

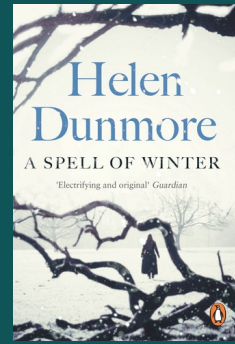
BOOK CLUB
QUESTIONS

www.brunchbookclub.com

Discussion Questions

A Spell of Winter

by Helen Dunmore



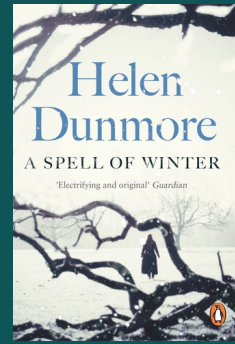
1. *A Spell of Winter* is considered a literary Gothic novel. When it began in the late-eighteenth century, Gothicism emphasised experiences connected with subterranean dungeons, secret passageways, bloody hands, ghosts, graveyards, etc. What motifs does the author use to create this atmosphere? Which eerie features are grounded in reality? Which ones are mysterious?
2. Rob and Cathy's father's dementia is called a 'moral idiocy' by the other characters in the book, and their mother's absence has been a negative influence. Their own incestuous relationship would commonly be branded immoral by the society they (and we) live in. Is there something in their essential natures or their family history that make Rob and Cathy incestuous? Is it their destiny in some way?
3. The author makes great use of closed spaces: the "snow-house" where the first incestuous union occurs (p. 99); the little "cottage" where the abortion takes place (p. 185); the tiny "clearing" where Miss Gallagher dies (p. 203). What relation do these physical landscapes have to the country estate? How do they correspond to the emotional landscape of the characters?
4. When closely observing the paintings of Richard Tandy, Cathy notices that "the sky was so pale, it dazzled, and behind the wood there was a heap of hills, purple as damsons" (p. 86). Intrigued by the style, she suggests it represents a different "reality" and a different "language." Why did Mr. Bullivant want Cathy to see these works? In what kind of reality does Cathy exist?
5. What is the better option for Cathy: Rob, Mr Bullivant or being independent, as she learns to be once the war starts?
6. Mr. Bullivant offers Cathy glimpses of a larger world, and Kate urges her to leave the estate, but she cannot bring herself to act in response. She even states that she's "not sure about anything" except staying at the house (p. 253). Why is Cathy so attached to a house with bad memories? What does this suggest about her psychological complexity?



Discussion Questions

A Spell of Winter

by Helen Dunmore



7. Chapter 18 begins with Kate packing to leave, simply saying: "It's never been my home" (p.223). Do you agree with this? Ownership of the estate, in strictly metaphorical terms, figures prominently throughout the text. How do the characters' feelings toward the house influence their eventual outcomes?

8. Is Rob leaving with Kate a betrayal or a kindness?

9. Scenes of madness are prominent plot devices in this novel. From the helpless father to the domineering governess, or even the exuberant Mr. Bullivant, the reader encounters off-kilter behavior. Give examples of when Cathy's sanity could be called into question. Which characters are the most stable? Which character is accused of madness without the reader experiencing it firsthand?

10. Having abandoned her family, the mother remains a topic mostly avoided by the men at the estate. But Cathy has difficulty forgetting (and forgiving). After Cathy's abortion, she recalls a poem about a woman's stillbirth: "A mother, a mother was born" (p. 196). What does this mean to Cathy? How does the abortion affect Cathy's bond with her mother? Contrast this with Cathy's feelings toward her father.

