In the Lake of the Woods

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TIM O'BRIEN

Tim O'Brien was born in 1946 in Austin, Minnesota, but he spent most of his childhood in the neighboring city of Worthington, Minnesota. Growing up, he showed great interest in nature and travel, two themes that echo throughout his novels and short stories. O'Brien studied political science in college. In 1968, shortly after graduating, he was drafted into the army and deployed to Vietnam, where he served for nearly two years. O'Brien was a member of the division that was involved in the infamous My Lai Massacre, although O'Brien himself arrived in Vietnam almost a year after this incident occurred. Following his military service, he studied writing at Harvard University. In 1973, he began his career as a writer by publishing the memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*. The book received a small but impressive amount of critical acclaim, and has been called the best book ever written about Vietnam. O'Brien continued to write novels, including *Going After Cacciato*, and short stories throughout the 70s and 80s, most of which either revolved around or alluded to the Vietnam War. In the 80s, he was also an activist for better treatment of military veterans, and criticized the American government's military action overseas. In 1990, O'Brien published the book for which he's best know, *The Things They Carried*. A collection of short stories about Vietnam, many of which O'Brien had written and published in the previous decade, the book received great acclaim, and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Since 1990, O'Brien has published three novels: *In the Lake of the Woods*, *Tomcat in Love*, and *July, July*, the latter two of which are much lighter in tone than his previous works.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The central historical event of *In the Lake of the Woods* is the Vietnam War. Between the late 1950s and the mid 1970s, the United States gave military and financial aid to its allies in South Vietnam to prevent South Vietnam from falling under the control of Communist forces, known as the Vietcong, which were based in North Vietnam and were led by Ho Chi Minh. Under the presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, the United States deployed tens of thousands of troops to Vietnam and waged chemical warfare on the land of Vietnam itself by dropping millions of pounds of bombs and napalm into its forests. During this time, many in the United States came to oppose America's involvement in Vietnam, protesting outside the White House and, in 1968, the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. In 1968, news of the Mai Lai Massacre reached the United States. It was shown that American troops massacred a village of unarmed civilians, including women and babies, and abused Vietnamese women before murdering them. All of these events are alluded to in *In the Lake of the Woods*, and some, such as the My Lai Massacre, are central to the plot. O'Brien also discusses the treatment of Vietnam veterans, and criticizes the lack of compassion and understanding the American public showed when dealing with veterans' post-traumatic stress disorder.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One of the most interesting qualities of *In the Lake of the Woods* is its unreliable narrator. At many points, the narrator acknowledges that he's distorted the facts to tell a better story, and cites sources about how all writers do this. There are many postmodern novels with unreliable narrators; some of these, like *In the Lake of the Woods*, blur the line between fiction and nonfiction by citing real sources alongside fictitious ones. Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), and John Krakauer's *Into the Wild* (1996) conduct similar experiments with narration and objectivity. It's also worth mentioning *Dispatches* (1977) by Michael Herr, another journalistic novel that treats the war in Vietnam as a collection of fragments that can't be put together.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *In the Lake of the Woods*
- **Where Written:** Austin, Texas and Worthington, Minnesota
- **When Published:** January 1995
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** The novel is hard to classify, but it features elements of the historical novel, the war novel, and the mystery novel.
- **Setting:** Lake of the Woods, Minnesota, and Vietnam
- **Point of View:** The novel moves between many points of view. There are third person limited chapters, in which the narrator describes events from the characters' points of view. There are also chapters of evidence, and footnotes in which the narrator speaks in the first person.

EXTRA CREDIT

Dedicated teaching: Though he hasn't published a book in more than a decade, O'Brien is far from retired. He continues to serve as the MFA chair at Texas State University in San Marcos.

Major awards: Tim O'Brien has won many awards for his writing and journalism. In 1978, he won the National Book

Award for *Going After Cacciato*, a novel of Vietnam. He's also won the Pritzker Military Library Literature Prize of 100,000 dollars.

PLOT SUMMARY

John Wade and Kathy Wade are a couple in their forties. John is a politician in Minnesota who has just lost a campaign for the U.S. Senate by a huge margin. He and Kathy have come to stay in a cottage near **Lake of the Woods**, a massive lake that joins Minnesota with Canada. They are both secretly depressed, but pretend to be happy by talking about having children and visiting faraway places.

Throughout the novel, there are chapters consisting of evidence. In the first of these, we learn that Kathy Wade disappeared during her time in Lake of the Woods. Various witnesses, including Kathy's sister, Patricia, suggest that foul play was involved, and may have involved John. We learn that John had an alcoholic father, and that John's political career ended after information about his past came to light.

When John was young, he loved his father, Paul Wade. His father committed suicide when John was fourteen years old. Afterwards, John cried and had long imaginary conversations with his father, in which his father said that he loved John.

John and Kathy spend their last day together walking around Lake of the Woods. They eat at a Mini-Mart, where they have an argument that Myra Shaw, a waitress, witnesses. John unplugs the phone in his cottage, seemingly because he doesn't want to think about his electoral defeat. He and Kathy don't make love that night.

There are also chapters of "hypotheses" about what happened to Kathy. In the first of these, Kathy wakes up in the middle of the night and leaves John for her lover, a dentist.

In the next collection of evidence, we learn that John fought in Vietnam, where he had the nickname "Sorcerer." The narrator cites biographers who say that the experience of war leaves a lasting, unforgettable impact on all soldiers.

As a child, John loved to perform **magic tricks**. Even in college, when he met Kathy, he performed "tricks" on her—he would follow her wherever she went, enjoying the sense of control he felt, and the thrill of deceiving other people. He told Kathy that he wanted to go into politics to help others, but secretly, he knew that he liked politics because he enjoyed manipulating others. John joins the army and spends two years in Vietnam—Kathy suggests that he's only doing so to bolster his chances of political success later on. As "Sorcerer," he performs tricks for his fellow troops, who see him as good luck. When John returns to the United States, he continues to stalk Kathy, and uncovers evidence that she was having a relationship with someone else. Nevertheless, he marries her. John often thinks that he must lie about his actions in Vietnam.

The night before Kathy's disappearance John woke up, muttering "Kill Jesus," and then went to boil water for tea. He poured the boiling water onto a plant, killing it instantly. He then boils more water and carries it to the bedroom. John has trouble remembering what happens next, but he recalls going to the boathouse and possibly getting in the lake. The next morning he notices that Kathy isn't next to him in bed but goes back to sleep.

The next hypothesis for Kathy's disappearance proposes that Kathy was scared by John's behavior that night. As a result, she decided that John was beyond her help or sympathy, and got in the boat to get as far away from him as possible.

As a child, John's father made fun of his **weight** by calling him "Jiggling John." Nevertheless, John's father was a popular figure in his community, and many of John's friends wished he was *their* father. John turns to magic as a way of escaping from his father's bullying. In Vietnam, John performs tricks for the soldiers, and sends Kathy letters in which he compares their love to **two snakes** eating each other until nothing is left. He shoots another soldier, PFC Weatherby; the narrator doesn't explain why he does so. Afterwards, John tries to tell himself that he's innocent of the crime, and that killing Weatherby was a mere "reflex."

Back in the United States, John runs for Minnesota state senator, and wins. John has begun yelling out in his sleep, though, and Kathy senses that he's hiding secrets about his behavior in Vietnam. Nevertheless, she stays married to him. Later, John runs for Lieutenant Governor, and wins.

On the day that Kathy disappears, John thinks of how he will explain to her why he killed the plants. He thinks that Kathy is out for a walk; in her absence, he drinks heavily. Around 6pm, he begins to think that something is wrong, and then notices that the boat is missing from the boathouse. He goes to speak to Claude Rasmussen, the old, rich, Democratic donor who invited John and Kathy to stay in his cottage at Lake of the Woods. Claude, with his younger wife, Ruth, gives John food, and listens to his story. He takes John back to John's cottage, where he notices that the phone is unplugged.

The narrator quotes from magic books. The implication is that magic is exciting because the audience knows the magic isn't real, but still wants to believe that it is. In the next chapter, the narrator describes John's role in the infamous My Lai massacre of 1968. John shoots an old Vietnamese man carrying a hoe, and sees other soldiers, led by Lieutenant William Calley, kill women and children.

The narrator hypothesizes that Kathy, frightened of her husband, left the house and took the boat out onto Lake of the Woods. There, Kathy may have hit a rock and drowned.

After speaking to Claude, John gets a visit from the police officers investigating Kathy's disappearance. Sheriff Arthur J. Lux, thinks that Kathy is probably fine, and says that he voted

for John. The other, Vincent Pearson, distrusts John. He was also a soldier in Vietnam, and doesn't like what he's read about John's behavior in the war. John calls Patricia, Kathy's sister, and tells her to come to Lake of the Woods.

The narrator gives evidence of the court-martial that took place after the My Lai Massacre. Soldiers insist that they were only following orders, or that they killed women and children to take revenge for own their dead friends.

After the massacre, John extends his tour in Vietnam for another year as a kind of penance while also changing documents to make it seem like he wasn't at My Lai. When he comes back to the United States, he runs for state senator, hiring Tony Carbo, a fat, experienced campaign manager who encourages John to focus on his image, not the issues. Tony seems to have a crush on Kathy, and asks John if he has any "dirt." John insists that he doesn't, but Tony says that he knows John is hiding something. At one point, Kathy tells John that she's pregnant, but John encourages her to get an abortion, since it's a bad time for him to start a family. Kathy does so, even though she wanted children.

It's also possible, the narrator suggests, that Kathy became lost. As she tried to find her way back to shore, she may have thought about her own affair with a dentist named Harmon—an affair that John eventually found out about. She thinks about an evening she spent gambling in Las Vegas with Tony when she had felt a sense of pure optimism. Later, when John lost his Senatorial race, Tony immediately defected to the campaign of the winning candidate, Ed Durkee. This "betrayal" angered Kathy, who had thought of Tony as a friend. Kathy might have been thinking about these things, the narrator acknowledges, as she left John's cottage on the day of her disappearance.

The narrator also hypothesizes that Kathy might have killed herself by overdosing on Valium, thinking before her death that she wanted more out of life than John could ever give her.

After John calls her, Patricia arrives at Lake of the Woods. She distrusts John. Patricia tells John that Kathy was frustrated with John's secrecy, a suggestion that John rejects.

In the next section of evidence, the narrator comments extensively in a footnote, revealing himself to have been another solider in Vietnam. He refuses to argue that the soldiers at My Lai were innocent, but also argues that humans are by nature capable of evil things. He also adds that it was the "**sunlight**" that made the soldiers behave as they did.

In Vietnam, following the My Lai Massacre, Lieutenant Calley tries to intimidate his troops into keeping quiet about their war crimes. One soldier, Richard Thinbill, who hasn't killed anyone at My Lai, asks John about his crimes, and John admits that he shot two people. John laughs hysterically, and Thinbill encourages him to do so, saying that honesty is the best policy. Later, in the court-martial, Thinbill names John, who he only knows as "Sorcerer," as a killer of two men. During the Senate campaign, Ed Durkee finds this information and leaks it to the press, leading to John's defeat in the Senate campaign.

In Lake of the Woods, Claude, Patricia, and John look for Kathy on the water, and Patricia criticizes John for seeming not to care about Kathy at all. Later, John quarrels with Vincent Pearson, and senses that everyone is beginning to believe that he's guilty of killing Kathy. That night, he strips and jumps into the cold water of Lake of the Woods, thinking that he's no better than his father, who killed himself when John was fourteen years old. Then, he remembers Kathy's eyes, and climbs out of the water.

Two weeks later, John receives a call from Sheriff Lux explaining that the huge fleet of boats searching for Kathy has found nothing. Afterwards, Claude tells John that the police are going to dig around John's cottage on the suspicion that John killed Kathy and buried her there.

In the next section of evidence, it's suggested that John developed his sense of trickery and his fondness for manipulation from his father. Ruth and Eleanor suggest that the narrator is obsessed with solving the mystery of Kathy's disappearance. In a footnote, the narrator admits his obsession, but says that the mystery of Kathy's vanishing is more beautiful than any one solution could ever be. The narrator suggests that John may have killed Kathy by pouring boiling water on her face and then weighing her body down with stones in the lake.

John takes a boat Claude left him and drives north. He reads Claude's letter, in which Claude advises him to head to Canada to "start over." It's revealed that John disappeared shortly after Kathy, and various characters comment that it's possible that he and Kathy are both alive and living somewhere together.

The narrator muses that he'll never solve the mystery of Kathy and John's disappearance. Nevertheless, he's written the novel to address his own memories of Vietnam, which aren't much different from John's. He proposes that, since there's no one answer to the mystery, one might as well propose the happiest solution. Thus, he proposes that John and Kathy faked their disappearance, met up later, and are starting a new life somewhere. The narrator concludes by suggesting that John was a man, not a monster, and that he was guilty of nothing but living his own life.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

John Herman Wade – The protagonist of the novel, John Wade is a politician whose career comes to an abrupt halt after it's revealed that he was involved in the infamous My Lai massacre of 1968 during his time as a soldier in Vietnam, when he went by the nickname "Sorcerer." While there is too much contradictory evidence about John to form an adequate description of his character, one of the most common topics

mentioned in descriptions of John is his fondness for magic, manipulation, and deception. His love for these things begins with his love for magic tricks as a child and continues through his relationship with Kathy, during which he often followed her, and his career as a politician, when he was able to exercise his love for trickery and deception constantly. John kills two men while he's a soldier in Vietnam: an old Vietnamese man and another American soldier. John has a difficult relationship with his father, who criticized John for his weight and later killed himself; it's implied that John feels a deep need to be loved and praised because of his relationship with his father. After his wife, Kathy, disappears during a visit to Lake of the Woods (a rural lake and vacation spot in Minnesota and the Canadian border), John is the target of much suspicion. The narrator leaves it up to us whether to believe that John, haunted by memories of Vietnam, killed his wife and hid her body, or whether he was uninvolved in her disappearance.

Kathleen "Kathy" Terese Wade – The wife of John Wade, whose mysterious disappearance while she and her husband are at Lake of the Woods is the subject of the novel. Kathy first meets John while they're both college students, and stays in touch with John during his time as a soldier in Vietnam. Throughout the book, we hear various analyses of Kathy and her relationship with John from a variety of sources. One common observation about Kathy is that she loves John, and considers it her duty to take care of him after he returns home from Vietnam, traumatized by the war. It's often implied that Kathy enjoys John's deception and manipulation, whereas other people find it frightening. When John embarks on a career as a politician, Kathy works in the admissions department of the University of Minnesota, but finds her duties as a politician's wife to be irritating. It's left largely up to reader how to interpret Kathy—whether, for instance, we should see her as a deceptive, unfaithful wife, or a warm, loving woman who never gave up on John even after evidence of his wrongdoing came to light. Further, it is never made clear whether she was murdered or purposely ran away and disappeared.

Narrator – *In the Lake of the Woods* is narrated by an unnamed Vietnam veteran, whose reasons for researching John Wade's life and compiling the research into a book are left largely unexplained. Most of the time, the narrator isn't a conspicuous "presence" in the book: he narrates what happened, and that's all. At other points, however, he suggests that he is distorting the facts, and reveals that he's been to many of the same places in Vietnam that John visited as a soldier. The question of why the narrator is telling this story is at least as important as the question of what happens to Kathy. The fact that this question is arguably impossible to answer suggests that the mysteries in O'Brien's novel can never be solved.

Anthony "Tony" L. Carbo – John Wade's campaign manager. A fat, unattractive man, Tony seems utterly amoral throughout much of the novel, often telling John that he should avoid talking about the issues and focus on his "image." In spite of his apparent cynicism, Tony has a crush on Kathy, and often tells her that he'd willingly lose weight if it meant that he'd have "a shot" with her. Kathy suggests that Tony isn't as cynical as he seems, and puts up an appearance of cynicism to disguise his true idealism.

Claude Rasmussen – An old, wealthy, and intelligent man, a longtime donor to the Democratic Party, and husband to the much younger Ruth Rasmussen, Claude Rasmussen is an ambiguous character for much of *In the Lake of the Woods*. It is Claude who invites John to stay on his property for a few weeks after John loses the primary election, effectively ending his political career. Later, when Kathy disappears, Claude offers John his company and help, but often seems to be withholding outright sympathy. Claude tells John that he can't say he voted for him, but also can't say he didn't vote for him—it's this kind of ambiguous "support" that characterizes his relationship with John for most of the book. Toward the end, however, Claude reveals that he's highly sympathetic to John's experiences as a soldier in Vietnam, and understands that John has been expressing his sadness over Kathy's disappearance in unusual ways. He leaves John the keys to a boat, allowing him to flee to Canada before John can become bogged down in a police investigation.

Vincent "Vinny" R. Pearson – A pale-skinned part-time detective who also runs a Texaco gas station, and the cousin of Myra Shaw, Vinny served in Vietnam, and resents John because of John's role at My Lai. He works with Sheriff Arthur Lux after Kathy's disappearance, and is immediately suspicious of John. Long after the case of Kathy's disappearance is accepted as an unsolvable mystery, Vinny continues to insist that John killed her.

Richard Thinbill – A young soldier who serves alongside John in Charlie Company, and witnesses enormous brutality at Thuan Yen, though he claims to be innocent of any wrongdoing. Richard Thinbill is ultimately responsible for bringing John's presence at the massacres to the public eye. Richard shows signs of PTSD, and often comments on the flies surrounding the dead bodies at My Lai and Thuan Yen.

Ruth Rasmussen – The wife of Claude Rasmussen, who takes care of John Wade after Kathy's disappearance. Ruth Rasmussen is in her fifties, and married to the much older Claude. She insists that John is a good man, and innocent of any role in Kathy's disappearance. She frequently compares the strength of John and Kathy's marriage to the strength of her marriage to Claude—a comparison that readers can take sincerely or ironically.

Sheriff Arthur J. Lux – The local sheriff near Lake of the Woods who is responsible for investigating Kathy's disappearance. Lux remains largely neutral during his investigation, especially

when compared with his colleague, Vincent Pearson. Nevertheless, he seems to become suspicious of John's role in Kathy's disappearance toward the end of the novel, and obtains a court order allowing him to dig up the land around John's cottage in the hopes of finding Kathy's body.

Lieutenant William "Rusty" Calley – A young American lieutenant who orders the troops under his command to murder innocent Vietnamese villagers, including women and children, at Thuan Yen. Calley is the only soldier who doesn't show any signs of guilt for his actions, and later tries to intimidate his troops into keeping silent about the acts of murder they've committed. Calley is the only soldier ever convicted for his role in the My Lai massacre.

Paul Wade – Paul Wade (mentioned by name only once in the novel) is John's father, and the husband of Eleanor Wade. He plays an enormous role in the novel, insofar as he influences his son's fondness for deception, manipulation, bullying, and charm. John's father is a popular figure in his community, and John loves him deeply. At the same time, his father is a drunk, and frequently bullies him, calling him fat and effeminate for wanting to practice magic. Eventually, Paul commits suicide by hanging himself. John is in high school at the time, and is devastated. John learns to use fantasy to repress his sense of sadness, and imagines having long, loving conversations with his father long after his father's death. It's suggested many times that Paul's death gives John a deep need to be loved, a need which influences his decision to enter politics as a career and to marry Kathy. It's also implied that John learns to go by many names because his father called him names as a child.

Lizzie Borden – Infamous "murderess" of the late 19th century who was tried and acquitted of killing her parents with an axe. The debate over whether or not Lizzie Borden was guilty of her crime continues to be a subject of interest for historians and conspiracy theorists, a fact that is itself highly interesting to the narrator.

Lee Harvey Oswald – The supposed assassin of John F. Kennedy, and a veteran of the American military, Lee Harvey Oswald is at the center of a huge number of conspiracy theories concerning the Kennedy assassination. There are those who maintain that Oswald was a "fall guy," meant to disguise the fact that a powerful organization—maybe the CIA, maybe the Freemasons, maybe the Teamsters—killed Kennedy. The narrator is interested in Oswald because of what he reveals about the psychology of conspiracy theorists.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Eleanor K. Wade – John Wade's mother, quoted many times in the "Evidence" chapters. She defends her son from all accusations of wrongdoing, and almost always takes the most sympathetic view of his actions.

Patricia "Pat" S. Hood – Kathy's sister, described as a fitter, healthier version of Kathy. Patricia doubts John's sincerity and regularly expresses her amazement that Kathy stayed with him for so long. When the possibility arises that John was involved in Kathy's disappearance, John senses that Patricia is very suspicious of him.

Bethany Kee – A co-worker of Kathy's at the University of Minnesota, Bethany offers her take on Kathy's disappearance during many of the "Evidence" chapters. She finds Kathy to be a cheerful woman, almost to the point where she must have been hiding something.

Lawrence Ehlers – John Wade's high school gym coach, who vividly remembers the pain John felt on the day he learned of his father's suicide.

Myra Shaw – A waitress at a Mini-Mart who sees John arguing with Kathy, and later sees John buying food just before his disappearance.

PFC Weatherby – A young soldier serving in Charlie Company during the Vietnam War. John Wade shoots and kills Weatherby, an action that haunts him for years afterwards.

Tommy Winn – A grade school classmate of John Wade who makes a speech about how much he likes John's father, Paul Wade.

Paul Meadlo – A soldier in Charlie Company in Vietnam who loses his left foot to a land mine and later testifies for the Peers Commission Report concerning American soldiers' behavior in Vietnam.

Mrs. Myrtle Meadlo – Mother of Paul Meadlo.

Salvatore LaMartina – A soldier in Charlie Company in Vietnam who later testifies for the Peers Commission Report concerning American soldiers' behavior in Vietnam, and insists that he was only following orders at My Lai.

Bernard C. Meyer – Author of various books on magic and sleight of hand.

Sandra Karra – A red-haired woman who runs the magic shop where John often went as a child.

Robert A. Caro – Famous biographer of such important political figures as Robert Moses and Lyndon B. Johnson.

Thomas Pynchon – Famously reclusive novelist and author of *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Lyndon B. Johnson – American president from 1963 – 1969 who oversaw the expansion of the American war in Vietnam.

Thomas E. Dewey – Politician who served as Mayor of New York and later lost the presidency to Harry Truman in a famously unexpected defeat. O'Brien cites Dewey's opinions on the psychological effects of defeat.

Richard M. Nixon – American president who resigned in disgrace in 1974 after the Watergate scandal.

J. Glenn Gray – Author of books on war and trauma, often cited

by O'Brien on both subjects.

Robert Maples – A soldier who was present at My Lai and disobeyed orders by refusing to shoot women and children.

Dennis Conti – A soldier in Charlie Company in Vietnam who later testifies for the Peers Commission Report concerning American soldiers' behavior in Vietnam. Conti testifies that he murdered women and babies, and raped Vietnamese women.

Fyodor Dostoevsky – 19th century Russian author of *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from the Underground* whose work is celebrated for its psychological depth and insight.

Doug Henning – A biographer of Houdini.

Harry Houdini – Legendary magician whose fascination with death and resurrection is compared with that of John Wade.

Anton Chekhov – Celebrated 19th century Russian author of plays and short stories.

Richard E. Ellis – Author of books on child development, cited for his opinions on the effects of a dead parent on a child's growth.

Robert Karen – Child psychologist who O'Brien cites for his views on shame and guilt.

Woodrow Wilson – American president whose humiliations as a child, O'Brien speculates, were instrumental in encouraging him to take up politics as a career.

Colonel William V. Wilson – One of the lead investigators at the court-martial concerning the Mai Lai Massacre.

Gregory T. Olson – A soldier in Charlie Company in Vietnam who later testifies for the Peers Commission Report concerning American soldiers' behavior in Vietnam, and who describes My Lai as an act of revenge.

George Sand – 19th century novelist and essayist.

Allen J. Boyce – A soldier in Charlie Company in Vietnam who later testifies for the Peers Commission Report concerning American soldiers' behavior in Vietnam, and who describes My Lai as an act of revenge.

Tommy L. Moss – A soldier in Charlie Company in Vietnam who later testifies for the Peers Commission Report concerning American soldiers' behavior in Vietnam, and who describes My Lai as an act of revenge.

Pat Nixon – Richard Nixon's wife, whose life is relevant to *In the Lake of the Woods* because, like Kathy Wade, she endured a huge amount of pageantry and campaign appearances for her politician husband's sake.

Lester David – A biographer of Pat Nixon.

B. Traven – Reclusive author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, often said to have changed his name to find a new identity for himself.

Karl S. Guthke – A biographer of B. Traven.

Jay Robert Nash – Author who is cited for noting that there are more than 30,000 cases of missing persons per year.

Sigmund Freud – Viennese founder of psychoanalysis, whose opinions about trauma and authorship are cited throughout the novel.

Edward F. Durkee – A Democratic nominee for the Senate who defeats John Wade in the primaries by digging up dirt on John's role in the My Lai massacres.

Harmon – The dentist with whom Kathy Wade has an affair. While it's implied that John finds out about this affair and confronts Kathy, little to no information is given about Harmon himself—indeed, Kathy says she can barely remember what he looks like.

Ambrose Bierce – 19th century writer who disappeared after saying he was going to explore Mexico.

Robert Parrish – Author of a classic text for magicians, *The Magician's Notebook*, often cited by O'Brien to explain the psychology of a magic trick.

Patience H.C. Mason – Psychologist and specialist in Vietnam veterans' post-traumatic stress disorder, cited for his opinions on trauma and memory.

General William Sherman – The notorious Civil War general for the Union who led a massive army through the South, eventually burning the city of Atlanta to the ground. Toward the end of his life, Sherman helped to settle the American West, calling for the "extermination" of the Native Americans.

Robert W. T'Souzas – A Vietnam war veteran who was tried and acquitted for the murder of children at My Lai, and was later murdered in the streets of his home town.

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.

VIETNAM, AUTHORSHIP, INTERPRETATION

Reading the first few pages of *In the Lake of the Woods*, it becomes clear that the novel is written in an unconventional style. There are fairly normal-seeming chapters written in the third person. But there are also chapters that consist of nothing but pieces of evidence; furthermore, most of the evidence consists of quotations from other people, some real, some fictional. There are also chapters that illustrate how certain events *might* have transpired. Read side-by-side, these hypothetical chapters often contradict one

another. Finally, there are occasional footnotes, in which the narrator speaks in the first person, revealing that he, like his main character John Wade, fought in Vietnam and visited My Lai. (In real life, the author Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam and went to My Lai a year after the massacre.)

In one sense, O'Brien writes this way because it's the best—arguably the only *realistic*—way to convey the experience of an American soldier in Vietnam. In contrast to the way earlier American wars had been conducted, Americans were being told multiple, contradictory things about who the enemy was, where the enemy could be found, and how Vietnamese civilians should be treated. After atrocities like the My Lai Massacre, many American soldiers and commanders lied about their complicity in the war, while on the home front, American politicians misrepresented the success and conduct of American soldiers. By reading *In the Lake of the Woods*, then, the reader can be said to experience a low-stakes version of the moral conundrum of the American soldier in Vietnam. The reader must decide which elements of the story are truth and which are fiction, which parts are misdirection and which parts, if any, should be believed.

But O'Brien doesn't only describe *Vietnam* in this fragmented, chaotic fashion—all of *In the Lake of the Woods* is written in this way. O'Brien isn't just aiming for heightened realism; he also wants readers to rethink authorship and reading. At the end of the novel, for instance, the narrator—and Tim O'Brien, a similar but nonetheless separate entity from the narrator—leaves us to decide what happened to John Wade and Kathy Wade. Kathy might have left John, or she might have killed herself. John might have killed her, or they might have run off together.

In order to decide what happened to the characters, the reader is forced to make moral judgments about John and Kathy. By deciding that John killed Kathy, for instance, one falls into the moral judgment that John is guilty of murder in Vietnam, and that his murderous tendencies overwhelmed his life of respectability. More broadly, this might suggest that *all* humans have the capacity for evil, or that some of the soldiers who fought in Vietnam became evil as a result of their experiences there.

There's no way to tell whether this opinion is right or wrong—and this is precisely the point. In other novels, the author acts as a kind of "military commander," telling the reader exactly what happens and how to feel about it. By playing with the more normal techniques of authorship, O'Brien neglects or rejects the usual duties of the author. He wants the reader to be active, not passive, and to be forced to consider and interpret the full complexity of reality, to face the impossibility of ever knowing "the truth", whether in wartime Vietnam or peacetime Minnesota.

WAR, MEMORY, AND TRAUMA

All of the major characters in *In the Lake of the Woods* struggle to deal with traumatic events from their pasts. John Wade, the protagonist, endured verbal abuse from his father and then lost his father to suicide. Most disturbingly, he later witnessed and participated in the infamous My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. At My Lai, American soldiers were ordered to murder Vietnamese women and children with the explanation that they were "dangerous." While some soldiers refused to carry out the order, many killed innocent civilians without question. We learn that John killed two unarmed people in Vietnam: an old man carrying a hoe, and a fellow soldier.

John's reaction to his experiences in the Vietnam War fits the classic definition of trauma given by Sigmund Freud (who's quoted several times in the novel): an event so disturbing and stressful that the mind doesn't know how to incorporate it into the memory, and thus relives it endlessly. As Freud's definition would suggest, John experiences his memories of Vietnam—and also of his father—as if they're happening to him in the present. At many points in the novel, John talks with his father as if he's still alive, and has visions of My Lai that border on hallucination.

John tries to cope with trauma by repressing it—trying to make himself forget that it ever happened to him in the first place. While this strategy seems successful—John spends years as a loving husband and a successful politician—it actually causes John to experience sudden "bursts" of trauma. He yells out in his sleep, and after evidence of his actions in Vietnam comes out, his relationship with Kathy Wade, his wife, seems to deteriorate almost immediately. In no small part, John's memories are traumatic because they seem to remind him who he really is: in other words, beneath his façade of charisma and kindness, he's still "Jiggling John," the child his father used to mock.

O'Brien (who served in Vietnam, has experienced post-traumatic stress disorder, and has many friends who have experienced it, too) has no illusions: it's incredibly difficult to deal with trauma. Nevertheless, he uses his novel to suggest a healthier way of coping with disturbing memories than the one John adopts. The form of *In the Lake of the Woods* itself implies that it is better to deal with the past by addressing it and treating it as a reality than it is to pretend that it never happened. O'Brien accumulates information about his subjects, John and Kathy Wade. He compares their actions with the actions of other, similar people—other soldiers who fought in Vietnam, for instance. At the same time, he delves into the characters' deep thoughts and feelings—thoughts they would be reluctant to share with anyone else.

There is nothing inherently successful about O'Brien's project; trauma is a terrible thing, and in many cases it's impossible to

make it any better. O'Brien also acknowledges that there is a limit to how much he, in the guise of the narrator, can know about John and Kathy. He ends the novel unsure whether John killed Kathy, Kathy killed herself, or the both of them ran off together. The entire novel, then, can be seen as a frustrating, inadequate attempt to perform the kind of therapy that John must perform on himself. Nevertheless, O'Brien acknowledges that the human mind has the ability to heal itself and overcome trauma over time. The only way to allow for this healing is to confront memory and trauma *oneself* by talking about it explicitly—hopefully John will do so.

EVIL, HUMAN NATURE, AND FREEDOM

In his descriptions of the war in Vietnam, O'Brien confronts the concept of evil. In the village of Thuan Yen, American soldiers—many of them young and seemingly innocent—murder unarmed men, women, and children, sometimes because their commanders tell them to do so, and sometimes because they want to do so themselves. At one point, speaking in a footnote, the narrator of *In the Lake of the Woods* claims that it was "the **sunlight**" that made the soldiers in Vietnam commit their atrocities. While this could suggest that the soldiers aren't fully accountable for their actions, the universal and constant presence of sunlight everywhere suggests that *all* humans are capable of committing atrocities—in other words, that it's within human nature to kill and obey orders to kill.

During the Peers Commission court-martial for soldiers involved in the massacre of civilians in Vietnam, American soldiers are vilified and called monsters. Later, when it comes out that John Wade was involved in the massacre at Thuan Yen, and killed two people— one a fellow American soldier, and the other an unarmed old Vietnamese man—the voters of Minnesota come to think of John Wade as an "evil" man. The assumption here is that John, in taking other human lives, was a free agent who chose to kill, and thus should suffer the consequences.

O'Brien can't possibly deal with all the issues of evil, human nature, and freedom that arise from the Vietnam War in only 300 pages. Nevertheless, he devotes a significant portion of his book to trying to explain how John came to kill other people. On one hand, he provides copious evidence for the influences that "led" John to kill: his troubled relationship with his father and his conflicted feelings for Kathy, for instance. He also describes John's behavior when he shot a fellow soldier as a "reflex." On the other hand, he doesn't absolve John of all guilt by placing the blame on other people—it was John, not Kathy, not his father—who felt the urge to kill and hurt other people.

While humanity may have the potential to commit atrocities, O'Brien suggests, human behavior can't be classified according to easy dichotomies like "good" and "evil," or "innocent" and "guilty." It's not right to say that John is solely responsible for his actions, and it's not right to say that all the blame lies in other people. Similarly, it would be wrong to argue that all humans are evil because they're capable of murdering innocent people, just as it would be wrong to say that humans are good and the soldiers in Vietnam are somehow sub-human. It is, however, possible to condemn John's actions while also feeling sympathy for him—how much condemnation and how much sympathy one gives him is ultimately the reader's choice, not O'Brien's.

APPEARANCE, THE UNKNOWABLE, AND MAGIC

When *In the Lake of the Woods* was first published, many readers were irritated that Tim O'Brien didn't solve the mystery he'd laid out: he didn't reveal what happened to Kathy Wade. While it's true that there's no way to determine to a certainty what happened, this shouldn't be seen as a fault of the novel: *In the Lake of the Woods* is largely *about* mysteries without solutions. As O'Brien says several at several points, life itself is a mystery without a solution—put another way, there's always more mystery than certainty in a person's life. On one hand, O'Brien presents John Wade, Kathy, and the other characters as puzzles. It takes us half the novel, for instance, to learn that John's father killed himself when John was a teenager. And even when we learn this, we sense that there's an even bigger secret in the form of John's relationship with his father—a relationship which O'Brien can *try* to convey in all of its complexity, but ultimately can't. On the other hand, O'Brien's novel is about appearances, and, more often than not, the appearance of total goodness: charm, charisma, politeness, kindness, etc.:

The most troubled characters in *In the Lake of the Woods* are the ones who seem the most "normal" to other people. John's father, a depressed alcoholic, is a beloved figure in his neighborhood, and John himself takes up **magic**, and later politics, to make himself seem likable. It's almost as if the appearance of wholesomeness and likability are evidence of some deep-down, unknowable sadness or neurosis.

This tension between what is seen and what lies beneath is the essence of magic. As O'Brien argues throughout his book, the "charm" of magic is that the audience knows things aren't what they seem (the magician isn't *actually* making the rabbit disappear), and yet wants to believe that things *are* what they seem. The tension between appearance and truth is more interesting and satisfying than truth by itself could ever be—it wouldn't be any fun to know the secret behind every magic trick, after all. The psychology of magic helps explain why Kathy stays with John even after she senses that something isn't quite right with him—she enjoys the mystery of his personality. In much the same way, this is why O'Brien doesn't provide a solution to the mystery of Kathy's disappearance. The solution

by itself couldn't possibly be as entertaining as all the possible explanations for how she disappeared, taken together.

Enjoying the mystery more than the solution can be dangerous—for instance, by accepting the "mystery" of John's personality, Kathy accepts and in some ways encourages his trauma and neurosis. And yet O'Brien the author can't entirely disavow this way of dealing with mystery, since he treats the mystery of Kathy's disappearance in much the same way. Ultimately, appearance and the unknowable reach a stalemate. It's impossible to know everything about everyone. In the absence of perfect information, humans make up scenarios and possibilities to explain what they don't understand. The result is a feeling of "magic"—failing to understand a phenomenon and enjoying the sense of uncertainty. Rather than judge this feeling as being entirely "good" or "bad," O'Brien suggests that it's a part of human nature.

LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

While *In the Lake of the Woods* is a mystery and a war novel, it's also a love story. The characters are motivated by their love for other people, and, perhaps even more importantly, their desire to be loved in return. One of O'Brien's most important points is that the way people express their love for one another often parallels the way they loved and were loved by their families. John Wade's tense relationship with his father—his father is a charming, likable man, but also an alcoholic who verbally abuses his son and later hangs himself—has a major influence on the way John treats his friends and wife. The absence of unconditional love from his father makes John crave love from other people, and inspires him to perform **magic tricks** and take up politics as a career. He wants other people to love him so that he feels happier, but he often shows little respect for these other people. Indeed, he controls and manipulates them, as if they're tools whose only use is to make him feel better about himself.

At the same time, John *wants* to love other people—he tells Kathy that he wants to go into politics to help people. It wouldn't be right to say that John is lying when he says this to Kathy. In reality, John's idea of love is both sincere and insincere. He's torn between treating people as means to an end and respecting them for their own thoughts and feelings.

Kathy's love for John is as complicated as John's love for her. She recognizes that John "needs" love to a greater extent than other people, and for the most part, she is happy to supply it, even when it isn't returned. Patricia, Kathy's sister, often criticizes Kathy for putting up with John's rudeness and manipulation—at one point, we discover that Kathy knows that John follows her wherever she goes, and doesn't do anything about it. For much of her marriage to John, Kathy seems to think of love as an act of unconditional *giving*. She loves John, and seems to be satisfied with being a means to the end of his happiness.

The love between John and Kathy, or between John and the people of Minnesota whom he serves, is based on the denial of information. John hides his own personal history, both from Kathy and his constituents, but insists on knowing everything about other people, using manipulation and deception to gain this information. The most obvious problem with this kind of love is that it doesn't last. Eventually, Kathy responds to John's deception with deception of her own—she has an affair with a dentist named Harmon. Similarly, the voters of Minnesota eventually learn about John's experiences in Vietnam, and end their "relationship" with John.

Toward the end of his book, O'Brien implies another model of what love *could* be. Instead of being an asymmetric relationship, with one lover keeping secrets yet demanding to know everything about his partner, love could consists of the reciprocal exchange of information, based on mutual respect. Thus, John and Kathy could exchange some but not all of their secrets with one another, providing sympathy and support as they do so. There's no guarantee that John and Kathy reach this kind of love, or if it's even possible. O'Brien leaves it up to the reader to decide if John and Kathy learn from their mistakes and develop a more equal relationship.

SYMBOLS

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

THE LAKE

The most obvious symbol in *In the Lake of the Woods* (so obvious it's in the title) is the lake itself. Throughout the book, we're told that Lake of the Woods is big and complex—so complex that it's possible to search it for months and never find what one's looking for. Later, we're told that in Lake of the Woods, things are neither entirely present nor entirely absent. Focusing on the latter observation, we can speculate that the lake symbolizes the past: the traumatic secrets, big and small, that all the characters of the novel hide. John's traumatic experiences in Vietnam haunt him for years afterwards. He sometimes thinks that they'll never entirely go away because they almost felt like dreams to begin with. This is a well-documented reaction to trauma: the events are so shocking and unprecedented that the mind doesn't know what to do with them, whether at the moment when they happen or in subsequent years. In this sense, the fact that the contents of the lake are neither entirely present nor absent is an apt metaphor for John's — and the other characters' — troubled relationship with the past. It's also worth noting that the lake, with its vast dimensions and complex interior is quite a lot like the novel itself: a puzzle that can never be solved.

WEIGHT AND FAT

Many characters in *In the Lake of the Woods* struggle with their weight: John endured mockery from his alcoholic father, Paul, for getting fat in the 4th grade. Tony, complains about his weight constantly and says that he'd lose weight if it gave him "a shot" at Kathy. And Kathy herself doesn't like it when John squeezes her sides. We might say that the characters' weight symbolizes the emotional baggage they carry with them wherever they go. This is especially clear in the case of John: he fights his weight for most of his life, ordering special dieting food as a child, exercising regularly as a teenager, and planning to take up running again after he loses his election. Most of the characters in the novel have a strong desire to reinvent themselves—John is simply the most successful at doing so. In the novel, weight and fat act as barriers to constant self-reinvention. There is a limit to how quickly, and how much, people can change themselves.

MAGIC

John performs magic tricks throughout his life: when he's a child, when he's in the army, and even when he's a politician. The symbolism of John's fondness is frequently and explicitly stated: magic symbolizes John's desire to be loved by others, to hide his own weakness and sadness, and to "fool" other people into believing that he's happier and more charismatic than he really is. At several points, O'Brien notes that magic is entertaining for the audience because the audience doesn't really want to know how a trick is done: it both believes that the magic is "real" and senses that it's fake. In this sense, magic, and magic's effect on an audience, represents the way we're meant to read *In the Lake of the Woods*: we're curious about what "really" happened to Kathy, but any solution to this mystery would be far less entertaining than the mystery itself.

SUNLIGHT

At several points in *In the Lake of the Woods*, soldiers—Richard Thinbill and the narrator himself—suggest that it was the **sunlight** in Vietnam that made American soldiers commit murder and other atrocities. It's difficult to understand what they mean by this. On one hand, to say that anything "made" soldiers kill is to absolve the soldiers of some of their guilt. On the other hand, to blame murder on something as ubiquitous as sunlight amounts to saying that everyone is capable of murder. In this sense, sunlight symbolizes nature—both the nature of the world and human nature. It may be the case that it's human nature to kill and hurt people. In this interpretation, the soldiers in Vietnam are no more or less virtuous than the Americans who stay home. The very ambiguity of sunlight as O'Brien describes it corresponds to the ambiguity in the way we're meant to view John Wade and his actions as a soldier in Vietnam.

ONE PLUS ONE EQUALS ZERO / THE TWO SNAKES

The phrase "one plus one equals zero" shows up at several points in the novel, as does the symbol of two snakes eating each other. In a sense, these are two different versions of the same problem. As John sees it, the two snakes eating each other symbolize the unity of love—his love for Kathy specifically. At the same time, the image is gruesome, and foreshadows the anger and pain and mutual destruction that John and Kathy will cause each other. John sees his entire life as a version of the two snakes—he thinks that every action must be accompanied by an equal and opposite reaction. Thus, when he kills innocent people in Vietnam, he tries to "balance out" his murders by forging documents and enduring great pain and danger. One (John's actions in Vietnam) plus one (John's pain and lying) is meant to equal zero (total innocence). Yet, for much of the novel, it seems that one plus one *never* equals zero. John tries to forget his guilt, but he can't, and eventually, everyone in Minnesota knows that he participated in the massacre at Thuan Yen. Similarly, John's relationship with Kathy isn't the beautifully symmetric marriage he seems to want—John, the stronger and more persuasive partner, takes control of Kathy's life and forces her to have an abortion, even though she wants children. And yet we're also given some indications that one plus one *can* equal zero. The narrator acknowledges that it's possible that John and Kathy actually left Lake of the Woods together and learned to treat each other with love and mutual respect. There's no proof that this happened, but it's certainly possible. In the end, the image of the two snakes, which can be interpreted positively or negatively, stands for the events of the entire book. One can interpret the novel in an optimistic or a pessimistic light, depending on whether or not one believes that it's possible to move past sin and guilt.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *In the Lake of the Woods* published in 1995.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ He didn't talk much. Even his wife I don't think she knew the first damn thing about him … well, about *any* of it. The man just kept everything buried.

Related Characters: Anthony "Tony" L. Carbo (speaker), John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

The novel alternates between chapters narrated from single characters' perspective and chapters like this one, which consist of pieces of "evidence" culled from interviews with the characters, other books, and real-life historical events. Here, Anthony Carbo, John Wade's campaign manager, describes John's personality: John was an extremely private man, to the point where even John's own wife didn't feel that she knew who he was. And because it's still early in the novel, we the readers don't know any more about John than Anthony does.

The quotation establishes the true "mystery" of *In the Lake of the Woods*. The novel appears to be about the search to solve the mystery of Kathleen Wade, who disappears suddenly during her time at Lake of the Woods; however the real mystery of the book is about John himself: what secrets, if any, he was hiding from his wife, and what, exactly, he kept "buried."

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ You know, I think politics and magic were almost the same thing for him. Transformations—that's part of it—trying to change things. When you think about it, magicians and politicians are basically control freaks.

Related Characters: Anthony "Tony" L. Carbo (speaker), John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In another "Evidence" chapter, Tony Carbo offers an interesting comparison between politicians and magicians. While there are lots of good parallels between these two professions (they're both about pleasing an audience, for example), Tony points to a desire for control, which he says is common in both politicians and magicians.

But what does Tony mean when he says "control?" In part, John Wade enjoys politics and magic because it gives him a sense of ownership. From an early age he collects toys and props for magic shows, and later on, when he becomes a career politician, he gets a sense of delicious pleasure from the bills he proposes. We can think of John's enjoyment of props and bills as "hard power"—he enjoys the feeling of *possessing* something, and being able to manipulate it completely.

Similarly, John also enjoys his sense of control in regards to people. In order to control people, John doesn't exactly try to manipulate them like objects—instead, he wants to wring love and affection from them. Whether as a politician or a magician, he performs in order to receive love, applause, and admiration. We can think of these aspects of John's personality as his penchant for "soft power," a different and perhaps more sympathetic kind of control.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ He talked about leading a good life, doing good things telling the full truth. Politics *was* manipulation. Like a magic show: invisible wires and secret trapdoors.

Related Characters: John Herman Wade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

The quotation describes John, a rising star in the American political scene, in the middle of a big speech. Although John is talking about the most wholesome, innocent values (honesty, goodness, progress), the passage makes it clear that he's not at all committed to these values. On the contrary, John knows deep down that he is a kind of masked deceiver, wowing an audience by disguising his own nature. Although at this point we're not sure what, exactly, John needs to hide so desperately, the implication would appear to be that John is intentionally lying to other people in order to delude them into thinking he's a better man than he is. (The image of a "secret trapdoor suggests *something*—it's unclear what—buried in John's past.)

One of the major ambiguities of the novel is whether or not John's behavior merits any sympathy. While John is intentionally lying to others, passing himself off as someone he's not, he's also lying to himself in order to survive. As the novel goes on, it becomes clear that John has been deeply

traumatized by his experiences in the Vietnam War. Keeping in mind all the violence and carnage John has witnessed, we can even begin to sympathize with John's manipulations: by becoming a politician and making glib speeches about honesty and virtue, he's desperately trying to forget his troubled past.

Chapter 8 Quotes

He moved to the far end of the living room, steadied himself, and boiled a small spider plant. It wasn't rage; it was necessity.

Related Characters: John Herman Wade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This passage draws an important distinction between rage and necessity. We see John Wade walking through his cabin in Lake of the Woods late at night. He boils water to make some tea for himself, but then pours the boiling water onto a plant instead. No lengthy explanation is offered for Wade's bizarre behavior. We're only told that Wade isn't killing the plant because he's angry; rather, he's acting out of necessity—he feels that he has no other choice than to kill the plant.

John's behavior in this scene (and throughout the novel) is indicative of his lasting psychological trauma, sustained during the Vietnam War (when he witnessed and participated in horrific acts of violence) and during his childhood (when his father abused him and then hanged himself). People suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder often say that they feel that they have no free will; they're just robots, going through the motions even when doing frightening things. The passage captures a similar sense of robotic helplessness—and yet it also shows John committing an act that, while small and petty, seems entirely cruel or even evil.

The passage also hints, very subtly, that even a medical diagnosis of John's problems is insufficient. At various points in the book, the plant that John kills is identified in various contradictory ways (sometimes it's a different species of plant altogether). Such ambiguities in the "hard facts" of the scene point to the unknowability of the novel's mystery and sense of truth, and also to John's state of mind—we can guess what he's been through, but we'll never really know.

Chapter 10 Quotes

They would live in perfect knowledge, all things visible, all things invisible, no wires or strings, just that large dark world where one plus one would always come to zero.

Related Characters: John Herman Wade (speaker), Kathleen "Kathy" Terese Wade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, John Wade, who has recently returned from the Vietnam War and married Kathy Wade, contemplates a happy future with his wife. John has been through a great deal—violence, war, an abusive parent, etc.—and he's spent most of his adult life trying to deal with his psychological scars, desperately try to erase them so that he can be "normal." In Kathy, John thinks he's finally found a way to be normal. Kathy is a kind, loving woman, who seems to love John for the person he aspires to be (honest, virtuous, etc.), rather than the person he may secretly be (deceptive, violent, manipulative). O'Brien chooses an interesting metaphor to convey John's aspiration of normality. The idea of one plus one equaling zero is strange—almost like a magic trick itself, though here John insists the opposite. While there are many symbolic interpretations of "one plus one equals zero" (see Symbols), John's thoughts here suggest that he thinks Kathy's normality can "shadow" or erase his own dark past. In other words, John thinks that in Kathy he's found someone so understanding and tolerant that she'll make him forget his traumatic experiences: her "one" will cancel out his own.

Chapter 12 Quotes

Audiences want to believe what they see a magician do, and yet at the same time they know better and do not believe. Therein lies the fascination of magic to modern people. It is a paradox, a riddle, a half-fulfillment of an ancient desire, a puzzle, a torment, a cheat and a truth.

Related Characters: Robert Parrish (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In this important passage, O'Brien sketches out a basic theme of the work. The idea of "believing and yet not believing" is crucial to the plot of the novel. Here are a few of the senses in which this theme applies to the book:

1) Kathy wants to believe that John is a good, honest man, and yet she also knows very well that he's lying to her. Strangely, the combination of honesty and duplicity makes John more attractive to Kathy than pure honesty or duplicity ever could. Like an audience watching a magic show, Kathy is enthralled because she believes and doubts simultaneously.

2) John believes and yet doesn't believe in himself. He spends his entire adult life trying to delude himself into thinking that he's a "normal" human being. And yet he never entirely succeeds in this lie: he can't prevent himself from thinking back to his traumatic childhood or his experiences in Vietnam—experiences that prove that he's not "good" in any normal sense of the word. John partly seems to enjoy lying to himself: he wants to believe in his own virtue, even when this is clearly impossible.

3) The book itself is a perfect example of believing and not believing. We are the audience for a magic show: as we read, O'Brien makes a man (John) and his wife (Kathy) disappear. We're presented with many possibilities for what happened to this couple, but none of these possibilities is totally convincing. Like an awestruck audience, we want to find the answer to the mystery, but we also don't want to know—we want to remain awestruck and entertained.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ John Wade would remember Thuan Yen the way chemical nightmares are remembered, impossible combinations, impossible events, and over time the impossibility itself would become the richest and deepest and most profound memory. This could not have happened. Therefore it did not.

Related Characters: John Herman Wade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 109

Explanation and Analysis

The American soldiers' experiences in Vietnam during the 1960s and 70s were some of the grimmest of any American war. Soldiers witnessed—and, horrifyingly, participated in—the murder of fellow troops, the burning of civilian villages, and the slaughter of women and children. Many soldiers—John Wade included—went through so much trauma in Vietnam that they developed a condition called PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Tragically, most of the soldiers who contracted this psychological disorder never got the medical help they desperately needed. John, for example, deals with his pain and guilt by repressing it; i.e., by pretending it never happened. As he says, "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not."

The natural questions, then, are *what* could not have happened, and *why* couldn't "it" have happened?" To the first question, O'Brien gives a number of answers, none of them totally convincing. It's suggested that John participated in the murder of Vietnamese civilians, and may have shot one of his own peers. The second question, however, is even more important. John refuses to believe that his trauma occurred because he refuses to believe that he's anything other than a "good man." Because he's so fixated on his own appearance of virtue, he tries to forget about his un-virtuous (and even evil) behavior as a soldier. Of course, John's effort to force himself to forget his past practically guarantees that he'll never forget it at all.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ All I remember now is the flies.

Related Characters: Richard Thinbill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 138

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Richard Thinbill, a troubled Vietnam veteran, remembers his experiences in a Vietnamese village—the site of a brutal massacre orchestrated and carried out by American troops—by referring to flies. Thinbill's quotation says nothing, and everything. The word "flies" calls to mind eerie and disturbing things, like corpses or rotting meat. Without explicitly mentioning any of the unpleasant things we associate with flies, O'Brien conveys these qualities in Thinbill's mind. Indeed, the veiled allusions to death and destruction are more disturbing than any description of a dead body could ever be.

And yet flies don't just make us think of corpses and rotting meat. Flies are also completely ordinary animals, more common than dogs or cats. In short, flies are both strange *and* familiar; morbid *and* banal. By choosing flies as a symbol

for Thinbill's recollections of Vietnam, O'Brien makes an important point about the way trauma works. The tiniest "trigger"—something as insignificant as a fly buzzing—could set Thinbill off on a long, painful flashback to his time in the war. Thinbill (and his hundreds of thousands of fellow veterans) lives in a nightmarish world in which he's constantly reliving the worst moments of his life.

Chapter 18 Quotes

Humming to herself, Kathy adjusted the tiller and began planning a dinner menu, two big steaks and salad and cold beer, imagining how she'd describe everything that was happening out here. Get some sympathy for herself. Get his attention for a change.
The idea gave her comfort. She could almost picture a happy ending.

Related Characters: Kathleen "Kathy" Terese Wade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 18, we're presented with one hypothesis for how Kathy Wade disappeared: she drove off in a boat by herself after having an argument with John. In this particular section, O'Brien offers us a window into Kathy's thought process for this scenario. As Kathy drives the boat, she thinks about how worried John must be that she's not at home. Moreover, she relishes the reunion she'll have with John that night: they'll have a nice meal and try to make a fresh start.

More generally, the passage offers an explanation for how Kathy has managed to stay married to John—a man she regards as dangerous and mysterious, and who she doesn't really know—for so many years. Kathy is an eternal optimist: no matter how bad things get, she's willing to look forward to a future in which things will be better between her and her husband. And yet Kathy is also something of a masochist: she enjoys the constant struggle for a happy marriage perhaps more than she would enjoy the happy marriage itself. Here, she seems to be enjoying her own "plot" to manipulate John into apology.

Chapter 19 Quotes

The thing about facts, he decided, was that they came in sizes. You had to try them on for proper fit. A case in point: his own responsibility. Right now he couldn't help feeling the burn of guilt.

Related Characters: John Herman Wade (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, we see John Wade struggling with his most common emotion: guilt. John Wade's wife, Kathy, is nowhere to be found, and seems to have disappeared into the lake. Because of the way O'Brien structures the chapter, however, it's not at all clear if John knows where his wife is or not. Because of the (intentional) lack of clarity in perspective, we have no way of knowing what, precisely, John is feeling guilty about. John may be pondering his treatment of Kathy—he may have literally killed her and disposed of the body. On the other extreme, John's anxiety about Kathy's whereabouts may have triggered some of the guilt he feels with regard to his father and to the war in Vietnam. Because he's always felt unloved and disliked, John has always felt guilty that his peers and family members don't love him more. So, strange as it seems, John's guilt in the aftermath of Kathy's disappearance isn't necessarily an admission of guilt at all—it's the natural response for an unloved child. O'Brien emphasizes the uncertainty of John's situation by commenting on the problem with facts themselves. As John describes them, facts aren't "true" at all; they have to be adjusted, tried on for size, etc. By the same token, there's no way to determine the facts about Kathy's disappearance: instead, O'Brien offers many contradictory facts, none of which tell the full story.

Chapter 20 Quotes

Double consummation: A way of fooling the audience by making it believe a trick is over before it really is.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 192

Explanation and Analysis

In this "Evidence" chapter, O'Brien offers a theory for Kathy's disappearance. But because he presents this theory in an ambiguous form—as the definition of a magical term—it's not clear for another hundred pages that he's offering another theory at all. The principle of double consummation—the idea that a trick isn't over when the audience believes it to be over—becomes especially relevant to Kathy's disappearance when, a few weeks later, John Wade himself disappears. While it's impossible to prove anything with regard to the case, O'Brien suggests that John and Kathy may have planned to run off together. knowing that they'd raise too many red flags by disappearing together, they decided that Kathy should disappear first, and John should disappear shortly afterwards. John and Kathy's vanishing act is a double consummation because the real trick (John's disappearance) arrives only after the first trick (Kathy's) is complete.

> The unknown, the unknowable. The blank faces. The overwhelming otherness. This is not to justify what occurred on March 16, 1968, for in my view such justifications are both futile and outrageous. Rather, it's to bear witness to the mystery of evil. Twenty-five years ago, as a terrified young PFC, I too could taste the sunlight. I could smell the sin. I could feel butchery sizzling like grease just under my eyeballs.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

In this footnote, one of the most surprising and unexpected moments in the novel, the narrator discusses his own thoughts, experiences, and opinions, speaking in the first person. Previously, the narrator of the novel has played the part of a calm, emotionless detective, sifting through the evidence—in short, the narrator hasn't really been a character at all. The fact that the narrator is suddenly giving his own interpretation of the events of the book tells us right away that he has strong feelings about and a personal history with the issues he's discussing—sin, violence, and butchery—and it's not hard to see why. As the narrator explains, he was present in Vietnam during the height of the war. (In real life, Tim O'Brien was also a soldier in Vietnam at this time.)

The narrator insists that he's speaking about his own experiences simply to "bear witness to the mystery of evil"—not trying to justify or condemn evil, but just to describe how it can occur in human nature. By this point in the novel, it's pretty clear that John Wade has participated in some pretty horrific things: he's murdered his fellow soldiers and shot old, harmless Vietnamese men. The narrator has no intention of forgiving John for his actions. But he also seems to be doing something more ethical than merely "witnessing" John's actions. By acknowledging that he (the narrator) felt "sin" during his own time in Vietnam, the narrator seems to be suggesting that John's actions, while horrific, aren't alien to human nature. In other words, human beings have the capacity to do evil. Most people never have to face the fact that they're capable of murder and torture, but John and the narrator, as soldiers, do.

Chapter 21 Quotes

> Thinbill sighed. "I guess that's the right attitude. Laugh it off. Fuck the spirit world."

Related Characters: Richard Thinbill (speaker), John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Thinbill—one of the only soldiers mentioned in the novel who doesn't participate in the atrocities of My Lai and other Vietnamese villages—gives John Wade some advice on how to deal with trauma. John has witnessed innocent women and children being murdered, and has even shot a harmless elderly man. John can't stop thinking about the horrific sights he's seen: like many victims of PTSD, he remembers the faces of the dead in vivid, photographic detail. John's reaction to his terrifying memories is to laugh.

In the way Thinbill interprets John's laughter, John is trying to escape his own memories of Vietnam (which Thinbill refers to as the "spirit world," suggesting how Vietnam will "haunt" the American soldiers). But as O'Brien has already shown us, John can't just "laugh off" his trauma. For years, John tries to use performance, humor, and charm to forget

his experiences in Vietnam, but he never succeeds in doing so. So Thinbill's interpretation of John's behavior may be incorrect. Thinbill believes John is "moving on," but in reality, John's laughter is just an extension of his trauma, not an escape from it. In short, John tries to laugh off his past, but fails.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ All you could do, he'd said, was open yourself up like a window and wait for fortune to blow in. And then they'd talked about stuck windows. Tony suggested that she unstick herself. So she'd shrugged and said she had tried it once but the unsticking hadn't gone well.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Kathleen "Kathy" Terese Wade, Anthony "Tony" L. Carbo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Kathy thinks about some advice Tony has given her recently. Tony knows that Kathy is locked in an unhappy marriage to John Wade. His advice is that Kathy free herself from her own unhappiness: in short, that she "unstick" herself.

It's important to recognize that Tony is referring to Kathy's marital infidelities here: he knows that Kathy has had an affair with another man at some point, and his advice is that Kathy should leave John for good. Of course, Tony is attracted to Kathy, and so his advice is also flirtation: he acts like he wants Kathy to be "free," but really he just wants to date her.

Tony's advice is also meant to counterpoint the difficulty that John and Kathy have with disentangling themselves from each other, and from their respective pasts. John has a long, traumatic past, and he *can't* just unstick himself, no matter how hard he tries. Similarly, Kathy feels that she has too much emotional baggage with John: as much as she sometimes wants to leave, she's too close to John to do so.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ Curiously, as he worked out the details, Wade found himself experiencing a dull new sympathy for his father. This was how it was. You go about your business. You carry the burdens, entomb yourself in silence, conceal demon-history from all others and most times from yourself. Nothing theatrical … and then one day you discover a length of clothesline. You amaze yourself.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Paul Wade, John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, John thinks about his father, Paul. Paul is a cruel, abusive drunk, who humiliates John for being overweight when John is just a small child. Decades later, John—in the midst of the search for Kathy, who's disappeared into the lake—decides that he and his father have ended up more or less the same. For John to compare himself with Paul (someone who caused him plenty of misery over the years) is a plain sign of his self-hatred at this time.

The passage is important because it suggests that John is coming to terms with his own tactics of evasion and repression. We the readers have known that John tries to bury his feelings under a surface of virtue, magic, and charm. But here, John himselfseems to become aware of this fact, too: by contemplating his father's problems with honesty and directness, John realizes that he himself is no better. The passage also suggests (obliquely and darkly) that John and Paul took different approaches to their deception. Paul couldn't handle the pressures of concealing himself from the people around him, so he hanged himself (the mention of a "clothesline" is intended to remind us of Paul's fate). John, however, found a way to relieve some of his own anxieties: magic, performance, and politics. In short, John and Paul suffer from the same fear of telling the truth, but whereas Paul cracks under the pressure, John finds a way to survive.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ Why do we care about Lizzie Borden, or Judge Carter, or Lee Harvey Oswald, or the Little Big Horn? Because of all that cannot be known. And what if we did know? What if it were proved—absolutely and purely—that Lizzie Borden took an ax? That Oswald acted alone? That Judge Carter fell into Sicilian hands? Nothing more would beckon, nothing would tantalize.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Lee Harvey Oswald, Lizzie Borden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, the narrator applies the rules of magic to real life (and to the novel). The world is full of unsolved mysteries, the narrator begins: Kennedy's assassination, the Battle of Little Big Horn, etc. There have been many people who've tried to solve these real-life mysteries, devoting thousands and thousands of hours to doing so. And yet for all their efforts, the narrator concludes, most of us don't really *want* to know the answer to the mystery. As with a magic trick, a real-life mystery (even a tragic or traumatic one) is fascinating in part because we can't know what really happened. Everyone feels a hunger for the truth, but if that hunger were ever satisfied in the case of (for example) Kennedy's assassination, people would forfeit something equally powerful—the sense of tantalizing excitement.

O'Brien's observations have some obvious relevance to the events of the novel. When we began reading, we naturally assumed that we would learn the solution to the "mystery" of Kathy's disappearance. But as we approach the end of the book, it becomes clear that O'Brien isn't going to tell us what happened. Furthermore, it's possible that we don't truly *want* to know what happened: the possibilities are too intriguing to choose only one.

Chapter 29 Quotes

And here in a corner of John Wade's imagination, where things neither live nor die, Kathy stares up at him from beneath the surface of the silvered lake. Her eyes are brilliant green, her expression alert. Se tries to speak, but can't. She belongs to the angle. Not quite present, not quite gone, she swims in the blending twilight of in between.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Kathleen "Kathy" Terese Wade, John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, the narrator offers another hypothesis for what happened to Kathy Wade. It's possible that Kathy Wade drowned (but whether because she was murdered or by accident we're not told), and in this case, Kathy is probably lying somewhere at the bottom of the lake.

O'Brien description of Kathy's bloated, decaying corpse is vivid and terrifying, and this is precisely his point. O'Brien isn't just describing Kathy's body; he's describing how John Wade might *imagine* Kathy's body, in all the gory, larger-than-life details. Ultimately, it's suggested, Kathy becomes a part of John's troubled, traumatic past—just like his time in Vietnam, or the abuse that he endured during his childhood. Just like these traumatic events, Kathy's body is "not quite present, not quite gone." In other words, John can't forget about Kathy altogether, but he also can't bring her back to life. Instead, Kathy is a memory for John, playing again and again in his troubled mind.

Chapter 30 Quotes

It's odd how the mind erases horror. All the evidence suggests that John Wade was able to perform a masterly forgetting trick for nearly two decades, somehow coping, pushing it all away, and from my own experience, I can understand how he kept things buried.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), John Herman Wade

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, the narrator personally intervenes in the novel once again. In a footnote, he offers a subtly different interpretation of John Wade's life than the one we've gotten so far in the book. For the narrator, it's potentially possible to forget one's traumatic past, or at least to *appear* to forget it. As evidence, the narrator offers John Wade's own life as a "normal" politician.

By this point in the book, however, the idea that John Wade was successful in pushing away his time in Vietnam should seem ludicrous. Clearly, John didn't really forget about Vietnam at all; eventually, his guilt and anxiety resurfaced. Even in the years immediately after Vietnam, when John was a happy, charismatic politician, it's been suggested that he continued to experience flashbacks to his time in war. John didn't "keep things buried" at all.

So why does the narrator seem optimistic that John was successful in his attempts to "erase horror?" Perhaps the narrator is trying to convince *himself* that it's possible to forget the past. The narrator chooses to believe that John succeeded in repressing Vietnam in order to reassure himself that *he* (the narrator) can do the same. And yet, as we see, trauma never really goes away until it is confronted in a direct and healthy manner.

Chapter 31 Quotes

❝ If all is supposition, if ending is air, then why not happiness? Are we so cynical, so sophisticated, as to write off even the chance of happy ending?

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the novel, the narrator offers some thoughts on the unknowability of Kathy's disappearance.

After 300 pages of hypotheses about what happened to Kathy, the narrator throws up his hands and admits that he has no idea what the truth is. But the narrator goes on to make a more complicated point: if we can't know what "really" happened, he argues, we might as well accept the most optimistic interpretation of the facts, provided that it's reasonable.

The narrator's rhetorical question sheds some light on the novel itself, without offering a "solution" to the mystery of Kathy's disappearance. The narrator tells us that "all is supposition." The natural question, then, is what was the purpose of this entire book? Strangely, the narrator has led readers through pages of facts and entire chapters of evidence, just to illustrate (in the most unforgettable way!) that all this evidence is futile. He's taken us across a bridge to nowhere, and then blown up the bridge.

And yet the narrator's project isn't totally destructive, even if he's destroyed some of our faith in the facts of the narrative. Evidence and research can't illuminate the truth for us, but we can choose to believe the most optimistic (or pessimistic, etc.) interpretation of the facts. In short, facts can't save us—only hope and personal interpretation can do that.

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.

CHAPTER 1: HOW UNHAPPY THEY WERE

The novel begins with two unnamed characters who, in the aftermath of a primary election, decide to rent a cottage in a place called **Lake of the Woods**. In the area surrounding the cottage, there are no people or towns whatsoever. The cottage has a beautiful view of the lake, which points north to Canada. The two people have come to Lake of the Woods for solitude, and to be together.

O'Brien begins his novel on a note of uncertainty. We don't know who these people are or what they're doing, and while we'll come to know much more about them as the story goes on, the mood of uncertainty will continue.

The two characters don't have sex with each other. They have tried sex before, and it didn't turn out well, though the narrator doesn't explain any further. They try to cheer each other up, even though one of the characters has lost the primary election, but they both secretly understand that this was a crushing loss. Instead of talking about the primary, they think of potential names for their children. It's a very sad time in their lives, and they're trying to be happy.

There's an immediate tension between appearances—how the characters act around each other—and how the characters really feel. Even though we've only just met them, we sense that what lies beneath their appearance is too painful and complicated to put into words.

The two characters think of places to travel. One character, whose name is Kathy, says that she wants to visit Verona, Italy. She and the other character talk about Verona as if it's a place where nothing bad ever happens.

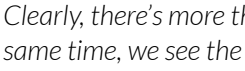
We begin to learn more about the characters. Kathy's conversation with her lover (still unnamed) suggests that she's a dreamer, always fantasizing about how her life could be better than it is.

After six nights in **Lake of the Woods**, Kathy tells her companion, a man, that things aren't that bad—together, they can make them better. In less than 36 hours, Kathy will be gone. Nevertheless, she tells her companion that he can get a job with a law firm in Minneapolis, and together they'll put together a budget and start paying off debts.

For all its metaphysical questions about the nature of appearances versus reality, this novel is also a good mystery. Here, O'Brien makes this very clear by establishing suspense and tension. We know that Kathy is going to disappear—for the rest of the book, we'll struggle to understand how and why.

The other character, John Wade, tries to be positive as Kathy talks about her plans. He closes his eyes and pictures a huge mountain crushing him. Still, he kisses Kathy and embraces her. He thinks, in disbelief, about the landslide loss he's endured in the primary election: he was beaten nearly three to one. He was lieutenant governor when he was 37 years old, and a candidate for the U.S. Senate when he was forty. Now, at forty-one, he is a loser. John is humiliated by his loss—he wants to scream "Kill Jesus!" and cut things with a knife. For years, he has been climbing, slowly—and now everything has come crashing down. As he thinks this, he promises Kathy that they'll travel to Verona together.

Even with all the information about John Wade that we learn in this section, it's not clear what's going on. Why John lost the election, or why the loss has destroyed his life is left unexplained (plenty of successful politicians have lost elections, after all). The expression, "Kill Jesus" is particularly frightening because it's unexplained. Clearly, there's more than an electoral defeat troubling John. At the same time, we see the tension between appearance and inner life once again. As John thinks terrifying thoughts, he continues to smile and talk about baby names and vacations.



Kathy asks John about having babies. She suggests that she's too old, but John assures her that they'll have many children. A short time later, Kathy cries, but denies that she's crying. She insists that she loves John, and doesn't care about elections at all. She asks John if he loves her, and he insists that he does. Kathy presses her hand against John's forehead. Later, when Kathy is gone, John will remember this moment vividly.

O'Brien ends the first chapter on another note of suspense, mentioning for the second time that Kathy will be gone soon. The contrast between the enormity of this prediction and the banality of her behavior creates a sense of dramatic irony that keeps the story interesting: even though we don't know what's going on, we know more than Kathy and John do.

CHAPTER 2: EVIDENCE

The chapter consists of many pieces of "evidence." The first is a quote from Eleanor K. Wade, identified as "mother." Eleanor says that "he" was always secretive as a child. Further pieces of evidence include an iron teakettle and a large boat. A man named Anthony L. Carbo is quoted as saying that "he" kept everything buried, and never said much to anyone, even his wife.

O'Brien's book is organized into different kinds of chapters, one of which is the "evidence" chapter. While the purpose of evidence is to aid in the solution to a crime, these pieces of evidence don't prove anything—they only establish that there is a great mystery at hand. The fact that John has secrets doesn't tell us anything new (we saw this in the previous chapter), but the fact that he's always had secrets does "raise the stakes" as we embark on the mystery of Kathy's disappearance.

The next piece of evidence is a missing persons report for Kathleen Terese Wade. She is 38, blond and green-eyed, takes valium, and had a pregnancy termination when she was 34. She has a sister, but her next of kin is John Herman Wade. Kathleen worked as a Director of Admissions at the University of Minnesota. A colleague, Bethany Kee, says that she's sure that Kathy didn't drown, because she was an excellent swimmer.

Here, in its simplest form, is the information about Kathy's disappearance. The list of information (height, weight, hair, etc.) is almost comical, because it tells us nothing and everything about her disappearance. There's a sense that all the statistics about Kathy can't tell us as much as one casual quote from Kathy's friend, Bethany. It's from Bethany that we learn that Kathy's disappearance must have something to do with the lake we saw in the previous chapter, and also that this makes her disappearance even more suspicious, since she was a gifted swimmer.

Further quotes and reports inform us that John's father bullied him when John was a child. John loved his father, Eleanor says, which is why his father's treatment of him hurt him so deeply. She adds that John was too young to understand alcoholism.

This piece of evidence is important because it's used to "explain" John—in other words, to suggest that John behaved the way he did because of his father. Ironically, while these quotes should inspire some kind of sympathy for John because they are related to his wife's mysterious disappearance and since we don't know what John did *at this point in the novel, this explanation actually* increases *our sense of his guilt instead of minimizing it. As readers we are placed in the position of investigators, which is both exciting and uncomfortable.*

An exhibit shows poll numbers from 1986. On July 3, Wade was leading over Durkee, 58% to 31%. On August 17, Durkee was leading 60% to 21%. Carbo says that the defeat ended John's career. Carbo had asked John if he had any secrets. John hadn't said anything. Carbo insists that he didn't betray John.

Again, the presence of statistics is both helpful and unhelpful—the numbers show us that there was a sudden, unexpected change in John's popularity, but doesn't tell us what caused this change. Ironically Carbo's pronouncement that he "didn't" betray John only makes us suspicious that he did.

There are more quotes. Bethany guesses that Kathy is on a bus somewhere, since she didn't want to stay married to a "creep" like John. Kathy's sister, Patricia, says she can't discuss her sister. A waitress named Myra Shaw remembers a loud argument she saw between John and Kathy. Vincent R. Pearson claims that John killed Kathy, an idea that Eleanor rejects as ridiculous. A man named Richard Thinbill complains about "flies," though he doesn't specify where he saw them.

We end the chapter with a collection of hypotheses about what happened to Kathy. Part of the delight of this section is the sheer uncertainty we feel. Any of these possibilities could be the truth, for all we know. Some of the possibilities directly contradict each other. All this, in conjunction with the unexplained word "flies," shows us that we have our work cut out for us: we must decipher the mystery of what happened to Kathy by navigating through the huge number of possibilities for what could have happened.

CHAPTER 3: THE NATURE OF LOSS

John Wade's father died when John was fourteen years old. After learning of his father's death, he felt the desire to kill. At the funeral, for instance, he wanted to kill his father, everyone who was crying, and everyone who wasn't.

This information about John and his father implicates John in Kathy's death. Clearly, he has the potential to do harm to others—he wants to harm others at a funeral, of all places. At the same time, he was just a kid devastated by the death of his father and lashing out mentally.

For weeks after his father's death, John buries his head in his pillow and imagines his father being alive. He imagines the two of them talking about the right way to hit a baseball. Later on, John invents stories for himself about how he could have saved his father's life by blowing into his father's mouth and restarting his heart.

John's behavior following his father's death shows his capacity for fantasy and deception. He begins by deceiving himself—trying to make himself believe that his father is still alive. This section paints John in a highly sympathetic light—he has no say in his father's death, even if it has a huge influence on his development.

While some of the stories John tells himself comfort him, nothing works for long. John can't fool himself—his father is dead. Nevertheless, he imagines finding his father in the house, putting him in his pocket, and vowing never to lose him again.

O'Brien suggests that deception never works for long—in the end, the truth is always revealed. This corresponds to what we know about how mysteries work—given enough time, the truth always makes itself known.

CHAPTER 4: WHAT HE REMEMBERED

On the seventh day that John and Kathy spend at **Lake of the Woods**, John remembers, nothing much happens. They laugh and chat over breakfast, but as Kathy is washing dishes, John notices her make a low sound and look away from him. 24 hours later, John will remember the distance he feels between Kathy and himself in this moment. He often wonders if she would have disappeared had they made love in the kitchen of the cottage.

Immediately after reading about John's behavior after his father's death, we see John engaging in similar behavior: he feels an enormous sense of guilt, as if he's personally responsible for both his father's death and his wife's disappearance. This suggests that John is capable of enormous love for other people.

When John speaks to others later on, he cannot remember every detail of his day with Kathy. He does recall, however, that around noon they went to swim in the lake. As they float in the **water**, John looks across the lake and imagines that he is a winner. Kathy asks him if he's all right, and John insists, despites Kathy's skepticism, that he is. Kathy asks again if he's all right, and John gets annoyed. He later remembers seeing Kathy clench her jaw after he says that he's fine.

From the beginning, the information we're given is unreliable—John admits that he can't remember everything that happened the day before Kathy disappeared (the fact that he's talking to "others"—perhaps the police—adds more suspense). One wonders if there should be a similar qualifier next to every one of the quotations we've read in the previous chapter—evidence is always a little unreliable if it comes from human beings.


For the rest of the afternoon, Kathy does crosswords and John organizes bills. Feeling "electricity in his blood," John twice tries to call Tony Carbo, but learns from Tony's secretary that he's left for the day. John doesn't leave a message. He then says "Kill Jesus," which he finds funny, and unplugs the phone.

The mention of "electricity" is a vivid way of conveying the suspense at this moment—clearly, something is going to happen. The fact that John unplugs the phone seems highly important, given what we know about Kathy's disappearance—if she leaves the cottage, there's no way for her to get in touch with her husband.


John can't recall what happened next. He may have napped, or had a drink. He does, however, remember driving into the nearest town with Kathy. During this drive, he feels a pressure in his ears, as if he's underwater. He and Kathy drive by Pearson's Texaco station, and a small schoolhouse. John and Kathy arrive in town, park, and pick up some mail they've received: a letter from his accountant, and a letter for Kathy from her sister in Minneapolis.

John's faulty memory seems to correlate to his drinking. Given what we know about John's father, it would seem that he's inherited the very qualities that strained his relationship with his father. The "pressure" John feels in his ears seems to foreshadow something, especially because he's described as feeling as if he's underwater when we know that Kathy disappeared on (or in) a lake.

John and Kathy take their mail, go grocery shopping, and then go to a Mini-Mart. Kathy reads her sister's letter, and complains that her sister has two boyfriends. John finds this "good," and Kathy responds that men, like politicians, always come in pairs. She says this is a joke, but John isn't amused. This annoys Kathy, who angrily reminds him, It's not my fault." John sees a muscle move in Kathy's cheek. At 5:24, the waitress who's serving them at the Mini-Mart notices their argument. Kathy insists, "we lost," and John responds, "Mr. Monster."

John and Kathy's argument is a great example of the "iceberg technique," referring to what is visible on the surface and what is hidden "beneath the water" —although they seem to be chatting about fairly banal things, we sense that there's a huge amount of unstated information that's nonetheless relevant to their conversation. The twitch in Kathy's cheek is further evidence of the unspoken feeling between them, as is the phrase, "Mr. Monster"—possibly a nickname that John earned during his campaign.

Back in their cottage, John and Kathy have some food and listen to music. At 8 pm, they walk around outside and watch the moon. John remembers that Kathy refuses to hold his hand for long, and then walking back inside. For the rest of the evening, they don't make love; instead, they play backgammon. John brings up "that stuff in the newspapers," but Kathy focuses on the game. Around 11, John claims, they go to bed. Kathy sounds cheerful, as if she doesn't know that she's "going away."

It's possible that the tension between John and Kathy is at least partly sexual—based on their earlier argument about romantic partners coming in pairs, and the fact that they don't make love now. The qualifier, "John claims," throws into doubt all the information we've received thus far—it's been pulled from people who aren't necessarily trustworthy or reliable.

CHAPTER 5: HYPOTHESIS

This chapter is structured as a "hypothesis." The first part of the hypothesis is that Kathy has a secret lover. During her seventh day at the cottage with John, Kathy may have been thinking about this lover: a simple, honest man, totally unlike her deceptive, secretive husband. This is only a possibility, the narrator acknowledges.

In this chapter, O'Brien makes explicit what he's already been implying—we can't take anything we read at face value. Just as the contents of this chapter are only one *possible version of the truth, the testimony we find in the surrounding chapters is equally warped by first-person perspective. Rather than ever get to a point of revealing "this is what happened," O'Brien circles around all of the things that* might *have happened. The story is both obsessed with figuring out "the truth" happened and also obsessed with the fact that you never can.*

Perhaps Kathy couldn't bear to tell John about her secret lover. She may have staged her own disappearance—this is unlikely, the narrator admits, but not impossible. She could have woken up early, arranged for her lover to pick her up, and driven away.

Even though this chapter is framed as a possibility, it begins to tell us more about John and Kathy's relationship—the mere possibility that Kathy had a lover is itself an important fact: clearly there was tension between John and Kathy, and clearly some of the tension stemmed from John's propensity for lying and deception—in short for being a politician.

CHAPTER 6: EVIDENCE

This chapter is structured as a collection of "evidence." The first piece of evidence comes from Richard Thinbill, who says, "We called him Sorcerer." The next pieces of evidence are related to John's love for magic and **magic tricks**: a photograph of John as a child, holding a wand, a quote from Eleanor about how he used to practice magic for hours, and a list of childish tricks he owned as a child. Patricia Hood, Kathy's sister, says that Kathy was sometimes scared of John.

We ended the previous chapter by noting John's propensity for deception. Here, O'Brien gives us evidence—a history, even—of his deception. This takes us back to his childhood, when he performed innocent tricks for his mother. Clearly, John's love for magic as a child followed him for years afterwards—hence his nickname, and, it's implied, the fear he inspires in Kathy.

The narrator quotes other books, such as *The Crying of Lot 49*, by Thomas Pynchon, and academic texts on trauma and paranoia. The Pynchon passage describes how a woman who lives in a constant state of fear and paranoia eventually realizes that the fear is all in her mind. To alleviate the fear, she does a great number of things, including getting married. The academic sources describe how armed combat almost always leads to trauma. Talking about trauma means talking about the evil of human nature.

Pynchon (himself a notoriously deceptive, reclusive author) describes how women make peace with their own insecurity. Perhaps this explains why Kathy married John—despite John's mysteriousness, marrying him was preferably to dealing with her problems on her own. The information about trauma establishes an important theme in the novel—human nature, and our capacity for evil.

Eleanor says that John was always well behaved as a child. John's service in the war had a big effect on his personality, she admits, but it's "too easy" to say that the war made him who he is. Tony Carbo imagines that **magic** and politics were one and the same for John. Other sources, taken from the memoirs or biographies of American politicians like Lyndon B. Johnson, Woodrow Wilson, and Richard Nixon, describe how great politicians were motivated by boundless love—for their families, for their constituents—but also that their lives seemed to lack love.

These quotes help to explain how John became the man he is, yet they also acknowledge the limitations of these kinds of explanations. No one thing can explain John—not his experiences in war and not his family situation. Nevertheless, it's important to keep in mind that politicians like John are often influenced by their relationships with family members. We can acknowledge that John's father played an important part in his development, so long as we don't get carried away and treat his father as the "skeleton key" to understanding John. And further, we should recognize that many other characters do try to understand each other using these sorts of "skeleton keys," which basically means that no one really understands each other.

Ruth Rasmussen says that John threw away a perfectly good teakettle. Vincent Pearson, a part-time detective, insists that John "did something ugly," but Arthur Lux, the sheriff, insists that Vincent is only a "theory man"—Arthur, who deals in facts, concludes that John's case is "wide open."

The mention of the teakettle is a god example of a "Chekhov's Pistol"—a piece of information that seems ordinary, but which will clearly turn out to be important, by virtue of being mentioned at all. Lux's comment about Vincent illustrates the tension between theory and fact. O'Brien will rely on both to reconstruct what happened to Kathy.

CHAPTER 7: THE NATURE OF MARRIAGE

As a child, John loved to perform **magic tricks**: silk scarves, a disappearing penny, etc. While these are only tricks, not real magic, John the child liked to pretend that the tricks are real. At fourteen, John's father dies, and in his mind he performs magic tricks that restore his father to life.

This section suggests that John's father indirectly influenced John's entry into the world of politics. His death influenced John to perform more magic and, based on what Tony Carbo said in the previous chapter, John thus went on to view politics itself as a collection of magic tricks.

John meets Kathy in 1966, when he's a senior at the University of Minnesota, and Kathy is a freshman. John is desperate to make Kathy love him. He thinks of his father's death, and worries to Kathy that things could go wrong between them. Shortly after they begin dating, John begins to spy on Kathy when she thinks she's on her own. He learns that she smokes, and what she eats for breakfast. He thinks that he loves Kathy best when he's spying on her, and the spying comes naturally to him. John knows that spying is wrong, but he blames Kathy for bringing the desire to spy out in him.

This section is structured to make us feel sympathetic to John, while also understanding the limits of that sympathy. Clearly, John's love for Kathy is related to his acute sense of loss and guilt concerning his father. At the same time, this doesn't absolve him of guilt for stalking Kathy—it's petty and irresponsible and also kind of scary of him to blame Kathy for encouraging him to stalk her, anyway. There is an implication here that John views Kathy as an object whose only purpose is to love him.

John continues spying on Kathy: he watched when she buys his birthday present, and when she buys her first diaphragm. Kathy says that it's weird how well he knows her. Nevertheless, they plan to get married and live in Minneapolis. John plans to go to law school, then run for lieutenant governor of the state of Minnesota, followed by Senator. Kathy is impressed, but finds John's plans cold and unfeeling. She asks John why he wants to go into politics, and he tells her that it's because he loves Kathy. Even as he promises Kathy that he wants to use politics to do good, John knows that he's lying. He knows that he enjoys politics because it involves manipulation and deception.

John is a manipulator and a liar who clearly enjoys the sense of exercising power over other people—hence his fondness for following the people he loves. It's as if John thinks that loving others and watching them are synonymous. It's revealing that Kathy seems to understand John perfectly well—she recognizes, for instance, that he's going into politics for himself, not for others—and yet continues to stay with John. Perhaps she sees some of herself in John, or perhaps her attraction to John is even more abstract, possibly even based on the fact that he is so hard to know.

John graduates college in June of 1967, when the Vietnam war is in progress. In nine months, he is in active combat in Vietnam. His challenge during the war, he understands, is to stay sane. He sends letters to Kathy, and she writes him back. While most of their correspondence is cheery, Kathy worries that John is only fighting so that he'll have an easier time getting elected. John is hurt, although he admits to himself that he sometimes fantasizes about being worshipped by crowds for his military sacrifices. He writes Kathy and tells her that he wishes she'd believe in him.

We see a tension between appearances and essences. John wants to appear to be cheerful and happy, even though, we sense, he's clearly witnessing awful things in Vietnam. Part of the sadness of this section is that John seems to be fooling himself as well as other people—he seems to believe, or at least half-believe, that he wants to go into politics to help other people. The desire to serve and the desire to control are always at odds in his head. It's not just that other people don't understand him. John doesn't seem to understand himself (and there is also a broader implication: that people in general don't totally understand themselves).


John isn't a great soldier, but he's popular among the other men. He does card tricks for them, which earn him the nickname, "Sorcerer." Once, a soldier named Weber is fatally shot while John is with him. As Weber dies, he asks John to do his **magic**.

John sees the military as a kind of practice for being a politician. He seems to be performing a useful function for the other soldiers, even if he's only doing so for his own selfish reasons—practice for his career later on.


John's **magic** eventually works its way into the military plans of his division, Charlie Company. The soldiers go through mock-rituals before they fight, in which John casts a spell to make them invisible, and tells their fortunes. They are impressed that John never gets injured, even when an explosive lands near him. John encourages this mystique. He writes to Kathy that he's the company "witch doctor." He also writes, "They actually *believe* in this shit." Kathy warns him to be careful with his tricks—one day, she says, he'll make her disappear.

John reveals himself to be a remarkably cynical and unfeeling man, one who has no respect for the people who like him. He hypocritically encourages the soldiers to worship him, then laughs at them for doing so. Kathy's words obviously foreshadow the events of the coming chapters, when Kathy herself will disappear. Coming on the heels of O'Brien's disturbing descriptions of John, this suggests that John is, or may be, responsible for Kathy's disappearance.

John worries that Kathy is growing distant. In a letter she sends him, she describes the fun she's been having, and he wishes he could spy on her. Meanwhile, men in Charlie Company die, and there's a general feeling that his **magic** has worn off. The soldiers aren't warm to him anymore.

John's relationship with Kathy parallels his relationship with the other men—it's as if they all start to see through John at the same time.

In February, an enemy sniper shoots a soldier named Reinhart; John is with Reinhart when he dies. John feels his body fill with anger, sadness, and evil. As if in a trance, he runs through the forest until he reaches the sniper, who he hits in the cheekbone with his gun. Later the soldiers praise John for finding the sniper so quickly. The soldiers perform their own act of **magic**: they raise the sniper high into the air with a rope, so that the Vietnamese villagers can see him.

This description of John's behavior suggests that he's not fully conscious of what he's doing—it's as if he, not the author, is the one repressing details of his experience. This is consistent with the definition of trauma. The section ends with a gruesome "act of magic"—the juxtaposition of magic, a seemingly innocent pursuit, and murder is far more disturbing than murder by itself could ever be.

John returns to the United States in 1969. He calls Kathy, but hangs up before she can answer. During a layover between his flight home, he looks at himself in the mirror and addresses himself as Sorcerer. When he's back in Minneapolis, he goes to the University of Minnesota and waits outside Kathy's dormitory. He rehearses a speech about loyalty that he'll deliver to Kathy later, but when he sees her, he notices that she seems quicker and cleverer. This makes him feel uneasy, and he goes to say in a hotel that night.

The scene in which John calls Kathy and then talks to himself in the mirror will appear later in the novel, in a different context. This is O'Brien's way of illustrating that context and backstory are as important as the facts themselves—one can't understand why John talks to himself in the mirror without understanding what he was doing previously. John's love for Kathy seems to hinge upon his thinking that he can fool her—he treats her like a constituent, as if she's practice for a life of politics. His uneasiness about Kathy's increasing cleverness makes him uncomfortable, it is implied, because she might be able to see through his "tricks."

The night he sees Kathy, John sleeps in a hotel and thinks about his father's funeral. He remembers wanting to hit everyone with a hammer, including his father. The next day, he returns to Kathy's dormitory, but can't resist spying on her as she goes to class and buys food. He feels suspicious that Kathy is seeing another man, but he also wants to forget his own suspicion. Still, he decides, he is the Sorcerer, and he has a gift for **magic**.

Again, John's deception is rendered more poignant than it would otherwise be because John is clearly deceiving himself, too. He knows that it's wrong to spy on other people, but his experiences in Vietnam have taught him to behave differently. It's difficult to assign blame for John's behavior—is he a product of his environment and his upbringing, or is he a free agent entirely responsible for his behavior?

John watches as Kathy leaves her dorm and makes a phone call from a payphone. He waits outside her dormitory all night and into the morning. When Kathy returns and sees him there, she says that she was out, and John smiles and nods. In the end, they get married anyway.

It's revealing that John marries Kathy even after he thinks that she's having a relationship with someone else. Having this knowledge gives John power over Kathy, and it's these two things—knowledge and power—that he's always seemed to enjoy about their relationship. Why Kathy marries John is more mysterious, and in some ways why she is with John is as mysterious as her eventual disappearance.

When John and Kathy get married, they promise to be true to one another, and move into an apartment in Minneapolis shortly thereafter. Kathy says it's scary how much she loves him. John, or "Sorcerer," as the narrator calls him, thinks to himself that he must guard his secrets, and never reveal the things he's seen and done.

The chapter ends on a somewhat surprising note—even after John squeezes information from Kathy, he refuses to give up any information about himself. One can call John hypocritical for behaving this way, but one can also be sympathetic—clearly he's seen things in Vietnam that he finds hard to deal with himself, let alone pass on to other people.

CHAPTER 8: HOW THE NIGHT PASSED

This chapter discusses John's behavior on the night before he supposedly discovered that Kathy was missing. He wakes up in the night, twice. On the second occasion, he says, "Kill Jesus," and goes to boil water for tea. He imagines tearing out "the bastard's" eyes.

John's behavior isn't remotely comprehensible—we have no idea why he would say these things or behave this way. Still, based on the previous chapter, it seems likely that his behavior is related to his experiences in Vietnam in some way.

John waits for the water to boil, and thinks about the primaries. He lost all but a few small cities. One minute, he thinks, he was presidential. The next, he was hated. John thinks that he has been betrayed; secrets have been betrayed. In the end, he lost by a margin of more than 100,000 votes. John interprets this loss as an end to his political career, and rues the "ambush politics" that made him lose the election.

John clearly sees himself as the victim—it's left up to us to agree or disagree with him. Based on what we know about his hypocrisy and denial, we're probably inclined to think that he's being hypocritical here, even if we've yet to understand what information made John lose his campaign.

The water boils, and John, saying "Kill Jesus," pours it over a geranium plant near the cottage's fireplace. The plant dies almost instantly, and John laughs. He fills the kettle again with water for it to boil. He then walks to the bedroom, where Kathy is sleeping.

John is clearly capable of tremendous acts of destruction. Killing a plant seems almost childish and yet also psychotic, and perhaps this is meant to remind us that John's behavior is at least partly the result of his experiences dealing with his father and his father's death.

In the days following Kathy's disappearance, John will think of what he should have done that night. He should have woken Kathy up and apologized to her, telling her that he was taking his electoral defeat hard, and that he was fighting with memories of Vietnam. Instead, John remembers touching Kathy's hair, pulling a blanket over her body, and returning to the living room.

John always prefers to hide information rather than reveal it. It's seems like that this is why his behavior is erratic—instead of dealing with his experiences in Vietnam, he keeps them hidden or even repressed, which means that they can continue to influence his behavior.

John later claims that he forgets what else he did that night. At one point, he remembers standing in the lake. At another time, he was near a dock. At some point he got back in bed. He had a nightmare about electric eels and boiling water. The next morning, he woke to find that Kathy wasn't there. When he realized this, he rolled over and went back to sleep.

John's nightmare is important, because it shows that, regardless of what John did, he has the potential to behave violently and destructively. We end with an image to which O'Brien will return again and again—John with his face buried in his pillow. This image can be shocking, poignant, hypocritical, etc.—it all depends on our perspective, as we'll come to see. And it is also an image that captures the idea of John hiding from things, repressing things.

CHAPTER 9: HYPOTHESIS

The chapter is structured around another hypothesis for Kathy's disappearance: Kathy heard John walking around in the night and got scared. Thus, she left the cottage. She might have heard John saying "Kill Jesus," or seen the plant he destroyed. She might have then left the house in her nightgown.

In the early chapters of the novel, Kathy seems like the innocent victim of John's hypocrisy and deception. Here is no exception—she doesn't know how to deal with John, because John keeps his feelings about Vietnam bottled up. Thus, she runs away.

Staring into the cottage from outside, Kathy might have seen John, yelling and laughing and looking completely unlike the man she thought she knew. Perhaps she contemplated going to the Rasmussen cottage a mile away to find a doctor and calm John down, but then decided to wait. John needed love right now, she must have thought—but the love she had given him in their marriage never seemed to satisfy him.

Despite being married to John for years, Kathy doesn't fully know him. Nevertheless, she feels great love for him—a love we have yet to fully understand. We get the sense that John and Kathy's love is asymmetrical—Kathy gives more to John than John gives back to her.

Kathy might have thought about everything that had happened to John lately. In August and September, the newspapers broke new information about John, information that made his audiences hate him and yell at him. When Kathy asked him if the information was true, John only replied that it happened a long time ago, and challenged Kathy about her dentist; he asked Kathy if he was right, and she nodded. Shortly after this incident, John gave a concession speech, and Kathy was amazed by how easily he pretended to be gracious and cheerful.

Kathy has a keen eye for John's hypocrisy and political talent—she sees how easily he moves between tense confrontation and glib speeches. And yet as Kathy challenges John about his secrets, John shows that Kathy too has secrets, which it seems likely involves an affair with a dentist.

As Kathy watched her husband that night near **Lake of the Woods**, she might have gone inside and seen the plants John killed. At this, she may have left—or, the narrator admits, maybe not. Maybe she walked into the bedroom, where she smelled wet wool and saw John pouring boiling water on the bed. After this, she might have concluded that her husband was beyond all help, and always had been, and then grabbed a sweater and run to the Rasmussen place. From here, she might have hurt herself or made a wrong turn. She might have gotten lost, the narrator admits, and she may still be out there.

In this scenario, John is responsible for Kathy's disappearance, even if he didn't directly hurt her or drag her from the cottage. Kathy finally sees that John is "beyond help"—even though she's been trying in vain to help him for years and years. Kathy's epiphany at this moment is undercut by the qualification that this is—as in the other "Hypothesis" chapters—only one possible scenario. We have no idea what actually *happened to Kathy that night.*

CHAPTER 10: THE NATURE OF LOVE

"One evening," while John is still in the midst of his political career, John and Kathy are at a political party. At this point, they have been married for almost seven years, and are still very much in love. John gets drunk, drives home with Kathy, and makes love to her. Afterwards, they return to the party, where John makes a speech and does **magic tricks**.

John continues to show some signs of alcoholism. This is disturbing, since alcoholism played such a major role in his traumatic experiences with his father. In this scene, however, John seems perfectly in control of himself—he can glibly move between sex, drink, and charismatic political campaigning.

John went to Vietnam because of love, not because he wanted to be a good citizen or a hero. He imagines his father praising him for fighting. He thinks to himself that he sometimes does bad things to gain other people's love, and that he hates himself for needing to be loved.

The information we learn here contradicts what we've heard earlier—is John going to Vietnam out of love, or out of political ambition? We sense that both hypotheses are partly correct—John seems to want to help others while also caring about his political career.

In college, John and Kathy often go to a bar called The Bottle Top. One night, John dares Kathy to steal a bottle of Scotch from the bar. Kathy talks the bartender into going into a back room, then takes a long time choosing which bottle to steal, and then takes it back to where they're sitting. This makes John love Kathy, and he says that they should get married. He looks into her eyes, and thinks that they have a light that could only belong to her.

When they're young, John and Kathy can bond over their deception of other people. Kathy, in this moment, clearly relishes the thrill of deception the same way John does. The image of Kathy's eyes, another important one in the novel, will reappear many times, each time suggesting something slightly different. This is indicative of the way the entire novel works—the same object or fact can point to multiple, mutually contradictory conclusions at the same time.

Before John and Kathy can marry, John fights in Vietnam. He sends Kathy letters in which he talks about love, but not the deaths he's seen. He compares their love to a **pair of snakes** he saw in Vietnam. Each was eating each other's tail, until their heads almost touch and a soldier ended their lives by chopping them with a machete. He also mentions that the other soldiers call him Sorcerer, a nickname he enjoys.

John adopts a clear "persona" in this letter—the macho, intimidating soldier (the analogy of love being like two snakes seems designed to make Kathy feel a little uncomfortable). The image of two snakes eating each other suggests that love and war are often difficult to distinguish—this is clear if we look at John and Kathy's relationship: it's often hard to tell if they love or hate each other. And there is a sense that they are destroying each other through the intensity of their relationship.

As a child of nine or ten, John would lie in bed, surrounded by catalogs of **magic tricks**, making note of all the prices. The next day, he would travel alone by bus to a magic shop. There, he would try to work up the nerve to go inside. When he walked inside, a women with red hair would call, "You!", and he would rush back outside and return home. At home, John would talk to his father. His father would ask him to watch a baseball game tomorrow, and John would say, "maybe." In response, his father would say, "Maybe's good enough for me."

In contrast to his slick, glib manner as an adult, John seems shy and uncomfortable as a child, avoiding the ginger-haired woman. He also seems to be the one responsible for alienating his father, not the other way around. His father, by contrast, seems like a saint—a kind, loving father who respects his children enough to give them their own choices

One day in Vietnam, John senses, "Something was wrong." He's surrounded by gunfire and dead women. He sees dead animals and burning villages, and thinks that he doesn't know where to shoot. He shoots at smoke and trees, and his only desire is to make what he sees go away. PFC Weatherby greets him as Sorcerer, and starts to smile. In response, Sorcerer shoots him.

John's behavior in Vietnam becomes a little clearer—he's clearly hiding the fact that he killed a soldier knowingly—but the circumstances of that event are far from completely explained at this point. Why John shot a fellow soldier remains to be seen.

Back in Minnesota, John is elected to the State Senate. He celebrates by hosting a small party, and getting a hotel suite with Kathy. In the suite, he and Kathy sing "My Way" by Frank Sinatra, and make love.

The juxtaposition of murder and political success sends a clear message—there's something disturbing about politics, something that attracts liars and hypocrites like John. The use of Sinatra (who sings about "bad mistakes," of which he's "made a few") is unnerving.

The narrator returns to describing John's experiences in Vietnam. One evening, Charlie Company approaches a small village. The company is attacked by mortar fire, but no one is hurt. Afterwards, Sorcerer helps round up every villager, takes them back to the company, and performs a magic show. He performs card tricks, and turns a pear into an orange. He also makes the village disappear—a trick which, the narrator notes, involves artillery and white phosphorus. Everyone who watches the show finds the vanishing village "trick" spectacular.

It's telling that John is called Sorcerer in this section—his identity in Vietnam is brand new, based on performance and appearances. The sinister side of magic is very obvious in this section. At first, we think that Sorcerer is doing the Vietnamese a favor. Then, we sense that the big "magic trick" he accomplished involved blowing up the Vietnamese village. This suggests that John's magic is far from harmless—he uses it to do actual damage to other people.

As a child, John practices **magic tricks** in front of the mirror. He thinks that he can use magic to read his father's mind. While looking in the mirror, he imagines his father thinking that he loves John. In general, John thinks, the mirror makes everything better. In the mirror, John's father always smiles, and John doesn't have to think about empty vodka bottles. John's father drinks in the garage, always promising John that he'll smash his bottles after he has one more drink.

It's no coincidence that John spends so much time in front of a mirror. Looking in the mirror, John is both lost in his own thoughts and at the same time performing for himself. This fits with what we know already about how John lies not just to others but also to himself. In contrast to earlier in the chapter, John's father's behavior in this section is disturbing—he hardly seems like a good father, and the fact that John has to imagine his love suggests that he doesn't love John much, or at least doesn't or isn't able to show it.

John's father is a popular, charming man. The other boys in the neighborhood love to play football with him and listen to his stories and jokes. In school, John's classmate, Tommy Winn makes a speech about how much he likes John's father, and gives John a sad look that seems to say, "I wish he was *my* father." At the time, John thinks that Tommy doesn't know about his father's drunkenness, or about how his father made fun of John when he got **fat** in the fourth grade, calling him "Jiggling John." John's mother insisted that John was only getting a little husky, but his father insisted that this wasn't true, and criticized John for doing **magic** like a "pansy," instead of playing sports.

We begin to see where John gets his fondness for deception and lying. His father is equally adept at hiding his demons from other people—indeed, he puts on an image of respectability and likability in front of other people. Worse, he abuses John verbally and encourages John to hate himself and his body. It's hard to hate John when we learn that he's the victim of an abusive father. His fondness for deception and nicknames seems to stem from someone else's bullying, rather than his own decisions.

As an adult, before he's found political success, John goes on walks with Kathy and discusses buying a house. Kathy wants to buy a blue Victorian-style house she's seen, but understands that she and John don't have the money for it. She dares John, jokingly, to rob a bank.

John and Kathy are only joking with each other, but it's hard not to see something sinister in their conversation, given what we know about John's propensity for lying and wrongdoing.

Sorcerer, the narrator says, thought he would get away with murder. Shooting PFC Weatherby was an accident, just a reflex, Sorcerer thinks. He tricks himself into believing that he hadn't killed Weatherby, and tells himself that he loved Weatherby the way he would love an animal. He and the other soldiers blame the Vietcong for Weatherby's death.

It's hard to tell which parts of this to believe and which parts to take with a grain of salt. Was the murder really just a "reflex," or is John only telling himself this because he doesn't want to think of himself as a murderer? It's difficult to answer these kinds of questions, because the narrator doesn't offer his own opinion. It's also revealing that John compares Weatherby to an animal—it's as if, even in his fantasies of love, John isn't capable of normal, human-to-human love. Whether this is because of his father or his own choices is left unclear.

In 1982, John Wade is elected lieutenant governor of Minnesota. He is 37 at the time. At the time, he and Kathy have begun arguing, but he's proud to stand next to Kathy and take the oath of office. He plans to buy Kathy a blue Victorian house. After being inaugurated, he and Kathy dance with each other. John thinks that Kathy's eyes are "only her eyes."

At this stage, John is uncertain about his own worth as a person, his future, and his relationship with Kathy. O'Brien shows this with wordplay—John's thoughts about Kathy's eyes could be taken as a statement about her unique beauty, or her diminished worth to him.


At the age of eleven, John and his father drive to Karra's Studio of **Magic** to buy John's Christmas present. John notes that the store hasn't changed since he was younger, and sheepishly walks inside. The red-haired woman still yells, "You!" at him. She and John's father laugh with each other and talk like old friends.

John seems to group his father with strange, unfriendly people—thus, it seems to him that his father and the woman are friends.


At the magic shop, John chooses a **magic trick** called the "Guillotine of Death," which is heavy and almost two feet high. The red-haired woman says that the Guillotine is her favorite trick. She demonstrates that there is a sharp blade on the Guillotine, and tells John's father to put his arm under it. John's father is reluctant to do so, but John urges him to, saying that he knows how to do the trick. The red-haired lady tells John, "Let him have it."

John's behavior in this section suggests that he uses magic as a way of fighting back against his father's verbal abuse and bullying—it's a way for him to make his father feel inferior and frightened, just as his father makes him feel this way. It's easy to imagine this sense of resentment turning into guilt after his father dies.

As an adult, John thinks that he wants to crawl inside Kathy's belly. He's afraid of losing her, and spies on her, following her to the drug store and the post office. As he watches her run errands, he thinks that he loves her eyes so much that he wants to suck them from their sockets. Later, Kathy tells John that she feels as if he's worming inside her, a suggestion that John doesn't deny. He tells Kathy that they must be like **snakes** gobbling each other up.

John's sense of love for Kathy takes on disturbing qualities in this section—it seems almost grotesque, as if he wants to own Kathy, treating her like an object instead of like a human being. It's unclear how much of this is John's "sincere" love for Kathy, and how much of it is carefully calculated to make Kathy feel uneasy—the mention of snakes seems closer to the latter than the former.

In Vietnam, the narrator says, Sorcerer is in his element. Vietnam is a place with tunnels, trap doors, monsters, and **magic**. There is no way of telling where the Vietcong are, or what the villagers are thinking. Secrecy, Sorcerer thinks, is key in Vietnam. Sorcerer's own secrets include shooting PFC Weatherby, and the fact that he loves Vietnam. The biggest secret of all is about a place called Thuan Yen.

This information about Sorcerer and Vietnam contradicts what we've read so far. Evidently, Sorcerer / John isn't in his element in Vietnam, since he feels that "something is wrong." In this section, the implication is that Sorcerer is adapting to his surroundings—taking on a new name and a new identity to deal with the horrors he sees there—horrors that he alludes to at the end of this section.

John knows that he is sick. He tries to tell Kathy about his sickness. As they prepare dinner, he says that he's afraid to look at himself in the mirror. Without ceasing to chop onions, Kathy tells him that she loves to look at him. John insists that he has to tell Kathy something important, but Kathy says, "It doesn't matter." She says, "We'll be fine." As John and Kathy look at each other, the narrator says, anything could have happened.

John is a sympathetic figure here—he's clearly trying to find the words to explain himself to Kathy, but Kathy seems uninterested or indifferent to his feelings, unwilling to dig deeper. The narrator's comment that "anything could have happened" is an apt way to talk about Kathy's disappearance.

John doesn't tell anyone about killing PFC Weatherby. However, he sometimes thinks he sees PFC Weatherby waving and smiling at him.

Even as Sorcerer—a persona designed to make John avoid a sense of guilt—John still feels guilty for killing Weatherby.

When John's father died, John was a teenager. The day he was buried, John performed **magic** in front of the mirror. He tells his father that he wasn't **fat,** but normal.

Clearly, magic—and more generally, fantasy and deception—are ways for John to avoid guilt and shame and fight back against his father's abuse.

After John returns from Vietnam, Kathy doesn't insist that John talk to a psychiatrist. At times, though, John yells out in his sleep, and Kathy says that he's speaking in a voice she's never heard. Later in the night, Sorcerer would stare at Kathy, and call her, "My Kath." As he stares at her, Sorcerer pictures Weatherby, and his father's coffin. He imagines **two snakes** eating each other, and dreams of the possibility that they eat all of each other, so that nothing—including his memories of Vietnam—will be left behind.

Here, the image of the two snakes eating each other broadens in its significance. It represents John's disturbing idea of love, but also his fantasy of innocence. He wants to forget his actions in Vietnam (whatever they are—we don't entirely know what he did yet). With this in mind, he wants to "balance out" his sins with something*—it could be politics, marriage, or more deception. In any case, the goal is to forget, to repress the trauma of war, to make it disappear the way the two snakes eating each other—a symbol of violence and love combined—ultimately would cease to exist.*

CHAPTER 11: WHAT HE DID NEXT

The chapter describes John's behavior the day he allegedly discovers that Kathy is missing. John wakes up late, and by the time he's showered and brewed coffee, it's almost noon. As he eats his eggs, he calls to Kathy. No one responds. He sits and continues eating, assuming that Kathy has gone for a walk. While he waits for Kathy to return, he decides to clean the house. There is a disgusting smell of dead plants, which he needs to get rid of. John thinks about getting up early and jogging from now on—he needs to "shape up."

In this section, John's behavior the previous night—during which he killed a house plant and called, "kill Jesus"—seems as strange to John as it does to us. John "contains multitudes"—no one version of himself can explain himself. He is charismatic and frightening, friendly and villainous. Here, we see John resolving to "shape up." This suggests that his father's verbal abuse continues to influence him—he's still fighting his weight.

John cleans up the dead houseplants he killed last night. He rehearses an explanation he'll give to Kathy when she returns. He does laundry, and goes through bank statements. Around one thirty, he pours himself a vodka tonic. As he drinks it, he plans to write a list of his debts. For the time being, though, he relaxes.

Even here, it's hard to take John seriously, because everything he does seems so rehearsed, and therefore false. The only un-rehearsed action he performs here is drinking, which is itself a kind of repetition of his father's alcoholism.

A little later, John awakes from a light nap, thinking that he hears something moving in the room. He thinks he feels Kathy's fingertips touching his eyelids, and hears her saying, "So stupid. You could've tried *me*."

It's not clear how we're meant to take Kathy's pronouncement. One explanation is that Kathy is telling John that he could have turned to Kathy for love and support instead of bottling up his trauma.

Around 6 pm, John has a drink and walks to the dock. He begins to sense that something isn't right—Kathy has been gone for a long time. He imagines that she might have fallen and hurt herself. He finds a flashlight in the cottage, and walks through the woods toward a nearby fire tower. He thinks he hears breathing in the woods, and calls Kathy's name, but there is no reply. John decides that Kathy is probably back at the cottage by now, so he decides to walk back. When he arrives at the cottage, he sees that Kathy isn't there. He considers calling Claude Rasmussen, but concludes that there's no need—Kathy will be home soon.

It's unclear what we're reading here—what actually happened, or the version o the story that John will later tell others (presumably the police) and even tells himself. Perhaps it's hard to distinguish these two stories because John is always performing for an audience. Nothing he does is entirely "honest"—the version of events he lives and the version he rehearses are one and the same. John's sense that Kathy is present parallels his visions of Weatherby, almost as if Kathy, like Weatherby, is a victim of John's madness.

The night of the day Kathy disappears, John takes a shower and drinks the rest of his vodka. He begins drinking rum. He feels nauseous and realizes that something might have happened to Kathy. Trying to convince himself that he's not too drunk, he walks toward the boathouse near the cottage. As he walks, he tells himself reasons why he shouldn't be afraid—Kathy is an excellent swimmer, for instance.

John continues to drink for the rest of the day, repeating the mistakes of his father, which caused him so much misery as a child. John's ability to lie to himself is on full display here—even though he's clearly drunk, he tries to tell himself that he's not. There's something almost noble about this—he's trying to be better—but he's also failing at it and self-deluding.

At the boathouse, John sees that the boat is gone—"as it had to be." He thinks that he and Kathy have been married almost 17 years, and now a huge part of his life is probably about to change. He seems to imagine Kathy sitting in the boathouse, and thinks that Kathy has reason to be afraid of him, since she knows from reading the newspapers what John is capable of. John imagines steam rising from Kathy's eye sockets. The narrator says such a scene is "impossible, of course." John turns and runs to his Buick.

John seems to be predicting the future. His initial relaxed manner quickly becomes frantically worried. It's as if his irrational clam has become irrational worry. The fact that the narrator doesn't reveal what John is capable of makes this section much more disturbing. Similarly, the fact that the narrator says that steam rising from Kathy's eyes is "impossible" makes the image much more frightening. The image of steaming eye sockets will return late in the novel.

John drives to see Ruth Rasmussen, who insists that John is drunk, though John insists that he isn't. Ruth is a sturdy woman in her mid-fifties. She gives John water to sober him up, and assures him that Kathy is fine. John repeats that their boat is gone, but Ruth says this isn't unusual—even if Kathy is stranded somewhere, she can take care of herself.

The presence of a new character, Ruth, reminds us of how self-deluding John is. When O'Brien writes from John's point of view, we can almost accept him as a rational, honest person. When another character appears, though, it becomes clear that John is drunk and irrational.

As John and Ruth talk, Claude Rasmussen emerges from his room. He is almost 80 years old. He puts on boots and a hat, and tells Ruth to call Vinny Pearson at the Mini-Mart (which happens to be where John and Kathy had their argument earlier). He makes a few jokes about John's political career, calling John a drunk senator. John calls the jokes "cute." Claude assures him that everything will be fine.

It's unclear how we're meant to think of Claude. He's not a "kind" person—in fact, he teases John in much the same way that John's father used to, attacking the things he knows will cause John the most pain. At the same time, his assurance that things will be fine, while not exactly rational, seem to calm John somewhat.

John gives Claude the keys to his Buick, and he drives John back to the cottage. John thinks about what he knows about Claude: Claude is old and unhealthy, but he's very tough. While he acts like a hick, he is intelligent and highly wealthy, and owns much of the surrounding area. John knows him as a former contributor to his political party. While the two men aren't friends, it was Claude who called John after his electoral defeat to offer him a chance to stay in the cottage in **Lake of the Woods** for two weeks. In the car, John repeats that Kathy has taken the boat. Claude responds that this doesn't mean anything. He calls John "Senator" and adds sarcastically that he likes John's optimism.

Claude seems a little like John himself—he's skilled at crafting an image (an old hick) that doesn't reflect his personality (clever and calculating) at all. Claude's behavior seems a little suspicious—we don't really know why he offered John his cabin at Lake of the Woods, and the possibility that he did so out of the goodness of his heart disagrees with everything we know about him so far. Even so, Claude seems sensible and rational, especially when compare to John. He's taking the information one step at a time—the absence of a boat doesn't mean anything by itself.

Back at the cottage, John walks Claude through the rooms. Claude asks where the phone is, and John says that he unplugged it and put it under the kitchen sink. Claude is surprised at this, and points out that it's made it impossible for Kathy to call John that day. He plugs the phone in and calls Ruth; he says that there's a busy signal, and that Ruth is probably talking to Kathy right now. He tells John that he's owned his land on **Lake of the Woods** for nearly a quarter century, and has never lost a single person, except for a few fishermen. He proposes that they wait and drink rum.

It's Claude who first notices that John unplugged the phone, a fact that he'll later relay to others. Even though he seems a little suspicious of John for this reason, he again shows signs of being similar to John, since he clearly enjoys drinking almost as much as John does. Claude seems like the most well-informed person in the novel. His age gives him perspective on Kathy's disappearance that no one else in the novel so far shares.

Claude and John sit and talk—it's almost 2 am. John pictures Kathy at the bottom of the lake with seaweed in her hair. Claude asks John if Kathy can swim. John says that Kathy is a good swimmer, but suggests that they begin searching the lake. Claude points out that the lake is pitch-black and foggy. Vinny Pearson runs the Texaco station, and is effectively the police officer for the area, but because he makes so little money, he won't want to wake up in the night and begin searching. Claude says that, at worst, Kathy is "beached up" somewhere.

John's vision of Kathy lying at the bottom of the lake seems gruesome and excessive—and in the strange world of John's repressed reality could suggest either that he fears for her or that he actually knows she's at the bottom of the lake. The more practical and optimistic Claude believes that most likely Kathy is alive but stuck on the lakeshore somewhere. Meanwhile, we become conscious of the logistical challenges of finding Kathy—not only is the lake enormous, but the people who are supposed to be looking for Kathy aren't motivated to do so.

John and Claude continue to talk. Claude asks John if John and Kathy had been fighting; John insists that they hadn't. Claude continues to call John a senator, and eventually, John tells Claude to stop. Claude smirks and reminds John of how badly he lost. He reminisces about the old days of the Democratic Farm Labor party in Minnesota, adding that he can't say he voted for John, but also that he can't say he *didn't* vote for him. Claude reminds John that John never asked Claude for money. Though John could never have won the election, due to news in the papers, Claude might have given him money anyway.

Claude practices a calculated ambivalence—he seems to be enjoying toying with John, saying that he may or may not have voted for him. Even so, his reaction to John's electoral defeat is the closest thing to sympathy for John that we've seen in the novel so far.

Claude calls Ruth, talks to her, and tells John that Ruth has been calling various local numbers and hasn't reached Kathy yet. He notices the flowerpots John has been cleaning out, and asks what happened. John merely says there was an accident—"hell of an accident," Claude replies.

Claude's suspicion of John seems to grow as the chapter ends. Even though he seems casual and unassuming, he's mentally collecting all the pieces of evidence he's seen: the flowers, the unplugged phone, etc.

CHAPTER 12: EVIDENCE

This chapter consists of more pieces of evidence. The first is a quote from Robert Parrish's book, *The Magician's Notebook*. Parrish writes that **magic tricks** are possible because the magician hides the true causes of the trick. The spectators want to believe that the magic is possible; that the magician can makes things happen simply by casting a spell, rather than by manipulating things from behind the scenes.

Parrish's rule will become enormously important to understanding the novel because it explains how people like John can pretend to be something they're not and fool other people. It also gives us a method for understanding the novel itself—O'Brien is performing a kind of magic trick on us, and we go along with it.

Patricia claims that John thought of himself as Sorcerer long after Vietnam, and that Kathy thought of him as Sorcerer, too—she wants him to pull off a miracle. The author Bernard C. Meyer notes that spectators want to believe in **magic**; they give in to the great force and power of the magician.

Kathy's love for John makes sense in the context of magic. By this argument, Kathy knows that she's being fooled, but goes along with the trick anyway because it's exciting. She both trusts and distrusts John—this makes her attraction to John stronger than any attraction based on trust alone.

Tony Carbo says that John was a charmer, and Ruth Rasmussen calls him a nice, polite man. Bethany Lee claims that Kathy knew about John's secrets, but also that Kathy wanted to be a part of them. An author named Patience H.C. Mason writes that the Vietnam veteran may seem not to need other people's help, but one must offer the veteran help anyway. Parrish argues that the fun of magic is that people want to believe in magic, but also know that magic is impossible. In this section there is also a list of John's childhood **magic tricks**, including Chinese rings and a Silk load, as well as a postcard from John's father that contains the words "out of here soon."

We're given multiple, contradictory pieces of information about John. Clearly, John was capable of charming others, such as Ruth and Kathy, and clearly his charm also rubbed other people the wrong way. It's suggested that his experiences in Vietnam endeared him to Kathy—Kathy wanted to take care of him, and his silence on the topic of Vietnam made her care for him even more. The section ends with another hint that John's father had a huge influence on his development—the words on the postcard could refer to jail, or they could foreshadow his father's death.

Eleanor says that when John was eleven, his father, whose name was Paul, went to stay with a state treatment center to fight his alcoholism. When he returned from treatment, he claimed that he was better, but his alcoholism never improved. Tony Carbo suggests that all politicians are insecure performers—they go into public life because they want to please others and be loved in return. Sandra Karra, the red-haired woman from the **magic** shop, notes that John continues to visit her store even when he got older but never learned her name.

We see that the words from John's father's postcard referred to his time in a state treatment center. This is the only time we see John's father's name in the entire novel. This underscores how little we really know about Paul: no amount of evidence or reporting can tell us what kind of man he was. Like his own father, it's suggested, John wanted to please others, even when it was clear that no amount of effort would make other people love him. The section ends with an indication that John is uncomfortable around women—for him there's something intimidating and unknowable about them. Perhaps this explains his desire to know everything *about Kathy.*

Richard Thinbill again mentions the huge number of flies, but doesn't say where he saw them. A quote from the Nuremberg Trials argues that soldiers aren't relieved of moral responsibility simply because they were following orders. A **magician's** handbook defines misdirection—a technique the magician uses to distract the audience from the real source of his trick. In Vietnam, John sends Kathy a letter about having a strange infection in his body. He signs the letter "Sorcerer."

There's a clear thought sequence in these pieces of evidence. John seems to have been involved in military atrocity in Vietnam, for which he's legally guilty of war crimes. Thus, he practices misdirection on Kathy by pretending to be in pain. This also suggests that he feels guilt for his actions, and is trying to punish himself.

Richard M. Nixon argues that the soldier is at his most dangerous after the battle, when he is too exhausted to know to do the right thing. The historian Robert A. Caro describes how angry Lyndon Johnson would become after losing an election, and the politician Thomas E. Dewey notes that all politicians are in a state of shock after they lose an election. The chapter concludes with the final results of the primaries for the Democratic Farmer Labor Party in Minnesota: Durkee with 73% and Wade with 21%.

The chapter ends by suggesting that John was capable of almost anything—he was both a returning soldier and a defeated politician. One again, this suggests that he may have been involved in Kathy's disappearance, and may have hurt or even killed her. We revisit the statistics about John's electoral defeat that we'd seen in an earlier chapter. The message is clear: the same information can be interpreted many different ways, depending on context. The numbers suddenly seem sinister to us, since they indicate that John may have committed murder.

CHAPTER 13: THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

In Vietnam the soldiers in John's unit complain that the war is a nightmare, and that it's impossible to find the enemy. John—or Sorcerer—privately thinks that the war has become his state of mind. A soldier named Rusty Calley mentions the Biblical principle of "eyeballs for eyeballs."

Calley's statement sounds like John's idea about two snakes eating each other. This is a dangerous idea, because it can be used to justify all sorts of wartime atrocities on the basis that they're acts of revenge.

The soldiers spend February in an area nicknamed Pinkville, which they hate. On February 25, 1968, they arrive at a village called Lac Son, and a mine blows up a soldier, killing him. Shortly thereafter other soldiers die to booby traps. Calley shouts for the soldiers to "Kill Nam," and they shoot the grass and trees.

We see that revenge is key in the American military's behavior. Their actions seem almost savage—they're attacking Vietnam itself, rather than the enemy soldiers. Calley seems like a savvy politician, using each new event to manipulate his troops.

On March 15, John receives a letter from Kathy. Kathy writes that John will have to treat her like a human being when he returns from the war. She still loves him, she says, but he can't "squeeze" her anymore. In his reply, Sorcerer writes a racist joke about the Vietnamese.

The boundaries between John and Kathy seem greater than ever—Kathy is trying to have a serious conversation with John, but he's too lost in his hatred of the Vietnamese to respond.

On March 16, 1968, Charlie Company ventures by helicopter into Pinkville and goes to a hamlet, Thuan Yen. Sorcerer feels energy in the air and senses the "pure wrongness" of the day. Sorcerer is the last person to get off the helicopter. The soldiers shoot, but Sorcerer explores the hamlet's houses. In one house, he sees a pretty girl with her pants off. She is dead, Elsewhere, he sees dead animals. He watches Weatherby shoot two children in the face. He watches other soldiers kill innocent people, and can only say, "Please." He watches as the soldiers casually eat food and laugh in between killing villagers.

John's reaction to what he sees in the Vietnamese village is impossible to read—even the word "please" can be interpreted in hundreds of different ways. This suggests that John's experiences at Thuan Yen are traumatizing for him—he can't reduce them to any one emotional reaction, so instead, he reacts without any emotion at all. Even so, readers can recognize, with horror, that the soldiers are laughing as they eat food, even though they've just committed murder of innocents.

In the coming years, John will forget what happens next in Thuan Yen—he will think, "This could not have happened. Therefore it did not." He will "not" remember shooting an unarmed old man—the old man was carrying something that looked a gun, but it was only a hoe. He will not remember the sight of hundreds of dead bodies, or shooting Weatherby.

Earlier in the novel, we've seen examples of this technique, whereby O'Brien denies something, and yet forces the reader to think about it. The same is true in this section—when he says that he will "not" think about his murders, John is clearly still thinking about them. This is John in the act of repression. It also raises questions about what he is thinking as regards Kathy's disappearance. Did he also repress his memories of his own actions that relate to it, or does he really not know what happened?

CHAPTER 14: HYPOTHESIS

The narrator suggests that Kathy might have drowned in a boating accident. She might have awoken early in the morning and turned to look at John as he slept. She would have wished that she could say something that would make him feel better, but also known that there was nothing to tell him. Perhaps she kissed John and whispered something to him.

In this hypothesis, Kathy is the victim of John's aggression, but in a less direct way than in the earlier chapters, where he manipulates and deceives her. She seems to have given up on John, knowing that there's no way for her to deal with his experiences in Vietnam.

After kissing John, Kathy may have showered and gotten dressed. She would have done some crossword puzzles while she ate breakfast, as was her routine—she liked to begin each day by solving things. Then, she might have gone outside and thought about how she and John never talked or made love anymore. Now that John's political career was behind him, she may have thought, she could tell John how much she'd always hated politics, and concentrate on having a child with him. She might have secretly felt glad at that moment—glad that John was no longer a politician.

We begin to get a clearer picture of Kathy's thoughts and feelings than we'd had in earlier chapters. Though we've learned a lot about what Kathy thinks of John, we know almost nothing about what she thinks about other things. Here, we learn that she's a problem solver and an energetic, imaginative person. We also begin to sympathize with her, since she's forced to participate in political events she doesn't care about at all.

As she thought about John's career, perhaps Kathy smelled the odor of dead plants and soil from the trash. As she became conscious of the smell, perhaps she remembered John's voice and the sound of the teakettle and became conscious of what John had done the night before. Then, she would have left the house quickly and gone to the boat, perhaps forgetting her life vest.

She senses the danger and darkness within him, and because of it abandons him. Put another way: she sees through the "magic" of his façade and comes to the conclusion that she can't help him, can't love him, and fears him. And that fear leads to her forgetting her life vest.

Alone in the boat, Kathy may have contemplated asking John about Harmon. Perhaps while she steered the boat around nearby Magnuson's Island, the boat hit a sandbar, injuring Kathy and throwing her into the **water**. Maybe this is how she died, the narrator concludes.

Again, this version of events is both satisfying and unsatisfying. It explains how Kathy died, but leaves plenty of other things unexplained, such as the identity of Harmon. O'Brien is being a little playful—we can't accept that this is how Kathy died, because we want to know more about this mysterious new character.

CHAPTER 15: WHAT THE QUESTIONS WERE

After Kathy's disappearance, the County Sheriff Art Lux flies in from Baudette, a town near **Lake of the Woods**, and sets up a headquarters at Vinny Pearson's Texaco station. At 9am on September 20, Lux and Pearson drives to John's cottage, and Claude Rasmussen shows them inside. He and Ruth have been staying with John. John is lying in the couch, having slept for an hour, no more.

Even if the police don't begin their search immediately, they set up their work station quickly and get to work. The fact that John is resting doesn't bode well for his relationship with Vincent and Lux—he seems too relaxed and laid back, as if he doesn't really care that his wife has gone.

Lux tells John that they haven't found Kathy, and that it may take a while to do so, since the lake is enormous. He asks John if he would mind answering some questions. John says he's willing to do anything that will help. Art tells John that there are twelve boats currently searching the lake. Also, a nearby town is sending more police. John nods at this, and feels like an actor. Lux insists that cases like Kathy's aren't unusual at all. Vincent says, "Ask the man why he never…", but Lux cuts him off before he can finish.

John's first interaction with Lux and Vincent sets a pattern for the rest of the novel: Lux is polite and rational, while Vincent is impolite and prefers to challenge John immediately. As Lux has already said in an "evidence" chapter, he is a facts man, while Vincent is the theory man. This fits with everything we know about John so far—the facts are inconclusive, but almost every theory we've seen so far blames John in some way—directly or indirectly—for Kathy's disappearance.

Lux continues to ask John questions. He asks John for basic information about Kathy—age, height, etc. He also asks John for a picture of Kathy, and when John asks, Vinny explains that the picture will be used in case Kathy's corpse is hard to identify. John gives Lux a small photograph he carries, and doesn't respond to Vinny.

Vincent's comments seem calculated to upset John, and John—a good politician, even when he's drunk and tired—doesn't play along with this game at all.

Art asks John what time he woke up the day he found Kathy missing (yesterday). Upon further question, John says that he last saw Kathy around midnight, when he got up to make tea, and that he waited nearly all day before he reported Kathy's disappearance to anyone, since he thought she might be hiking. He also admits to drinking in the evening—five or six drinks. Vinny presses Lux, and Lux asks John why he didn't check immediately to see if the boat was gone. Lux suggests that it's unlikely that Kathy could have started the boat without alerting John—boats are loud, after all. Vinny suggests, sarcastically, that John must be a very deep sleeper.

Here, even Lux seems to be challenging the veracity of John's story, on the basis that Kathy could never have started the engine of a loud boat without alerting John immediately. John's story, as he gives it to Lux and Vincent, is deliberately simplified version of the events we've seen, which leaves out his frightening behavior and the way he destroyed the houseplants.

Lux asks John if he and Kathy had argued, and mentions John's campaign, and the recent news about John. Lux adds that Vinny was also in Vietnam; Vinny mutters that he didn't kill any babies while he was there. Lux mentions Myra Shaw, the waitress who noticed Kathy and John arguing at the Mini-Mart, and calls her chubby—Vinny objects that Myra, his cousin, is actually plain "hog-fat." John insists that the argument Myra witnessed was minor. Lux tells John that John should call Kathy's family—John responds that since Kathy's parents are dead, he'll call Patricia Hood, Kathy's sister.

Here, it becomes clear why John lost his campaign, and why Vincent dislikes him—John was involved in war crimes in Vietnam. But John being involved in those crimes doesn't necessarily mean he is the cause of Kathy's disappearance, so Vinny's theories about John are now tinged by Vinny's own prejudice against John. Vincent's statement about his cousin being fat echoes John's father's statements about John being fat as a child, and makes Vinny seem less likable and perhaps less believable.

Lux asks John one more question before he and Vinny leave: why did John unplug his phone? (Claude mentioned this fact to Lux, Lux says.) John claims that he turned off the phone because he wanted to forget about the external world—the election, the polling numbers, the news, etc. Lux challenges John to explain the dead houseplants in his sink—John, getting annoyed, says that Kathy is missing, and everything else is "bullshit." Lux tells John that John is an important politician, while he and Vinny are small-time people. Still, Lux says, they'll do their best to find Kathy.

John's story seems suspicious to us, as well as to Vincent and Lux. This doesn't mean that he doesn't have legitimate reason to unplug his house phone or kill plants, but it also makes him seem more likely to have hurt his wife in some way. These details seem to be important simply by virtue of appearing in the story at all—O'Brien wouldn't include these things, we might think, unless they were important in solving the mystery of Kathy's disappearance.

After Vinny and Lux leave, John hears Claude and Ruth in the kitchen, making breakfast. John asks Claude why he mentioned that John was drunk; Claude laughs and says that he didn't say "drunk," just "juiced up." John eats the eggs Ruth made him, which make him feel better, and then tries to call Patricia Hood in Minneapolis, but finds that she is unavailable. John finds it impossible to sleep; he also thinks that he is feeling great "sorrow." He remembers saying, "Kill Jesus" the night before Kathy disappeared, and looking at her and feeling great love and tenderness. He also remembers carrying a teakettle. He falls asleep in his room that afternoon.

Claude's behavior is, once again, hard to interpret. He isn't doing John any favors—because of him, Lux thinks that John was drunk last night. At the same time, Claude told the truth, and supposedly didn't use the word "drunk" himself. It's equally difficult to interpret John's behavior (another sign of the similarity between Claude and John): he feels sympathy for Kathy, but this could mean any number of things, particularly since John is a master at deceiving himself and repressing guilt.

When John wakes up, it's almost 6 pm. He goes out into the living room, where Claude is sitting playing solitaire. Claude tells him that Lux checked in and said that he'd arranged for extra boats to explore the lake. He tells John that he and Ruth will sleep in the spare bedroom of the cottage. John implies that Claude thinks John is guilty of killing his wife; a suggestion that Claude promptly denies. He suggests that Vinny intimidated John, and assures John that everything will be fine. He also suggests that John start acting like a real husband—showing concern.

Claude's views on things continue to remain unclear. His advice that John behave more "like a husband" could be interpreted one of two ways. Either he is surprised that John seems so casual and is therefore suspicious of him, or he just understands the "optics" of a situation and continues to believe John is innocent and is just giving him friendly advice.

In the evening, John drinks vodka and tries to call Patricia Hood again. He tries a few more times, and finally reaches her around midnight. His conversation is difficult, though it doesn't last long—Patricia is shocked, though John senses that she is being careful to be civil with him. She says that she'll be in **Lake of the Woods** tomorrow.

The very civility with which Patricia and John speak to one another suggests that they have special reason not to be civil with one another. Patricia is still a new character in the novel—by ending the chapter with the promise of her arrival, O'Brien heightens the suspense and makes us look ahead to the next chapter.

CHAPTER 16: EVIDENCE

We come to another list of evidence. The first piece of evidence is a transcript of Rusty Calley's court-martial, in which he says that he used a hand grenade to "evacuate" people. More pieces of evidence establish that Thuan Yen is the correct name for My Lai, the site of the infamous Vietnam War massacre. Paul Meadlo, a soldier at My Lai, testifies that he shot children and babies. His mother, Mrs. Myrtle Meadlo, says that the military turned him into a murderer.

Much of the evidence in this chapter is about Vietnam and the actions of soldiers there. The name "My Lai" triggers all sorts of associations for the reader—it was at My Lai, after all, where one of the most infamous massacres perpetrated by US Soldiers during the Vietnam War took place. The implication of Mrs. Meadlo's quote is that the soldiers themselves aren't guilty of wrongdoing to the extent that the military itself is guilty.

Tony Carbo says that John handled "it" in his own way, but adds that John was destroyed long before "it" destroyed him. Other soldiers in Vietnam claim not to remember "it"—Calley, for instance, can't recall how many dead bodies he saw in a ditch, though Paul Meadlo claims that Calley pushed people into the ditch and then shot them. Eleanor claims not to believe anything people said about John during his campaign.

The absence of any explanation of what "it" is makes "it" seem much more disturbing—we can fill in the blanks and imagine anything we want. Some people, such as Eleanor, react to the news about Vietnam with denial—she refuses to believe that her own son could have done anything wrong.

In a court-martial, soldiers from Vietnam are asked to testify about the size of a ditch. Most refuse to say anything about it, but a few admit to remembering women and children, and seeing other soldiers shoot them. We're also presented with a box of John's "tricks," dating from the time after he returned from the war: 12 photographs of his father, a deck of cards, an empty bottle of vodka, **magic** books, and medals, including a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star.

It's telling that the soldiers can't even answer questions about the ditch—the scope of the events at My Lai is so enormous that soldiers struggle to talk about it—in part, no doubt, because they're grappling with intense guilt about their role there. John's collection of "tricks" suggests that it was his experience at My Lai that drove him to alcoholism, but also that he gained a reputation for heroism there.

J. Glenn Gray, author of a book on war and trauma, is quoted as saying that a soldier is often given orders that clash with his definition of right and wrong. Richard Thinbill complains once again about flies. A soldier named Salvatore LaMartina claims that everyone at My Lai was following the orders they'd been given.

We return to the question of guilt—are the soldiers guilty of murder, or are they innocent, since they were following the orders of their commanders? The presence of "flies" here draws many associations—we can imagine that there are flies buzzing around a huge pile of corpses.

Dennis Conti, another soldier at My Lai, testifies in a court-martial that Calley ordered other men to shoot dozens of women and children, even after the soldiers had tried to avoid killing them. When Calley gave the order, the soldiers fired, and pieces of flesh flew into the air. One soldier, Robert Maples, refused to shoot the soldiers, even after Calley ordered him to do so.

We see the various ways that soldiers dealt with My Lai and the other atrocities of war. Some refused to be involved; others, like Calley, seemed to enjoy the killings. Most, however, went along with their orders, even though these orders conflicted with their sense of right and wrong.

Dennis Conti admits that he dragged Vietnamese women on the ground and talked about raping them. The author Fyodor Dostoevsky is quoted as saying that all men have secrets they only tell their friends, and still others that they never tell anyone. Patricia says that John used to yell in his sleep, and Vinny claims that "something was wrong" with John. Colonel William V. Wilson, a U.S. Army Investigator, says that the crimes of American soldiers at Son My Village include murder, rape, sodomy, and assault.

We return to the question of secrets. We already knew John had secrets, and always had, but now we see the scope of his secrecy. John could have been involved in any number of things at My Lai—we already know that he killed one of his fellow soldiers. Our lack of knowledge about John's behavior makes us assume the worst—no news is bad news.

CHAPTER 17: THE NATURE OF POLITICS

In November 1968, John extends his tour in Vietnam for an extra year. He does this because he feels he has no choice—his experiences at Thuan Yen make him lose touch with himself. He writes to Kathy that he can't explain his decision other than to say that it's personal. Kathy responds that she loves him, and hopes his decision isn't a career move.

It comes as a shock that John would extend his tour, especially after we've read about the horrors of My Lai. Perhaps this is a sign that John is beginning to enjoy the atmosphere of chaos and uncertainty in Vietnam. Many soldiers who suffer from PTSD have had similar reactions to combat.

After he extends his tour, John tries hard to forget what he's seen in Vietnam. He is promoted twice, but in December and January sustains injuries in battle: shrapnel and a flesh wound. John feels that he needs the pain because it helps him reclaim virtuousness. At times he can almost forget about Thuan Yen.

John copes with his actions (still unknown to us) in a few ways. He hurts himself, as if to do "penance" for his sins. He also tries to repress his memories of the affair. This is a highly unhealthy way to deal with trauma—when repressed, trauma never goes away; it merely reappears at the most unlikely time.

In November of 1969, John returns to the United States, having won many medals. He marries Kathy five months later, and Kathy says that she knows they'll be happy. He goes to law school and goes on to pass the bar in 1973. For the next three years he works as an assistant legislative counsel for the Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor Party, a dull, low-paying position that nonetheless helps him forget about the war. For their five-year anniversary, John does **magic** for Katy and makes five roses appear. Kathy observes that he seems more content and peaceful than he had before.

At first, Johns' attempts at repression seem completely successful—he leads a normal life, and returns to loving Kathy and pursuing a political career. Nevertheless, this doesn't prove anything—clearly, he still remembers what he did at My Lai, even if he pretends not to—at some point, his memories will come back to haunt him. In the meantime, though, John continues to use magic to disguise his inner anxiety.

In 1976, John announces that he is running for the Minnesota State Senate. He asks Tony Carbo, an **overweight**, experienced campaign manager, to help him. John assures Tony that he wants to win, "in his guts." Tony asks John how he wants to run; John replies that he wants to focus on the issues, but Tony assures him that it's impossible to win by focusing on the issues. Tony says that he'll help John, because he's handsome, a war hero, and has a beautiful wife. Tony asks John to imagine a scenario. In the scenario Tony describes, John meets a beautiful woman at a party. John wines and dines her, and tells her about his life and his beliefs. The beautiful woman starts to sense that she "owes" John her love and attention, even though neither of them has ever discussed the idea of the woman owing John anything. As he explains all this, Tony looks at Kathy, but mutters that it's only a metaphor.

Tony seems to understand John in a way that few others do. While Kathy in some ways believes John's image of capability and trustworthiness, Tony sees it as a mere "image." Tony also shows himself to be attracted to Kathy—his long, rambling metaphor about a beautiful woman, delivered as he stares directly at Kathy, is obviously based on his crush, even if he denies this. Perhaps there's more to the metaphor, though—Tony sees the relationship between a politician and his constituents as almost romantic—John has already shown that he sees politics in exactly these terms as well.

John is in the state senate for six years. Tony runs his campaigns, which are expensive, slick, and successful. John acquires a reputation for being a good politician and organizer. John has a boyish charm that makes people and the press like him, and he instinctively knows how to cooperate and compromise with others. He sincerely believes that he is doing good. At the same time, he listens to Tony's advice about keeping up appearances: he wears expensive suits, keeps fit, and makes friends with people who could be helpful to him in the future. Secretly, he still enjoys manipulation and deception, though he projects an image of modesty and sincerity.

John believes that he's doing genuine good for other people, but it seems that he's focusing less and less on the issues and more on deception and manipulation for their own sake. We see once again the influence of John's father on John's career—even as an adult, John keeps fit, as if he's still afraid of being insulted by his father. John is turn between a desire to help others and a desire to manipulate others—perhaps these two desires are one and the same for him.

Because John is a state senator, his life with Kathy is sometimes difficult. They are happy, but only because they're thinking of the future—in the present, they don't go on vacations or have children. John and Kathy learn to be frugal and clever with their spending, since they have to fund their campaigns. They rarely make love, a fact that bothers Kathy and makes her suspicious. She asks John if she's keeping secrets from him, and John replies that he isn't. He's secretly afraid of losing her, and always has been.

Kathy begins to suspect that John isn't being faithful to her. John's insistence that he isn't keeping any secrets from her can be taken any number of ways—we know by now that he is keeping secrets (his experiences in Vietnam, the fact that he follows Kathy, or followed her, etc.)—therefore, it's possible that he's keeping secrets about adultery from her.

Several times, Tony asks John if he's "clean," and John responds that he is. Tony also asks about religion; John says that he's not sure, and Tony recommends that John become a Lutheran and start going to church every week. Shortly thereafter, John wins a big victory and becomes the lieutenant governor of Minnesota. He's confident that he's on his way to becoming a senator.

John proves himself to be a ruthless, cynical politician, willing to take up a new religion wholly for the sake of getting elected. It's even more disturbing that these cheap attempts to grab votes end up working—John wins in a landslide.

In July 1982, shortly after John becomes lieutenant governor, Kathy tells John that she is pregnant. John and Kathy have many conversations about this, and John stresses that they have plenty of time before they need to have children. John made a phone call, the narrator says, and forms were signed. He stands in a clinic, looking at himself in the mirror and trying to think of a way to explain himself to Kathy—he fails to do so.

Here, John shows that he's indifferent to Kathy's happiness if it conflicts with his career. He urges Kathy to have an abortion, even though she seems to want a child, because he's afraid a child would limit his political career. As John's manipulation and deception of Kathy becomes more extreme, he finds it increasingly difficult to talk to her—thus, when he rehearses a speech to give to her, he can't find the words.

A short time later, John casually tells Kathy that they have done the right thing. Kathy insists that all she wanted was a baby. Afterwards, they watch TV, and never talk about the incident again. While John and Kathy know that they shouldn't be burdened with a child at this point in their lives and that they are not ashamed of their decision, they sense, deep down, that they have sacrificed a huge thing in return for the future.

It's clear that Kathy didn't want to have an abortion. It's also clear, then, that she loves and respects or at least obeys her husband, if she was willing to give up something she loved for his sake. O'Brien skillfully transitions form descriptions of what "Kathy" wants to descriptions of what "they" want. Evidently, John is speaking on behalf of both himself and Kathy instead of giving her an equal vote in what the family will do.

On January 19, 1986, John announces his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. Polls put him well ahead of his nearest rival, an old-time politician named Ed Durkee. Tony is confident that they'll win the election easily. In his speeches, John avoids talking about the issues—instead he talks about "fresh air and fresh starts."

By now, it's obvious that John has taken Tony's advice, and only talked about puffy slogans, not issues. As in magic, as a politician he focuses on the surface of thing, of creating an image that fools others.

After John announces his candidacy, he, Kathy, and Tony have dinner. Kathy mentions that John's campaign seems a little "empty." When she asks Tony what John's message should be, he replies, "Win." Kathy suggests that Tony isn't as cynical as he seems—deep down, he's a dreamer, just like John. Tony eats food off of Kathy's plate, and says that it's mind-boggling that she married John. He says that Kathy is "spectacular," and Kathy tells him that he doesn't say so nearly enough. John, who is sitting at the table as Kathy and Tony have this conversation, continues to smile—Kathy's hand is on his knee.

Kathy, not John, is still focused on the issues. John has deluded himself into believing that at a later date, he can begin to focus on the issues—Kathy doesn't buy this at all. It's unclear how we're supposed to interpret the scene that follows. Clearly, Tony is attracted to Kathy, and appears to be flirting with her. Why, then, doesn't John say anything? He seems to feel comfortable with his "ownership" of Kathy, as evidenced by her hand on his knee. Or perhaps he's more concerned with winning the campaign than with keeping his wife's love.

Tony asks John what issues he'd like to talk about, and John admits that it's probably better to focus on the election and then turn to the issues. Kathy objects, saying that John will never get to the issues, since there will always be another election for him. Tony, who is drinking bourbon with his meal, notes the paradox of politics: politicians who care about the "issues" are always hated. The most successful politicians are those who can appeal to foolish, uninformed voters. As he explains this, he starts to get angry, and says he doesn't think John is interested in the issues, anyway. Kathy goes to the bathroom, leaving John and Tony to talk.

Tony, for all his apparent cynicism, is perceptive about the nature of American politics. It's as if constituents want *to be fooled—they actively resist any attempts on the part of politicians to enact real change, preferring glitzy surfaces and the mere appearance of charisma. This is also how the novel has described magic. Tony also proves that he's more insightful about John than Kathy is: Kathy still thinks that John might want to discuss issues, when Tony sees the truth—John is indifferent to issues altogether.*

While Kathy is in the bathroom, Tony tells John she's a "yummy specimen," and points out that Kathy thinks John is "Mr. Clean." When John objects that he *is* Mr. Clean, Tony says that John doesn't fool him: John avoids talking about certain issues. When John asks what issues these might be, Tony refuses to name them, but only says, "bang-bang." John says that Tony is reaching, and Tony admits that he might be. As Kathy returns from the bathroom, Tony says that he'd gladly lose **50 pounds** for "a shot" at her.

Tony continues to prove how insightful he is about John. The "bang bang" he refers to could mean either John's experiences in Vietnam, or his possible adultery, or both. Once again, the fact that these issues aren't explained makes them seem more sinister and mysterious to us. Tony's comment about losing weight for Kathy seems to suggest his belief that appearance is what counts in love as well as in politics. But the thing about weight is that it's not so easy to lose, so the idea of weight comes to symbolize the intersection of appearance and reality because it is something you can control but not entirely, it is subject to a person's will but also influenced by the parts of themselves that people can't control.

CHAPTER 18: HYPOTHESIS

The chapter is another hypothesis about how Kathy disappeared, similar to the one mentioned in Chapter 14. Kathy might have left John to go boating around Magnuson and then continued to American Point and Buckete Island. As she rode through the **water**, she would have felt relieved not to be thinking about politics. Perhaps she slid her hands through the water, noting how her hand's reflection closed back on itself, and how easy it was to lose oneself.

In this "Hypothesis" section, Kathy is once again the victim of John's terrifying and intimidating behavior. Yet the image of her hand disappearing into the water parallels John's image of the two snakes cancelling each other out, and suggests that there is some connection between the way John and Kathy think about love, even at this moment, when Kathy is fleeing from John.

It's possible that Kathy made a small miscalculation on her way to Buckete Island, and ended up riding north into Canada without knowing how lost she was becoming. Eventually, she would have become anxious and then decided to refuel the boat using a gas can, and then head back south. Perhaps she was contemplating telling John about how easily she could have been lost, thereby reminding him to keep his priorities straight.

Kathy, at least in this hypothesis, is a manipulator and a deceiver, too—she's clearly looking forward to scaring John and controlling his emotions with a story about how she got lost.

As Kathy drove back to John's cottage, the narrator speculates, she might have felt curiously fearless. Perhaps she felt this way because she was always a puzzle-solver, even as a child, and liked to believe that all challenges could be solved with determination and intelligence. Although she no longer went to church, she'd always had an almost religious belief that even the simplest things had dark, sad secrets—John, for example. As she thought this and rode in the boat, Kathy must have been glad to be on the **water**, far away from John.

We get more information about Kathy in this section—the problem is that it's a hypothesis. Kathy remains largely unknowable, and the guesses O'Brien puts forth about her personality are only that: guesses. Still, O'Brien's guess about Kathy is a sensible one—clearly, Kathy enjoys thinking about secrets, whether the secrets of a crossword puzzle or the secrets of her husband.

As she went south—or what she clumsily approximated as south—Kathy may have been thinking about Harmon, a dentist she'd once loved, and his thick fingers and white chest. Shortly after this, she might have run out of gas. Then, Kathy would have added extra fuel to the boat, and restarted it. Perhaps she thought about her childhood training as a Girl Scout, which was supposed to prepare her to find her way home in these situations. Perhaps she looked around and realized how lost she was—she had no idea how far from the cottage she was.

It's no coincidence that Kathy "runs out of gas: while she thinks about a man she had an affair with (the Harmon character who the narrator mentions in the last hypothetical chapter). Much like John, Kathy is lost in the past—on a symbolic level, then, it makes sense that Kathy can no longer move forward just as her boat runs out of gas.

Instead of crying at the fact of being lost, Kathy probably would have decided to come ashore and wait for John to find her. Perhaps she found a small island, parked her boat there, and went ashore, confident that she'd be able to find food, former Girl Scout that she was.

Kathy shows herself to be an optimist, even in a dire situation. It's this optimism that makes her stay with John long after other women would have left him—she enjoys the challenges of a mysterious husband, just as she's enjoying the challenge of a mysterious island in the middle of the lake.

As Kathy walked ashore, the narrator suggests, she may have been thinking of the night long ago when she and John went dancing at the Bottle Top. John had kissed her and then made a small turning motion, as if he was dropping something. Kathy never understood what he dropped, but it may have been a part of himself, or all of himself. Afterwards, she felt, John was always deceptive and manipulative. Perhaps Kathy then thought about her "thing" with Harmon. Then she may have curled up against the side of her boat and fallen asleep, confident that she'd find her way back home.

Like John, Kathy can't stop thinking about her secrets, as well as her fond memories with John. We've heard about dancing at the Bottle Top before, from John's perspective, but we weren't told about the small "twisting" motion John made—this suggests that the distance between John and Kathy is so great that they can't even agree on the things they did together, much less the secrets they keep from one another, such as Kathy's affair with Harmon. Like John, Kathy has an almost impressive ability to fool herself into optimism; thus she goes to sleep, looking forward to the day ahead.

CHAPTER 19: WHAT WAS FOUND

By the morning of September 21, two days after John discovers Kathy missing, there are almost a hundred volunteers searching the **lake** for Kathy, along with aircraft, patrol boats, and an airplane with special infrared sensors. Yet nothing is found—neither a boat nor a body.

The full magnitude of Kathy's disappearance becomes more apparent to us—the search is enormous, but the lake is so big that no number of boats is guaranteed to find Kathy's body.

Around noon that day, Kathy's sister calls John from International Falls and tells him that she needs to be picked up in an hour. She sounds brusque and rude. John showers and drives into town, thinking about Patricia, who goes most often by the name Pat. Even when John first met Pat with Kathy in college, Pat was cold to him. In part, John thinks, this is because she distrusts men—she's been divorced twice, and has always had too many boyfriends. At the moment, Pat owns a chain of successful health clubs in the St. Paul area. The health club is the only relationship that ever worked for her, John thinks.

In contrast to the politeness John and Pat showed one another over the phone, Pat is now rude to John, as if she doesn't have to bother with the pretexts of politeness any longer. John's explanation for why Pat is hostile to him aren't convincing at all-we can sense that Pat is hostile to John because she doesn't like him or trust him. John seems childish in this section—his comment about the health club makes him seem like a petty gossip, not a concerned husband.

John stops at the Texaco station, where Lux is drinking coffee. Lux tells him that he doesn't have much to report, except that a huge number of people are looking for Kathy. He mentions that he voted for John, and, when John says that Pat is coming to the cottage, he adds that incidents like Kathy's disappearance help to keep things like careers and politics in perspective. Lux also tells John that Vinny distrusts John. John insists that he's telling Lux the complete truth about Kathy. He adds that Vinny can go fuck himself, a statement that makes Lux laugh. Lux bids John good day, and tells him to bring Pat by for some questioning.

Lux's insistence that he voted for John doesn't bring John much reassurance, either about the search for Kathy or about his political career (neither one is going very well), but it at least shows that Lux is trying to be friendly with John. Even so, Lux's comment about keeping politics in perspective comes with a little sternness—it's as if Lux has noticed that John doesn't seem as concerned as he should seem.

John waits for Pat at the town landing. He has a hangover, and thinks that he needs to give up drinking—tomorrow, he tells himself. At 1:15 pm, Pat arrives by floatplane. She looks like a taller, healthier version of Kathy. They kiss, a little awkwardly, and John tells her that there's been no sign of Kathy for two days. Still, he says, Kathy is probably okay. John drives Pat back to the cottage, and on the ride they barely say anything to each other.

John's thought that Pat looks like a healthier version of Kathy seems a little suspicious—the focus on physicality recalls John's own struggles with weight but also suggests perhaps that he was dissatisfied with Kathy's looks in some way and therefore suggests the possibility that he had affairs, or even the possibility that he had an affair with Pat! These kinds of speculations are inevitable when reading the novel, but they're also impossible to verify—or disprove.

In the cottage, Pay says she needs to take a shower. While she does so, John tries to imagine Lux calling him with good news, or Kathy walking into the room. His fantasies don't help at all. Pat walks out of the shower, wearing a University of Minnesota sweatshirt. She invites John to catch her up on everything she needs to know about Kathy's disappearance.

John retreats into fantasy, just as he did as a child. While this might make him seem innocent of any wrongdoing, we should keep in mind that John is talented at lying to himself and minimizing his own guilt—he retreated into fantasy after My Lai, too. John's impressions of Pat after she comes out of the shower are more than vaguely sexual—the possibility that he had an affair with Pat seems to be increasing.

John tells Pat about Kathy's health, the boat, and the search. For half an hour, he explains all this: Kathy is healthy, the boat is in good condition, and the search has been professional. Pat's first reaction is that "it doesn't make sense." She asks to see the boathouse, so John shows her to it. Inside, she asks John where Kathy would have gone, and why she would have gone. John replies that he doesn't know, but that Kathy never needed reasons to leave—she would often go for long walks by herself. Pat says that she's afraid. The last time she talked to Kathy, she tells John, Kathy sounded happy, as if she could finally move on with her life now that John's political career was over. Pat touches John's arm, and he recoils, a little startled. Pat asks him if "body contact" bothers him, and he admits that it does, a little.

Pat's reaction to the description of Kathy's disappearance is the same as ours—things don't add up, whether or not John was involved in her disappearance. The comment about "body contact," like so many of the comments in this section, can be taken many ways. It's possible that John and Pat had an affair; it's also possible that Kathy has complained to Pat about John's lack of interest in lovemaking. In either case, it's clear that Pat dislikes John now—it's less clear whether or not she's always felt this way about him.

Together, Pat and John walk along the dirt road by the boathouse, and then turn into the forest toward the fire tower. As they walk, John thinks that Kathy walked the trail every day that she and John were by **Lake of the Woods**. He wonders if she's watching him right now. After twenty minutes of walking, he and Pat reach the fire tower. Pat says that she's tired, and they decide to rest by the tower before returning to the cottage. John surveys the forest and thinks about little things Kathy would do: the way she slept, her habit of eating Lifesavers, etc.

John feels curiously haunted by Kathy, in much the same way that he felt haunted by Weatherby in Vietnam. The way John remembers Kathy in this section—as a sum of many small details—parallels the fragmented way O'Brien writes this novel. In other words, it's impossible for both the reader or any of the characters to understand the "totality" of any of the characters—both we and the characters one can only catch glimpses of them.

Pat tells John that Kathy was a very good person, and deeply in love with John. John replies that he was in love with Kathy, too, a statement that Pat doesn't acknowledge. Pat assures John that Kathy lost herself in John's career—except for the dentist, John tells Pat. Pat tells John that this incident was nothing, and suggests that John has had infidelities, too—John denies this, but Pat points out that he's been having an affair with "Little Miss Politics."

Kathy's affair with Harmon (presumably the dentist they're both referring to in this scene) casts a shadow over their marriage. While it remains unclear whether or not John had infidelities of his own, it's clear, even before Pat suggests it, that he put his career before his relationship with Kathy, and that this made Kathy lonely and unhappy. We've seen this in the way he forced Kathy to get an abortion, even though she clearly wanted children.

Pat tells John that Kathy hated being a politician's life. John dismisses this suggestion, and tells Pat that he and Kathy had a wonderful relationship. Pat tells him that Kathy became frightened of John, especially after John began shouting in his sleep, and after the newspapers revealed that John was a war criminal. She adds that she didn't like John following her around everywhere. John tells Pat that Kathy never actually said any of this; Pat counters that Kathy didn't have to—it was obvious from the way she behaved. John says that his reputation as a war criminal is "bullshit." Pat asks him if he did "something" in Vietnam—at first, John asks Pat what she means, but then denies that he did.

Pat acts as the spokeswoman for Kathy—a compiler of all the things that Kathy was thinking. But as befits this novel, with its unreliable narrators and characters, it's impossible to tell how much of what Pat says is true—how much of its comes directly from Kathy—and how much of what Pat says is her own invention or assumption. Again, we hear about John's behavior in Vietnam, but don't understand exactly what he did, if anything, beyond shooting the old man and PFC Weatherby. People and events in this novel are understood in terms of what they do, *not what motivated those actions, because fully understanding motivations is so murky and impossible.*

Pat and John walk back to the cottage, where Ruth and Claude are waiting. John introduces Pat to both of them, and then calls Lux. Lux tells him that there's no news, and makes a sound that could be either sympathy or exasperation.

And here the impossibility of understanding motivations is driven home: neither John nor the reader can interpret the meaning of the sound that Lux makes, nor whether Lux is now suspicious of John.

John tells Claude that he wants a boat tomorrow, so that he can explore the lake and look for Kathy himself. Claude tells John that he'll provide one at 6:30 am, and that he wants to be on it. Pat goes to rest in the spare room, and Ruth and Claude return to their own home. John sits by himself in the living room, drinking vodka and reading the local paper, which mentions Kathy on the second page, including quotes from the governor and Tony. Next to the article there's a photograph of Kathy looking very happy. John says, "Oh, Kathy," and drinks more.

John's behavior is nearly impossible to read in this scene. He's drinking, just as his father did, but it's not clear if we're supposed to find this fact poignant or disturbing, or both. Similarly, John's statement, "Oh, Kath," could be read in any number of ways—it could suggest either that he's innocent or guilty of her disappearance. John is both sympathetic to Kathy and self-pitying.

John spends the rest of the night drinking vodka and trying to sleep. Around midnight, he gets up, dresses, grabs a flashlight, and walks to the boathouse. Inside, he senses that "things had happened there." The smell of the floor of the boathouse reminds him of the smell of dead flowers. This in turn reminds him of the iron teakettle he was carrying the night Kathy disappeared, and the fact that he said "Kill Jesus." He remembers going back to his room and watching Kathy. For a moment, he thinks, her eyes opened.

John seems not to remember everything that he did the night that Kathy disappeared. Whether this is because he didn't do anything of note or because he has repressed the traumatic experience of killing Kathy is left for us to decide. It's important to note that Kathy's eyes open in this scene—where before her eyes implied love and peace, they now inspire tremendous guilt in John. This is further significant as so much of John's life has been about avoiding being truly seen, about creating surfaces – magic, politics—that hide him. Eyes are a window into the soul of his wife, but also a possible threat as they might see him for who he truly is in a way he can't stand.

John feels a tremendous sense of guilt. He leaves the boathouse and turns off the flashlight. When he returns to the cottage, he sees Pat sitting outside. She asks him if he's out for a stroll.

The chapter ends with the same suggestion O'Brien has been making the entire time—Pat suspects John of being involved in Kathy's disappearance.

CHAPTER 20: EVIDENCE

The chapter consists entirely of quotes and statistics related to John. The first is from Ruth Rasmussen, who claims that John and Kathy were like onions: no matter how much one peeled, one found more layers. Vinny Pearson claims that John was deliberately leaving out plenty of information, and wagers that there are bones buried somewhere near the cottage. A classmate of Kathy's, Deborah Lindquist, says that Kathy knew that John followed her everywhere, since he was very clumsy. Deborah is amazed that Kathy put up with John's deceptions.

Ruth seems more overtly sympathetic to John than the other characters, but her sympathy isn't naïve. She recognizes that John and Kathy must be understood together, not separately—unlike other witnesses, such as Tony or Vincent, who prefer to think of John and Kathy one at a time. It's also in this section that we learn that Kathy knew about John's habit of stalking her. This is disturbing, because it seems to confirm that Kathy enjoyed *John's manipulations, even when she is their object.*

Sandra Karra praises John for having "slick hands" and keeping his mouth shut—two invaluable skills for a **magician**. Pat is quoted as saying, "Forget the dentist!" and accusing the questioner of being "obsessed." In a footnote, the narrator urges the reader to look ahead to a later footnote.

Here, the narrator first emerges as a character. It's important to distinguish the narrator from Tim O'Brien the author—they're two different people, even if they seem to have a great deal in common. The first quality of the narrator we notice is also the most important—obsession.

There is a list of magical terms and their definitions: vanish, a **magic trick** in which something or someone disappears; transposition, a magic trick in which two objects switch places; casual transportation, a magic trick in which the magician himself disappears; double consummation, a magic trick in which the magician fools the audience by making it believe that the trick is over before it's actually over. After this glossary, there is a quote from Anton Chekhov, about a man who had two lives, one public, one private.

The glossary of magician's terms will continue to be important in the remainder of the novel, the principle of double consummation in particular. For the time being, they make us remember that the book itself is a magic trick—a woman has disappeared. Further, fiction in general is a kind of magic trick: the creation of a non-existent world that the reader both never believes in and totally believes and invests in The Chekhov quote is also significant—it reminds us what we already know about John, that he has many secrets, some of which he hides even from his closest friends.

In a court-martial, Paul Meadlo discusses rounding up Vietnamese villagers and claims that they were Vietcong. Richard Thinbill claims that he shot no people in Vietnam, only cows. Eleanor says that she "found" John's father in the garage, and that she "knew" even before she went in. A biographer of Houdini, Doug Henning, narrates an episode from Houdini's childhood, in which Houdini's father took him to see a magician who chopped a man into pieces and then reassembled him. This incident, Henning argues, was an important one in Houdini's career because it gave him a lifelong interest in death and resurrection.

We learn several important things here. First, the soldiers at My Lai deny their guilt almost without exception—if nothing else, John is no more guilty than any of them. Second, John's father hanged himself. Finally, this suicide has a major influence on John, because it gave him an interest in transfiguration. While this may be disturbing, it suggests that John's love for magic could be used to accomplish positive acts, as well as destructive ones—he can call people back to life as well as kill them.

Eleanor says that John became more secretive after his father hanged himself. Lawrence Ehlers, John's gym coach, describes the heartbreaking experience of pulling John out of class on the day John's father died. Eleanor insists that John's father was never physically abusive. On the contrary, she says, he was bright and charismatic, even if he had a secret, sad side. In between these quotations about John, there are excerpts from biographies of Woodrow Wilson and Lyndon Johnson, explaining how they went through embarrassing experiences as children that impelled them to succeed and to lie.

O'Brien reiterates the enormous influence that John's relationship with his father had on his development as a magician and a politican—like many other great politicians, he used his humiliating experiences as a child as a springboard for pursuing popularity and likability, which naturally pushed him to pursue politics. Implied here, again, in the way John fits into this broader pattern of behavior, is just how responsible John is for his choices—this is a question that is never resolved.

Tony Carbo says that John repressed his terrible experiences in Vietnam, to the point where John himself barely remembered them, and no one else, including Kathy and Tony himself, thought they existed. John and Kathy were a happy couple, Tony reports, and their future looked bright. Then, during his Senate run, John's secrets came out, as all secrets inevitably do during a national campaign. In the end, Tony concludes, John fooled himself.

Tony is more insightful about John than most of the other characters. He recognizes what O'Brien has already made clear: John was adept at fooling others, but he was equally adept at fooling himself, repressing his memories of Vietnam for years and years. John tricked others, but also himself. He was both a victimizer, and a victim.

Eleanor reports that John was yelling at his father's funeral—she thinks that John never accepted his father's death, since for years afterwards she heard him having conversations with his father in his bedroom. Richard E. Ellis, author of a book on child development, says that children whose parents die unexpectedly often carry issues of abandonment with them into adulthood. Robert Karen suggests that shame is often acquired at a very young age.

Ellis and Karen provide scientific basis for the idea O'Brien has been floating around for hundreds of pages already: John's father's death gave John a sense of guilt that encouraged him to pursue love from other people, whether as a politican or as a husband to Kathy.

Richard Thinbill, at a court-martial, explains that a soldier nicknamed Sorcerer shot an old man "by accident." The questioners ask Thinbill to remember the soldier's real name, and Thinbill says that he remembers. Thinbill also says that the ditches near My Lai stunk, and there were flies everywhere. At night, the flies glowed in the dark, and make the forest look like the "spirit world."

Here, Thinbill's quotations help to explain how information about John's participation in My Lai got out, causing him to lose in a huge landslide. The flies now refer not just to the actual flies flitting about post-massacre but to the guild that never stops flitting about the soldiers. The quote about the spirit world suggests the constant haunting of Vietnam in the minds of the soldiers who fought there.

The chapter ends with the footnote that the narrator had previous urged the reader to pair with Pat's quote about being obsessed with "the dentist." The narrator, speaking in the first person for the first time, agrees with Thinbill that Vietnam was the spirit world: there were ghosts and graveyards everywhere. The narrator claims to have arrived in Vietnam a year after John got there. When he saw My Lai, he understood why the massacre occurred: "it was the **sunlight**." There was a feeling of unknowable wickedness, he continues, in the environment. Other factors that contributed to the massacre include frustration and rage at the enemy in Vietnam, which was often difficult to find. The narrator insists that he isn't trying to justify the My Lai massacre, but he also admits that he, like John, felt the sunlight, and felt the potential for butchery underneath his eyes.

This is the most substantial self-portrait the narrator has given us so far. We see that the narrator has his own thoughts and feelings—indeed, he was in Vietnam a year after John. In real life, Tim O'Brien was in Vietnam at the same time as the narrator, and was in the same company that committed the My Lai massacre, but arrived in Vietnam after the massacre took place. Still, it would be a mistake to equate O'Brien with the narrator of this novel—the narrator, like John Wade, is also fictional, also a product of the "magic" of fiction that makes imaginary people seem real. The narrator's statements about the sunlight at My Lai can be taken any number of ways, but it's very important to keep in mind that he's not justifying the massacre at all. On the contrary, he's suggesting that all humans—even those who didn't fight in Vietnam—have the potential to do "butchery." It's arrogant and hypocritical, perhaps, to blame the soldiers in Vietnam for their actions and call them evil—they were acting on the basis of human nature, the narrator suggests.

CHAPTER 21: THE NATURE OF THE SPIRIT

We are in Vietnam, during the My Lai Massacre. The killing takes four hours, and it is both systematic and thorough. In the **sunlight**, soldiers shoot, rape, sodomize, and stab Vietnamese villagers. PFC Richard Thinbill, a young, good-looking man, asks Sorcerer if he can hear "the sound." Sorcerer nods that he can, except that it's actually thousands of sounds. Thinbill says that the army told them there would be civilians—he says that the people their army company killed must be Communists, then. He asks Sorcerer how many people he killed; Sorcerer says he killed two. Thinbill says that he didn't kill anyone.

In this chapter, we get a much better sense of what happened to John during his time in Vietnam. To begin with, we're introduced to Richard Thinbill, who's been quoted throughout the "evidence" chapters of the book, but never properly discussed until now. It's significant that O'Brien refers to John as "Sorcerer" in this section—clearly, John is trying to adapt to the horrors of Vietnam and My Lai by embracing his new identity. His decision to tell Thinbill about his murders will eventually cause his electoral defeat.

The narrative cuts to John's Senate campaign. On September 9, John loses in a landslide. John delivers a brief concession speech, thinking privately that his career is over. John and Kathy return to their hotel and sit, naked, listening to traffic. Later on, Tony stops by and talks with John and Kathy. He tells Kathy that he loves her dearly; Kathy has "never looked happier" than when she hears this.

The juxtaposition of the scenes from Vietnam with Thinbill and the scene in which John concedes defeat make it very clear that it was Thinbill's testimony that resulted in the landslide. It's also implied that Kathy is happy that John lost, since she no longer has to go though the motions of pretending to enjoy campaigning.

Tony tells John that he'll be working for Ed Durkee, the man who defeated John, from now on. John calls Tony a "bastard," and Tony replies that he asked John a hundred times if he had anything to hide. He adds, "a village is a terrible thing to waste." Tony and John drink a final toast while Kathy goes to the bathroom. Tony guesses that she's angry at Tony's "betrayal." He also tells John that he's long had a crush on Kathy, and even went to a gym in an effort to lose **weight** for her.

Here, we see the "betrayal" that Tony alluded to in the earlier chapter of the novel. Tony is a cynic, it would seem, who sells his services to the highest bidder. Kathy's apparent anger suggests that she'd felt that Tony was an honest, trustworthy man. It continues to be strange that Tony is frank with John about his attraction to Kathy—though here, it makes more sense, since Tony is about to leave John forever, and can thus say whatever he wants.

The narrative returns to Vietnam. Charlie Company moves toward the sea in the east. Thinbill mentions the spirit world to Sorcerer, and observes, "Fuckers just don't *die*." The soldiers are mostly silent, although Calley is talkative, saying that "gooks are gooks." When Calley claims that the operation in My Lai was a success, Sorcerer says that there were babies and women there. Calley brushes a fly off his sleeve and then denies that there were any babies. Other soldiers nod in agreement with him. Calley advises Sorcerer not to cast any stones, since he's guilty too.

Calley's behavior in this section contrasts markedly with that of the soldiers. Where Thinbill feels trauma from My Lai, and won't stop talking about flies, Calley casually removes a fly from his body, symbolizing his complete lack of guilt about killing women and children. It's interesting to note that Sorcerer shows more signs than the other men of showing remorse for his actions, even if his remorse is possibly self-interested (he doesn't want to end his political career before it begins).

Thinbill says, half to the other soldiers and half to himself, that they must have killed easily three hundred villagers that day. Someone tells him that they'll all bathe in the river and wipe the blood and "stink" off their bodies, but Thinbill insists that they'll never be able to wash their experiences away. Sorcerer advises Thinbill to forget. As they talk, they hear flies buzzing all around them.

Thinbill makes explicit what everyone else is thinking—they'll never be able to forget the things they've seen and done at My Lai. The persistence of the flies throughout this scene represents this fact—trauma doesn't go away.

The next day, Charlie Company travels toward a river, and Sorcerer can't stop thinking about the old man with a hoe whom he shot. He tries to make himself forget this sight, but he cannot. The men make camp in an area where there are many landmines. They sit and laugh with each other, and suddenly, a landmine explodes and blows off Paul Meadlo's left foot. There is a silence after this explosion, then voices, and then the buzz of the flies.

John's attempts to forget what he saw confirms what Thinbill has just said—none of them will ever forget what they've done. The company's reaction to Paul's accident is very telling—it's as if they've endured so much trauma already that they're desensitized to any other experiences.

John remembers how his father called him Jiggling John. John knew at the time that his father was drunk, but he still felt ashamed of himself. Shortly after his father starts to mock him, he orders a diet he's seen advertised in a magazine. When the bill comes, John's father tells John, "that's a whole lot of bacon **fat**."

O'Brien creates a parallel between John's failure to forget his traumatic experiences in the war with his failure to mitigate his father's bullying—all attempts to do so only make the problem worse.

By the eighth grade, John has begun to grow, and his father calls him Javelin John instead of making fun of his **weight**. Throughout middle school and high school, John makes himself feel better by looking in the mirror. He has almost no friends, but he puts on **magic** shows at school and birthday parties. His audiences applaud, and while they don't exactly give him affection, they give him something very close to affection, he believes. Sometimes, he would replace his father's bottles of vodka with water; later, when John was smirking, John's father would tell him that he looked ridiculous. By spying on his father and playing tricks on him, John thinks, he's developing a bond of love with his father.

In the long term, it would seem, John finds a way to hide his guilt and humiliation. He turns to exercise, magic, and politics as ways to make other people love him. While nothing can entirely make up for the absence of love between himself and his father, John's attempts offer him short-term happiness. His earliest attempts at deception are well meaning—he's trying to cure his father's alcoholism, for instance. We see the same proximity between trickery and love in John's relationship with Kathy.

On March 17, 1968, after Meadlo is taken to the hospital, Charlie Company returns to Thuan Yen. There, they see tremendous pain and suffering: women who have been raped and stabbed, mass graves, and men with missing limbs. Sorcerer tells himself that it is all an illusion. The narrator writes that Sorcerer isn't fooled.

Immediately after Thuan Yen, John's attempts to fool himself into happiness aren't any more successful than his earliest attempts to fight his fatness. Whether his later attempts will have more success remains to be seen.

The sight of flies and dead bodies makes many of the soldiers physically sick. Calley, who isn't sick at all, asks his soldiers, intimidatingly, if they've heard any rumors that what happened in the village was criminal or murderous. Thinbill, intimidated, says that he hasn't heard any rumors of this. When Calley asks Sorcerer if he's heard anything about murder, Sorcerer says he's "deaf" and "blind." Afterwards, Calley tells the men to find Vietcong weaponry in the village. The soldiers look, but they find nothing, as they knew they wouldn't. Privately, Sorcerer makes himself forget what he's seen and done. He thinks about Kathy and tells himself that he's a decent person.

Calley's approach to the massacre seems almost identical to John's—he's trying to make others, and perhaps himself, forget that the incident ever happened at all. Yet the very anger with which he conducts himself seems to prove that Calley will never entirely succeed in forgetting about Thuan Yen. It's in this section that categories like "decent," as well as "good" and "evil" come into question—O'Brien wonders if anyone can really be described as a decent person.

Later in the night, Thinbill approaches Sorcerer and asks him if he thinks the two of them should say something about the massacre they've witnessed. Sorcerer is unsure how to respond—he thinks about the people he's killed, including the old man with the hoe, and PFC Weatherby. As he feels himself having to make a choice, he begins to giggle uncontrollably, frightening Thinbill.

John's reaction may seem unusual, but in actuality people respond to trauma and extreme stress with unusual emotions all the time. "Normal" emotions are the mind's responses to "normal" situations; thus, John giggles when he's confronted with a terrifying dilemma of revealing one's shame or hiding it.

As John giggles, he thinks about the other soldiers firing quickly and skillfully at Vietnamese women and children. He pictures a woman's head exploding, and thinks that the villagers are gradually merging into one huge, bloody mass. Calley laughs and makes wisecracks about the mess, and other soldiers cry, urinate, and resume firing on their victims. As he laughs, John rolls into the mud. Thinbill tells him to take it easy. John begins to calm down, but as he calms himself he pictures Weatherby and remembers shooting him.

John's behavior in this scene illustrates an important point—entertainment is the mind's way of dealing with tragedy and trauma. This could apply to any number of entertainments: John's giggling laughter, his magic shows, or even Tim O'Brien's book itself. Entertainment and storytelling are forms of therapy, through which the suffering people can alleviate their pain.

As John stops laughing, he hears other sounds in the area—some people are crying, and there are echoes of gunshots. Thinbill tells John he has the right attitude—"fuck the spirit world."

Freud said that laughter is the mind's attempt to fight repression. And Thinbill—the closest thing to a "good" character we have in the novel—praises John when he laughs. John prefers to repress his trauma, but here, if only once, he "lets it out." That said, it's not clear if Thinbill is actually interpreting John's laughter correctly. Is John laughing at the "spirit world"—at the guilt—or is he paralyzed by the situation.

CHAPTER 22: HYPOTHESIS

The chapter contains another hypothesis for Kathy's disappearance, resuming the morning after Kathy went ashore with her boat, as described in Chapter 18. Around dawn, the narrator speculates, Kathy uses her Girl Scout training to build a small fire, using a pile of twigs and sparks from the boat's starter cord. Using the heat, she dries her clothing. She's hungry, but not too hungry.

As the hypothesis that Kathy flees from John goes on, we learn more and more about Kathy. She's an optimist, and resourceful, despite her lack of familiarity with nature.

Kathy gets back in her boat and refuels it, using the remainder of the gasoline left in the can. Although she has almost no experience with nature, she will use a map left in the boat to navigate her way back to the cottage. She looks at the map and at the **sun**, and tries to determine which direction is which. The exercise calms her. As she plans her route, she thinks about building a huge casino on the **lake**, and remembers playing the slots in Las Vegas during a campaign visit she made with John and Tony. She enjoys casinos because there is always a jackpot in the near future: in short, casinos are the "golden future."

Kathy is an inventive and ambitious woman. Despite her apparent lack of interest in politics, she seems like she'd make an excellent politician (perhaps she'd be more interested in the issues than John is). Kathy's attraction to casinos is both inspiring and disturbing. On one hand, it's nice to see that Kathy is an optimist; on the other, it's depressing that Kathy can't find joy in the present, particularly because casinos nearly always win in the end.

Kathy begins riding the boat. She notices a small island and pictures a huge casino, shaped like a spaceship, or a penis. She then remembers what else happened during her last visit to Las Vegas with John and Tony. She and Tony sat at a blackjack table, where they played for hours. Around midnight, John found them sitting there, and touched Kathy on her back; Kathy remembers his grip being "stiff." He suggests that Kathy leave the table, but she refuses—instead, she bets more money, and wins.

Kathy's imagination might hint that she's starved for sex, since she hasn't made love to John. It could also hint that she's no longer attracted to John, and has other lovers. In Kathy's flashback (a flashback within a hypothetical!), she and John clearly have a strained relationship. John seems like a cynic for wanting Kathy to leave and spoiling her fun.

At the casino, John says, half-jokingly, that he'd have to "bomb the place" to get Kathy to leave the table. Kathy replies that this "doesn't seem like you." Tony observes that Kathy has lots of "yous," but then tells John to forget it; John says that he has, but Kathy notices that he isn't touching her back anymore. Kathy and Tony play for a few more minutes, and then cash out. Kathy has won more than 800 dollars.

Kathy's comment that John wouldn't bomb a building seems like an ironic foreshadowing of John's later disgrace. Tony, perceptive as ever, notes that Kathy has many "yous." This could either mean that Kathy has had affairs, or that John has multiple facets to his personality. Both of these could be true.

After they cash out, Kathy and Tony sit alone at a bar, drinking. Kathy complains to Tony that John has ruined her evening. The feeling of luck and winning, far better than the feeling of having money itself, is gone—John broke "the spell." Tony counters that the feeling is the best part of gambling. He also points out that John isn't interested in luck; he's a **magician**, meaning that he's only interested in the certainty of rigging the decks. As Tony speaks, Kathy notices his eyes, quickly glancing around the room, and his odd clothing, which makes him seem even fatter than he is.

Tony, John, and Kathy all make their personalities known in this scene. Tony, the realist, prefers the money. Kathy, the optimist, prefers the sensation of potentially winning. John, the powerful politician and magician, doesn't like to be a player at all; he wants to be in control. Tony seems to have a crush on Kathy, hence his uncomfortable behavior. Kathy seems vaguely attracted to him, even though she's a little turned off by his clothing and physique.

Tony and Kathy continue to talk at the bar. Tony points out that John's career is a lot like his performances as a magician. He performs **magic**, and part of the charm of the trick is that everyone knows it's a trick. The same is true of politics: everyone knows that politics is a dirty business and full of intrigue. He says he hopes that John is successful in the campaign, and will end up taking Tony to Washington with him. Kathy suggests that Tony go solo instead. Tony rejects this possibility, since he's **fat** and unattractive, a "waddler." He explains that unattractive people know their place. For the rest of the night, he and Kathy try to recover the "glow" of the casino, with little success. As Kathy rides the boat, she remembers other details of the night, such as the way Tony's eyes kept looking at her shoulders and back.

Throughout the novel, Tony has been much more insightful about John than Kathy, or even John himself. It's Tony, for instance, who recognizes that John lies to himself as well as to other people. Here, it's Tony who senses that people—including Kathy herself—accept politicians like John because *they know that, on some level, they're being lied to. In this section, we're given some insight into the reasons for Tony's perceptiveness. Perhaps his unattractive appearance and general lack of a suave "mask" to his personality has made him more attuned to the "masks" other people craft themselves. In short, Tony recognizes other people's lies because he doesn't lie to himself.*

Back in **Lake of the Woods**, Kathy feels cold, and wishes she were back on the island with her fire. She thinks about John, and decides that she still loves him very much. She remembers the "glow" that they had when they were younger and happier. As she remembers, she notices a small group of islands in the distance.

In this section, it's as if the pleasant memories of John "create" the prospect of land in the distance. While this may seem a little unusual—even magical—O'Brien has already made it clear that perception is, to a large degree, reality: in other words, people only believe the things they want to believe. Here, Kathy seems to see what she wants to see.

Kathy remembers what else happened the night she and Tony got drinks in Las Vegas. Tony told her that she had to think of luck as an "open window"—if the window was stuck, she had to "unstick herself." Kathy told Tony that she'd tried to unstick herself once before, but she didn't tell him the name of the man she was thinking of, Harmon, and she didn't mention Loon Point, either. Instead, she simply told Tony that unsticking was messy and uncomfortable. She asked Tony if he wanted to know more, and he said he didn't. Tony asked Kathy if John found out about Kathy's infidelity; Kathy replied that he found out some, but not everything—she added that John would be gone if she was unfaithful again.

Tony, for all his cynicism and realism, shows himself to be more of an idealist even than Kathy. Where Kathy settles for John, and finds his mystery attractive, Tony wants Kathy to free herself from her obligations and loyalties and try something new, though it's important to note that Tony is clearly flirting with Kathy and might be hoping that he *would be the new thing she would try. Kathy's response to Tony's question is ambiguous—we don't know how she felt about Harmon, the dentist, or how their affair ended.*

Tony and Kathy spent more time gambling, and then went up to their hotel rooms. Tony said he'd kiss her if he weren't so **fat,** and in response, Kathy kissed him—Tony said that he'd live forever.

Tony and Kathy's friendship is almost touching—they seem more sincere with one another than John and Kathy. This explains why, when Tony defects to another campaign, Kathy is devastated—she's lost her friend.

Kathy walked into her hotel room and saw John, clearly pretending to sleep. Kathy thought about what she'd accomplished at the casino. She won 700 dollars, but more importantly, she'd felt happiness. In the past, she sensed, she had allowed John to define for her what happiness is. She realized then that nothing she does with John anymore gives her the same sense of happiness she felt years ago at a bar, when she dared John to steal liquor from the bartender.

For all her optimism, Kathy can't escape the fact that she's less happy than she was when she and John were younger. While Kathy wants to look ahead to the future, she finds herself ill-equipped to deal with John, who's repressing his past. As a result, she can't help but mourn the vanished past, as John occasionally does when he contemplates his marriage.

As Kathy watched John lying in bed, seemingly asleep, she heard him yell out. She did not touch him, knowing that nothing could ever help him. Instead, she went back to the casino and played more blackjack, feeling the same glowing happiness as before. Kathy remembers all of this as she rides her boat toward the islands in the distance—or at least she might have been remembering it, assuming that this is what happened to her on the day after she disappeared.

Despite her differences from John, Kathy suffers from the same problem—she doesn't try to address John's problems, but instead reaches an uneasy truce with them. Thus, she leaves John to sleep instead of offering him her comfort and kindness.

CHAPTER 23: WHERE THEY LOOKED

It is 6:30 am on September 22. Claude, Pat, and John are pushing Claude's large Chris-Craft boat into **Lake of the Woods** so that they can look for Kathy themselves. As John pushes, he feels a sense of health and clarity that isn't exactly optimism, but still makes him feel good.

Coming on the heels of a long chapter about Kathy and her optimism, John's behavior in this chapter mirrors that of his wife. Perhaps John is beginning to heal, instead of continuing to attempt to forget.

Claude, Pat, and John board Claude's boat and begin their search. Claude says that their journey will be based on pure luck and intuition—there's no scientific way to trace Kathy's trail. Pat points to a string of nearby islands and suggests that they begin by looking there. Claude steers the boat in this direction, and in ten minutes they've landed on the islands.

Claude, like Tony, is a realist, and doesn't mitigate the truth when the truth is less than inspiring. It's Pat, not John, who points to their starting place; she seems more energetic than John during the search, a fact which annoys her.

Claude, Pat, and John circle around the islands. There is mist, making it difficult to see anything, but they spend the next hour looking for any signs of life. They see nothing. John begins to wonder what they'll eventually find of Kathy. He wonders how much of Kathy will have survived.

John seems hopeless in this scene—instead of imagining himself reuniting with Kathy, he thinks about the remains of her body. This is a surprising reaction, especially after the signs of optimism he showed only hours ago.

As John looks for life on the islands, he remembers a song, "I know a girl, name is Jill," that he and his company sang in Vietnam in middle of a monsoon. He remembers other things: playing around with Kathy in their old apartment, the old man with the hoe, PFC Weatherby, singing Sinatra with Kathy, etc. As he thinks, Claude calls his name and calls him Senator: John looks like he's half-asleep. Claude says that John looks sick and offers to stop searching. Pat insists that they continue, and says that John isn't even trying to find Kathy. Claude tells them both to be silent, but John tells Pat that, whatever she's thinking, he's sorry. Pat says "Wonderful" sarcastically.

For all the cynicism he shows, John is at least thinking about his time in Vietnam instead of repressing it. It would seem that Pat is unfair to criticize John for daydreaming: he's thinking about events Pat can barely comprehend, after all. The distance between John and Pat—indeed, between John and nearly everyone in his life—is obvious when John apologizes to Pat. Instead of trying to understand what Pat is thinking, he just issues a blanket apology. In doing so he isn't really communicating, he's ducking blame.

The three continue searching for Kathy on small islands in **Lake of the Woods**. The islands are very flat, and don't show any signs of life. They boat to Buckete Island, and then turn west, where they spend the next hour searching around American Point. As they search, John notices that Pat's body is tight and athletic. As he looks, he tells himself never to drink again.

O'Brien keeps dancing around John's relationship with Pat, without ever explaining what it is. The closest he comes to explaining their antipathy is here, when it's revealed that John is obviously attracted to Pat. Whether this explains Pat's dislike for him or not is left unexplained—we could even take John's attraction to Pat as a form of love for Kathy (it's been mentioned that Pat looks a lot like her sister).

John thinks that Pat is suspicious of him; he can tell by the way she stares at him while she pretends to look out into the distance. John thinks that everyone is suspicious of him: Vincent Pearson, Lux, and the whole state of Minnesota. That's the risk of living life as a **magic trick**, he thinks. John has spent his political years try to make his past disappear—and his intentions, he thinks, were always virtuous. Now, his trick has failed, and everyone thinks of him as a cheat. This is the risk of being a magician—you have to live with your trickery.

We hear, again and again, that John's intentions in deceiving others have always been virtuous. It's impossible to know how to take this sentiment. At times, John acknowledges that he's deceiving because he likes to deceive; at other times, he thinks that he's acting out of love for others. It would be a mistake to take either one of these explanations as "true" and the other as "false"—there's some truth in both of them. What's clear is that John's deceptions have an impact, regardless of their motivations.

It is twilight, and Pat, John, and Claude tie up Claude's boat near the Angle Inlet boatyard. They have been searching for Kathy all day, and found nothing. On the inlet, they see a group of men sitting around a campfire. This sight makes John think of Vietnam, and his company. Claude and Pat walk along the beach, with John walking behind. He feels a strange tension in his stomach, similar to the tension he always felt during a political campaign.

John is still thinking that everyone is suspicious of him; thus, he's reluctant to talk to other people—they could be potential enemies. At the same time, he's thinking about Vietnam more than he has in the last decade; somehow, the events of the week have triggered old memories of the war.

As Pat, John, and Claude walk toward the fire, John sees that the men sitting there are Vincent and Lux. Lux and Vincent shake hands with Pat, and Lux hands John a beer. Vincent points out that John is looking "Fit as a fiddle," after three days of not searching for Kathy. Lux encourages John and Vincent to make up, but John calls Vincent "albino," which angers Vincent, who insists that he's Swedish. He accuses John of being a mass-murderer, and John threatens to fight Vincent. Vincent pauses, then laughs and suggests giving John a "bellyful" of truth serum.

John's exchange with Vincent is strange, and more than a little humorous. He's no longer trying to be a politician—instead, he's quite willing to fight back, which is what makes his barb about Vincent being "albino" so unexpected and amusing. One thing to take from this scene is that everyone has "issues"—Vincent clearly has a story to tell about his Swedish background, for instance—even if John has darker secrets than most.

Everyone gathers around the fire: John, Pat, Claude, Vincent, Lux, and at least six other people. Lux introduces everyone to these new men, but John barely pays attention. The conversation that occurs that night around the campfire is almost meaningless to John—something about weather and the **water**. Claude mentions that the men are "water pros," and will dig Kathy up for John.

One can take John's indifference to the conversation as indifference to Kathy's disappearance, or anger and frustration (and tiredness) with his situation, including but not limited to Kathy's disappearance. In any case, he's begun to despair, and seems to believe that he'll never see Kathy again.

John notices Pat and Lux talking quietly to one another. He contemplates telling them "secrets" about himself: the teakettle and the boathouse. He wants to tell them about his father, his fascination with **magic** and mirrors, etc. John drifts deep into thought. Some time later, Claude taps John, and John notices that almost everyone is gone, including Vincent. He says to Claude, "convicted?" very pleasantly.

Even for John to consider explaining some of his secrets voluntarily is a major step forward for him. At the same time, it's notable that he may be thinking of telling these secrets because he knows Lux and Pat suspect him of being involved in Kathy's disappearance. It's also important that, in the end, he doesn't *say anything to them.*

The next day, John, Pat, and Claude go out on the **lake** to look for Kathy, and they continue looking for the next two weeks. On October 8, the police begin scaling back their search resources, until there are only two boats looking for Kathy. Throughout this time, John continues to search for Kathy, and the routine of waking up to look with Pat and Claude keeps him going. John begins to realize that anything can be lost in **Lake of the Woods**—it's a huge, still body of water. The lake reminds him of a box of mirrors.

There's a sudden "jump" forward in the narrative in this section. We've been so focused on the day-to-day interactions between John and the detectives that it's a little surprising to see O'Brien leaping forward by half a month. The section feels like a kind of "summation: of everything we've been reading so far. For instance, O'Brien makes explicit what he's been suggesting all along: the lake is a symbol of deception and uncertainty (and not a bad symbol of the book itself!).

John asks Claude about obtaining a second boat, so that John can look for Kathy on his own while Claude and Pat continue their usual search. Claude immediately refuses to give John this boat, refusing to explain why. Later on, while John and Pat are eating dinner with Claude and Ruth, John brings it up again. Claude tells John that he could end up like Kathy—lost in a boat in the middle of a **lake**. Pat sarcastically praises John's chivalry.

It's unclear to us why John is asking for Claude's boat; this means that it's also unclear why Claude refuses to give it to him. Perhaps he doesn't trust John; perhaps he's worried that John is going to kill himself; perhaps he thinks John is going to flee since he's guilty of murder. Pat seems to believe the third option.

The next day, it snows in **Lake of the Woods**, and John spends the morning shoveling snow in the driveway outside Claude's house. He thinks about **magic**, and contemplates a "last nifty illusion," a piece of "casual transportation," similar to **snakes eating one another**. As he thinks, he remembers his father, and thinks that he knows what his father went through. John's father's suicide was a **magic trick**, one that left his audience traumatized forever.

The links between magic and the events of the novel are becoming more explicit. Here, for instance, O'Brien tells us that John's father's death was a magic trick—something we've had in the back of our heads for a while. One new suggestion in this section, however, is that magic can terrify as well as entertain. The casual transportation John mentions could be his own suicide.

At dusk, John removes his clothes and jumps into the **lake**, where, he thinks, Kathy is. He closes his eyes as he dives in, and is surprised to find that he can't feel the cold. He pushes back to the surface, and then dives back to the bottom of the lake again. John thinks about his father. As a child, John imagined his father praising his **magic tricks**. John thinks that he wanted to be loved to the point where he performed tricks on his own life, disguising himself and practicing deception on others. As he thinks all this, he feels Kathy's presence: her eyes, her flesh, her empty womb. When he feels Kathy's presence, he pushes back to the surface of the lake and goes back ashore.

It seems as if John is committing suicide in this scene. We can take what he experiences in the water as a kind of epiphany, or even a symbolic "baptism" in which he's born again. John's love for Kathy seems to save him from depression—he's accepted that he's no different than his father, and thus a suicide case. Then, he thinks about Kathy, and apparently decides that he wants to live. The qualifiers, "apparently" and "seems" are necessary here, because O'Brien doesn't give us perfect information about what John is thinking.

At 8 pm, Art Lux calls the cottage. After speaking to Pat, he tells John that the search for Kathy is being discontinued due to paperwork and red tape. John says that Lux is giving up on Kathy, but Lux insists that there are other places the police have to look. Lux asks to speak to Claude; John passes Claude the phone and fixes himself a drink, noticing that Pat is quietly crying. John thinks that he's like his father.

In this section, at least two important things happen. First, it becomes clear that Lux has broadened his search to a place that includes more direct suspicion of John—his mention of "other places" to look suggests that he's going to search John's own property, or the cottage where he's staying. Second, John recognizes what we've recognized long ago—he's become his father. To recognize this may mean that John can change—and perhaps become a better person.

After speaking to Lux, Claude explains to John that the police want to look around John's cottage, on the chance that Kathy is buried there. Claude points out that even if the police don't find anything buried, the world will still think that John is a murderer, given the news about John's behavior in Vietnam. As Claude explains all this, John, surprised, senses that Claude is a genuine friend to him.

In a chapter full of sudden changes, this may be the most sudden. Claude, always an ambiguous character, is revealed to be something of a friend to John—he's helping John by telling him about what's in store for him.

Claude suggests that John hasn't been crying for Kathy because there's no use crying. Claude also suggests that John should leave **Lake of the Woods**, since the police will be arriving soon to dig up the cottage area. John asks Claude for a boat, gasoline, and a map, but Claude refuses, saying that he doesn't need two people on his property getting lost in the lake. John insists that he'll find a way to get a boat, anyway. Claude seems to accept this, and he tells John that he is genuinely sorry for his hardships. John notices that Claude looks very tired.

We've been given hints that Claude and John are two versions of the same person, but it isn't until now that we see how deeply the two men understand one another. All along, Claude has understood John's apparent indifference to his wife's disappearance—he knows that people behave abnormally in abnormal situations. It's not clear how much help he'll give John in the end—even though he refuses to give him a boat, he seems to accept that John's going to get one anyway.

The next day, John, Claude, and Pat go out once again on the boat to look for Kathy. Pat refuses to look at John. Around 3 pm, Claude pulls into a harbor, and the three walk to the Texaco station. There, John goes to the Mini-Mart where he and Kathy argued, and buys food, a map, and alcohol, along with a compass. Myra notices him as he makes his purchases, but says nothing. John contemplates "baring his teeth" at Myra, but instead he's very polite to her.

We're coming "full circle"—for the second time in the novel, John is buying things in the Mini-Mart. Whether he's changed at all since the last time he was there is left up to us to decide. In John's mind, he's restraining himself from showing his anger to Myra for making his argument with Kathy early in the novel seem more important than it was. He thinks he's acting as well as could be expected towards her. Yet later it will be shown that Myra's perspective of his behavior here is very different from his.

That night, John sleeps in his cottage and dreams about an enormous computer, with circuits made of electric eels. When he wakes up, it's a little before dawn. On the table, he's unsurprised to see that Claude has left the key to his boat, along with an envelope—John takes both. He brings his supplies, including warm clothing, into Claude's boat, and takes the boat out onto the water. He drives north; as he moves onward, he looks back at the small cottage where he's been staying. He imagines a man and woman wrapped in blankets sitting outside the cottage, thinking of names for their children and exotic places to visit. As he gets farther away, the man and woman disappear into the fog of **Lake of the Woods**—the place where **one plus one** equals zero.

The subject of John's dream seems to symbolize something, but it's not apparent what it's a symbol of. Perhaps the enormous computer is a symbol of inevitability—a testament to the fact that John has always been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He shipped off to Vietnam at a time when ordinary people were being forced to do barbaric things, and he had the misfortune to be born to a drunken, suicidal father. Claude seems to see John's life in these terms, and it would appear that John sees his life this way, too. John sees the cottage as the place where Kathy and he became those snakes: loving and destroying each other until they both ceased to exist. But, as should be no surprise for this book by now, there are multiple ways to cease to exist: there's death, and there's willfully disappearing to become someone else.

CHAPTER 24: HYPOTHESIS

In this hypothesis about Kathy's disappearance, the narrator suggests that Kathy had already left John in the summer of 1983, when she had an affair with Harmon in Boston. Later, she killed herself in **Lake of the Woods**. Kathy has been on the brink of suicide, the narrator suggests, for many years even before 1983, at which time she flew out to Boston to see Harmon. For years, she's been on Valium and other mood-controlling drugs, and she despises her life as a politician's wife. As she drives the boat out on Lake of Woods, perhaps she took Valium and thought about all the events in her life that brought her to this point.

As John becomes more complex and sympathetic to us (as he does in the previous chapter), Kathy becomes a little less sympathetic. Here, she's hardly a loving, understanding wife—she's an adulterous pill-popper. It would seem from the mention of Harmon in this section that we're going to learn something about who he is and why Kathy had an affair with him.

Kathy's affair with Harmon began almost by chance, and lasted only four months. As she rides the boat, she thinks that she can remember Harmon's round white face, but not his eye color. She and Harmon had gone dancing at a place called Loon Point, and the dancing made Kathy feel adventurous and young.

Kathy's memories of Harmon don't make him sound particularly appealing; more to the point, Kathy barely remembers him at all. This seems to parallel the fragmented way John remembers Vietnam. The characters in O'Brien's novel never have a clear view of their own past, much less the pasts of other people.

After visiting Harmon in Boston, Kathy flew back to Minneapolis to see John. She drank a few martinis on her flight, and when she returned to her home, she poured herself wine. John arrived home from work and embraced her, **squeezing her waist** as usual. Kathy dislikes when John does this, because it makes her feel fat. On this occasion, she sensed that John had "no inkling." John and Kathy had pork chops for dinner, and John asked polite questions about Kathy's trip. Kathy lied that the friend she'd gone to see had been boring.

This is more than a little frustrating—for hundreds of pages, we've been waiting to learn how Kathy came to have an affair. Yet here we only get a few sentences about the bare bones of her adultery—when she flew to see Harmon, and how long she was with him. It's also illuminating that Kathy doesn't like John pinching her fat—many of the characters in this novel dislike their own weight, and weight seems to symbolize the characters' struggle with their own flaws and poor choices, with their realities*—things which can't be shaken off easily.*

As John and Kathy talked about her trip to Boston, Kathy apologized for the storm that made her fly home a day early. John is confused at this, and Kathy realizes that he'd forgotten when she was supposed to return to Minneapolis. Kathy's pork chops tasted rancid in her mouth. She felt the need to make John jealous by describing Loon Point where she danced with Harmon. Still, she didn't tell him anything, thinking that John would never know about her secret.

In this version of the past, John is a neglectful husband who barely remembers when Kathy is supposed to be home. As hurtful as this detail of their marriage may be, it comes with a silver lining—John isn't cheating on Kathy (if he were, he'd have known exactly when she was returning, and exactly how much time he had away from her). Perhaps he's too devoted to "Little Miss Politics," as Pat suggests.


As Kathy boats through **Lake of the Woods**, preparing to kill herself, perhaps she thought more about returning from Boston and greeting John. When Kathy returned from visiting Harmon, she stood outside her house with her robe open, and felt a "pure wanting." Then, when John walked outside and greeted her, Kathy closed her robe immediately. On Lake of the Woods, Kathy thinks that she blames herself for the waning of her love for John. She gave up on her dreams and on having fun with John. Her affair with Harmon was proof that she was unhappy. Perhaps, the narrator concludes, Kathy stares out onto Lake of the Woods and whispers, "Why?" The answer to this question, the narrator notes, is, "Who knows?"

As little information as we get about Kathy in this section, we do learn something important about her personality—she feels an intense desire for change, and the exact contents of the change are less important to her than the fact of change itself. This helps to explain why O'Brien doesn't tell us more about Kathy's affair—the exact details of who Harmon is and why Kathy had an affair with him are beside the point. The big picture is that she wanted something to be different, and the affair was a product of that desire. And, as with John, the why behind such desires is never simple enough to answer. Kathy, like John, doesn't know why she's done what she's done. Every character in the novel is like their own lake in the woods, vast and unknowable, even to themselves.



CHAPTER 25: EVIDENCE

This chapter is another collection of evidence about John. The first piece of evidence is a quote from Vincent Pearson, comparing John to the three monkeys who "see no evil," "hear no evil," and "speak no evil"—Vincent's point is that John is claiming to be so innocent that he must be guilty.

We've been forced to examine the differences between appearance and reality—John, for instance, appears to be a happy, charismatic politician, even though he's really a disturbed war vet. Tony's point is a good one: the appearance of cleanness is almost a guarantee of some dirtiness beneath the surface.

Ruth Rasmussen insists that John didn't kill Kathy, because he loved her—just like Claude loves Ruth. Lux insists that he doesn't make guesses. Colonel William V. Wilson says that he wishes "this thing" was fiction. Soldiers in Vietnam, such as Gregory T. Olson, Tommy L. Moss, and Allen J. Boyce, describe their mood going into My Lai as revengeful. Famous warriors of the past, such as General William Sherman (the Civil War general who ordered his army of Union soldiers to burn the city of Atlanta to the ground) describe how the Sioux tribe must be exterminated. The author George Sand notes that evil people never see themselves as evil.

As we go on, Ruth's praise and sympathy for Kathy and John never wavers. Toward the end of the book, though, the narrator seems more sympathetic to John as well. We see this in the quotations about revenge—it seems that soldiers who commit war crimes are often under the impression that they're avenging their friends' deaths. While this doesn't excuse their behavior (as the narrator openly admits), it does help to humanize their actions.

Patricia says that Kathy tried "too hard" with John, while Patricia herself never gave John a chance. Bethany Kee notes that Kathy always wanted to travel to Verona, Italy though Kathy's only source of information about the place was *Romeo and Juliet*. Patience H.C. Mason, author of a book on PTSD, notes that in American society, it is considered normal to "overfunction" to hide one's partner's problems from other people.

Kathy's love for John is much more mysterious than John's feelings for Kathy—we can't quite tell if Kathy loves John for his mystery or for his appearance of goodness, or both. Part of her attraction to John seems to be based on a suicidal or nihilistic streak—hence her obsession with Verona, Italy, which is, after all, the place where Romeo and Juliet die for each other.

Soldiers, both from Vietnam and from other eras, explain how they viewed the enemy as subhuman, and fought because they wanted revenge for their own friends' deaths. Paul Meadlo describes killing villagers to take revenge for his friends, while British infantrymen from the Revolutionary War describe Americans as "savages."

This is another side in the debate about the morality of war crimes. It doesn't excuse the soldiers for what they did, but it suggests that they're motivated by the same kinds of things that motivate people every day—friendship, anger, jealousy, etc. And it suggests that the soldiers of Vietnam—seen as villains by many—may not have been all that different than the American soldiers of the Revolutionary War who everyone today sees as heroes.

Richard Thinbill is quoted talking about the flies. In another piece of evidence, from a court-martial, he tries to remember Sorcerer's real name, but can't, noting that Sorcerer giggled after the Vietnamese massacres. Patricia admits that Kathy wasn't perfect, considering the affair she had with "that dentist," who she refuses to name.

In this section, the characters identify other characters, albeit imperfectly. Thinbill doesn't identify John because he doesn't know John's real name. Pat refuses to name Harmon because she wants to protect her sister even as she admits that here sister has faults. Neither character's reasoning matters much—in the end, we already know that John is Sorcerer, and we already know that Harmon is Kathy's former lover.

The Boston Herald reports that a man named Robert W. T'Souzas was shot and killed, nearly twenty year after he was accused of murdering two Vietnamese children at My Lai. T'Souzas was never convicted, since he testified that he killed the children because they were in pain and already dying. The article also notes that Lieutenant William Calley was the only man every convicted in the My Lai massacre.

The contrast between Calley's legal punishment and T'Souzas's rough life suggests that the soldiers at My Lai were *punished for their actions, even if they never served prison time—their guilt and self-hatred haunted them for the rest of their lives.*

There is a list of John's "Box of Tricks." It includes invisible ink, a coin trick, and a copy of The Peers Commission Report. Tony Carbo says that John ran out of **magic**—when the story about his behavior in Vietnam broke, Minnesota wasn't forgiving at all. Patricia recalls that Kathy had her own problems. There follows a series of quotes about politicians' wives, such at Pat Nixon. Though they were highly skilled at affecting an appearance of normality and happiness, they secretly hated being married to politicians. Lester David, author of a book on Pat Nixon, suggests that Richard Nixon lied to his family as well as to America about his role in Watergate.

The list of John's tricks ends with the Peers Report, the compilation of investigations into American soldiers' actions at My Lai. This is a stark way of illustrating Tony's point—John "ran out" of magic. What follows is a study of the banal "magic" that politicians practice on their constituents and their wives, and the performances their wives give in return. Kathy's pain and anguish derived in no small part from the fact of being a politician's wife, not only from John himself.

There follows a series of quotes about John's multiple names. Vincent Pearson insists that John's nickname, "Sorcerer," proves that he was a deceptive man who didn't even know who he was. Eleanor notes that John always had nicknames for himself—some of which, like "Jiggling John" and "Little Merlin," John's father gave him. Karl S. Guthke, author of a biography of the author B. Traven, opines that Traven adopted a pseudonym because he wanted to lose his old identity.

John's nicknames prove his love for magic, but also the lack of control he exercises over his own life. He's come to enjoy nicknames and false identities, precisely because his father bullied him when he was a child. One can interpret this to mean that John is a victim, or that he's responsible for his own lies. The truth, as usual in this novel, lies somewhere in between.

The final two quotes in the chapter are from Patricia and Eleanor. Patricia urges the investigators to give up, because "No one will ever know" what happened. Eleanor says that the investigators should stop, since she's said everything she knows.

We turn to a new side of the narrator's investigation. Throughout the novel, we've taken it for granted that it's worthwhile *to investigate Kathy's disappearance. Here, we're asked—"why is the narrator investigating it at all?"*

In a footnote corresponding to Eleanor's final comment, the narrator asks, rhetorically, why anybody should care about murderers like Lizzie Borden or Lee Harvey Oswald. Perhaps, he suggests, mysteries are themselves more fascinating than any solution could be. The narrator has looked over countless notes and records and never solved the mystery of Kathy's disappearance. Even though he'll never solve the mystery, he continues to look—the mystery itself is what motivates him.

Here, the narrator provides an answer to the question of why he's investigating Kathy's disappearance. He's more interested in the mystery and magic of her vanishing than with any single solution to the problem. In this way, he's not so different from Kathy herself—Kathy, too, was more interested in the mystery of John's personality than in any one explanation for how he got this way.

CHAPTER 26: THE NATURE OF THE DARK

All the soldiers who fought in Vietnam were young: Calley was 24, T'Souza was 19, Thinbill was 18, Sorcerer was 23, etc. After the massacre at Thuan Yen, they spent months fighting in the forest, occasionally losing more soldiers to the enemy. In the night, everyone feels shame at the massacres. For the most part, people don't talk about what happened, although Thinbill always mentions the flies.

O'Brien includes another detail that's gotten "lost in the mix"—the soldiers who killed civilians at My Lai were young, some of them teenagers. It's no wonder, then, that they're severely traumatized by their own behavior—Thinbill, for instance, seems to be suffering from PTSD.

Charlie Company never returns to Thuan Yen; it moves on to other places. Sorcerer tries to forget about the massacre; he takes extra risks in battle to help himself forget, but nothing works fully. Sometimes, he can feel himself becoming "wicked" again, and he remembers rolling around in the ditch. In November 1968, he extends his tour for an extra year, telling Kathy that it's a personal choice he's unable to explain.

John tries to repress his guilt instead of "getting it out," as Thinbill advises. We already knew that he extended his tour; reading this for the second time, however, we interpret the information differently. At first, we assumed that John extended his tour because he'd become a sociopath. Now, we see things a little differently—John is trying to hide his guilt by making himself pay for his crimes. While this doesn't make John seem like a saint, it does humanize him to an extent we hadn't seen before.

In the middle of combat, Sorcerer sometimes feels as if the trees are talking. He also hears voices from the village massacre, and sees Weatherby and the old man with the hoe. To make the voices and visions go away, he sometimes burns jungles and shoots his gun.

Much as before, John's anger seems to be with Vietnam itself, hence his attacks on the trees and ground. It's implied that his guilt makes him a better soldier—a chilling thought.

Two months before his tour ends, Sorcerer takes up a desk job, where he does paperwork all day. He contemplates his future, and using his access to military files, he retypes all the lists of military personnel so that it seems that he was always in Alpha Company instead of Charlie Company. This makes him feel less guilty. He recognizes that he won't be able to fool everyone, but he also knows that very few people in Charlie Company ever knew his real name—those who do, he believes, will forget it if they haven't already. Shortly after he changes the files, John is shipped back to the United States.

Throughout the novel, characters have proved their guilt by attempting to hide it. Thus, John proves—to the voters of Minnesota, anyway—that he's guilty of war crimes in Vietnam because *he tries to hide his actions. This is another demonstration that repression and denial are bad ways to deal with one's past. In the end, the truth finds a way out, and the fallout from the attempts at repression is far worse.*

When he lands in the United States in Seattle, John calls Kathy, but hangs up after two rings. When he's in a plane flying back to Minneapolis, he goes to the restroom and look at himself in the mirror, asking, "Hey Sorcerer, how's tricks?"

We've already seen this scene before, but here, with the context completely different, we have no choice but to interpret it differently. Before, we took John's behavior as proof that he was "still in Vietnam." Now we see his reliance on his Sorcerer persona as a method of coping with himself and his behavior. He never stopped being Sorceror. He never stopped hiding who he was from everyone, including himself.

CHAPTER 27: HYPOTHESIS

In this hypothesis about how Kathy disappeared, John wakes up late at night, sweating. He remembers how the news of his involvement in Thuan Yen broke: there were headlines, terrifying pictures, eyewitness accounts. After the news broke, Kathy looked at John with an empty expression—twenty years of love disappeared instantly. In the cottage, John whispers, "Kill Jesus" and goes to boil water in a teakettle.

By this point, we've seen this scene, in which John boils water and kills flowers, several times. In this version, however, John is—at least initially—a kind of victim. The novel has done enough to show that he wasn't a simple "war criminal" while also showing how he has hidden and repressed those worries about himself. So to have all that revealed, and to have both the public and his wife see him as such a war criminal, is devastating. Kathy's empty look is important—she sees through him.

After the water boils, John takes the teakettle and killed a young spider plant. He isn't angry—he's acting out of necessity. He then returns to the kitchen and fills the kettle with more water to boil. After the second kettle of water is boiling, he takes it to the bedroom, where Kathy is sleeping.

The difference between anger and necessity is crucial to the novel. Anger implies that John is acting of his own free will; necessity suggests that John isn't free at all—he's obeying "the sunlight," as the narrator puts it.


As John stands over Kathy, he tips the teakettle forward. Kathy eyes open slightly as he does so, and she looks at him, a little confused. John pours boiling water all over Kathy's face, and steam rises from her eye sockets. She screams, but John continues to pour, until there's boiling water in her throat. As John pours, he imagines the cries of women and children, and sees Kathy's skin blister and peel off.

In this version of events, John is at his most brutal, but also in a way his most innocent in the sense that he's acting not because he wants to kill but because he feels he needs to kill in order to survive. He needs Kathy not to see him as a war criminal—and so he literally destroys her eyes. There is a mirroring here to what the soldiers did in May Lai—they felt like they were compelled to do it, by orders, by their own fear and suffering. And yet: those soldiers committed war crimes, and John here is murdering his wife! They are both not responsible and totally responsible.


The narrator suggests that John wraps Kathy in a sheet and carries her to the dock. He is very gentle, even loving, and whispers, "my Kath" as he places her in the boat. John starts the engine and drives the boat no more than 200 yards out. Here, he weighs Kathy's body, still wrapped in the sheet, with heavy stones. After this, John tips the boat on its side so that it fills with water, and then lets it sink to the bottom of the **lake**.

Even as he's wrapping and hiding the body in the lake, John still acts with a kind of love toward Kathy. The implication is that he kills her not out of hate or anger but because he couldn't stand for someone he loved—someone who for him existed to provide love—to see him as the war criminal he feared he might be. Calling her "My Kath" is both a signal of his love for Kathy and a signal of the way she serves as a kind of possession for him, an object that gives love. None of this is meant to excuse the murder, just as nothing can excuse a war crime. It is to offer a humanizing explanation for it. And, of course, it's important to remember that this is just another "hypothetical"—this is just the narrator speculating about one more possible thing that could have happened.


Perhaps, the narrator suggests, John sank along with Kathy for a while before he let the body go and returned to the surface of the **lake**. Later on, John would have woken up in bed and reflexively reached for Kathy. Then he would have hugged his pillow.

"Hugging the pillow" is a recurring image in the novel—here, it suggests that John is both remorseful for his actions and emotionally incapable of wrapping his mind around what he's done. That he's hiding his face from his actions.

CHAPTER 28: HOW HE WENT AWAY

It is 7 am and John is riding in Claude's boat, the day after Claude told him about Lux's plan to search the cottage grounds. He is about three miles away from the cottage, headed north. By mid-morning, he's crossed into Canadian waters. He has about 250 miles left to go before he runs out of gasoline. By noon, he has reached a series of small channels that are difficult to navigate.

It's clear that John has taken Claude's advice—it's unclear, though, how much of this advice he's taking. Whether John will get away from the police's investigation or kill himself is uncertain. Even after hundreds of pages we don't know him well enough to say what he'll do. Perhaps he doesn't know what he'll do either.

As he rides north, John remembers talking to Kathy about his actions at Thuan Yen. He told her "everything he could tell," though the narrator doesn't recount exactly what this means. In his boat, John thinks that he doesn't consider himself an evil man at all, and that he couldn't explain everything that had happened in Vietnam. He has always wanted to be good, almost as if he has a disease that forced him to desire goodness. He cries out, "Kath!" but there is no answer.

Even in this moment, a crucial one in the book, we don't hear exactly what John tells Kathy about his involvement in Thuan Yen. He could have told her the "whole truth" or he could have twisted the truth to make himself seem like a victim of Calley's orders. Perhaps the fact that we don't hear about Vietnam at all in this section indicates that John continues to repress certain aspects of his behavior from himself—he simply cannot address his own actions.

In the evening, John drives the boat to land and makes a small fire, where he eats a sandwich and reads the note Claude left him in the envelope. Claude writes that he doesn't blame John for anything he's done—he sees John as being sucked down into a funnel. Claude offers his theory of what happened—Kathy went out in her boat and got lost. He notes that there is a radio in John's boat, set to "the right frequency." He advises John to head to Canada, suggesting that it's easy to "evaporate" and start over again. John drinks vodka, and thinks that Claude is mostly right about Kathy. Kathy probably had an accident. Nevertheless, he thinks, he is responsible for making Kathy's life miserable with deception and manipulation in place of real love. In short, he is guilty of being Sorcerer.

Claude's letter continues the sympathy he showed John the day before. The fact that John thinks that Kathy had an accident may or may not prove his innocence—we know that John is excellent at lying to himself. That he admits that he's guilty of alienating his wife could be a noble act, a sign of some personal growth, or it could just be another example of tremendous self-delusion.

John goes to asleep. Late at night he wakes up—it's raining. He says, "Well, Kath?" but again there is no reply. At dawn, he returns to his boat and drives north. He passes by a chain of islands that are covered in snow, and look like a Christmas card. He drinks vodka and yells Kath's name. In the cold air, John sometimes feels as if he's back in Thuan Yen.

John continues to call Kath's name—we can interpret this to mean that he's desperately searching for her, or that he's talking to himself and imagining her, just as he did with his father as a child. Thus, calling could symbolize John's optimism that she's alive, or his delusions about her very certain death (and by extension his own possible murder of her).

At the end of the day, John turns on the radio in the boat and speaks into it. Claude's voice answers. Claude says that Lux and Vincent are monitoring the radio, and possibly listening right now. He adds that police are searching the cottage grounds; John replies that they won't find anything, and assures Claude that he didn't kill or hurt his wife. Claude laughs and says that he'll keep it between John and himself. He reiterates that Canada isn't a bad place to go, but John doesn't respond. He turns the radio off.

It's important that Claude tells John that Vincent and Lux are listening to their conversation, or may eventually listen to it, because it invalidates any confession or insistence of innocence that John might give. We almost sense that O'Brien is playing with us—going out of his way to make John's innocence ambiguous. One could even say that the novel makes the crime unrealistically *ambiguous—usually, there's at least* some *evidence or proof at hand.*

For the rest of the day and into the night, John eats, drinks, and feels miserable in the cold. He thinks that misery is the point, but can't explain to himself what this means. Perhaps the point is for John to feel the same pain and sadness that Kathy felt.

John signed up for a second tour in Vietnam to try to atone for his actions; here he seems to try to atone for causing Kathy pain by feeling it himself. Though it remains unclear if the misery he is trying to feel is akin to what Kathy felt when he murdered her or a more emotional pain she felt because of his behavior. Is he growing, or is he delusional?

John thinks about his memories. He can't stop thinking about Thuan Yen. Similarly, his memories of his father's death keep replaying in his mind. He thinks that the villagers in Vietnam are never fully dead, since they keep dying over and over again. Late in the night, John drinks vodka, turns on the radio, and voices all of these thoughts. He also says that choice is a myth. People don't choose what they do, they just submit to the laws of the universe—thus, people "fall in love," submitting to the laws of gravity.

John has a sense that traumatic experiences never leave you, that they simply continue over and over. This both keeps alive the dead, in a sense, but only in a way that makes them haunt you. His idea about the lack of choice mirrors to an extent the novel's contention that it isn't possible to simply say that people acted in a way that can be separated from their influences. At the same time, it is a philosophy that allows John to see himself as innocent, or even as the victim, which is convenient. It's not clear that the novel agrees with his philosophy here.

John continues to drunkenly speak into his radio. He conducts a "talk show" with himself, noting that Kathy was "what I had," but adding that she used to chase him around the house with a squirt gun. He says that he fell in love with Kathy, and that she was the girl of his dreams. He asks, rhetorically, if others wouldn't "tell a fib or two" in a similar situation.

John continues to attempt to free himself from guilt, implying that everyone has secrets that they try to hide. John's "talk show" shows that he continues to talk to himself, just as he did in the mirror when he was a child.

At 6:30 am, John throws his radio in the water and continues on through the water.

John has used the radio like a mirror—a way of talking to himself and absolving himself of guilt. Perhaps by throwing the radio in the water he shows that he's willing to move on with his life and confront his choices.

CHAPTER 29: THE NATURE OF THE ANGLES

The narrator notes that Kathy Wade, lying at the bottom of the lake, watches fish swimming. In **Lake of the Woods**, he continues, there is a large body of land called the "Northwest Angle." In this area, there is both enormous beauty and great mystery. There are animals both alive and dead, and presumably the dead bodies of people who've been lost in Lake of the Woods, such as a group of hunters from 1958. Here, the narrator adds, everything is present, and everything is missing.

We've been given many jarring shifts in perspective in this novel, but this is without a doubt one of the strangest. The irony of this description of Kathy is that Kathy *herself doesn't see anything from the bottom of the lake—Kathy is dead. It's the narrator who sees the lake through Kathy's eyes. This is a highly illuminating distinction—though the narrator has been describing events from John and Kathy's perspectives, we understand here that he's only ever seeing the world from his* own *perspective.*

The history of the Northwest Angle begins with glaciers, and then, later, French settlers from the 18th century. The area wasn't charted until 1925, and it was impossible to get there without a plane or boat until 1969. There is a road on the Northwest Angle, and a dock, and a yellow cottage overlooking the water.

The yellow cottage on the Northwest Angle sounds a lot like the cottage from which John just came. The fact that the area is uncharted, and perhaps incapable of being charted completely, gives it the same air of mystery as the lake itself. There is something both frightening and peaceful about this place, much like the lake itself.

In the Northwest Angle, everything is an equal exchange. The surrounding waters change color throughout the year in an endless cycle from blue to gray to white to blue. It is in this place, at least in John's imagination, that Kathy lies, staring up from beneath the water and trying to speak. She cannot speak—she isn't present, and she isn't gone.

The emphasis on equal exchange in this section is supposed to remind us of the equal relationship between John and Kathy that John had prophesized earlier, a relationship that they seemingly never found. The image of Kathy being neither present nor absent parallels John's memories of Vietnam—he can neither remember them perfectly nor entirely forget them. Caught in this limbo, he can never move past the days when he was Sorcerer.

CHAPTER 30: EVIDENCE

The final chapter of evidence begins with Bethany Kee, who says that everyone who worked in admissions at the University of Minnesota talked about Kathy's disappearance constantly. No one could think of any signs that Kathy was unhappy in any way. Perhaps, Kee says, Kathy was a great actress. Lux says that he never found anything in **Lake of the Woods** that incriminated John, and compares the process of investigating a crime to digging a hole in sand—the hole keeps filling up. Vincent Pearson simply argues that John buried Kathy very deep.

The final chapter of evidence seems like a kind of summation of everything we've learned. Thus, Bethany can only conclude that Kathy and John had secrets—she has no idea what these secrets were. Similarly, Vincent and Lux present their "theory" and "fact"-driven interpretations of the events. The former is sure that John killed Kathy; the latter thinks that anything could have happened.

There is a list of quotations about missing people. Jay Robert Nash, an author, notes that there are more than 30,000 cases of missing people each year. Ambrose Bierce, a writer who disappeared in Mexico, writes that he wants to go to the Pacific ports, precisely because they are unfamiliar to him. Ruth Rasmussen argues that John's sudden departure need not mean anything bad—sometimes people leave.

The sheer number of missing persons is a reminder of how much mystery goes unexplained every day. For every Kathy, there are literally hundreds of thousands of other, presumably equally complicated cases of disappearance.

Bethany remembers one clue in Kathy's disappearance: when Bethany asked Kathy when she'd come back from **Lake of the Woods**, Kathy merely laughed—as if, Bethany thinks, she knew something. Sigmund Freud says that biographers inevitably engage in lies and concealment.

This bit of evidence suggests that Kathy never intended to return. Or put another way: this evidence, presented in this way at this time in the book, seems to suggest that Kathy never intended to return. The evidence is never certain, as the narrator himself reveals when he quotes Freud as Freud argues that biographers by their nature can never be reliable, as they must engage in a kind of "magic" to put the pieces of the story together to make a cohesive whole.

Arthur Lux agrees with Vincent that something doesn't add up about Kathy disappearance. He says that John is wrong: **one plus one** never equals zero. Ruth Rasmussen says that Claude was angry when the police dug up the cottage. She adds that she misses Claude, and that he had faith in people. Myra Shaw mentions seeing John at the Mini-Mart just before he left, and says that she was disturbed by the look he gave her.

We return to the theme of one plus one equaling zero. At times, John has interpreted this notion to mean that deception can "cancel out" evil and immoral behavior, but Lux seems to deny that even as he can never get the evidence to add up to anything concrete. Ruth's comment about Claude is contrasted by Myrna's interpretation of him: Claude had faith in John despite all the evidence stacked up against John. Myrna saw John as giving her a disturbing look even as John was trying to act normal and not reveal his anger to her. Both of those different interpretations of John come down to perspective, to whether or not the other character had faith in John.

Edward F. Durkee admits that it was he, not the Peers Commission, who was looking for dirt on John. In a letter to John, Richard Thinbill apologizes for giving testimony that was used to implicate John in the Thuan Yen massacres. He recalls the night that John laughed in the ditch, and insists that he was right all along—it's always better to be honest about what you've done. He adds that he doesn't know how John "stood it" for so many years.

We see the full irony of John's predicament—if he hadn't entered politics—the reason he went to Vietnam in the first place—no evidence of John's wrongdoing would ever have made itself known. Ironically, it's John's own attempts to cover up his guilt that expose his guilt. Thinbill's letter suggests that the only way to alleviate trauma is to talk about it honestly.

Patricia remembers how Kathy heard about John's actions in Thuan Yen. After reading about it, she waited for John to come home. When he did, he gave her a look that seemed to tell her not to ask him. At this moment, Patricia says, she knew that Kathy would always stay with John.

In this version of events, Kathy loves John more than ever after she finds out about his involvement in Thuan Yen. In earlier chapters, it's been suggested that John's actions in Vietnam drove a wedge between him and his wife; here, the opposite is suggested.

A partial list of John's "Box of Tricks" includes a mouse cage, a document of honorable military discharge, and a book called *Marriage: A Guide*.

In a sense, this evidence doesn't show us anything we didn't already know: John treated marriage as another magic trick. At the same time, it conveys the full extent of his cluelessness about how to make Kathy love him, and thus makes John seem like a sympathetic character, not a manipulative one.

Ruth notes that Claude died shortly after John's disappearance, and that he and John developed a close trust for one another. Lux says that John communicated by radio for a while after he left the cottage. Ruth emphasizes that John and Kathy are gone, and says that the narrator should get back to his own life. A quote from Jay Robert Nash suggests that authors are obsessed with missing people.

We're given another confirmation that Claude and John understood one another—Claude didn't give John sympathy, but he seemed to understand what John was going through, without condoning or condemning it. The final two quotes here shift the emphasis from John's neurosis to the narrator's—he's clearly obsessed with Kathy's story, long after the other characters have lost interest.

Various people speculate on where John is now. Ruth is optimistic: she believes that John and Kathy are together in Hudson Bay, in Canada, since they are still in love, just like Ruth and Claude. Tony Carbo suggests that John and Kathy ran away together, since they were both excellent at deception, and since they have nothing to return to, what with their debt and political defeats. Myra Shaw notes the tourist maps John bought, and argues that John wouldn't have killed himself after buying such things. Lux notes that John didn't leave a will, and that he didn't seem particularly upset after Kathy left. It's possible, he admits, that John and Kathy ran off together.

In the end, Kathy's disappearance is like a Rorschach inkblot test: optimists take an optimistic view of the situation, and pessimists assume the worst. We've faced the possibility that John and Kathy ran off together before, but here, it seems like the most likely hypothesis of all—it's highly unlikely that two people would go missing in the same week. This would make the entire case a "double consummation"—John made himself disappear long after the police thought the "trick" was over.

Three more people guess what became of John and Kathy. Bethany notes that Kathy seemed happy and carefree after the end of the election, as if she had something to look forward to. Eleanor argues that people have to be hopeful, and thus hopes that John and Kathy are happy together somewhere. Thinbill acknowledges that John pulled off one final **magic trick** by disappearing. Still, Thinbill says, John still dreams about flies.

All three of these quotations are optimistic to varying degrees. Perhaps the most illuminating is Eleanor's—people "have to" be hopeful, she argues. In other words, it's up to the reader how he or she interprets Kathy's disappearance—in the absence of evidence, one might as well choose the happiest outcome. Thinbill's prophesy is darker—even if John does disappear, he argues, he'll never entirely overcome the trauma or guilt from the war.

In a footnote to Thinbill's final comment, the narrator discusses the peculiarities of memory. Like John, the narrator has his own old man with a hoe, and his own PFC Weatherby. Yet two decades after fighting in Vietnam, the narrator doesn't remember much of being there, aside from stray images of violence of brutality. Similarly, John seemingly forgot about his Vietnam experiences for two decades.

With only a few more pages to go in the novel, we see what motivates the narrator himself. He, too, went through horror in Vietnam—but where John deals with horror by trying to forget about it, the narrator tries to process and transfigure his horror using storytelling. By telling a story about a similar soldier, the narrator faces and studies his own "flies," but indirectly, safely, and perhaps without confronting it fully. Perhaps this obsession is, then, a manifestation of the narrator's own repression of the war.

Perhaps, the narrator continues, humans have the power to grow from trauma by forgetting. Strangely, the narrator says, John Wade's experiences in Vietnam seem much more vivid that the narrator's own. This may be the function of the book for the author—to remind him.

The narrator ends on an optimistic note—people have the ability to overcome trauma and move on. Yet there's something a little terrifying about this possibility—what he's saying is that people have the ability to commit horrible acts of murder and rape, and then live perfectly happy lives afterwards. It's an ambiguous way for the narrator to explain what motivates him. It's strange that the narrator characterizes his experience writing the book as a way of remembering Vietnam, since he's just admitted that he feels distanced from his behavior in the war. One could interpret the narrator's strategy for dealing with trauma as no different than John's—he's shifting the blame to other people, and distancing himself from his actions instead of owning up to what he did. At the same time, the narrator doesn't deny that he committed atrocities; he simply refuses to accept that he is incapable of changing himself through storytelling and reflection.

CHAPTER 31: HYPOTHESIS

The narrator offers one last hypothesis for what happened to John and Kathy. After a book of pessimism and cynicism, the narrator notes, it's time to offer up the possibility of happiness. While happy endings may seem sillier and more childish than gruesome endings, there's no reason that John and Kathy might not have run off together, thinking that they wanted to start over in a faraway place.

Ultimately, the narrator suggests, In the Lake of the Woods *says more about the reader than about the narrator or John and Kathy. There's no way to know to a certainty what happened to John and Kathy; thus, the readers' hypotheses reflect their own idiosyncrasies and beliefs.*

In two consecutive footnotes, the narrator discusses the proper way to end his story. One could believe that John poured boiling water on Kathy and disposed of the body. This is an aesthetic question—perhaps this gruesome scene is wrong simply because it's disgusting—in addition, it's unlikely that John killed Kathy, because he loved her. On the other hand, there's no accounting for taste. Maybe a scenario in which John poured boiling water on Kathy is the best ending, aesthetically speaking.

If there's one big conclusion to draw from O'Brien's novel, it's that there are mysteries in the most innocent and banal of places—John and Kathy's disappearances, one should remember—are only a drop in the bucket compared to the thousands of similar cases that happen every year. Because the universe is full of mystery and uncertainty, the function of art and storytelling is to make sense of the mystery. Even if objective truth isn't possible or feasible, one can still control the function *of evidence—in other words, a novelist can manipulate evidence, acknowledging his own manipulation, with the goal of transforming uncertainty into optimism and happiness.*

Perhaps, the narrator suggests, John rejoined Kathy in Buckete Island or Massacre Island. They reunited, and sat around a fire together, thinking of children's names. Perhaps soon afterwards they made their way to a nearby city and boarded a small plan or a bus. John was able to produce passports and other documents, because he was Sorcerer. As they flew or rode along, John and Kathy might have promised each other to start again and become different people.

The remainder of the novel is an optimistic version of what happened to John and Kathy, following the narrator's argument that in the absence of perfect information one might as well assume the best. Here, John's talent for deception is used for the good of both himself and Kathy, rather than to deceive his wife.

In a footnote to the above passage, the narrator says that his heart tells him to end the novel here. But this would be wrong, he continues, because there is no solution to a mystery as big as the mystery of John and Kathy. The narrator adds that everyone has secrets, and everyone performs vanishing tricks.

The narrator reiterates what he's spent the entire novel proving—everyone has secrets. More to the point, secrets need not be malicious or damaging—on the contrary, secrets are an essential part of the human experience.

John makes a radio broadcast on October 26, 1986. He is drunk. He speaks to his father, asking for his love and respect. He also calls out for Kathy, asking where she is. He never admits knowing where Kathy is. Perhaps this is the biggest mystery of all—how John, a **magician**, could have woken up and discovered that his wife was gone without a trace. John loved his wife, and now that she was gone, he couldn't bear the pain.

We get another version of John's radio broadcast, from the narrator's perspective instead of John's. We can't tell if John is telling the truth or not (he knows that the police are listening), or whether he's lying to himself or not. Based on what the narrator has been arguing, we might as well assume the best, so long as we also acknowledge that our assumption is only an assumption, not the absolute truth.

The novel ends with the image of John alone on **Lake of the Woods**, heading north, "lost in the tangle." The narrator asks if it's possible that John was a man, not a monster, and if he was innocent of everything except his life. In closing, the narrator asks, "Could the truth be so simple? So terrible?"

The narrator has already acknowledged that no single explanation for what happened to John can sum up his personality, or the mystery of how he and his wife disappeared. This hypothesis is no exception—instead of resolving ambiguity, it shows ambiguity in all its glory. "Innocent of everything except his life" is a concise way to describe the paradoxes of free will we've seen in John's behavior. He's both the victim of an unjust war and a cruel father, and a moral agent capable of knowing right and wrong. O'Brien doesn't end his novel with a "solution" to the problem of free will—instead, he implies that John, and all human beings, have to confront these moral problems throughout their lives and will never get to the bottom of that mystery.

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