonaparte, Noble, 'Awkins, and Belcher are staying at the house of an old woman, whom Bonaparte describes as surly and quick to scold the Irish soldiers. Bonaparte goes on to describe how Belcher helps the old woman with chores, anticipating her needs and being unfailingly polite. He notes that Belcher is a quiet man, while 'Awkins talks constantly. Belcher is a skilled card player, but when he wins, he lends the money out to 'Awkins, who promptly loses it.

Bonaparte expresses shock that Belcher is so eager to pitch in with chores in what is technically a prison. Bonaparte further draws a distinction between Belcher, who expresses himself through deeds, and 'Awkins, who will say anything that's on his mind. In Bonaparte's description, Belcher takes on the role of an older brother, bailing out 'Awkins for his poor performance at cards and enabling him to stay in the game, which is important to the spirit of camaraderie at the old woman's house.

Bonaparte says that 'Awkins loves to argue with Noble about religion, which needles Noble in part because Noble's brother is a priest. Bonaparte describes 'Awkins as profane, argumentative, and lazy.

As Bonaparte describes him, 'Awkins seems to enjoy irritating people. He specifically seeks to bother Noble on the subject of religion because he has a family connection to it. It's clear that 'Awkins believes in what he's saying, but it also allows him to argue, which is what he really loves. Argument is more than an intellectual exercise for 'Awkins; it's the way he engages with and reaches out to people.

Bonaparte then tells an anecdote about 'Awkins trying to strike up an argument with the old woman. When 'Awkins complains about the drought, the old woman attributes it to an obscure rain god. Later, when he states that the capitalist class is responsible for the First World War, the old woman responds cryptically that the cause of the war was the theft of a relic from a Japanese temple.

When 'Awkins tries to stir up an argument with the old woman, something strange happens. 'Awkins is rendered speechless. The chasm between 'Awkins's anti-capitalism and the old woman's mysticism is too wide for a debate to occur. Crucially, each are looking for a root cause of World War I, what 'Awkins calls "the German war." As both are touched by the Irish War for Independence much closer to home, they need to find some way to make sense of it.

PART 2

One evening, the four soldiers plus Jeremiah are playing cards. Bonaparte realizes that Jeremiah doesn't like the two Englishmen, which was hard to determine at first because he's shy.

Here, Bonaparte had assumed a level of friendship and goodwill on Jeremiah's part that never really existed. Jeremiah's general awkwardness was camouflaging a real dislike of the Englishmen. This speaks to Bonaparte's naivete about the war, that he thinks the Englishmen being on the opposing side is just a technical distinction and doesn't preclude friendship.

A big argument breaks out about capitalism, religion, and patriotism. 'Awkins argues that the capitalist class bribes the priesthood to distract the common man, while Noble responds that people believed in "the next world" long before capitalists existed.

'Awkins begins to draw the motivations for war into his general argument against religion. He argues that the priesthood is a tool the capitalist class uses to hide their crimes and motivate common men and women to work, fight, and die. 'Awkins's implication is that ideas of duty and patriotism serve a similar function.

'Awkins gets wound up even further, and he continues to mock Biblical beliefs using offensive and profane language that irritates Noble. Belcher just humors him by agreeing periodically while warming himself by **the fireplace.**

'Awkins is described as "preaching a sermon" to emphasize that his radical skepticism about religion is an act of faith just as surely as a religious belief is. Meanwhile, Belcher, whose chief concern is domestic harmony, just humors 'Awkins by saying "That's right, chum" in a way that shuts off further debate.


To avoid the argument, Bonaparte walks down to town with Jeremiah. On the way, Jeremiah suddenly stops to scold Bonaparte for failing to guard the prisoners. This prompts Bonaparte to ask him why they even bother keeping Belcher and 'Awkins around. Bonaparte claims that he'd rather be "out with a column" than doing this guard work.

Bonaparte is surprised and defensive when Jeremiah applies the word "prisoners" to Belcher and 'Awkins, illustrating the extent to which he's forgotten that the Englishmen are their enemies. Bonaparte asks to go "out with a column," or fight at the front, but it's a hollow gesture born out of resentment of Jeremiah's authority. Furthermore, it shows Bonaparte's limited view of war. For him, fighting at the front counts as war, while guarding prisoners in a civilian house doesn't.


Then, Jeremiah explains that the British prisoners are hostages and that the Irish army plans to shoot them unless the British release their Irish prisoners. Dismayed, Bonaparte complains to Jeremiah that they should have been told sooner about the purpose of keeping the British prisoners.

Again, Bonaparte resists being drawn into details of the larger war. He can't believe that anything done many miles away would have any bearing on the people he's come to think of as friends. Finally, he feels used because he's been complicit in keeping hostages without knowing it.


Bonaparte is miserable as he returns to the house. When he arrives, the religious argument between 'Awkins and Noble is still raging. 'Awkins challenges Noble on the gaps in his belief in the afterlife, including what and where heaven is, whether angels wear wings, and where the wings are made. Noble throws up his hands and gives up.

The argument devolves into mockery as 'Awkins puts to Noble unanswerable questions challenging his faith. These questions betray a deeply literal mindset, requiring a burden of proof for religion that he doesn't require for his own beliefs in capitalist conspiracies.

After the British prisoners are locked up for the night, Bonaparte tells Noble about the true purpose for keeping them under guard. They resolve not to tell 'Awkins and Belcher, thinking it'd be kinder not to.

Bonaparte does his part to prop up the fiction of the arrangement they've made at the old woman's house. He doesn't confront the real possibility that they may have to kill the Englishmen, telling Belcher it's "more than likely" the British won't kill their Irish prisoners. By doing this, he hopes to delay the intrusion of the war as long as he can.


That night, Bonaparte has a lot of trouble sleeping, obsessing over how to prevent his fellow soldiers from executing the British prisoners. He notes that many of his fellow soldiers in the brigade are violent men, and that he might have to be prepared to fight them.

Bonaparte has a pivotal reckoning with his ideas about national identity and duty here. He contemplates an act of treason by forcefully preventing his fellow soldiers from executing the Englishmen. Furthermore, he describes some of the men in his own army as violent and bloodthirsty, comparing them unfavorably to Belcher and 'Awkins. He thinks that "disunion between brothers is a terrible crime," referring to his fellow soldiers but that "I knew better after." He calls into question the criteria he used to designate someone a "brother."

The next morning, both Bonaparte and Noble have trouble interacting with the Englishmen. Belcher is at his customary place by the fireplace, but 'Awkins is agitated. Noble can't even respond to 'Awkins when he begins prodding Noble about religion.

O'Connor presents a scene in which most of the details of the old woman's house are the same as before. Belcher is in his usual spot by the fireplace and 'Awkins is griping about religion. But all the life has been taken out of the atmosphere because of what Bonaparte and Noble now know. Now, they can only interact with Belcher and 'Awkins as the soldiers they are, knowing that at any time they may be asked to execute them.

PART 3

When evening comes, Belcher suggests a card game in his usual way, but Bonaparte has a bad feeling. Suddenly, Jeremiah comes to their door to demand the prisoners.

Bonaparte spends the day agonizing over the prospect that he'll be called on to execute the prisoners. It's a "relief" when Belcher suggests a card game in his usual way. Bonaparte welcomes this gesture as a return to the easy familiarity of the past days. Bonaparte describes Belcher's behavior as "peaceable," as if he's suggesting an end to hostilities between them.

Jeremiah says that four Irish prisoners "went west" (or were killed), as he hinted before that they might. Now, the Irish soldiers have orders to kill Belcher and 'Awkins in response. Outside the door, a man named Feeney, who's an Irish intelligence officer, is waiting.

When Jeremiah describes the killing of the Irish prisoners, he uses the euphemism "went west," meaning to die, to minimize the violence of his news. Neither Jeremiah nor Bonaparte explicitly say that they're going to kill the Englishmen, even while describing preparations for the execution. They gingerly sidestep the actual words, illustrating their moral discomfort.

Jeremiah sends Feeney and Noble to gather tools from the shed and dig a hole near the bog, while Bonaparte and Jeremiah take the prisoners. He suggests that they tell the prisoners they're being moved back to the Second Battalion, rather than telling them they're about to be executed, in order to keep them cooperative.

Here again, Jeremiah maintains the fiction that Belcher and 'Awkins are just amusing civilians being bounced between units of the Irish army. He, too, is trying to delay acknowledgement of the violence he plans to commit.

The old woman protests this decision so forcefully that Jeremiah snaps at her. 'Awkins complains that they're being moved just as they're starting to feel at home, but Belcher jumps up to thank the old woman for her hospitality.

The old woman resists the departure of Belcher and 'Awkins, demonstrating her affection for them and the home they've built together. 'Awkins and Belcher also mourn the loss of home, but they do so in ways that reflect their differing personalities. 'Awkins complains and pins the blame on distant elites, while Belcher shows authentic gratitude to the old woman, recognizing how rare and precious this sense of home is.

As the four begin to walk down to **the bog**, Jeremiah tells them that they'll be executed in response to the death of the Irish prisoners. 'Awkins can't believe it at first, accusing Jeremiah of playing at being soldiers. Jeremiah responds by insisting that it's his duty, but 'Awkins silences him by saying "Cut it out!"

Getting closer to the bog, the pretenses fall away. Jeremiah begins to explain the reason for their execution, and 'Awkins' shock and disbelief mirrors Bonaparte's own reaction when he discovered that Belcher and 'Awkins were hostages. Jeremiah appeals to duty, but this approach is least likely to appeal to 'Awkins, who believes duty is a result of capitalist scheming.

Jeremiah appeals to Bonaparte to try to convince 'Awkins that the execution is for real. 'Awkins still won't believe it and insists that he and Bonaparte are "chums." 'Awkins and Jeremiah argue about the morality of shooting them in response to the death of British soldiers.

Facing resistance from 'Awkins, Jeremiah explicitly divides the group into Irish and British sides when he asks 'Awkins why "your people" would kill their prisoners. Jeremiah continues to operate on this level while 'Awkins continues to cite friendship, placing the status of "chums" above that of enemy soldiers.

Bonaparte recoils at the prospect of killing the British prisoners, and he resolves not to stop them if they try to escape. 'Awkins asks whether Noble is complicit in this, and he claims that he'd never shoot his Irish friends if their positions were reversed.

Bonaparte imagines that if the prisoners tried to escape, he wouldn't stop them. It's an example of a minor disobedience he feels he may be capable of, as opposed to the major one of "disunion between brothers," or going against one's nation.

Bonaparte thinks about **the bog**, despairing that it will be Belcher and Awkins's resting place. He mentions again that he doesn't want them to die.

The bog now seems like a malevolent force in Bonaparte's mind. It serves as a perverted image of domestic life when he thinks of it as the Englishmen's "last earthly bed." But as the inevitability of the execution sets in, Bonaparte continues to dodge it in his language. He thinks "I didn't want them to be bumped off," rather than "to die" or "to be killed."

PART 4

Jeremiah, Bonaparte, 'Awkins, and Belcher meet Noble and Feeney. 'Awkins immediately lays into Noble for his complicity in this scheme and continues to profess his friendship for both Noble and Bonaparte.

Seeing Noble fully participating in the execution, 'Awkins feels betrayed all over again. When he insists he wouldn't kill the Irish soldiers if the situation were reversed, he tries to put the execution in human terms, rather than seeing it through Jereimiah's notions of duty and opposing armies. Friendship is the primary motivator for 'Awkins, which explains his disbelief that someone he calls a friend would kill him because of something that happened far away.

Jeremiah readies his gun and asks 'Awkins whether he has any final messages or prayers. Instead, 'Awkins appeals to Noble and Bonaparte as his "chums" and even offers to desert and fight for the Irish side. Neither Noble nor Bonaparte responds.

Jeremiah asks 'Awkins if he wants to say his prayers, which is especially ironic considering 'Awkins' opinions on religion. Instead, 'Awkins offers the ultimate act of "disunion between brothers"—deserting his own army to fight for the "enemy—something Bonaparte imagined doing to a lesser extent. By offering to switch sides in a national conflict, he nullifies any questions of national identity or duty. Instead, it's "chums" that he's chiefly concerned with.

Jeremiah asks a final time for a last message before shooting 'Awkins in the back of the neck. Bonaparte tries to say a prayer as he watches. The Irish are silent as they witness 'Awkins's last moments.

Bonparte shuts his eyes and "tried to say a prayer" as Jeremiah shoots 'Awkins. The word choice of "tried" is crucial because it implies the effort wasn't entirely successful, emphasizing the inadequacy of traditional belief in the face of this violence. All talk of duty or country also falls silent, as 'Awkins death seems to render these ideas meaningless.

Belcher, anticipating his own execution, pulls out a handkerchief to tie over his eyes and borrows another from Bonaparte. In their excitement and inexperience, the Irish had forgotten to offer this courtesy to the condemned men. Belcher notes that 'Awkins isn't dead and asks Bonaparte to shoot him again, which he does, killing him.

Belcher needs to provide his own handkerchief to place over his eyes. This seems to validate 'Awkins's accusation that the Irish were playing at soldiers, as they seem to have stumbled into this execution and are merely going through the motions. Belcher even has to remind Bonaparte to shoot 'Awkins again to kill him. It's telling that Bonaparte delivers the second shot rather than Jeremiah, as it's an act of mercy delivered by someone who cared about 'Awkins.

After 'Awkins dies, Belcher laughs darkly. He remarks that 'Awkins was so concerned about the afterlife, but he knew nothing for certain. Now he knows much more about it than anyone living.

Belcher here seems to introduce his own theology as distinct from 'Awkins's or the old woman's. He believes that only the dead have full access to spiritual truth, and that while we're alive, we live "in the dark."

Belcher asks the Irishmen to deliver the letter on 'Awkins body to his mother. He says that he has no family of his own, as his wife and child left long ago. He likes the "feeling of a 'ome," but hadn't been able to find that simple family life afterward.

Belcher's revelation that he lost his family gives a deeper meaning to his puzzling actions throughout the story. As he says, he was trying to recreate a "feeling of a 'ome." Warming himself the fireplace (a symbol of home), helping the old woman with chores, and instituting the nightly ritual of the card game all point to a desire to create a new family.

Belcher apologizes for babbling about domestic life, and Jeremiah asks him for a final prayer. Belcher responds that he doesn't see the point.

Belcher seems ashamed to talk about doing housework while facing death, but the fact that his thoughts return there proves how important these simple actions were to him. O'Connor implies that the household chores that seem so trivial were the basis of Belcher's "feeling of 'ome." In contrast, Belcher shrugs off Jeremiah's invitation to a final prayer. In the end, he found his domestic life more important than his spiritual life.


As he prepares to fire, Jeremiah tries to explain that he's only doing his duty, but Belcher doesn't understand what duty really means. He says that he doesn't blame them and that he still thinks they're "good lads." Jeremiah then shoots him once and kills him.

Jeremiah tries to soothe his conscience by insisting once again that he's just doing his duty. But Belcher doesn't play along. Instead of duty, Belcher proposes that what's important is whether you're a good person. This forces the Irish to face the horror of what they're doing without the help of duty or service.

With both men dead, the Irish take the corpses to the bog to bury them. Noble finds the letter on 'Awkins' body. After the burial, Noble and Bonaparte return in silence to the old woman's house, which they find cold and dark. The old woman asks what's been done with Belcher and 'Awkins. Noble answers indirectly until it's clear that they've been killed.

Belcher's idea that to live is to be "in the dark" holds true in the aftermath of the execution. Multiple references to the darkness and loneliness of the bog suggest that Bonaparte and Noble are spiritually lost. The return to the old woman's house, once a lively home, is now also "cold and dark." The dark both outside and in seems a physical indicator that the home that once was here is gone.


The old woman falls to the ground in grief, praying with her rosary beads. Noble also sinks to his knees near **the fireplace**. Overwhelmed, Bonaparte pushes his way out of the house.

In the face of grief, the old woman turns to a religious symbol, while Noble kneels at the fireplace, an enduring symbol of domestic life. Bonaparte can't find comfort in either of these, and in fact, seems disgusted by them.


Bonaparte remembers that during the execution and burial, he felt thousands of miles away from where he was, distant from the bog and the bodies of Belcher and 'Awkins. He feels unbearably lonely, and notes that nothing in his life felt the same way afterward.

Bonaparte's feeling of being thousands of miles away speaks to the loneliness he feels, and it also reflects an estrangement from his country and an inability to look at his homeland in the same way. Both home (his time at the old woman's house) and homeland (attachment to Ireland) are broken by a single act of violence. And he further explains that these feelings are permanent and that he views every subsequent event in his life through that lens.

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