

The Shadow Box Character Breakdown and Plot Summary

CHARACTERS

Agnes

Agnes is described as a “middle-aged woman, very neat, very tense, very tired.” According to the author, Agnes is someone who has “tried all her life to do the right thing, and the attempt has made her unsure of herself.” She is Felicity’s oldest daughter and her only surviving child. She shares with the interviewer that she suffers from psychosomatic headaches. They are so much a part of her that she has trouble recognizing them unless they have “gone away.” Living in the shadow of her deceased sister, Claire, it appears that Agnes is consumed with pleasing her mother, with caring for her adequately during her illness, despite ongoing abuse from her mother, and the disruption Felicity’s illness creates in her life. When asked about her sister or her mother, Agnes has little difficulty in relaying all of the details of their lives. But when asked what she will do when her mother dies, she looks at the interviewer in silence. Agnes also admits that after one of her mother’s hospital stays, she wrote a letter in response to her mother’s own letter, posing as Claire. She has continually written such letters, claiming that it gives her mother hope, that “it makes her happy.” But when the interviewer asks Agnes what “makes her happy,” she is startled and immediately redirects the focus back to her mother’s condition.

Beverly

Beverly is a surprise guest at Cottage Two, and much to Mark’s dismay, she is his lover Brian’s colorful ex-wife. Beverly is a world traveler, an adventurer, and a bit of a drunk. She enters the cottage in an expensive, though soiled and torn, evening dress decorated with “bits of jewelry” and hidden by a “yellow slicker raincoat and rubber boots.” Despite her physical attractiveness, she has a rather bawdy sense of humor and throughout the play can be observed swigging from a gin bottle strategically placed in her purse. What makes Beverly an endearing character is her ability to be brutally honest or frank, yet at the same time interject humor into an otherwise grave situation. She is able to illuminate the reality of Brian’s disease both to the patient and to his lover, appeasing or comforting one while alienating the other. Her ability to see Mark’s true character is also apparent. She reminds Mark that Brian needs him.

Brian

Brian is the second terminally ill patient, introduced in the work as “a graceful man... simple, direct, straightforward,” who “possesses an agile mind and a childlike joy about life.” Of all of the characters, Brian seems to have taken considerably more time to ponder his life for the sake of productivity—his past relationships, his accomplishments, his hopes and dreams unfulfilled, as well as what it means to be dying. During a conversation with his ex-wife, when asked about his newfound interest in writing, Brian says, “I realized that there was a lot to do that I hadn’t done yet. So I figured I better... start working.” For Brian, “working” means liquidating or selling off all of his personal assets and burying the money in a sock on Staten Island, visiting Passaic, New Jersey, just to go, or writing an endless stream of literature. Besides being a dreamer of sorts, Brian is the philosophical voice of the work. He is resolved to forgive and forget the fact

that his ex-wife walked out on him. Brian has come to terms with his past, and in doing so, his universe has opened up.

Felicity

Described as being sixty or seventy and wheelchair bound, Felicity is surprisingly feisty, if not somewhat senile, and openly hostile to both the interviewer and her daughter Agnes. She refers to the interviewer as “you and your people” who’ve “all come to look at the dead people.” Felicity’s assessment of her daughter is not encouraging either, telling the interviewer, “She’s a little slow. It’s not her fault. Not too pretty and not too bright,” and warns the interviewer “you have to be careful of Agnes. She’s jealous.” Felicity also appears to be suffering from dementia, speaking to the interviewer of life on her dairy farm as if she were still there, and of her deceased daughter Claire as if still alive. She holds onto these memories, according to her daughter, to keep herself going, to maintain a sense of hope. According to the interviewer, however, these memories may be the only thing keeping her alive.

Interviewer

The mysterious interviewer never reveals him or herself to the audience. This character definitely works for the hospital and appears to be a clinician. Whether he or she is a psychiatrist is unclear. It is also clear to the interviewer’s subjects that meetings with the interviewer are research driven. More importantly, however, it is through the probing questions of the interviewer that the audience becomes privileged to information others do not have.

Joe

Act 1 opens with Joe, a terminally ill patient and resident of Cottage One, speaking to the interviewer. He is described as being a “strong, thick-set man, a little bit clumsy with moving and talking, but full of energy.” It has been six months since Joe has seen his wife and son, and after a long hospital stay, he is a bit anxious about a family reunion. Although Joe reveals to the interviewer his fears about dying, he is quick to point out that it is his wife’s mental state that troubles him deeply. When the interviewer tells Joe that he “seems” to be “fine,” Joe responds half-heartedly, distracted by the momentary arrival of his family, saying, “Oh, me. Yeah sure, but Maggie.” Joe does express his own personal feelings concerning his illness to Maggie.

Maggie

Amid a “mass of bundles, shopping bags and suitcases,” Maggie approaches the cottage, dressed up yet looking a mess. She is not just Joe’s wife, or Steve’s mother, but also the troop leader and family organizer. Despite her obvious leadership abilities, often times Maggie appears to be nervous, easily excitable, and highly agitated by her surroundings as well as by interactions with her husband. She reacts frantically to Joe and his attempts to talk to her about his disease, avoiding connection with Joe’s illness by refusing to discuss it. After months of separation, she tells Joe that he “doesn’t have to tell” her about his condition, that she can see Joe is “fine.” More dramatically, Maggie refuses to walk into the cottage, stating “I’ll go when I’m good and ready.” In a tense moment, she resorts to slapping her son and fleeing from the cottage to avoid entering Joe’s world.

Mark

Male companion and nurse to Brian, Mark is a somber character in the work. In contrast to Brian, he is rather serious, appears to be overly protective, and is a bit standoffish with Brian's ex-wife, Beverly. Upon meeting her, he immediately launches into an explanation of his experiences with Brian, as if the pain and suffering were his own. Mark warns her of Brian's changed appearance in graphic detail. In revealing details of his relationship with Brian to Beverly, the audience discovers entirely different, selfish motives for Mark's devotion to his dying lover. He admits to working as a male prostitute before being invited into Brian's home. For Mark, Brian is his second chance. Now Brian's death means Mark is finished too.

Steve

Steve is Joe's son, an energetic boy of fourteen. Unaware of Joe's illness, Steve becomes the subject of controversy between his father and mother, Maggie.

PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1

The Shadow Box opens with Joe's interview. Joe is a terminally ill patient vacationing on the grounds of a large hospital, a guest in one of three cabins, two of which are otherwise occupied by other patients and their families. He admits that he hasn't seen his family in six months due to excessive hospital bills and the belief that one day he will return home.

Joe shares that he has explained "the whole setup" to his wife, Maggie, and has asked her to relay the information to their young teenage son Steve. He is concerned about his wife's ability to cope with his illness, but for Maggie "it just takes her a little time." Joe explains to the interviewer his own emotional struggles with his condition, admitting his anger and fear.

Joe leaves the interview to meet up with his family back at the cottage. When Maggie arrives, she reacts defiantly, stating "I'm not coming in. You're coming out." In an effort to overcome the awkwardness of their separation and to avoid any discussion of Joe's condition, Maggie engages in small talk but eventually breaks down in Joe's arms. She is unable to accept his condition and insists on silencing Joe when he tries to explain his illness.

Brian is now in the interview area, explaining his own feelings as a patient to the interviewer: "people don't want to let go." He expresses his amazement at the denial of others, exclaiming "the trouble is most of us spend our entire lives trying to forget we're going to die... it's like pulling the cart without the horse." Further on in his reflection, Brian volunteers that his wife left him, demonstrating that he has come to terms with her departure.

Brian's interview is finished, and the action shifts toward the activity in Cottage Two, where Beverly, Brian's ex-wife, and Mark, Brian's gay lover, are meeting for the first

time. Beverly is quick to assess a rather awkward scene, “Well, I think we’ve got that all straight now. He’s dying. I’m drunk. And you’re pissed off.” Mark reports to Beverly that Brian is indeed dying, that his condition is terminal. He then goes into the details of Brian’s health as if he were reciting a laundry list, inspiring Beverly’s sarcasm, “All the details. You’re very graphic.” Mark assumes a protective posture with Beverly, causing her to antagonize him even further. The two do not approve of each other, and Mark, in frustration and disgust, is compelled to exit the cabin, leaving Beverly to wait for Brian.

The scene again shifts to Cottage One. Maggie is unwilling to enter the cabin, stating “I’ll go in when I’m good and ready.” As Maggie’s irritation increases, Joe begins a lighthearted conversation about buying a farm to try to keep things happy and upbeat. The banter ends in a scuffle when Joe and Steve attempt to pull Maggie toward the cabin. Maggie answers with a hard slap to Steve’s face. Steve retreats inside and Joe relents, confused. He discovers that Maggie has not told Steve that he [Joe] is going to die, and angrily turns to Maggie for clarification. Maggie responds “it isn’t true” and runs off, leaving a stunned Joe to sit with his head in his hands.

“Piss poor... your attitude. It’s a piss poor way to treat people,” says Felicity to the interviewer. Felicity is also a patient and a resident of Cottage Three, along with her daughter Agnes. She is now in the interview area, but exhibits a decidedly more hostile attitude toward the interviewer than do the other patients. As she expresses:

I’m the corpse. I have one lung, one plastic bag for a stomach, and two springs and a battery where my heart used to be. You cut me up and took everything that wasn’t nailed down.

Felicity has confused the reality of the hospital grounds with the belief she is at home. In her lunacy, she states that her daughter Claire is “here,” “at the house,” but a few minutes later adds that “no, Claire isn’t with me anymore... Agnes is with me now,” and then calls out to Agnes in the darkness. Agnes arrives, and Felicity commands that she “take her back” to the cottage, but not before humiliating Agnes in the presence of the interviewer.

When Brian arrives at Cottage Two, his reunion with Beverly is a warm and friendly one. Brian updates Beverly on his life, and all of his recent accomplishments. He has liquidated his assets, put them “in a sock” and “buried” them on Staten Island, taken up painting and writing, even spent time in a Holiday Inn in Passaic, [New Jersey](#). Brian’s explanation for this flurry of activity is that he doesn’t “want to leave anything unsaid, undone... not a word, not even a lonely, obscure, silly, worthless thought.” Apart from this moment of elation, Brian tells Beverly “I’m scared to death” when he thinks about dying.

Act I ends in Cottage Three, with Felicity and Agnes. In a struggle to reach her mother, Agnes yells out “Mama!!!! Stop it!!” as her mother sings an unfamiliar, disturbing song. As the scene progresses, the voices of the inhabitants of all three cottages form a

disjointed, confused dialogue of suffering, beginning with Felicity's childlike cries for help, and ending with Mark's reassuring words,

"It'll all be over in a minute. It just seems to take forever."

Act 2

During a small party in Cottage Two, a disgusted Mark again threatens to walk out on Beverly's outrageous, drunken behavior, only to have Beverly carelessly pour a bottle of champagne on him. Brian responds to the conflict, "My God, it's only a jacket. Why are we wasting this time?" After a moving speech, Brian takes Beverly in his arms, "Come on, my beauty, I'll show you a dancer." But the activity is too much for him, and he collapses, then carefully exits to the bedroom.

Agnes confesses to the interviewer that she is writing letters, posing as her dead sister Claire to humor her mother, stating, "I didn't know what to do, I tried to tell her... I tried... but she wouldn't listen." Agnes believes that playing along with her mother "makes her [Felicity] happy." The subject turns to Felicity's suffering, and when Agnes pleads, "Why does she want to keep going like this?" she is shocked by the interviewer's answer, "It's what we call 'making a bargain.' She's made up her mind that she's not going to die until Claire arrives." A troubled Agnes flees the scene but not before promising she will return to speak to the interviewer again.

Mark admits to Beverly that he was at one time a male prostitute until Brian befriended him. He speaks of Brian's illness as if it were his, "It's sick and putrid and soft and rotten and it is killing me." Beverly calls Mark on his bout with self-pity, "from one whore to another," she says, "Brian happens to need you. And if that is not enough for you, then you get yourself out of his life, fast." The struggle ends with Beverly's departure. Before she leaves, she says to Mark, "Don't hurt him with your hope."

Meanwhile, Maggie and Joe have been reminiscing about their life together. The conversation is not a happy one—Joe expresses his anger because he is dying, and his life is ending without a sense of accomplishment. Maggie breaks down to Joe, stating that he should come home because their relationship isn't "finished," that "it's too fast." The scene between Maggie and Joe ends as they enter the cottage. Upon Maggie's request, Joe says, "I'm going to die, Maggie."

At the play's conclusion, Brian and Mark remain together. Agnes, in what seems like a moment of redemption, says to Felicity, "If I told you the truth now, would it matter?" Recognizing her mother's decline, Agnes forgoes telling the truth and proceeds to read the fictitious letter from Claire to Felicity.