Secrets

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BERNARD MACLAVERTY

Bernard MacLaverty was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1942, and spent his childhood living with his parents, brother, great aunt, and grandparents. Many of MacLaverty's stories deal with the political tensions of his childhood, as he was raised Catholic during the Troubles in Northern Ireland (a conflict between unionists loyal to the British-controlled government and nationalists who wanted Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland). MacLaverty's stories may also be informed by his father's early death, as they often center around the harsh truths of loss and grief. A sign painter whose profession brought him in close contact with carcinogenic paints, MacLaverty's father died when the author was only 12. MacLaverty began writing at a young age: he remembers receiving his first payment for a story in primary school, when a teacher gave him sixpence for an essay titled "A Rainy Day." Nevertheless, MacLaverty did not excel academically and even failed his English A-level exams. He left school to spend 10 years as a medical lab technician before attending Queens University in Belfast to study English and teaching. While at Queens, MacLaverty wrote for student writing magazines and joined an influential writing club run by the British poet Phillip Hobsbaum. In 1967, he married Madeline McGuckin, and the couple had four children. By 1975, the Troubles were making Belfast increasingly violent, so the family moved to Scotland. MacLaverty became a full-time writer in 1981, after publishing his first novel, *Lamb*, in 1980. He went on to write four more novels, six short story collections, and two children's books, in addition to numerous radio-plays, screenplays, teleplays, and libretti. The author currently resides in Glasgow, Scotland with his family. In 2021, at the age of 79, MacLaverty published a new collection of short stories titled *Blank Pages*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the action of "Secrets" takes place many years after World War I, the war is an important historical context for John and Mary's relationship. John was a soldier in World War I while he and Mary were together. He then became a Catholic monk and ended his relationship with Mary in order to process the trauma of the war. Although "Secrets" is fictional, the trauma both John and Mary experienced was common for many World War I survivors. The war was an international conflict that involved much of Europe, the United States, Russia, Turkey, the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia from 1914 to 1918. One of the deadliest conflicts in history, World War I killed over 9 million soldiers and 5 million civilians worldwide. Due to the psychological effects of surviving this war, historians refer to the generational cohort that reached young adulthood during World War I as the "lost generation." Ernest Hemingway popularized this term in the epigraph for his 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, which read, "You are all a Lost Generation." The phrase conveys the disoriented spirit that many veterans and survivors adopted during the post-war period. Like John from "Secrets," many of the men who survived the war suffered acute mental health problems and returned home disillusioned. And like Mary, many women lost romantic partners to the war and remained unmarried after the war ended. The fictional characters of "Secrets" therefore exemplify World War I's very real psychological toll on the "Lost Generation."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

When Aunt Mary reads to the protagonist, she chooses excerpts from 19th literary works, including *Lorna Doone*, by R.D. Blackmore, *Persuasion*, by Jane Austen, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. Additionally, "Secrets" describes World War I's impact on two members of the "Lost Generation," the generational cohort that came of age in the years between 1914—1918. Ernest Hemingway, himself a member of this generational cohort, popularized this term in the epigraph for his 1926 debut novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, in which he quotes novelist and playwright Gertrude Stein telling him, "You are all a lost generation." Hemingway's novel actually pushed back against this statement, representing the generation's resiliency as well as its trauma. Finally, while "Secrets" explores the human cost of World War I, much of MacLaverty's writing focuses on the psychological toll of a more recent conflict: the Troubles of his native Northern Ireland. MacLaverty's most well-known novel, *Cal*, published in 1983, tells the story of a young Catholic man who is recruited to fight for the Irish Republican Army and ultimately falls in love with the widow of a police officer he helped murder. In stories such as this one, MacLaverty studies ordinary people's daily lives, often against the backdrop of extreme violence. Critics celebrate his ability to represent the complexity of these everyday stories with elegant yet simple prose. At the beginning of his career, he honed this writing style with the Belfast Group, a highly regarded writer's circle run by the English poet Phillip Hobsbaum, and later, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. The Belfast Group's enduring influence on one another can be seen in the similarities between Heaney's poetry and MacLaverty's prose. Like much of MacLaverty's work, Heaney's poetry focuses on loss and resilience. His volume, *North*, published in

1975, contains elegies for the many lives lost to the Troubles. Both Heaney and MacLaverty gave voice to the plight of Northern Ireland, using their literature to access pathways of grief, compassion, and hope.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Secrets
- **When Published:** 1977
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** The protagonist's childhood home in Ireland
- **Climax:** Great Aunt Mary lashes out at the protagonist when she finds him reading John's letters.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Art Imitates Life. Bernard MacLaverty grew up with a Great Aunt Mary who resembled the character of the same name in "Secrets." According to an article MacLaverty wrote for the *Irish Times*, his Great Aunt Mary was a teacher and kept detailed account books, much like the protagonist's Aunt Mary.

Eye on the Ball. As a child, MacLaverty did not dream of becoming a writer. Instead, he wanted to play for Manchester United. He partially credits his observation skills, which have become key to his writing career, to his childhood obsession with sports.

PLOT SUMMARY

The protagonist returns home from studying at his girlfriend's house to visit his Great Aunt Mary on her deathbed in her final hours. Kneeling on the threshold of the crowded room, observing Mary's shrunken, pained figure, he reflects on how much dignity she has lost. He can't bear witnessing her like this and retreats to her sitting room.

The story flashes back as the protagonist remembers what Mary was like when he was a child. She lived with his family in an apartment at the back of the house, and she was always small and dignified, with no jewelry except for a ring and locket. He used to ask her about the ring when she read stories to him. She would tell him that her grandmother had given it to her, but she tired quickly of his questions and went back to reading.

One day, the protagonist entered Mary's study to ask for stamps for his stamp collection. She unlocked her bureau, revealing an organized array of papers, and told him he could steam the stamps off her postcards. While removing the stamps, he noticed that many of the postcards were from someone named Brother Benignus. She said only that he was a friend who had died. The protagonist then reached over to read her collection of **letters**, but she firmly told him that he was never to touch them. Instead, he looked through some old photographs and found a picture of a young man standing in front of the ocean, with the inscription, "John, Aug '15 Ballintoye" on the back. He asked if this man was Brother Benignus, but Aunt Mary didn't respond.

One summer evening, after Aunt Mary left the house to go to Devotions, the protagonist snuck up to her room, unlocked the bureau, and opened the bundle of letters. He found that they were all written to Mary from John during World War I. In the first letter, John told Mary that the war had begun and he missed her deeply. In the next letter, he wrote that his memories of her were keeping him sane as he endured the war, and passionately recalled their first kiss. But in the next letter, written in the deep cold of winter, John told Mary about the horrors of war, describing how the dead lay frozen on the ground. He wrote that he felt numb and full of "anger which ha[d] no direction."

In the final letter, John wrote Mary from a hospital bed, telling her regretfully that in order to make sense of the war, he needed to break off their relationship and become a Catholic monk. As the protagonist finished reading this final letter, Aunt Mary entered the room. Betrayed by the protagonist's invasion of her privacy, she slapped him on the face and said, "you are dirt, and always will be dirt. I shall remember this till the day I die."

Back in the present, the protagonist builds a **fire** in his Aunt Mary's fireplace. She has passed away, and the protagonist's mother wants to clear out her things so that the protagonist can use the room as his study. He asks his mother who Brother Benignus was, but she doesn't know, since Aunt Mary was a very private person. She starts to burn the papers from the bureau in the fire. As the protagonist watches the letters burn, he asks his mother if Aunt Mary said anything about him before she died. His mother responds that Aunt Mary "was too far gone to speak" and continues to burn the letters. Afterwards, studying alone in his room, the protagonist cries silently for the "woman who had been his maiden aunt, his teller of tales, that she might forgive him."

CHARACTERS

The Protagonist – The protagonist of "Secrets" is an unnamed young man who lives with his mother and his Great Aunt Mary. At the beginning of the story, Great Aunt Mary is on her deathbed, surrounded by family. As the protagonist waits for her death, the story flashes back to his childhood, when the protagonist is a curious boy in a household that values privacy. He has a caring relationship with Aunt Mary, but whenever he asks her about her past, she reprimands him for being too

inquisitive. He is especially curious about Aunt Mary's friend, Brother Benignus, who he knows has written her many postcards over the years. Craving a deeper connection with his aunt, and wanting to satisfy his curiosity about Brother Benignus, the protagonist finally oversteps his aunt's boundaries and breaks the trust they share: he sneaks into her room and reads her **letters** from her former lover, John, even though she has expressly forbidden him from touching the letters. He learns that, after enduring horrific trauma in World War I, John broke off his relationship with Mary and became a Catholic monk named Brother Benignus. As the protagonist realizes that John and Brother Benignus are the same person, Aunt Mary returns to her room to discover him invading her privacy. Deeply hurt, she slaps the protagonist and tells him that she will remember his betrayal until she dies. The story then returns to the present. Aunt Mary is now dead, and the protagonist is watching as his mother burns Aunt Mary's papers, including John's letters. By letting the letters burn despite his ongoing curiosity about Brother Benignus, the protagonist shows that he has learned how to respect Aunt Mary's desires for privacy. Later on, when he is alone in Aunt Mary's old room, the protagonist breaks down in tears. Because he grieves alone, his tears represent the pattern of emotional isolation he learned from Aunt Mary. However, the protagonist's tears also carry a sense of release and healing, as he is able to acknowledge his grief and guilt over the incident, and to hope for his aunt's forgiveness.

Great Aunt Mary – The protagonist's Great Aunt Mary dies at the beginning of the story, but from then on, most of the story consists of the protagonist's memories of her from his childhood. Mary is a loving but secretive character, and her living situation reflects these characteristics: in the protagonist's flashback to his childhood, she lives with him and his mother, but in private rooms secluded at the back of the house, away from the family's shared spaces. Mary is a loving presence: she lets the protagonist enter her space and reads books to him, and she allows him to remove stamps from her postcards for his collection. But Mary's character also revolves around organization, routine, and control. Along with her impeccably neat appearance, she carefully organizes her life, maintaining a vase of fresh irises in her sitting room and regularly attending Catholic services. She is also careful to control the level of information her family knows about her: as the protagonist's mother reflects after Mary's death, "your aunt kept herself very much to herself." For this reason, she answers the protagonist's questions about her past evasively, and she symbolically locks away her important papers in an organized bureau. When the protagonist finds a picture of Mary as a beautiful girl with "dark and knowing" eyes, the reader sees that Mary has always been somewhat austere and mysterious, even as a child. However, the **letters** from Mary's former lover, John, reveal a much more vulnerable and open side to Mary: in one letter, John describes Mary as a skilled teacher. In another, he describes the day of their first kiss, when her usually neat hair was undone, representing her vulnerability. Through these letters, the reader realizes that Mary's inability to be vulnerable with her family members is partly a response to the trauma of heartbreak: having trusted John only for him to leave her to become a Catholic monk named Brother Benignus, Mary has not been able to trust again. Thus, when the protagonist betrays Mary by reading her most personal letters against her will, he triggers this trauma, causing her to lash out angrily at him. In her inability to trust, Mary demonstrates how grief and trauma can numb people to their emotions, preventing them from healing.

John/Brother Benignus – John's **letters** to Great Aunt Mary, written when he was a soldier fighting in World War I, reveal that he and Mary were in a romantic relationship in their youth, before and during the war. From the letters, it's clear that he cares deeply about Mary, describing how proud he is that she is a teacher and reminiscing about their first kiss. Like Mary, he loves the written word: he writes eloquently and finds other soldiers' illiteracy "heartrending." Throughout the four letters the protagonist reads, John becomes increasingly depressed by the war, until, by the third letter, he tells Mary that if he survives, he "will be a different person." This letter demonstrates the war's traumatic effect on John: he describes witnessing dead bodies frozen on the ground and staying with a fellow soldier as the man "chok[ed] and then drown[ed] in his own blood." Throughout the letter, John references the frozen winter weather, which parallels his own frozen emotions, as he tells Mary that he "has lost all sense of feeling" besides anger. The fourth letter, written from John's hospital bed, depicts him making sense of this trauma through his religion: he tells Mary, "In some strange way, Christ has spoken to me through the carnage." As a result, he decides to "sacrifice" their relationship in order to become a Catholic monk named Brother Benignus. John's experience in World War I therefore demonstrates the trauma that World War I's "Lost Generation" carried with them for the rest of their lives. His ability to process his trauma through his religion additionally demonstrates how facing grief can help "thaw" emotions and facilitate new growth. After reading this fourth letter, the protagonist realizes that John, whom he saw pictured in Mary's photo collection, is the same person as Brother Benignus, whose name appeared on many of Mary's postcards. By telling the protagonist that John was "perhaps" killed in the war, Mary insinuates that the war so changed John's personality, and their relationship, that John may as well have died. Nevertheless, the two kept a steady correspondence until Brother Benignus's death, including sharing their love of books, revealing their continued care even after their romance ended.

The Protagonist's Mother – A minor character, the protagonist's mother is nevertheless a force of change throughout the story. As Great Aunt Mary lies dying in the

opening scene, the protagonist's mother removes the old woman's dentures, causing the lower half of Mary's face to seemingly "collapse" and thus moving her closer toward the undignified appearance of death. In the protagonist's flashback to his childhood, his mother is often tidying the house, sorting "useful items that had to be kept" from "paper scraps torn in quarters and bits of rubbish." In doing so, the protagonist's mother contributes to the household's attitude of secrecy about the past: rather than holding on to physical remembrances and sharing them with the family, the protagonist's mother throws away anything that does not have immediate utilitarian value in the present, even tearing paper scraps in quarters to conceal any secrets they may reveal. After Aunt Mary has died, this same attitude drives the protagonist's mother to burn all of Aunt Mary's papers to make room for the protagonist, thus erasing much of Mary's physical legacy. In this way, although the protagonist's mother cared about Mary, she moves on relatively quickly after Mary's death, representing the constancy of change in life as well as the family's dismissive attitude toward the past.

The Protagonist's Girlfriend – When the protagonist visits Great Aunt Mary in her final hours of life, he comes directly from studying for A-level exams at his girlfriend's house. Trying to avoid looking at his aunt's distorted figure, he covers his face with his hands, only to smell his girlfriend's hand cream. This detail contrasts Aunt Mary's old age with the protagonist's youth: as Mary arrives at the end of her solitary life, the protagonist is on the edge of adulthood, with a new relationship and an array of possible life paths ahead of him. The smell of his girlfriend's hand cream seems to make the scene of Mary's death even more intolerable to him, perhaps because he knows Mary's own youthful romance ended in heartbreak and feels guilty about invading her privacy to learn that secret. In this way, the protagonist's girlfriend, although a very minor character, demonstrates the protagonist's youth relative to Mary's old age and reveals his ongoing guilt about betraying Mary's trust as a child.

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.

SECRETS AND CURIOSITY

Throughout the protagonist's childhood, his Great Aunt Mary admonishes him, "don't be so inquisitive." "Secrets" asks readers to consider this warning: is it good to question everything? Or are there some instances when unbridled curiosity does more harm than good? By demonstrating how the protagonist's youthful curiosity leads him to lose Aunt Mary's trust forever, "Secrets" suggests that curiosity can be harmful if it is not paired with respect for others' privacy, and that learning one another's secrets can actually drive people further apart rather than bringing them closer together.

While the protagonist and Aunt Mary have a loving bond, as a child, the protagonist does not have much compassion for his aunt, who's a very guarded and reserved person. Instead, like many curious children rebelling against authority figures, the protagonist disrespects Aunt Mary's boundaries in order to find out more about her past. He sneaks into her room to read her **letters** from her old lover, John—the only items in the room she has explicitly forbidden him from touching. Through reading these letters, the protagonist learns that John ended their romantic relationship when he became a Catholic monk (and changed his name to Brother Benignus) after fighting in World War I. But learning this secret from his aunt's past doesn't bring the protagonist and Great Aunt Mary any closer—instead, his invasion of privacy ruins their relationship and deepens the mystery of Aunt Mary's life rather than resolving it. Her anger at the protagonist's betrayal makes sense: after suffering heartbreak, Aunt Mary has spent most of her life not trusting others, mirroring Brother Benignus's monastic isolation. Because the young protagonist was one of the few people she let enter this private life, his betrayal hurts her deeply. As a young child, the protagonist is unable to see that his actions could have hurt Aunt Mary, whom he perceives as an unemotional authority figure. In this way, his curiosity isn't tempered with compassion and thus results in harm.

However, when Aunt Mary dies years later, the protagonist (who is now a young adult) has learned from his past mistakes, and he checks his curiosity with compassion. Despite his ongoing interest in Brother Benignus, he lets his mother burn the letters in the **fireplace** rather than reading them, out of respect for Aunt Mary's privacy. The story thus suggests that although curiosity can be a good quality, it must be moderated with a genuine care for other people's emotions.

DEATH, LOVE, AND LEGACY

"Secrets" suggests that love is the only lasting legacy of a person's life after their death. In the first scene, as the protagonist sees his Great Aunt Mary on her death bed, he observes how much of her personality has already been lost in her declining health. Though devoutly Catholic, Mary cannot grip the crucifix her family has placed in her hands. And though devoted to keeping her appearance impeccably neat, in death, Mary has "lost all the dignity [the protagonist] knew her to have." Furthermore, the events of the story revolve around the material remnants of Aunt Mary's long life: her correspondence and photos, including a picture of her in her youth and a collection of **letters** from her former

lover, John (who later became a monk named Brother Benignus). In life, these objects were important to Aunt Mary, as she guarded them vigilantly in a locked bureau and became very angry when the protagonist invaded her privacy to read John's letters. But after her death, her belongings lose much of the significance they held while she was alive. While clearing out Aunt Mary's room, the protagonist's mother burns all of Aunt Mary's papers, reducing the traces of her life to ash. And despite her pledge to remember the protagonist's hurtful invasion of her privacy "until the day she dies," Aunt Mary is "too far gone to speak" when she dies, rendering her unable to forgive or condemn the protagonist for his disrespectful action. Her disputes, like her personality and her possessions, are lost to death. The only remaining trace of Aunt Mary's life is in the protagonist's loving memory of her. After John's letters burn, the legacy of Mary and John's relationship still remains in the protagonist's mind, alongside his fond memories of his "maiden aunt, his teller of tales." Therefore, the story suggests, love is the only legacy that truly survives death.

WORLD WAR I AND THE LOST GENERATION

"Secrets" explores the far-reaching devastation of World War I, detailing the war's repercussions not only for the generation that fought in it, but also for generations to follow. When the protagonist reads Aunt Mary's letters, he realizes that she was in love with a soldier named John during the war, who later became a Catholic monk and changed his name to Brother Benignus. Having reached young adulthood during World War I, both Brother Benignus and Mary are members of what historians call the "Lost Generation," and both are psychologically scarred by their experiences. The four **letters** the protagonist reads from John reveal that, like many other members of his generation, the horrors John experienced on the battlefield deeply transformed him. Although John seems hopeful about the future in the first letter the protagonist reads, by the third letter, he describes the horror and anguish of watching his fellow soldiers die, writing, "if I live through this experience, I will be a different person." Thus, while he physically survived the war, he was so mentally altered by it that Mary implies that he was, in a sense, killed in the war. His name change to Brother Benignus once he was ordained further implies that the pre-war John symbolically died. Mary also suffered a huge loss, as she had to give up the future she had hoped for with John when he became a monk. Scarred by the trauma of this heartbreak, Aunt Mary seems to have spent the rest of her life trusting no one and "keep[ing] mostly to herself." Mary and John's failed romantic relationship therefore demonstrates the deep pain and isolation that many members of the Lost Generation carried with them for the rest of their lives.

The protagonist grows up amid the reverberations of this pain, demonstrating how, even two generations after the World War I, the devastation of the Lost Generation still echoes. Coming of age around Aunt Mary's unspoken trauma, the young protagonist learns not to talk about his emotions. As a child, he clearly craves connection with his aunt, but she answers his questions with evasive statements or silence. He finally goes behind her back to read her letters, an invasion of privacy that angers her and only drives her further away. Having learned to repress his emotions, the protagonist carries his guilt about this incident silently, never talking to Aunt Mary or his mother about it. Unable to process his feelings with others, his shame over a childhood mistake continues to haunt him into young adulthood. The story's last scene, in which the protagonist weeps alone, symbolizes his emotional isolation. Through both Aunt Mary and the protagonist's silent pain, the story captures the intergenerational trauma of World War I.

GRIEF AND HEALING

The main characters in "Secrets" process their grief by compartmentalizing their emotions. While this response perhaps helps them survive in the short term, the story suggests that in order to properly heal from their trauma, the characters must allow themselves to truly feel their grief. All three of the story's major characters deal with grief by compartmentalizing and "freezing" their emotions. The story opens with the protagonist grieving the imminent death of his Great Aunt Mary, "trembling with anger or sorrow [...] waiting for something to happen." This passage describes the protagonist's distance from his emotions—he can't tell whether he feels sorrow or anger—as well as his suspension in time, as he "waits," "trembling" as if frozen, removed from the scene of Mary's death. When the story flashes back to the protagonist's childhood, a similar response to grief is evident in Aunt Mary's character. The reader learns that Aunt Mary has spent much of her life grieving the loss of her former lover, John, who was so traumatized by fighting in World War I that he became a Catholic monk named Brother Benignus. Like the protagonist, Aunt Mary also distances herself from her emotions by compartmentalizing them, refusing to let herself be vulnerable with anyone, including the protagonist. And by locking John's **letters** in her highly organized bureau-bookcase, Aunt Mary very literally compartmentalizes the source of her grief. Finally, in his wartime letters to Aunt Mary, John describes his grief from the trauma of war, saying, "I have lost all sense of feeling" and worrying about what will happen to the dead bodies around him "when the thaw comes." Like Mary and the protagonist, John's immense grief freezes him, making him unable to feel anything but anger.

Because they are emotionally closed-off and numb, all three characters are able to endure their trauma in the short term. But Mary's emotional outburst when the protagonist betrays her trust demonstrates the long-term cost of not processing

grief. Because she has only locked her emotions away, Aunt Mary transfers her unprocessed anger from John's betrayal to the protagonist, whose childish actions are hurtful but arguably do not merit such an intense response. Thus, the rigidity of being emotionally frozen causes her to hurt the people she loves, and she never moves on from her grief. By contrast, in becoming Brother Benignus, John is able to feel his grief and make meaning from it. As he writes to Aunt Mary, "Christ has spoken to me through the carnage," demonstrating that although the horrors of war still haunt him, by facing his grief and processing it through his religion, he has begun to heal. The protagonist's tears at the end of the story similarly demonstrate his ability to process his grief over Mary's death. Although he never gets the closure of Mary's forgiveness, by crying "for the first time since she had died," the protagonist finds a sense of release, taking the first step toward healing. The story therefore suggests that in order to truly heal from trauma, we must first "thaw" our emotions and face our grief.

SYMBOLS

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

THE LETTERS

John's letters to Mary symbolize her loss of vulnerability due to grief. While the letters contain evidence of Mary's past vulnerability with John, who was her lover before and during World War I, they also represent the way her grief impedes her ability to trust again. John's letters depict Mary as a vulnerable young woman, far removed from the closed-off personality that the protagonist (Mary's nephew) knows. Remembering the summer day at Ballycastle when they first kissed, John describes Mary's open, trusting body language. He remembers her shirt that "opened down the back," "the clean nape of [her] neck," and the way she lay beside him with her "hair undone." These intimate moments soften Mary's normal austerity, revealing parts of herself that she usually conceals. Additionally, the final letter, in which John breaks up with her to become a monk, reveals that she is capable of being hurt. In this way, the letters carry evidence of Mary's vulnerability as a young woman.

Years later, the letters, and the bureau that holds them, come to represent Mary's unprocessed grief and inability to trust her family. By locking the letters away in the bureau, Mary literally keeps her family members from seeing the evidence of her vulnerability. The frail rubber band that contains the letters shows that even Mary herself does not frequently revisit this vulnerability, as it's lost its elasticity with disuse. For this reason, the bureau's organized interior, "divided into pigeon-holes, all bulging with papers," mirrors Mary's emotional interior: she compartmentalizes her grief about her failed relationship into a "pigeon-hole" in her mind just as she compartmentalizes John's letters, ignoring it rather than sorting through it. But this mental state is precarious, since her emotions, like the letters, "bulge" out of their "pigeon-holes," ready to spill out at the slightest provocation. Thus, when the protagonist betrays her trust, he triggers Mary's volatile emotions, causing the letters to "[spring] out in an untidy heap." In the final scene, the protagonist's mother burns the letters, thereby symbolically freeing Mary from her unprocessed grief in death.

MISS HAVISHAM

Miss Havisham, a character from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, represents Aunt Mary's inability to move on from her past. When reading to her nephew, the young protagonist, Mary often chooses to read the passage from *Great Expectations* when Pip meets Miss Havisham. Left at the altar on her wedding day, Miss Havisham has since become a recluse in her decaying mansion, unable to move on from her the heartbreak of her youth. By drawing this parallel to Dickens's archetypical jilted bride, the story hints that Mary is similarly mired in grief over past heartbreak.

Both Mary and Miss Havisham live most of their lives alone. After her groom left her at the altar, Miss Havisham retreated into her mansion for the rest of her life. Similarly, Mary's heartbreak causes her to mirror her ex-lover, Brother Benignus's, lifestyle after he breaks up with her to become a monk, spending most of her time alone in her secluded rooms and seeming only to venture out of the house to go to Catholic religious services. The two characters also share some physical resemblance, as both are associated with the color white. Like Miss Havisham's faded wedding dress, which she has not removed since her doomed wedding day, Mary's grandmother's cameo ring is white and "worn through," and her hair is "white and waved." The whiteness of Mary's appearance, like Miss Havisham's, suggest that her grief has frozen her in time. Similarly, Miss Havisham traps herself in the moment her groom left her, stopping all the clocks in her house at ten minutes to nine. Finally, when Mary asks the protagonist whether he thinks the picture of herself as a girl is beautiful, she demonstrates that, like Miss Havisham, she is stuck in the past, seeking male approval of her girlhood beauty. In this way, Mary's similarities to Miss Havisham symbolize her inability to move on from her heartbreak.

However, Mary's dignity differentiates her from Miss Havisham. While Miss Havisham behaves with dramatized self-pity, performing her grief loudly, Mary hides her pain both from her family and from herself. And while Miss Havisham plots to avenge herself against the man who left her, Mary maintains a lifelong friendship with Brother Benignus despite the

heartbreak he caused her. Therefore, while the two characters are similarly frozen in the past, this imperfect comparison also reveals the dignity in Mary's grief.

THE FIRE

The fire at the end of the story represents both Mary and the protagonist's final ability to move on from their grief. By burning John's **letters** after Mary dies so that the protagonist can use Mary's room as a study, the protagonist's mother erases the meaning they held for so many years. In doing so, she symbolically releases the Mary's lifelong grief over her breakup with John. With Mary dead, the protagonist's mother sees the letters only as more of Mary's many papers, less "useful" than the rubber band that holds them together. While the protagonist watches the letters burn and remembers their meaning to Mary, he only remembers the passages he read; the rest of their contents is lost to the fire. The fire in this way symbolizes how Mary's death releases her from the burden of her heartbreak. With the letters reduced to meaningless ash, Mary's spirit might finally be free to move on from her grief.

The fire is similarly cleansing for the protagonist, who has also been haunted by grief, not only for Aunt Mary's death, but also for breaking her trust when, as a young child, he read the letters behind her back after she told him not to. As she dies, he seems unable to process his grief immediately, "trembling with anger or sorrow, he didn't know which." He becomes an unemotional bystander, removing himself from her bedroom to wait alone for news of her death. In this way, his grief "freezes" his emotions. Only after watching John's letters burn in the fire can the protagonist truly thaw these emotions, finally crying "for the first time since [Mary] had died." Although the protagonist will never know whether Mary forgave him, his ability to mourn her death suggests that he has begun to learn how to forgive himself. The fire therefore provides the turning point in the protagonist's path to forgiveness, symbolically clearing out space in Mary's old bureau for his next stage in life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves* published in 2018.

Secrets Quotes

He was trembling with anger or sorrow, he didn't know which. He sat in the brightness of her big sitting-room at the oval table and waited for something to happen. On the table was a cut-glass vase of irises, dying because she had been in bed for over a week. He sat staring at them. They were withering from the tips inward, scrolling themselves delicately, brown and neat. Clearing up after themselves. He stared at them for a long time until he heard the sounds of women weeping from the next room.

Related Characters: The Protagonist, Great Aunt Mary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

After the protagonist witnesses Aunt Mary on her deathbed, he retreats to her sitting-room to be alone and wait for her death. The passage depicts the protagonist as numb and unable to process his grief, much like John later in the story. As in John's third letter to Aunt Mary, in which he describes his "trembling anger" during the war, the protagonist is also "trembling" in his grief. In John's letter, the word "trembling" connotes shaking due to severe cold as well as anger: he is both physically numb because of the winter weather, and emotionally numb because of the trauma of war. While the protagonist is physically warm, his "trembling" carries the connotation of emotional numbness, as he is unable to differentiate between anger or sorrow. His passive behavior adds to the impression of this emotional disconnect, as he removes himself to another room and "waits for something to happen." In this way, the story links the protagonist and John together through their emotionally numb reaction to grief.

Additionally, the link between Mary and the irises sheds light on Mary's character. Catholics sometimes use the iris to symbolize the sorrows of the Virgin Mary. In "Secrets," Mary, who is a devout Catholic, always keeps a vase of fresh irises on her table; the protagonist notices that they are dying because she has been too unwell to freshen them in her last week of life. The irises therefore reveal the biblical associations of Aunt Mary's sorrow: like her namesake from the Bible, Mary has lived her life in dignified suffering and sacrifice. The fact that these irises, symbolizing suffering, are dying, suggests that Mary is finally able to let go of her grief in death. And unlike Mary's more visceral death, the death of the irises remains dignified: they "wither... delicately," thus capturing the dignified end of Mary's

sorrow.

When he was bored he would interrupt her and ask about the ring. He loved hearing her tell of how her grandmother had given it to her as a brooch and she had had a ring made from it. He would try to count back to see how old it was. Had her grandmother got it from *her* grandmother? And if so what had she turned it into? She would nod her head from side to side and say, "How would I know a thing like that?" keeping her place in the closed book with her finger.

"Don't be so inquisitive," she'd say. "Let's see what happens next in the story."

Related Characters: Great Aunt Mary (speaker), The Protagonist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 282

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Aunt Mary reads to the protagonist in the beginning of his flashback to his childhood. It introduces the reader to the protagonist's curiosity and Aunt Mary's secrecy. The protagonist's questions about Mary's cameo ring reveal that he is a child with an active imagination. By imagining that the ring has been inherited through a lineage of Mary's ancestors, the protagonist demonstrates his desire to know more about his aunt's origins. Yet, like many children, he has not yet learned how to moderate his curiosity with sensitivity to others. By interrupting Mary's reading to ask about the ring, the protagonist foreshadows the story's climax, when he disrespects Mary's boundaries to satisfy his curiosity about John's letters.

The passage also demonstrates Mary's secretive nature. In the past, Mary has told the protagonist the story about the ring. But here, she tires quickly of the protagonist's imagination, scolding him for being "too inquisitive." Nevertheless, she is also an imaginative reader of fiction, curious to "see what happens next in the story." Ironically, by sharing her love of literature with the protagonist, she inspires his curiosity, so much so that he later remembers her as his "teller of tales." In this way, Mary's character appears divided on the subject of curiosity, as she is both curious about literature and secretive about her own past.

He reached over towards the letters but before his hand touched them his aunt's voice, harsh for once, warned.

"A-A-A," she moved her pen from side to side. "Do not touch," she said and smiled. "Anything else, yes! That section, no!" She resumed her writing.

Related Characters: Great Aunt Mary (speaker), The Protagonist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

After steaming the stamps off of Mary's postcards, the protagonist wants to open her letters, but meets Mary's harsh refusal. Due to the Catholic references throughout the story, Mary's refusal can be read as an allusion to the book of Genesis in the Bible. The wording of Mary's statement mirrors God's mandate to Adam in Genesis 2:16 and 2:17, in which God tells Adam that he can "freely eat" from any tree in the Garden of Eden, except for the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Similarly, Mary tells the protagonist he can touch "anything else" in the room, except for the section containing John's letters. Thus, like God forbidding Adam to eat from the tree of knowledge, Mary forbids the protagonist from reading John's letters.

This parallel establishes the reader's expectation that the protagonist will follow Adam and Eve, who eat from the tree of knowledge and are banished from Eden. The reader expects the protagonist to similarly fall from his state of innocence to betray Mary. Within the metaphor, the protagonist's curiosity can be likened to Adam and Eve's in the Bible, leading him towards disobedience. When he reads John's letters, the protagonist does lose some of his childhood innocence, as the letters contain knowledge of good (Mary's intimate relationship with John) and evil (John's descriptions of the horrors of World War I). In that sense, like God in Genesis, Mary forbids the protagonist from reading the letters partly to preserve his innocence.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"Why? What do you think of her?"

"She's all right."

"Do you think she is beautiful?" The boy nodded.

"That's me," she said. The boy was glad he had pleased her in return for the stamps.

Related Characters: The Protagonist, Great Aunt Mary (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mary and the protagonist are looking at the picture of Mary as a young girl. In some ways, the passage parallels Mary's favorite literary excerpt, in which Pip meets Miss Havisham for the first time in *Great Expectations*. In this famous scene, Miss Havisham invites the novel's young protagonist, Pip, to meet her beautiful adopted daughter, Estella. Miss Havisham, hoping to manipulate Pip in order to avenge her own broken heart, asks Pip if he finds Estella beautiful.

Similarly, Mary asks the protagonist if he thinks the girl in the picture is beautiful. This slight manipulation, in which Mary asks the question before revealing that the picture is of her, echoes Miss Havisham's manipulation. Like Miss Havisham, who treats the young people as a proxy for her past failed romance, Mary seems to seek the protagonist's approval of her girlhood beauty to replace John's rejection of it. This parallel suggests that Mary, like Miss Havisham, has not been able to move on from her failed relationship.

Additionally, the protagonist's response that he was "glad he had pleased her in return for the stamps," illustrates his transactional understanding of love. Instead of seeing Mary's love as abundant, the protagonist assumes that love operates on the basis of a transaction, such as exchanging compliments for stamps. In this immature understanding of love, he disrespects Mary's boundaries throughout the story, testing how much he can get from her in the transaction rather than showing genuine care for her emotions. This explains why, when he later plans to read John's letters, he does not consider how his actions would affect Mary.

"I thought maybe it was Brother Benignus," he said. She looked at him not answering.

"Was your friend killed in the war?"

At first she said no, but then she changed her mind.

"Perhaps he was," she said, then smiled. "You are far too inquisitive. Put it to use and go and see what is for tea."

Related Characters: The Protagonist, Great Aunt Mary (speaker), John/Brother Benignus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation about John's picture reveals Mary's sense of loss. By saying that John may have died in the war even as the protagonist is starting to understand that John became Brother Benignus, Mary is not only trying to thwart the protagonist's curiosity. In her closed-off way, she is also communicating the deep loss she felt when John broke off their relationship. As the protagonist later learns, when John became a monk, Mary lost her relationship and the future she had hoped for. By suggesting that the war killed John's spirit, even if his body lived on, Mary communicates the extent of her grief. In this way, Mary's character represents the grief of many women of the Lost Generation, whose romantic partners often returned from war deeply traumatized and changed, if they returned at all.

While this level of communication is uncharacteristically revealing for Mary, it nevertheless demonstrates her inability to process her grief. By admonishing the protagonist for being "too inquisitive" yet again, she chooses to conceal her pain rather than talk about it.

My love, it is thinking of you that keeps me sane. When I get a moment I open my memories of you as if I were reading. Your long dark hair—I always imagine you wearing the blouse with the tiny roses, the white one that opened down the back—your eyes that said so much without words, the way you lowered your head when I said anything that embarrassed you, the clean nape of your neck.

Related Characters: John/Brother Benignus (speaker), Great Aunt Mary

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

John's second letter to Mary reveals the level of intimacy and vulnerability the couple shared, which is one of the reasons Mary wants to keep the letters hidden. Opening by

calling Mary "my love," John goes on to describe Mary's vulnerable body language, remembering how her shirt opened down the back, and the way she lowered her head to expose the back of her neck. In her later life, Mary does not want her family to see this evidence of her vulnerability, which is so different from her closed-off and secretive personality, so she hides the letters away.

However, the image John describes of Mary is still reserved, much like Mary is later in life. By describing "her eyes that said so much without words," John suggests that, even with the intimacy between them, Mary was not very talkative. This description is completely congruent with the narrator's experience of Mary as an older woman, who rarely seems to speak in multiple sentences. Similarly, while John describes Mary's vulnerability, the package of letters does not contain Mary's responses, rendering the protagonist and the reader again blind to Mary's true emotions. Thus, while the letter does reveal Mary's vulnerability, it also demonstrates her characteristically reserved nature.

Finally, by comparing his memories of Mary to a book, John reveals the prominent place that literature holds in the couple's relationship. Even after they break up and John becomes Brother Benignus, he continues to send Mary books to read. By "reading" his memories of Mary to stay "sane," John foreshadows his monastic life, when he finds sanity by reading the Bible. In this way, the story establishes the connection between love, healing, and the written word.

Having graphically described seeing the bodies of dead soldiers frozen in the winter cold, John then names the emotional winter inside himself. Instead of experiencing the normal range of emotions, John describes being stuck in anger. Depicting this anger as "sheer," "white," and "trembling," he draws a comparison between the winter landscape and his emotional landscape, suggesting that his emotions are frozen. In this way, John is displaying a common trauma response in which the traumatized person loses emotional flexibility. Additionally, by predicting that he will emerge deeply changed from this experience, John becomes a voice for the many soldiers who returned from World War I with severe trauma.

Both Mary's and the protagonist's grief in some way resembles John's frozen emotional state. White is the main color that represents Mary, with her white hair and white ring, linking her to John's "sheer white" anger. Unable to process the trauma of losing John, she is also emotionally rigid, and reacts with extreme anger when the protagonist invades her privacy. The protagonist, too, seems frozen in his grief after Mary dies, as he is unable to differentiate between anger or sorrow. In this way, the three characters demonstrate the emotional rigidity of many people who are struggling to heal from traumatic experiences.

❝ The only emotion I have experienced lately is one of anger. Sheer white trembling anger. I have no pity or sorrow for the dead and injured. I thank God it is not me but I am enraged that it had to be them. If I live through this experience I will be a different person.

Related Characters: John/Brother Benignus (speaker), Great Aunt Mary, The Protagonist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

By describing his emotional numbness in the third letter the protagonist reads, John describes his trauma in a way that mirrors both the protagonist's and Mary's trauma responses.

❝ I have been thinking a lot as I lie here about the war and about myself and about you. I do not know how to say this but I feel deeply that I must do something, must sacrifice something to make up for the horror of the past year. In some strange way Christ has spoken to me through the carnage.

Related Characters: John/Brother Benignus (speaker), Great Aunt Mary, The Protagonist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

In the fourth letter the protagonist reads, John is writing to Mary from his hospital bed, having been injured in the war. In this letter, John demonstrates that he has been able to begin to "thaw" his metaphorically frozen emotions by processing them. He tells Mary that he has been processing

what he saw in the war by "thinking a lot." Instead of feeling only anger, John now "feels deeply that [he] must do something," demonstrating a newfound emotional range. Furthermore, the "carnage" of the war, which in his previous letter provoked his "directionless anger," has become an unlikely pathway to Christ. He is therefore using his religious beliefs to process the senseless violence he experienced. This suggests that in order to heal from trauma and grief, sufferers must first find a way to emotionally "thaw."

Unfortunately for Mary, John's path towards healing becomes her path to loss, as he feels called to "sacrifice" his relationship with her "to make up for the horror of the past year." This element speaks to the rippling trauma of war, in which the initial loss and trauma on the battlefield spark yet more loss and trauma at home. Ultimately, because Mary's trauma impacts the protagonist, the story speaks to World War I's intergenerational trauma.

> "You have been reading my letters," she said quietly. Her mouth was tight with the words and her eyes blazed. The boy could say nothing. She struck him across the side of the face.
>
> "Get out," she said. "Get out of my room."
>
> The boy, the side of his face stinging and red, put the keys on the table on his way out. When he reached the door she called him. He stopped, his hand on the handle.
>
> "You are dirt," she hissed, "and always will be dirt. I shall remember this till the day I die."

Related Characters: Great Aunt Mary (speaker), The Protagonist

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

After realizing that the protagonist has been reading the letters, Mary feels deeply betrayed. This passage continues the story's link to the biblical book of Genesis.

Like God banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they ate from the tree of knowledge, Mary banishes the protagonist from her room after realizing his betrayal. This banishment signifies the protagonist's loss of innocence due to his curiosity. In the same way that God reserved a special place for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Mary seemed to have a special bond with the protagonist, trusting him more than the rest of the family. By invading her privacy to satisfy his curiosity, the protagonist triggers Mary's memory of John's betrayal. He therefore loses his innocence in Mary's eyes, and she no longer trusts him.

Additionally, her comment, "you are dirt [...] and always will be dirt" echoes God's message to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:19: "you are dust and to dust you shall return." This line is the basis for the Christian doctrine of original sin, which establishes that humans are inherently sinful and in need of redemption. By referencing this doctrine, Mary again reinforces the protagonist's loss of innocence due to his curiosity. The protagonist's damaged relationship with Aunt Mary therefore suggests that curiosity, though tempting, must be paired with genuine care for others.

> Tears came into his eyes for the first time since she had died and he cried silently into the crook of his arm for the woman who had been his maiden aunt, his teller of tales, that she might forgive him.

Related Characters: The Protagonist, Great Aunt Mary

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

The protagonist's tears after watching Mary's letters burn in the fire carry multiple meanings. Because he cries alone, he demonstrates that he has learned Mary's traumatized behavior of isolation. However, in crying at all, the protagonist nevertheless "thaws" his frozen emotional state and shows that he is finally able to grieve for Mary. This is an improvement from his previous emotional distance, in which he could not differentiate between his sorrow and his anger as he waited for Mary's death. In this way, the fire symbolizes the protagonist's ability to move on from grief.

Similarly, his desire for forgiveness carries Christian connotations of redemption. In hoping Mary forgives him, the protagonist shows that he is moving past his shame and guilt and focusing instead on the loving connection they shared.

This loving relationship becomes Aunt Mary's true legacy.

Because so many of her meticulously cared-for documents burned in the fire, including the evidence of her relationship with John, the physical remnants of her long life have disappeared in death. Yet the protagonist's memory remains, as he cries for "his maiden aunt, his teller of tales." In this way, the story develops the theme of legacy in death, showing how our relationships outlive our physical legacies.

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.

SECRETS

The unnamed protagonist is "called" to see his Great Aunt Mary on her deathbed. She has been in the process of dying for days. This evening, the protagonist has come back from his girlfriend's house, where they were studying together, to find his aunt in her final hours of life.

The first sentences of the story contrast the protagonist's youth with Aunt Mary's old age. The protagonist is studying for the A-level exams, which may help determine his career path, and is involved in a relatively new romantic relationship. Meanwhile, Aunt Mary is in her final hours of life. This contrast introduces the theme of legacy in death, asking readers to consider the way life continues after someone passes away. Additionally, by describing the protagonist being "called" to be present at the end of Mary's life, the story establishes that its characters are coming from a religious background. Readers can therefore be alert to religious connotations throughout the story.

The protagonist kneels on the threshold of Aunt Mary's bedroom, which is crowded with family members. He observes the shrunken figure of Aunt Mary on the bed as she twists her head, her white hair damp with sweat, her hands unable to clutch the crucifix someone has placed there. She makes a horrible sound deep in her throat as she breathes, as if she's drowning, and is unable to open her eyes fully. The protagonist's mother takes Mary's dentures out of her mouth, causing the lower half of Mary's face to appear to collapse.

The gruesome description of Mary's dying body represents death as a force of destruction, erasing Mary's personality. In death, Mary is physically shrinking and collapsing. In light of her devout Catholicism, her inability to hold the crucifix may also suggest that her soul is leaving her body, as her body loses its hold on this spiritual symbol. Finally, she is becoming closed off to the world, struggling to take in breath and sight. She is therefore disappearing in death. The protagonist's position on the threshold of the room resonates metaphorically with this transitional state between life and death. Additionally, by kneeling on the threshold, he also demonstrates his role as a bystander, unsure of his place at Mary's death. This bystander role is an early key into the tenuous nature of his relationship to Mary, as well as an important element to his grieving process.

The sound Aunt Mary is making becomes intolerable to the protagonist, making him mourn the loss of her dignity. He retreats to her sitting room, where he sits "trembling with anger or sorrow," staring at the vase of withered irises on the table. Finally, he hears women weeping in Aunt Mary's bedroom.

Mary's dignity is yet another personality trait that she is losing as she dies, again bringing up the theme of death as loss. This passage also further develops the distanced nature of the protagonist's grief. As compared to the emotion of the women weeping, the protagonist seems separated from his emotions, unable to discern between anger and sorrow. He also physically distances himself from the room where Mary is dying, thus avoiding a show of emotional vulnerability. Finally, the irises on the table carry multiple symbolic meanings. First, like Mary's body, they seem to be shrinking in death, "withering from the tips inward." Second, in the Catholic Church, irises symbolize Mary's suffering in the Bible. Their presence on the table suggests that, like her biblical namesake, Aunt Mary has also led a life of suffering and martyrdom.

The protagonist flashes back to his memories of Aunt Mary. She is a small person, with fresh skin and white, wavy hair. She wears no jewelry except for a gold locket and a worn cameo ring, which the protagonist stares at when she reads to him. At first, she reads fairy tales, but as he gets older, she reads extracts from famous novels, her favorite extract being Pip's meeting with **Miss Havisham** from *Great Expectations*. He sometimes interrupts her to ask about the ring, and loves to hear how her grandmother gave it to her as a brooch. But she tires quickly of his questions and turns back to the story, telling him, "Don't be so inquisitive."

The protagonist's memory of Aunt Mary establishes her as unmarried (she wears no wedding ring), dignified, and loving. The reference to Miss Havisham is ambiguous at this stage in the story, but the reader already has a sense that, like Dickens's famous jilted bride, Mary may be struggling to move on from the sorrows of her past. Mary's impatience with the protagonist's questions about her grandmother's ring reinforces this character trait, as it demonstrates her secrecy about her past. This passage also establishes the protagonist's curiosity as a child. Specifically, he wants to know more about his aunt and her ancestors. In this way, the passage highlights a key tension between secrecy and curiosity.

One day, the protagonist enters Aunt Mary's room as she sits at her desk "copying figures," the vase of irises on the table vibrating slightly. He asks if she has any stamps for his stamp collection, and she walks over to the bureau in the corner and unlocks it. Inside, **letters**, postcards, and bills bulge out of the bureau's pigeon holes. She gives him the postcards so that he can steam the stamps off of them, but she warns him to be careful not to damage the cards. She then returns to her writing.

This passage is important in establishing Mary as a highly organized character. The phrase "copying figures" implies she is writing meticulously, while the pigeon holes in her bureau reveal her method of organizing documents. The presence of the vase of irises on the table, repeated from the scene of her death, suggests that she regularly keeps fresh irises in her room, thus revealing her dedication to routine. Additionally, the locked bureau demonstrates another element of Mary's secrecy: she locks her documents away, presumably from the eyes of her family members. Yet the fact that she allows the protagonist to see inside the bureau demonstrates the trust that they share.

The postcards have interesting images from faraway places, and odd stamps the protagonist has never seen before, from Spain, France, Germany and Italy. He asks to take them downstairs, but Aunt Mary doesn't want his mother to see the postcards, so she tells him to bring the kettle up to her room, which is secluded in the back of the house, facing the orchard.

This passage again develops the secrecy of Mary's character. While she does not mind if the protagonist reads the postcards, she does not want his mother to see them, which suggests that they contain sensitive information. Because the protagonist is a child, she thinks he will not be able to understand this information, so she allows him to read the postcards. The fact that her rooms are in the back of the house, away from the family's common spaces, also suggests that she leads a secluded life, closed off from the rest of the family.

When the kettle boils, the protagonist steams the stamps off, which curls the postcards slightly, but Aunt Mary doesn't notice the damage. He notices that many of the cards are from Brother Benignus, and he asks her who he is. She responds that he was a friend. The protagonist asks her if he is alive, and she tells him only that Brother Benignus is dead now, then warns him not to let the kettle run dry. After he has taken all the stamps off and replaced the postcards in their proper pigeon hole, he reaches for the bundle of **letters** in the bureau. But Aunt Mary quickly stops him, her voice unusually harsh, telling him he can touch anything else but the letters.

The protagonist's removal of the stamps damages the cards slightly, despite Mary's request that he be careful. This detail establishes the protagonist as having a certain level of disregard for Mary's emotions and boundaries. This passage also introduces the character of Brother Benignus, who remains mysterious due to Mary's secrecy. Nevertheless, the theme of death returns in their short conversation, once again establishing Mary as a character who has lost people she loved. Finally, Mary's mandate that the protagonist not touch the letters is an important plot development. The force of her voice, and the fact that she tells him he can touch anything else, suggests that the lock on the bureau, and perhaps her entire air of secrecy, is meant to conceal the contents of the letters.

The protagonist then looks through some old papers and finds an old photograph of a beautiful girl. She has dark hair, pulled tightly back and knotted in a braid on the top of her head, and a thin mouth that looked as if it had just finished smiling. Her brown eyes are dark and knowing. He asks who she is, and Aunt Mary asks him if he thinks the girl is beautiful. When he replies that he does, Aunt Mary tells him that it is a picture of herself as a girl. He is glad that he pleased her, since she gave him the stamps.

Even as a young girl, Mary seems to have been somewhat mysterious and reserved. Her tightly braided hair suggests her characteristic organization, while her "knowing" eyes and mouth that "just finished smiling" seem to conceal inner thoughts and feelings. This passage also introduces an element of slight manipulation between the two characters. When Mary asks the protagonist if he thinks the picture is beautiful before revealing that it is a picture of her, she manipulates the protagonist into complimenting her. For his part, the protagonist feels that he exchanged the compliment for stamps, thus manipulating her. Mary's secrecy may have created this undercurrent of manipulation, as it teaches the protagonist to conceal himself rather than be vulnerable and honest. Thus, there is a transactional element within the characters' relationship, as both characters feel that, at least sometimes, they must manipulate the other to get what they want.

The protagonist continues looking through the photographs and finds a picture of a man smoking a cigarette by the sea. He asks Aunt Mary who the man is, and she tells him that he was a friend, adding that the protagonist better run downstairs to see what is cooking. Instead, he looks at the back of the picture and sees the words, "John, Aug '15, Ballintoye." Surprised, he tells his aunt that he thought the man was Brother Benignus, and she looks at him but does not answer. When he asks if "[her] friend was killed in the war," she says no at first but then says that he may have been. Smiling, she tells the protagonist that he is "far too inquisitive" and urges him to go downstairs.

The inscription on the back of the photograph of John says that it was taken in 1915 in Northern Ireland. The war that the protagonist refers to is therefore World War I, which lasted from 1914 to 1918.Again, Mary continues to be secretive about Brother Benignus. However, by telling the protagonist that John may have been killed in the war, Mary alludes to having endured a deep sense of loss. Significantly, she also scolds the protagonist for asking too many questions, suggesting that this will become a point of conflict between the two.

One summer evening, the protagonist is doing his homework while his mother organizes the household junk drawers. Aunt Mary comes downstairs and tells the family she is going to Devotions. She stops at the mirror to pat her hair before leaving the house. The protagonist sits for a long time wondering if he will have the time he needs to sneak up to her room.

Aunt Mary's outing to Devotions further establishes her character's devout Catholicism, as the protagonist implies that she regularly attends Devotions. This practice again reveals her comfort with routine. The protagonist's thoughts in this passage are equally revealing. Instead of thinking about whether he could hurt Aunt Mary's feelings, the protagonist is concerned with whether he will get caught. Again, his childhood curiosity leads him to disrespect Mary's boundaries.

After 10 minutes, the protagonist rushes upstairs to her bureau and unlocks it. He pretends for a moment to look at the postcards before reaching for the bundle of **letters** and taking off the brittle elastic band. He opens one at random and reads a letter that begins, "My dearest Mary." The writer tells Mary about censoring letters that are being sent from the battlefront, written mostly by illiterate soldiers who do not have the words to express what they feel. He tells Mary how proud he is that she is a teacher, bringing literacy to the next generation. The protagonist skims to the signature, where the writer professes his love for Mary and signs his name as John.

By pretending to look at the postcards, the protagonist shows that he does feel some sense of guilt for having betrayed Mary's trust. Nevertheless, he decides that satisfying his curiosity is worth the risk that Mary will find out and feel betrayed. The letter he reads is crucial in proving that Mary had a romantic relationship with John, the man from the picture. They seem to share a love of words and reading. This shared interest, as well as John's comments about Mary being a teacher, point to the rise of literacy during World War I. Historians highlight this increased literacy as a defining characteristic of the Lost Generation, the generational cohort that came of age in Europe during the war years. There is also an element of irony in the fact that the protagonist is secretly reading a letter about John, who was secretly reading soldiers' letters in the war. Apparently, war is an occasion for secrecy, both as it happens and as it is remembered years later.

In the next **letter** the protagonist opens, John writes to Mary that his memories of her keep him sane. He reflects on the day they climbed the head at Ballycastle and lay down in a hollow out of the wind, in the warm, dry grass. He remembers how her hair was undone, and how he kissed her for the first time, and the look of disbelief on her face afterward that made him laugh. He writes that he is laughing at himself now, with his feet in the thick mud and "his head in the clouds."

This passage reveals the deep intimacy that John and Mary shared. As a reserved person, Mary may want to keep the letters secret partly because they show her in such a vulnerable light. This passage also illustrates the power of remembering loving moments, as the act of remembering his love for Mary keeps John's spirits high as he endures the war. However, while John does not describe the war in this letter, it seems to have started to take a toll on him. He is no longer censoring letters, but rather is standing in deep mud. The image suggests that the war is getting worse, and John is in the thick of the action.

In the next letter, John tells Mary that he is so cold it is difficult to write. His legs and feet have gone completely numb, and the ground is unbelievably cold. The dead lie frozen; you can tell they aren't living by their slate-colored faces. He has lost all feeling besides a "sheer white trembling anger." He tells Mary that if he survives, he will be a different person, but "the only thing that remains constant is [his] love for [her]." He then describes watching a man die beside him, drowning in his own blood after a piece of shrapnel pierced his neck.

The metaphor of a frozen winter describes John's emotional interior, as he is numb to all feeling except anger. This traumatized state resembles both the protagonist's and Mary's responses to grief at different points in the story. John's fear of what will happen to the bodies "when the thaw comes" symbolizes his fear of facing his trauma and "melting" his frozen emotions. These graphic descriptions of the violence of World War I reveal the trauma that defined the Lost Generation. Like John, many members of this generation returned from the war deeply changed, often with serious mental health struggles as a result of what they endured.

In the next **letter**, John apologizes for not writing for so long. He is writing from a hospital bed, where he had been for two weeks before he regained consciousness. It took another two weeks for him to build the courage to write this letter. He tells Mary that he has been thinking a lot "about the war and about myself and about you." He tells her he feels strongly that he needs to sacrifice something after the horrors he experienced, and that "in some strange way Christ has spoken to me through the carnage."

This letter establishes that John became a Catholic monk (Brother Benignus) after the war, leading him to break up with Mary. In joining the monastic brotherhood, John seems to have been able to face his trauma and make meaning from it, as he now feels that the horrors of the war allowed him to hear God's voice. Tracing the metaphor of John's trauma as a frozen winter, John seems like he has begun to "thaw" and feel his emotions again. In this way, the story suggests that processing grief and trauma, instead of ignoring it, is an important part of healing.The letter also reveals Mary's own emotional martyrdom. After John sacrificed their relationship in order to pursue his religious calling, Mary seems to have sacrificed the life she wanted to live as well. Instead of pursuing another relationship with someone else, she lives a secluded and devout life, much like Brother Benignus's monastic practices. But unlike Brother Benignus's sacrifice, this sacrifice appears to keep Mary stuck in the past, rather than helping her heal.

After reading this line, the protagonist hears Aunt Mary's footsteps on the stairs. He rushes frantically to slip the **letters** back in their envelopes but ends up crumpling them. He spreads the elastic over the bundle, but it snaps, so he squeezes the scattered letters back into their pigeon hole and slams the bureau shut loudly.

The letters, symbols of Mary's vulnerability, spring out from the pigeon hole after the protagonist reads them, representing Mary's emotional volatility due to her unprocessed grief. Like John in the third letter, Mary is frozen by her grief, able only to explode in anger when provoked. Mary's experience exemplifies the trauma of the Lost Generation.

Aunt Mary enters at this moment, and she immediately guesses what the protagonist has been doing. "You have been reading my **letters**," she says quietly, and the protagonist cannot respond. She slaps him across the face and tells him to leave her room. As he exits, she hisses, "You are dirt, and always will be dirt. I will remember this till the day I die."

In the statement, "you are dirt and always will be dirt," the story references God banishing Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, as God tells them, "you are dust and to dust you shall return." This biblical reference establishes the protagonist's loss of innocence, as, like Adam and Eve, he has followed his curiosity and learned about the horrors of sin (or war). Seeing him as a traitor instead of an innocent child, Mary banishes him from her room. Thus, the story describes the harm that comes from curiosity when it is not paired with compassion for others. By losing his relationship with Mary, the protagonist also experiences, though from a distance, the reverberating loss of World War I. The story therefore communicates the intergenerational effects of the war's trauma.

Back in the present the protagonist builds a big **fire** in Aunt Mary's sitting room so that his mother can clear out Mary's belongings and turn it into his study. His mother enters the room, unlocks the bureau, and begins burning his aunt's papers. The protagonist asks her who Brother Benignus was, and she responds that she wouldn't know, "your aunt kept herself very much to herself." She only knows that Brother Benignus would send Aunt Mary books.

The burning of Mary's papers demonstrates the way death changes the meaning of material items. The postcards, pictures, and letters Mary collected over the course of her life held a lot of significance when she was alive. But with her death, much of that meaning is lost, and the documents become mere objects. This loss of meaning speaks to the impermanence of the physical form: like Mary, we all must die, and when we do, the meaning of most of our belongings will die with us. In this way, the story suggests that our relationships with other people, rather than our possessions, are our most meaningful and lasting legacy.Additionally, the protagonist's mother's description of Mary as a woman who "kept herself very much to herself" reinforces Mary's secrecy, while her note that Brother Benignus sent Mary books again highlights the friends' shared love of literature.

His mother then comes to the **letters**, takes off the elastic band that contains them and puts it aside in her pile of useful things. She skims one letter before throwing them on top of the **fire**. The protagonist asks his mother if Aunt Mary said anything about him before she died, and she responds that "the poor thing was too far gone to speak." She then continues to burn the letters.

By deeming John's letters less useful than the rubber band that contained them, the protagonist's mother once again demonstrates the way death changes objects' meanings. The fire's destruction of the letters also symbolizes Mary's final release from grief in death. By calling her a "poor thing," the protagonist's mother also recalls the way death took away Mary's dignity. Additionally, this passage shows that the protagonist has learned how to respect Mary's boundaries, as he lets the letters burn even though he is clearly still curious about Brother Benignus. Finally, the protagonist's question to his mother suggests that he was never able to repair his relationship with Mary. Recalling Mary's promise that she would remember his betrayal "until the day [she died]," the protagonist hopes that Mary forgave him on her deathbed. However, the fact that she was "too far gone to speak" means that the protagonist will never gain the closure of her forgiveness.

While studying in the room after his mother leaves, the protagonist feels his throat close up and tears come to his eyes for the first time since Aunt Mary died. He cries silently "for the woman who had been his maiden aunt, his teller of tales, that she might forgive him."

After watching the letters burn, the protagonist is able to cry. The fire metaphorically thawed the protagonist's frozen emotions, and he can now grieve openly for Mary and hope for her forgiveness. In this way, the fire represents the protagonist's ability to move on from his grief. His tears also represent the intergenerational trauma from World War I, as he mourns the relationship he lost with Mary. He lost this relationship in part because Mary could not be vulnerable with him due to her trauma from the war years.Finally, his memory of Mary as his "maiden Aunt, his teller of tales," demonstrates the lasting legacy of relationships. While most of Mary's belongings have lost their meaning, Mary's legacy lives on in the protagonist's memory.

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