The Gardener

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RUDYARD KIPLING

Rudyard Kipling was born in Bombay, India, in 1865 to British parents. After being educated in England, Kipling returned to India in 1882 and began writing short stories for several local newspapers. In 1888 these stories were included in Kipling's first collection of short fiction, *Plain Tales from the Hills*, which described life in India and in Anglo-Indian colonial society. Kipling traveled widely throughout his life, journeying to Asia, South Africa, and the United States. He married Caroline Balestier in 1892 and the pair settled in America, where he wrote his short story collection *The Jungle Book*. After the death of their daughter, Josephine, Kipling and his wife relocated to England where he wrote his novel *Kim*, in 1901, and his children's collection, *Just so Stories*, in 1902. Kipling also wrote extensively about European politics during this period, writing pamphlets in support of the British establishment in their political clashes with Germany, Africa, America, and Ireland. His poetry was extremely popular in Britain, dealing as it did with issues of nationhood and empire, and Kipling was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907. Kipling also wrote anti-German propaganda in the years preceding the outbreak of World War 1. Kipling's son, John, was killed in World War 1, in 1915 at the Battle of Loos, and Kipling wrote several short pieces of fiction and poetry, such as "My Boy Jack," "Mary Postgate," and "The Gardener," which reflected this loss. Kipling continued to write until his death in 1936.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Gardener" follows the aftermath of World War I which broke out between several European countries in 1914 and ended in 1918. There is a distinction between the beginning of the story, which represents the strict social conditions and rigid class systems of British society before World War I, and the aftermath of World War I in which many of these conventions began to be questioned. Britain joined the war when Germany invaded Belgium and France. Millions of young men joined the armed forces and were sent to fight along the Western Front. Kipling was an enthusiastic supporter of World War I, fostered an extreme hatred of Germans, and penned political pamphlets and propaganda encouraging young men to join the war. He used his literary status and political connections to get his son, John, a commission as an officer in the army. John was sent to France and went missing at the Battle of Loos in 1915. After the confirmation of John's death, Kipling wrote several stories, including "The Gardener," dealing with the aftermath of World War I on both a personal and a societal level. "The Gardener" also refers to Kipling's Anglo-Indian background, as India was under colonial rule by Britain during the time that Kipling was writing. Britain retained political control over India until 1947.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although Kipling is often thought of as a Victorian writer, is style is eclectic and varied. "The Gardener," with its themes of World War I and its ambiguous dialogue, closes the gap somewhat between Kipling and the modernist writers who were active during the same period. It is one of several stories of this type from Kipling's collection *Debits and Credits* (1926). In its use of suggestion and broken dialogue, "The Gardener" resembles many of Ernest Hemingway's short stories, although it also borrows heavily from Russian realist writers such as Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy. In its description of respectable British society, both before and after World War I, "The Gardener" bears resemblance to Siegfried Sassoon's *Sherston Trilogy*, Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, and the historical novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. In its description of the war graves "The Gardener" is reminiscent of the work of World War I poets such as Rob Ruggenberg, particularly his poem "In Flanders Fields" which famously depicts the image of poppies growing on the war graves in Holland. In its depiction of the life of Anglo-Indians abroad, and the repressive social conditions of Edwardian British society, "The Gardener" is also similar to E. M. Forster's novels *Howard's End* and *A Passage to India*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Gardener"
- **When Written:** 1920s
- **Where Written:** France
- **When Published:** 1925
- **Literary Period:** Modernist
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Rural England and Normandy in France
- **Climax:** Helen Turrell tells the gardener that she's looking for the grave of her "nephew" (who is actually her illegitimate son, Michael), and the gardener says he will show her where her "son" is buried, immediately intuiting Helen and Michael's true relationship.
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous Friends. Kipling was friends with many famous authors

of the late nineteenth century. He spent time with Mark Twain and Arthur Conan Doyle, and the famous novelist Henry James attended Kipling and Caroline's wedding.

Literature Laureate. Kipling received his Nobel Prize for Literature when he was forty-two years old, making him the youngest winner of the prize to date.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Gardener" tells the story of Helen Turrell, who, at the end of the nineteenth century becomes pregnant with an illegitimate child. Helen lives in India, which is under British colonial rule. She travels to the South of France, where she gives birth to a son, Michael, in secret and then takes him to live in England. In order to maintain her place in British society, Helen invents a story surrounding Michael's birth to hide the fact that she has scandalously had a child out of wedlock. Helen's story is that Michael is really the son of her brother George, who has recently died. It is implied that "everyone in the village" understands that this is not a true story but, because Helen has "nobly" taken on the responsibility of raising Michael, and because she has created a story which fits in with British society's moral conventions, she is accepted among the community.

Michael, like Helen, is accepted into British society and grows up believing that Helen is his aunt, not his mother. When he is a young child, he asks Helen why he cannot call her "mummy," and Helen tells him that she is his aunt but that he may call her "mummy" at bedtime. Michael is pleased with this arrangement but becomes upset when he finds out that Helen has told her friends about their discussion. He threatens to hurt Helen by dying young, foreshadowing his early death in World War I.

Just as Michael is about to start at Oxford University, World War I breaks out in Europe. After enlisting, Michael is sent to Norfolk and then to Normandy with his unit. Michael writes to Helen that "nothing much" is happening where he is, and that his unit has mainly been used for digging trenches and doing maintenance work on the line. In 1915, one year into the war, Michael is killed by a **shell**. Helen is first informed that Michael is missing; she privately believes that "missing always mean dead," but she is encouraged by the community to keep up hope and to send letters to organizations that search for missing men and prisoners of war.

When the war ends, Helen finally receives confirmation that Michael is dead and journeys to Normandy to visit Michael's grave. On the train to her hotel, Helen meets Mrs. Scarsworth. The woman tells Helen that this is her ninth visit to the cemetery; she takes photographs of the graves as commissions for grieving relatives who cannot make the trip themselves. Helen is horrified by Mrs. Scarsworth's open and seemingly callous attitude towards death and is pleased to escape from her in the hotel. Mrs. Scarsworth however, bursts into Helen's room and confesses that her story about the commissions is not true. She has, in fact, been in love with a man who has been killed in the war but, because she is married to someone else, she cannot openly grieve for him. Mrs. Scarsworth rushes off and Helen does not see her again.

The next morning, Helen goes to visit Michael's grave and is given a row number to help her find his headstone. However, when she enters the graveyard, she finds that it is vast and confusing, and she becomes lost. She happens upon a man who is "evidently a gardener" and asks him for help to find her nephew. **The gardener**, looking at Helen with "infinite compassion," tells her that he will "show her where her son lies," instantly intuiting the true relationship between them. The story closes with Helen looking back at the "gardener," who is "bending over his young plants," as she leaves the graveyard.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Helen Turrell – Helen is Michael's mother and the central protagonist. She gives birth to her illegitimate son, Michael, in secret and raises him as her "nephew" to conform with the standards of propriety in British Edwardian society. Helen is a conventional, upper class woman. The fact that she chooses to raise Michael as her nephew—passing him off as the son of her dead brother, George—suggests that Helen cares about upholding cultural norms and retaining an outward appearance of respectability. This also suggests that she believes she has committed a sin by having a child out of wedlock and wishes to be redeemed in the eyes of society; the invented story about Michael's birth achieves this, since everyone quietly intuits that Michael is really Helen's son but calls Helen noble anyways for choosing to raise the boy. Helen is a strong willed and determined character. Her decision to raise Michael, and to hide his illegitimacy, suggests that she has a large amount of self-control. She only allows Michael to call her "mummy" at bedtime even though this clearly hurts him. Years later, when Michael goes missing in World War I, Helen does not allow herself to be comforted by platitudes and privately accepts Michael's death, even though she maintains a public façade of hope for his return. When Helen goes to visit Michael's grave after the war, she begins to lose some of this control while on her desperate search for his grave among the "chaos" of the cemetery. The climax of the story revolves around Helen's interaction with **the gardener** in the graveyard, who symbolically acknowledges Michael's illegitimacy and shows Helen compassion despite this by leading her to where Michael is buried.

Michael Turrell – Michael is Helen Turrell's son, whom she

raises as her "nephew" to hide his illegitimacy and sidestep the scandal it would certainly cause. From a young age, Michael is anxious about the fact that he is not from a traditional family. Helen has told him that she is his "aunt," and that his "parents"—Helen's dead brother, George, and a lower-class girl—were not married. When Michael is a child, he questions Helen about why he is not allowed to call her "mummy," and he becomes upset when Helen talks openly about with her friends about allowing Michael to call her "mummy" only at bedtime. This gives the reader the impression that Michael is already learning to be ashamed of his origins from the society around him. He grows up to be "as accepted" as Helen herself by society. However, the reader gets the impression that his social status still haunts him. Kipling suggests that Michael is treated differently at school because his "parents" were not married and because Edwardian society perceived illegitimate children to be naturally inferior. Like his biological mother, Michael is quite a proud character and tries to brush off his concerns about his background. However, when he is ill, his true concerns come to the surface; in his fevered delirium, he "talks of nothing else." The reader learns that Michael is "valiant" in his eagerness to serve in World War I and comes across as a brave character. Even though he believes that the war will be long and difficult to conclude, he still demonstrates that he believes it is necessary and honorable to fight for his country, mirroring Kipling's own views about patriotism and the necessity of World War I.

Mrs. Scarsworth – Mrs. Scarsworth is a woman who Helen meets on the train to Hagenzeele when she is on her way to visit Michael's grave. Mrs. Scarsworth tells Helen that she is traveling to the cemetery for the ninth time, as she takes commissions from grieving families who cannot make the journey themselves and photographs the graves of their loved ones for them. At first Helen is horrified by this seemingly callous approach to death. Mrs. Scarsworth is talkative and outgoing and attempts to ingratiate herself to Helen. Even though Helen finds the woman overbearing and bothersome, the reader learns that Mrs. Scarsworth and Helen are actually quite similar. Mrs. Scarsworth has had to construct this elaborate story about commissions to cover her real motives for visiting the graveyard so often—she was in love with a man who has been killed in the war. Their relationship was not respectable, because Mrs. Scarsworth is married to someone else, and she has had to keep it a secret and cannot openly grieve or visit his grave. Her confession to Helen is a desperate attempt to communicate her pain and to be understood; the reader gains the impression that Mrs. Scarsworth has been extremely controlled in her public presentation of herself, just like Helen. Unlike Helen, though, Mrs. Scarsworth has reached her breaking point and is overcome by the need to show her real feelings, even if this confession risks her losing her outward appearance of respectability. Shrewdly, Mrs. Scarsworth chooses a stranger, Helen, to confess to, as this will not have any consequences in her everyday life. Kipling implies that, like Helen, Mrs. Scarsworth is a victim of a restrictive society that expects unrealistic levels of emotional control and propriety from people.

George Turrell – George Turrell is Helen's brother, who at the outset of the story, has recently died in India of a fall from a horse. Helen concocts the story of Michael's illegitimate birth around George, suggesting that Michael is actually the son of George's lower-class mistress in India, and that George has always been a person who acts in unconventional and unrespectable ways.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Emma – Emma is Helen's maid who dies before the end of the story and before Michael is killed in World War I. The story implies that Emma sometimes puts ideas in Michael's head about his real parentage, about which Emma is fully informed.

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.

PROPRIETY, PERFORMANCE, AND SECRECY

"The Gardener" is a short story about a woman named Helen Turrell, who keeps the birth of her illegitimate child a secret and raises the boy, Michael, as though she is his aunt and he is the son of her dead brother, George. Helen leaves India when she becomes pregnant (under the pretense of going away to the South of France for her health) and brings the boy to England in order to avoid the scandal, which Michael's illegitimate status would cause in both Anglo-Indian and British society in the early 1900s. The rigid moral conventions of British Edwardian society make it impossible for Helen to speak openly about her experience. According to these moral conventions, Helen is doing the "noble" and "honorable" thing by raising Michael herself while maintaining an image of propriety by calling herself his aunt. However, these same moral conventions make it necessary for Helen to engage in behaviors that would be considered immoral, such as lying and slandering her dead brother. The importance of conforming to moral conventions in British Edwardian society is conveyed by the lengths that Helen is willing to go to in order to align herself with the society's standard of behavior.

According to the moral conventions of British society, Helen is behaving correctly by denying the true nature of her relationship with Michael and inventing a story around his

birth. Kipling opens "The Gardener" by stating that "everyone in the village knew that Helen Turrell did her duty by all her world," and then gives an account of the story of Michael's birth, which Helen has concocted. This suggests that the villagers quietly realize that Michael is Helen's son but are willing to play along with this fake origin story for the sake of propriety. The community's acceptance allows Helen to maintain a false (and ironic) image of herself as an altruistic woman who is "as open as the day" and has nothing to hide. The irony of this is that it implies that people in British society would rather be complicit in a lie than deviate from their strict moral conventions or tolerate someone who has gone against the grain of proper behavior. The fact that "everyone in the village" knows Helen's story suggests that almost everyone around her is willing to ignore the truth and to say one thing while doing another for the sake of propriety and appearance.

Although she portrays herself as someone who values honesty, Helen is being blatantly dishonest about Michael. The outward respectability, which Helen is required to put on in order to maintain her place in society, has a negative impact on her ability to be a "moral" person in other ways. Helen's need to create a believable story about Michael's birth leads her to slander her dead brother, George. By implying that George had "many fresh starts given and thrown away," Helen paints a picture of her brother as a careless and ungrateful person who did not care for his own or his family's reputation. Helen's invention of George's lover, "the daughter of a retired non-commissioned officer," also supports Helen's image of British conventional propriety. Claiming that Michael's mother has sold the baby to her, Helen states that "people of that class would do almost anything for money." This puts a distance between Helen, who is upper class and wants to be seen as respectable, and "people of that class," who are evidently from a poorer background. It is convenient for Helen to blame her own mistake on someone from a lower-class background, as she knows that this story will be widely accepted. It removes responsibility from Helen, and from her own class more generally, as the birth of illegitimate children in the early 1900s was something associated with poorer, less "respectable" members of society.

Helen's dishonesty not only contrasts with her ability to be a "moral" person, but also seems to conflict with her underlying personality and emotions. Despite being outwardly dishonest, Helen is honest with herself internally. For example, Helen allows Michael to call her "mummy" at bedtime. This demonstrates that Helen feels a conflict between her external portrayal of herself as Michael's aunt and her close maternal bond with him, which flourishes in private. Many years later, when Michael goes missing during World War I, Helen is surrounded by people who "preach hope" that he might still be alive and "tell her tales" of missing relatives who have been "miraculously restored." Rather than deluding herself in this way, Helen privately acknowledges that "missing always means dead." Externally however, Helen plays along with the social etiquette of having hope and sending out letters to try and recover Michael. These socially acceptable "rituals" maintain a sense of propriety throughout the war, rather than allowing people to give in to grief and despair, which would perhaps have been considered improper and unpatriotic. The introduction of Mrs. Scarsworth, towards the end of the story, provides a mirror through which both Helen and the reader can re-evaluate Helen's experience, as well as the effects that restrictive social conventions have had on her life. Mrs. Scarsworth's confession that, when she isn't telling lies, she "has to act 'em" and "to think 'em always" demonstrates the control with which Helen has also had to manage her delicate situation in society, both in her experience of raising Michael and in dealing with his death.

As "The Gardener" comes to a close, Kipling demonstrates the wider social implications of restrictive social conventions in British society. The introduction of Mrs. Scarsworth towards the end of the story suggests that many people are secretly in the same position as Helen and are forced to keep parts of their lives a secret in order to maintain a façade of propriety and hide the fact that they have transgressed the boundaries of societal convention.

CHRISTIANITY AND COMPASSION

While searching for Michael's grave in a "merciless sea of black crosses" in the graveyard at Hagenzeele, Helen meets a man she assumes to be **the gardener**, tending to the war graves. The gardener, who represents Christ, offers to show Helen "where her son lies." The fact that this man helps Helen in her moment of need, and that he immediately knows Michael is her son even though she has carefully introduced herself as the boy's aunt, point to the compassion Christ shows to humanity. Furthering the story's biblical underpinnings, Helen is associated with the figure of Mary Magdalene because she is a woman who has lived a sinful life (according to the conventions of the time) by having sex out of wedlock, but who has been redeemed through her "honorable" decision to raise Michael as her nephew. The closing message of forgiveness and compassion in "The Gardener" suggests that British society's rigid restrictions on behavior are impossible to live up to, and that transgressions should be forgiven. Rather than holding people to such high standards, and judging them when they fail, the ending of "The Gardener" seems to suggest that it is kinder, and more Christian, to forgive people and allow them to be honest, rather than to ignore them when they run into difficulties.

In Kipling's story, the gardener is strongly associated with the restoration of order and with new life, thus linking him with the figure of Christ. In preparing to visit Michael's grave, Helen has been told "how easy and how little it interfered with life to go

and see one's grave" (meaning the war grave of a relative who has been killed). However, when she arrives at the graveyard, it is far from easy. She can "distinguish no order or arrangement" among the graves and becomes lost and confused until she meets a man who is "evidently the gardener." The fact that the gardener helps Helen makes sense of the chaos within the graveyard, leading her to the place she is looking for, is suggestive of Christ's ability to provide clarity in life and represents the biblical idea that God created the world out of chaos. The contrast between the "merciless" mass of graves and the "infinite compassion" with which the gardener looks at Helen represents the climax of the story. The fact that the man is a "gardener," and that Helen sees him "bending over the young plants," is representative of the Christian message of resurrection, redemption, and new life, even after the terrible losses of World War I, which the graveyard consequently represents. The images of "young plants" and "fresh-sown grass" also reflect the cycles of nature and the seasons, as life and death follow on from each other, with life renewing in the spring after winter.

The fact that the gardener instantly understands Helen's secret suggests that nothing is hidden from Christ. The gardener, standing in for Christ, is associated with "mercy" and relief in the story, as the reader knows that Helen has been carrying this secret "burden" alone for a long time. Kipling opens "The Gardener" with an excerpt from his poem "The Burden," which appears in full at the end of the story. The poem references the story of Christ's Resurrection, through its repetition of the line "rolled the stone away." This refers to the tomb in which Jesus's body was laid after the Crucifixion—a tomb that was found empty, with the stone rolled away from the entrance, after his Resurrection. The poem also associates the heavy "stone" with the heavy "burden" of suffering and grief, which the poem suggests God can relieve just as he "rolled the stone away" from Christ's tomb. The poem is emblematic of the events in "The Gardener" as Helen is relieved of the burden of her secret through her interaction with the gardener.

Just as the gardener stands in for Christ, Helen is associated with the figure of Mary Magdalene throughout the story, both in her dealings with conventional society and in her interaction with the gardener. By giving birth to an illegitimate son, Helen would have been given the status of a fallen woman—a woman who had transgressed the conventions of British society. The fact that she "nobly" chooses to raise Michael, and the esteem this wins her among the community, gestures to Mary Magdalene's redemption and return to respectability in her transformation from a prostitute to one of Jesus's disciples. Helen's transgression does not affect only herself but also Michael, who is born illegitimate and, therefore, considered socially inferior. Helen is redeemed through her love for Michael, whom she is devoted to even though their relationship is looked down upon by society, just as Mary Magdalene is redeemed by her genuine devotion to Jesus.

Helen has compromised herself morally, by lying, because of her love for Michael. When the gardener addresses her secret, he recognizes this and acknowledges, for the first time, her sacrifice and her love for her son rather than the shame of the boy's existence. Helen's real redemption comes not from society calling her "noble," but in her interaction with the gardener at the end of the story. While she has been tolerated by her community, the gardener immediately knows her secret and, in his display of "compassion," is able to relieve her of the burden of her secret and the shame that she has felt as a result of society's unforgiving moral code. Helen's interaction with the gardener also mirrors Mary Magdalene's interaction with Jesus after his Resurrection in the Book of John 20:10-18. Finding Jesus's tomb empty, Mary Magdalene meets Jesus and mistakes him for the gardener. She asks him to help her find Jesus's body, mirroring Helen's search for Michael's grave in "The Gardener." Like Mary Magdalene, Helen's redemption throughout the story is signified, not only by her renewed respectability from society's point of view, but, more importantly, in her redemption through Christian faith and in the recognition of her acts of love and sacrifice.

The fact that the gardener immediately knows Helen's secret is representative of the fact that, although Helen has tried to hide the truth from the people around her, her secret is known to and forgiven by God. The story's closing image of the gardener tending the young plants in the graveyard leaves readers with the Christian message of hope and renewal and encourages them to emulate the gardener's compassion and tenderness.

WORLD WAR I

The bulk of Kipling's "The Gardener" follows Helen Turrell as she deals with the fallout of her son Michael's death in the wake of World War I. A staunch patriot, Kipling wrote propaganda for the British government in support of World War I. He had a reputation as an enthusiastic supporter of British Imperialism, expressed strong political opposition to German expansion, and encouraged his own son, John, to sign up for the forces. However, like many Europeans, Kipling was surprised by the scale of the war, the extent of the destruction, and the heavy loss of life that it caused. Though not opposed to war in general, he believed that World War I was poorly executed. After his son was killed, Kipling joined the Imperial War Grave Commission, organizing the burial and commemoration of young men killed on the battlefield. The climax of "The Gardener" takes place at a war graveyard, imbuing the story with Kipling's own grief for his son and for Britain's sons more generally. Despite the palpable heartache for Britain's fallen soldiers, "The Gardener" ultimately takes a nuanced approach to the war. Kipling criticizes Britain for its poor execution and the resulting loss of life, while still elevating the war as

necessary and honorable.

Michael's decision to enlist at the outbreak of WWI is treated ambiguously in the story, echoing Kipling's own nuanced opinion of the war. At times, Kipling seems to regret that the war has been necessary. He notes that Michael is "no fool" and that "the war took him just before what was likely to have been a most promising career," squarely placing the blame of Michael's death on the war itself. The use of the phrase "took him" suggests an unstoppable force, pointing to the war's magnitude and the extreme loss of life which, in Kipling's view, could have been avoided if the war had been fought more effectively or if Britain had been better prepared for its scale. Similarly, the fact that Kipling uses the term "holocaust," meaning mass destruction, to describe the "public school boys who threw themselves into the First Line" is also suggestive of the enormous losses that WWI produced. Using the term "holocaust" frames the war as a slaughter, rather than a fair fight, from which these young men had little chance of returning. This demonstrates Kipling's critical stance on the tactics that were employed during the war, such as trench warfare which was notorious for gaining little ground but for causing high casualties.

This critical tone however, is undercut when Kipling describes Michael talking "valiantly" about enlisting, suggesting that it is noble to want to fight for and defend one's country. This moment provides a characteristic expression of patriotism for the writer, depicting the war as necessary and the sacrifice of British soldiers as honorable. Before Michael enlists, Helen is blasé about the war and says that "it couldn't possibly last beyond Christmas." Michael knows better and tells Helen that they will have "no such luck." This supports Kipling's description of Michael as "valiant" and demonstrates Kipling's respect for the soldiers and his attitude of support for the war. Although Michael hopes that the war will be over soon, he is realistic enough to know that men like him need to fight so that Britain can be protected from German invasion.

Although Kipling had previously penned propaganda emphasizing the glory of war, "The Gardener" frames WWI in a more mundane and realistic way, reflecting the everyday experience of soldiers. Michael's battalion is used for necessary manual labor, digging trenches on various parts of the line. When Michael is killed in Loos, his death is not one the reader associates with "valiant" warfare. Instead, Michael is killed in an impersonal way, by a **shell**, while he is posted somewhere with "nothing special doing." This demonstrates Kipling's observation of the actual experience of WWI, from the perspective of a soldier's relative, as opposed to the glorious descriptions of combat in war propaganda.

The mundane approach that Kipling takes to Michael's death is mirrored in Helen's plodding and mechanical experience of grief. Helen connects her grief to the manufactured item—the shell—which has killed Michael and remembers a time when he "had taken her over to a munition factory." Like the shell that Helen sees being made, which is described as a "wretched thing," Helen feels that she is being "manufactured" into a "bereaved relative," just as the shell has been "manufactured" into an instrument that creates bereaved relatives. Helen also remarks upon the mechanical form her grief takes and the fact that, "moving at a great immense distance, she sat on various relief committees and held strong views—she heard herself delivering them—about the site of the proposed village War Memorial." This description of Helen "at an immense distance," and the disassociated idea that she "heard herself" delivering speeches, suggests the shock of grief and the difficulty in resuming normal life after suffering a deep loss. The fact that almost everyone in the village has lost someone, and that they are "old in experience of war" by the time Michael is killed, demonstrates the magnitude of losses in the war. These losses led to the development of a new social etiquette around grief after WWI, which involved remaining hopeful and patriotic, and it is this which Helen feels pushed on her by society after Michael's death.

Although Kipling had previously written propaganda supporting World War I and encouraging young men to enlist, the reality of the war was bleak for everyone involved. New weapons technology meant that the loss of life was much higher than expected, and the anonymous nature of death for many of the soldiers, like Michael in the story, led to the necessity to build new "ritual" around this. This is reflected in the cemeteries full of unmarked graves created to deal with the numbers of men whose bodies were never found, which Kipling describes in "The Gardener." Although Kipling's views on WWI are somewhat complicated, the story does suggest that the end of the war is a "relief," even though, in Kipling's view, Britain's entry into the war was very necessary. The Armistice is described in terms of a dawn that "broke over" Helen; this metaphorical sunrise points to renewed life and mercy, connecting the end of the war to the image of Christ as **the gardener** and the mercy that he shows to Helen.

SYMBOLS

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

THE GARDENER

The titular gardener functions as a symbol of Christ, as well as the Christian message of redemption. Helen Turrell meets the gardener in a war cemetery, where she has come to visit the grave of her son, Michael, who has died in World War I. As the story explains, Michael is really Helen's illegitimate son, but she raised him as her "nephew" for the sake of propriety. Helen meets this man,

who she assumes to be the gardener, in the cemetery while she is lost among the graves. His compassion and instant understanding of her secret (even though she carefully and specifically introduces herself to him as Michael's aunt) symbolize Christ's forgiveness as part of the Christian message. This man tells Helen that he will "show her where her son lies," swiftly unearthing her secret and freeing her of the burden of having to pretend to be the boy's aunt. The gardener's words also symbolize eternal life after death and the reunion of separated loved ones through the promise of Heaven.

The fact that the man is described as a gardener is also symbolic of Mary Magdalene's meeting with Christ in the biblical story of Christ's Resurrection in the Book of John. While looking for Christ's body outside the tomb in which he has been buried, Mary Magdalene meets a man whom she thinks is the gardener, but is really the resurrected Jesus. She asks the man to help her find Christ's body, just as Helen asks the gardener in the cemetery to help her find Michael's grave. The idea of the man being a gardener in Kipling's story is also symbolic of Christ caring for human souls just as the gardener in the story is tending to the "young plants" in the graveyard. Christ's compassion towards Helen, despite his knowledge of her secret, demonstrates the potential for forgiveness in the Christian message and the image of the "young plants" suggest rejuvenation, or new life after death, after World War I.

THE SHELL

In "The Gardener," Kipling uses the image of a shell projectile as a symbol of the manufactured etiquette that dominates British society, even during the traumatic events of World War I. At one point in the story, Michael takes Helen to see shells being made at a munition factory. Helen sees the shell as something being manufactured and extends this image to the whole experience of loss and grief during World War I in Britain. She compares the manufacture of the shell to the manufacture of herself "into a bereaved relative." Although people in her community are outwardly sympathetic towards Helen, and others who have lost relatives in the war, there is something impersonal and manufactured in their attitude towards loss more generally. Instead of acknowledging that Michael is dead, they instead offer platitudes and encourage her to go through the process of filling out forms and appealing to organizations to try and find Michael. This attitude seems to her, not a mode of comfort, but a means of putting off the inevitable news of Michael's death and avoiding difficult conversations about grief. Once enough time has gone by, and no news of Michael has been returned, confirming Helen's belief that he must be dead, she goes through the process of visiting his grave which also involves several stages, echoing the shell's manufacturing process. Although this framework of ritual and organization appears to be helping Helen move linearly through the process of grief, it does not actually achieve anything beyond telling her what she already knows: that Michael is dead. The number she receives at the war grave does not help her find Michael's grave, and it is only when she receives help from **the gardener** that she receives the compassion and personal sympathy that she has been denied by the cold and mechanical attitude towards grief in British society.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Borzoi edition of *Collected Stories* published in 1994.

The Gardener Quotes

❝ Everyone in the village knew that Helen Turrell did her duty by all her world, and by none more honorably than by her only brother's unfortunate child. The village knew, too, that George Turrell had tried his family severely since early youth, and [...] after many fresh starts given and thrown away, he [...] had entangled himself with the daughter of a retired non-commissioned officer, and had died [...] a few weeks before his child was born.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell, George Turrell, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 827

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator begins the story by summarizing one of the central elements of the plot: the idea that Helen Turrell is "honorably" raising a child, Michael, who is not her own but is the illegitimate child of her brother, George, and an Indian girl.

Throughout the course of the story, the reader learns that Michael is, in fact, Helen's illegitimate son and that the story about her brother has been fabricated to protect her reputation. The fact that "everyone in the village" knows that Helen does "her duty" and behaves "honorably" is intended ironically as Helen's conduct, in having sex and becoming pregnant outside of marriage, is highly dishonorable according to the standards of Edwardian British society. The fact that Helen's brother, George, is dead is convenient for Helen as it allows her to construct an image of him as a troublemaker who does not care for his own, or his family's, reputation. By suggesting that George has had "many fresh starts" and "thrown" them away, Helen

suggests that George's affair is typical of his character.

"Everyone" understands that Helen is lying, yet they allow her to maintain the illusion of propriety and an image of herself as a "noble" and put-upon woman who is cleaning up her brother's mess. Kipling suggests that British society is hypocritical in this sense, because it would rather accept a blatant lie than openly acknowledge an uncomfortable and unconventional relationship in its midst.

> All these details were public property, for Helen was as open as the day, and held that scandals are only increased by hushing them up. She admitted that George had always been rather a black sheep, but that things might have been much worse if the mother had insisted on her right to keep the boy. Luckily, it seemed that people of that class would do almost anything for money.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell, George Turrell, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 828

Explanation and Analysis

Helen projects an image of herself as an "open" woman by making the details of her life "public property." This is intended ironically because the story that Helen uses to explain her relationship with Michael is a lie.

Helen's presentation of herself as a woman who wants nothing to do with "scandals" is an attempt to deflect criticism of herself and her story. By being "open" about this falsely constructed past, Helen is able—on a surface level, at least—to win over the people in her community by appearing to uphold social conventions.

Helen expands upon her story about her brother's misconduct, and she also attempts to explain away the role of Michael's supposed mother in the scenario. Suggesting that Michael's mother is Indian, and therefore of a lower-social status than Helen herself, Helen uses racial stereotypes from the British colonial period to suggest that this woman is inherently immoral and "will do almost anything for money." This is clearly something that people in Helen's community are willing to believe about people from different cultures and social groups (even though in this case they know that the story is a lie) and demonstrates some of the intolerant social attitudes from this period. Although Kipling was known for his British patriotism, "The Gardener" is critical of some of the less tolerant aspects of British Edwardian society.

> In a few years Michael took his place, as accepted as Helen—fearless, philosophical, and fairly good-looking. At six he wished to know why he could not call her "Mummy," as other boys called their mothers. She explained that she was only his auntie, and that aunties were not quite the same as mummies, but that, if it gave him pleasure, he might call her "Mummy" at bedtime, for a pet name between themselves.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 828

Explanation and Analysis

Michael is accepted into the community, despite his illegitimate status, because Helen has lied and carefully constructed a backstory for him which fits in with the community's, and British Edwardian society's, standards of propriety.

When Michael is six, the reader is given the first insight into the confusion he feels surrounding his relationship with Helen and his position in the community more generally. Although he does not understand that he is illegitimate, or even what the difference is between "aunties" and "mummies," Michael is aware that he is different from other people because of his interaction with other children his own age. The reader is told that Michael is "as accepted as Helen," but the reader is also aware that Helen is only just accepted by the community in the village, who are aware of her misconduct and who tolerate her merely because she lies to maintain an image of propriety.

Helen tries to placate Michael by partially giving in to his wish to call her "mummy," but she takes care not to reveal the truth and, therefore, risk his telling someone and causing a "scandal." The fact that she wishes to bring him "pleasure" suggests that Helen genuinely does love Michael and wants to make him happy. Michael, like most children, wants to feel accepted and be like the other children in his community.

> At ten years old, after two terms at prep. school, something or somebody gave him the idea that his civil status was not quite regular. He attacked Helen on the subject, breaking down her stammered defenses with the "family directness."
>
> "Don't believe a word of it," he said cheerily, at the end. "People wouldn't have talked like that if my people had been married. But don't you bother, Auntie. I've found out all about my sort in English Hist'ry [...] There was William the Conqueror to begin with, and—oh, heaps more, and they all got on first-rate. 'T'wont make any difference to you, my being *that* – will it?"

Related Characters: Michael Turrell (speaker), Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 829

Explanation and Analysis

As Michael grows up, the differences in how he is treated become more pronounced and start to cause him anxiety. It is not clear what Michael has heard about himself, but the fact that he says, "people wouldn't have talked like that" if his parents "had been married" suggests that he has overhead negative gossip about his illegitimate status, which he doesn't "believe a word of."

Michael, rightly, suspects that people would treat him with more respect were he not illegitimate. This leads him to worry about his future place in society, which views illegitimate children as inferior to those with married parents. To disguise his fears from Helen—who is upset by Michael's questioning and "stammers" under his "attack"—Michael tries to underplay his worries and suggests that being illegitimate cannot be too much of a problem because many historical figures, such as William the Conqueror, were illegitimate and "got on first-rate."

Ironically, Michael has taken Helen's presentation of herself as honest at face value and, therefore, has grown up to be an honest person himself, inheriting the "family directness." Although Michael is trying to protect Helen by downplaying his concerns, he does ask her if it could change how she feels about him. The italicization of "*that*" suggests that Michael views illegitimacy as something disgusting or distasteful. This shows how deep Michael's fears go and just how intolerant British society could be, as Michael is genuinely worried that Helen, who clearly loves him, will also look down on him because of his social status.

> "All right. We won't talk about it anymore if it makes you cry." He never mentioned the thing again of his own will, but when, two years later, he skillfully managed to have measles in the holidays, as his temperature went up to the appointed one hundred and four, he muttered of nothing else, till Helen's voice, piercing at last his delirium, reached him with the assurance that nothing on earth or beyond could make a difference between them.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell (speaker), Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 830

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of his conversation with Helen, about the gossip he has heard about himself at school, Michael decides that he and Helen should not talk about this subject "anymore if it makes" her cry. The reader can glean from this that Michael is learning, from the society roundabout him, to avoid difficult conversations and emotional displays, which British society considers improper.

Although Michael has tried to avoid upsetting Helen by never referring to his illegitimacy, his fears have not been removed but have simply been repressed. The fact that these things still worry him becomes obvious when Michael is ill with a fever and, in his delirium, "talks of nothing else." This supports the story's larger point that secrets, although they may be covered up, are still present under the surface and are a "burden" to those who carry them.

Helen tries to comfort Michael and it is clear that one of his biggest fears, which he talks of in his sleep, is that Helen will love him less because of his illegitimacy. Helen tries to reassure Michael that "nothing on earth or beyond" could come between them and the fact that these words finally "pierce his delirium" suggest that the bond between them is very strong and overrides societal conventions in private, if not in public.

> Since Michael was no fool, the War took him just before what was like to have been a most promising career. He was to have gone up to Oxford, with a scholarship, in October. At the end of August, he was on the edge of joining the first holocaust of public-school boys who threw themselves into the Line.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 830

Explanation and Analysis

Despite the prejudice he has faced as a result of his illegitimate status, Michael has done well at school and received a place at Oxford University. His finishing school coincides with the outbreak of World War I, which began in Europe in 1914.

Kipling was a patriotic writer and politically in favor of World War I. He felt that the Germans, who had invaded Belgium and France, were a threat to Britain and needed to be resisted with force. Although Kipling's stance on this did not change throughout his life, his son John was killed in World War I and "The Gardener" is written in the aftermath of this event. As a result of this, Kipling's tone in his discussion of the war is quite nuanced as, although he felt it was an important cause, it led to an enormous loss of life and affected Kipling personally.

There is evidence of this nuance in this passage concerning Michael's enlistment. The idea that "the War took" Michael is written in the passive voice and gives the impression that the War is a predatory or inevitable force which sadly, although it was necessary, claimed many lives. The use of the word "holocaust" also suggests the large-scale genocide caused by the war. The idea that young men "threw themselves into the Line" also mirrors the eagerness to join up among young men in Europe prior to the outbreak of war. Kipling wrote propaganda for the war effort and contributed to this eagerness to fight.

Helen had been shocked at the idea of direct enlistment.

"But it's in the family," Michael laughed.

"You don't mean to tell me that you believed that old story all this time?" Helen said [...] "I gave you my word of honor—and I give it again—that—that—it's alright. It is indeed."

"Oh, *that* doesn't worry me. It never did," he replied valiantly. "What I meant was, I should have got into the thing sooner if I'd enlisted—like my grandfather."

Related Characters: Helen Turrell, Michael Turrell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 830

Explanation and Analysis

Helen is shocked that Michael has been considering direct enlistment before he receives his commission and becomes a ranking officer. Direct enlistment was more common among lower-class men and a man of Michael's wealthy social status would expect to join the army as an officer.

Michael's statement that direct enlistment is "in the family" is a reference to his "grandfather"—the father of the Indian girl whom Helen claims is Michael's mother. It is unclear to the reader how much of the truth Michael has heard from Helen. Helen's shock that Michael has "believed that old story all this time" suggests that she has never made the truth clear to him but expects him to have read between the lines and understood that these types of stories are often used to disguise scandals in British society. Helen tries to convince Michael that it is "alright" that he is illegitimate and that he should not think of his status as lowered because of this, which is what she thinks his words suggest.

Michael replies "valiantly" that this "doesn't worry" him and that the only reason he wanted to enlist directly was to join the fighting sooner, dismissing her fears that he is ashamed of his status. Michael's valiance here further reflects Kipling's nuanced approach to World War I as, although it is tragic that Michael is killed, it is commendable that he is so keen to fight for his country.

In France luck again helped the battalion. It was put down near the Salient, where it led a meritorious and unexacting life, while the Somme was being manufactured; and enjoyed the peace of Armentières and Laventie sectors when the battle began.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 831

Explanation and Analysis

Michael's battalion are described as being helped by "luck" because they manage to avoid much of the combat, and, in particular, the worst battles—such as the battle of the Somme, which claimed more than one million lives.

Kipling's nuanced and realistic approach to war is shown in this passage. Although it is commendable that Michael has joined the army and has demonstrated patriotism and a desire to help his country, this does not detract from the horror of combat itself. This demonstrates the soldiers'

bravery through their willingness to sacrifice their everyday comforts, their careers, and often their lives, for the sake of their country.

Kipling's descriptions of Michael's time in the army, while he is stationed in Normandy, also give the reader insight into the practical and mundane aspects of the war, such as the construction of the battlefields—which Michael's battalion partakes in—and the maintenance of the trenches. The essential nature of these tasks is reflected in the fact that Michael's battalion lead a "meritorious" life in Normandy and demonstrate Kipling's detailed knowledge of army life in this period.

❝ A month later, and just after Michael had written Helen that there was nothing special doing and therefore no need to worry, a shell-splinter dropping out of a wet dawn killed him at once. The next shell uprooted and laid down over the body what had been the foundation of a barn wall, so neatly that none but an expert would have guessed that anything unpleasant had happened.

Related Characters: Helen Turrell, Michael Turrell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 831

Explanation and Analysis

It is tragic and in keeping with the story's general tone of irony that Michael is killed when he is not engaged in combat and there is "nothing special doing." The reader also feels a greater sense of tragedy for Helen since she has just been comforted by Michael's reassurance that she should not worry right before he is killed.

Kipling's use of the word "dropping" suggests the abruptness of Michael's death. It also gives an impression of the randomness of death during the war with the image of the deadly shell falling suddenly on an ordinary, wet morning. The shell is not aimed at Michael but kills him nonetheless.

The image of the "barn wall" disguising Michaels body "so neatly that none but an expert would have guessed anything unpleasant had happened" is suggestive of the theme of disguise in the story more generally. Helen has covered up her misconduct in order to hide the ugly truth and pretend that "nothing unpleasant has happened" and, throughout the story, the reader learns that this is a tendency of British society overall. Extending this metaphor to serious themes such as World War 1 and death suggests the power of denial and self-delusion, which is expanded upon later in the story with the descriptions of the British ritual surrounding grief after the war.

❝ Helen, presently, found herself pulling down the house-blinds one after another with great care, and saying earnestly to each one: "Missing always means dead." Then she took her place in the dreary procession that was impelled to go through a series of unprofitable emotions. The Rector, of course, preached hope and prophesized word, very soon, from a prison camp. Several friends too, told her perfectly truthful tales, but always about other women, to whom, after months and months of silence, their missing had been miraculously restored.

Related Characters: Helen Turrell (speaker), Michael Turrell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 832

Explanation and Analysis

When Helen receives word that Michael is missing, she immediately acknowledges privately that he is probably dead. The image of Helen pulling down her blinds and addressing the insides of them with the words "missing always means dead" suggests that this is a purely private and instinctive response, taking place on the inside of her house and experienced by Helen alone.

This impression is further supported by the fact that Helen must present a different face to the outside world when it comes to the subject of Michael's death. As Kipling describes, in public Helen is "impelled to go through a series of unprofitable emotions." She is encouraged by the people in her community—the Rector, her friends—to hold out hope for Michael's return. Though this makes them feel better by giving them something proper and polite to talk to Helen about—rather than addressing the uncomfortable issue of hopeless grief—it is "unprofitable" for Helen because believing them will only cause her pain and disappointment.

Although Helen is dishonest with the outside world, she is

honest with herself. The fact that the Rector "preaches hope," rather than offering honest compassion and sympathy for her loss, is emblematic of a flaw in British society more generally, in which even the Church cares more about propriety than genuine connection with those in pain. This message is starkly contradicted by the simple compassion and kindness of the gardener at the story's end.

> Helen did and wrote and signed everything that was suggested or put before her. Once, on one of Michael's leaves, he had taken her over a munition factory, where she saw the progress of a shell from blank-iron to all but the finished article. It struck her at the time that the wretched thing was never left alone for a single second; and "I'm being manufactured into a bereaved next of kin," she told herself, as she prepared her documents.

Related Characters: Helen Turrell (speaker), Michael Turrell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 832

Explanation and Analysis

Following the advice of the people around her—not because she believes Michael is alive, but to keep up an acceptable image of propriety—Helen writes to organizations to try and retrieve Michael and muses on the atmosphere of surveillance and conformity which dominates the grieving process in British society. Rather than being allowed to grieve for Michael in peace Helen must put on an elaborate show of activity and hope in order to conform with societal pressures.

This process reminds Helen of the process of manufacture which she witnessed at the munition factory, when Michael took her to see a shell being made. The fact that the shell is "never left alone" demonstrates the invasive nature of conformity in British society and the fact that Helen is not "left alone" by her peers, who, instead of helping her by acknowledging her grief, demand a performance of propriety from her. This represents British attitudes during World War I, which focused on approaching the war with stoicism and a "stiff upper lip" rather than appearing to wallow in grief or defeatism, which would have been considered unpatriotic.

The emphasis on the "manufacture" of the "wretched thing" suggests the false nature of these displays of optimism in that they are "manufactured." Comparing these social conventions to the "manufacture" of a weapon suggest the brutality inherent to a society that denies people the mercy of compassion during times of grief.

> The agony of being waked up to some sort of second life drove Helen across the Channel, where, in a new world of abbreviated titles, she learnt that Hagenzeele Third could be comfortably reached by an afternoon train which fitted in with the morning boat, and that there was a comfortable little hotel not three kilometers from Hagenzeele itself where one could spend quite a comfortable night, and go to see one's grave the next morning. All this she had from a Central Authority who lived in a tar and paper shed on the skirt of a razed city full of whirling lime-dust and blowing papers.

Related Characters: Michael Turrell, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 834

Explanation and Analysis

After Helen has received confirmation of Michael's death, she finds herself in a "new world" of grief and, in response to this, travels to Normandy to see Michael's grave. She feels stifled by the emotionally reserved approach to grief in British society and hopes that this will give her some sense of relief.

There is a stark contrast in the passage between the use of the words "driven" and "agony"—which suggest that Helen's grief is unbearable and that she is compelled to act because she is desperate—and the repetition of the words "comfortable" and "comfortably," which are used several times throughout the remainder of the passage. Of course, it seems impossible to the reader that someone who is in "agony" can travel "comfortably" but the placement of these two words side by side recreates the stifling atmosphere of a society that, despite undergoing a huge traumatic loss, must underplay emotional suffering for the sake of propriety.

This impression is further reinforced by the position of the Central Authority, who is helpfully giving out information, as though he is in a tourist office, on the outskirts "of a razed city." This links back in to the image of the barn wall hiding Michael's body and eloquently symbolizes the lengths to

which British society is willing to deny the reality of certain things, even if their effects are plainly visible. The descriptions of the war cemeteries also likely mirror Kipling's own experience after the death of his son.

Helen was grateful, but when they reached the hotel Mrs. Scarsworth [...] insisted on dining at the same table with her and, after the meal [...] took Helen through her "commissions" with biographies of the dead, where she happened to know them, and sketches of their next of kin. Helen endured this till nearly half-past nine, ere she fled to her room. Almost at once there was a knock on the door and Mrs. Scarsworth entered; her hands, holding the dreadful list, clasped before her.

Related Characters: Mrs. Scarsworth, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 835

Explanation and Analysis

On the train, on her way to Hagenzeele to visit Michael's grave, Helen meets a woman called Mrs. Scarsworth, who latches onto Helen and tells her that she has visited the cemetery nine times. She tells Helen that she goes there to take photographs of the graves as commissions for family's who cannot make the journey themselves. Helen is grateful to be able to escape Mrs. Scarsworth at the hotel and is disappointed when Mrs. Scarsworth invites herself to dine with Helen.

The fact that Helen "endures" Mrs. Scarsworth's descriptions of her "commissions" gives an impression of how uncomfortable Helen feels with Mrs. Scarsworth, whom she believes is making money from other people's grief purely for her own gain. The name "Mrs. Scarsworth" at first suggests this to the reader too, as it suggests "getting your money's worth" from people's "scars."

This nightmarish quality is continued when Helen finally "flees" Mrs. Scarsworth after dinner but finds that Mrs. Scarsworth immediately follows Helen to her room. The description of Mrs. Scarsworth's list of commissions as "dreadful" suggests Helen's horror at Mrs. Scarsworth's reason for visiting the graves. It is also emblematic more generally of the orderly and "manufactured" veneer with which polite British society has tried to cover up grief.

Because I'm *so* tired of lying [...] year in and year out. When I don't tell lies I've got to act 'em and I've got to think 'em, always. *You* don't know what that means. He was everything to me that he oughtn't have been—the only real thing—the only thing that happened to me in all my life; and I've had to pretend he wasn't. I've had to watch every word, and think out what lie I'd tell next, for years and years!

Related Characters: Mrs. Scarsworth (speaker), Michael Turrell, Helen Turrell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 836

Explanation and Analysis

Appearing at Helen's door, Mrs. Scarsworth confesses that she has been in love with a man who is not her husband, but who "was everything" to her. Because of the strict moral conventions of British society, Mrs. Scarsworth has had to carefully hide her love affair, just as Helen has had to hide her relationship with Michael.

Mrs. Scarsworth has finally been overwhelmed by the burden of her secret and, in a moment of desperation, confesses to Helen, who she knows is not married and therefore, she thinks, might sympathize with her situation. Unknowingly, Mrs. Scarsworth articulates the constant pretense, and the effort of this pretense, that has dominated Helen's life since she became pregnant with Michael and was forced to conceal her secret.

Mrs. Scarsworth's description of the need, not only to lie, but to "act" lies and "think" lies always, mirrors Helen's constant performance as Michael's aunt. This revelation changes the connotations of Mrs. Scarsworth's name and suggests that she herself has "scars" that she is working to conceal. This incident further connects the two women to the poem, "The Burden," at the start of the story as well as to the story of Mary Magdalene, a prostitute who was redeemed through her devotion to Christ, just as Helen is redeemed through her devotion to Michael.

"Lieutenant Michael Turrell—my nephew," said Helen slowly and word for word, as she had many thousands of times in her life. The man lifted his eyes and looked at her with infinite compassion before he turned from the fresh-sown toward the naked black crosses. "Come with me," he said, "and I will show you where your son lies."

Related Characters: Helen Turrell (speaker), Mrs. Scarsworth, Michael Turrell

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 838

Explanation and Analysis

Helen arrives at the graveyard the next morning and tries to find Michael's grave. Instead of finding an orderly cemetery as she'd expected, however, she becomes disorientated in the "sea" of "black crosses." Across the cemetery she sees a man who is "evidently the gardener." Helen approaches and asks him to help her find Michael's grave.

The fact that Helen tells the "gardener" that she is Michael's aunt, although he knows nothing about their relationship, suggests how automatic this pretense has become for her. This relates back to Mrs. Scarsworth's description of having to constantly "act" and "think" lies. Kipling supports this impression with the phrases "word for word" and "many thousands of times."

The gardener is symbolic of Christ. This is demonstrated by the "infinite compassion" he shows Helen, even though he knows her secret. There is a contrast between the "black crosses" and the "fresh-sown grass." The "crosses" suggest the "chaos" of death, while the "fresh-sown grass" suggests hope and redemption. Helen is related to Mary Magdalene as, after Christ's Crucifixion, Mary Magdalene returns to his tomb and, finding it empty, asks a man she thinks is the gardener for help. This is Jesus resurrected, and his resurrection symbolizes the promise of hope in the Christian message, just as the gardener's compassion for Helen promises hope of redemption and forgiveness after Michael's death.

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.

THE GARDENER

The story is prefaced by an excerpt from a poem written by Kipling himself that includes the lines "And God looked down from Heaven / And rolled the stone away." The excerpt of the poem, called "The Burden," describes Christ's Resurrection following his Crucifixion.

The use of this excerpt foreshadows the story's central themes of grief, mercy, and the "burden" of guilt. The poem references Christ's death and Resurrection, which symbolize God's mercy to mankind, and removal of the "burden" of grief, through the possibility of life after death.

Everyone in Helen Turrell's community believes that she has done "her duty by all the world." Her brother, George Turrell, has always been a trouble maker, so no one is surprised to learn that he "had entangled himself" with a girl in India just before his death. After George dies from falling off a horse, Helen "most nobly [takes] charge" of the situation, despite being incapacitated in the South of France due to "lung trouble." Although she could have "washed her hands of the whole disgraceful affair," she has the baby and his nurse brought to France. However, the nurse turns out to be incompetent (her "carelessness" allows the baby to fall sick with dysentery), so Helen fires the nurse and restores the baby, whom she names Michael, to health herself. Once he is "wholly restored," Helen brings him to England.

Michael is really Helen's son, to whom she has secretly given birth in the South of France. The fact that George has died in India means that there is no one to contradict Helen's story about her brother. Helen emphasizes the fact that she could have "washed her hands" of the affair to make her decision to raise Michael look "noble" in the eyes of the local community, who have all heard Helen's story and who know that Michael is really her son. As far as the community are concerned it is not Helen's decision to raise Michael which is noble, but the fact that she has lied about his parentage to maintain an image of propriety and make herself appear morally upright. This helps the community feel that they can accept Helen without compromising themselves and their morals, which are reflective of British Edwardian society.

Helen is "open as the day" about this situation and allows all of the unsavory details to be "public property," since "scandals are only increased by hushing them up." Helen tells everyone in the village that she is grateful that Michael's mother allowed Helen to take the boy and raise him herself—"it seemed that people of that class would do almost anything for money." Helen tells everyone in the village that although she doesn't particularly like children, she will raise Michael out of her deep love for George.

Helen tries to appear "open" in response to the pressure British society puts on people to be morally upright and transparent. Although this makes her a hypocrite, British society views this as preferable to being honest and openly causing a "scandal." Helen instead, lays the blame for the "scandal" on Michael's "mother" (the invented Indian girl) and claims that she has sold her baby to Helen to raise. This fits in with British stereotypes about Indian people of the period, which viewed them as greedy, immoral, and "uncivilized." This addition makes Helen's story more "believable" and acceptable to the community around her.

Michael grows up to be "as accepted as Helen had always been." When he's six years old, he asks Helen why he can't call her "Mummy," which is what "other boys called their mothers." Helen explains to Michael that she is his aunt, not his mother, though he can call her "Mummy" at bedtime—and only then—as a sort of nickname, though he can't tell anyone about it.

Michael is accepted by the community because Helen has lied for him and maintained a public image of propriety. As Michael grows up, however, he notices differences between himself and the people around him. The fact that he cannot call Helen "mummy" confuses him because he does not yet understand his illegitimacy or the effect it could have on his social status. Helen allows Michael to call her "mummy" at bedtime, demonstrating that she wants to make Michael happy and allow him to express his affection towards her, although, of course, it must remain private.

Helen, "as usual," shares these details with her friends. When Michael finds out, he's furious, angrily asking why she told anyone that he calls her "Mummy." She tells him that it's important to be honest, but he tells her that the "troof's ugly" and that he will no longer call her "Mummy." Getting increasingly worked up, Michael declares that since Helen has "hurted" him, he will hurt her, too. He says that he'll keep hurting her even after he dies, and that he'll be sure to die young just to hurt her some more. Helen turns to leave, but Michael begins to cry, "Mummy! Mummy!" so she returns to his side and cries with him.

Helen tells her friends about this so that, if anyone finds out, there is an explanation in place and it will not look like she is hiding something. Michael's reaction suggests he is learning to feel ashamed of his status because he knows it is something he cannot be open about and therefore must be something bad. Michael's claim that he will "hurt" Helen foreshadows Michael's early death in World War 1. The fact that Helen cries with Michael after the fight shows the strain that this secrecy and confusion puts on their relationship and shows that Helen feels ashamed of herself for putting him in this position.

When Michael is ten, after he has been at prep school for several months, "something or someone" at school gives him the idea that his "civil status" is "not quite regular." Michael questions Helen about this with the "family directness." He tries to brush off what he has heard about himself, telling Helen that he has learned about William the Conqueror, who was also "his sort," but who "got on first-rate." Despite Michael's bravado, he is worried by the comments and asks Helen if his "civil status" will make any difference to how she feels about him. Helen replies that nothing could and begins to cry. Michael says that they won't talk about it anymore if the subject makes her upset.

Michael is becoming aware of his illegitimate status because of the way he is treated by people in British society. It is left ambiguous what exactly has brought this to Michael's attention. The fact that Michael questions Helen with the "family directness" is ironic because the "family directness" is itself a lie. Michael is clearly anxious about how his illegitimacy might affect his place in society, but he tries to conceal this with bravado. The fact that he asks Helen if his illegitimacy will change how she feels about him shows that Michael is absorbing the Edwardian idea that illegitimate children are inferior. Helen, who does love Michael, cries at this because she feels responsible for Michael's pain and is sad that he thinks she will stop loving him.

Michael does not bring the subject of his illegitimacy up again with Helen "of his own will." Two years later however, Michael comes down with measles during the school holidays, when he is staying at home with Helen. As his temperature rises with the illness, Michael becomes delirious and "mutters of nothing else." Helen stays with him and reassures him that nothing could change how she feels about him until he finally comes out of his delirium.

Although Michael does not bring the subject up again, it clearly worries him. When he is delirious, and not in control of what he says, this anxiety comes to the surface and he raves about his fear that Helen will stop loving him because he is illegitimate. This reinforces the cruelty of certain social conventions in this period, as they make people feel ashamed of things they cannot help.

Michael spends his school holidays at home with Helen and the two remain close as Michael grows up. Helen "treasures" her holidays with Michael like "jewels on a string" and, although Michael develops "his own interests", his affection for Helen remains "constant and increasing throughout" his school years. When he finishes school Michael, who is "no fool," gets a place at Oxford University, but World War I breaks out just before Michael is about to begin his studies.

As time goes on and Michael grows up, he and Helen remain close. This passage demonstrates that the pair cherish their time together and this gives emotional weight to the tragic element of the story: Michael's death in World War I.

At first Michael plans to enlist directly in the army and join "the first holocaust of public-school boys who threw themselves into the Line." He avoids this however, because of his social connections, and is made a commissioned officer in a new battalion. Helen is shocked to hear that Michael has been thinking about direct enlistment, but Michael jokes that it is "in the family" and says, "valiantly," that he would have been in the war sooner if he had enlisted directly. Shocked that Michael seems so eager to join up, Helen asks him if he thinks the war will end "so soon" (she has been told by a friend that the war will be over by Christmas). Michael is realistic about the war, however, and says that they will have "no such luck" and that the war will be "a long job."

It is suggested that Michael feels he should enlist directly because of his illegitimate status, which he believes makes him partially lower-class than Helen as his "mother" in Helen's story was a poor Indian girl. Commissions were usually given to upper class men who entered the ranks as officers rather than regular soldiers. Michael tries to justify his preference for direct enlistment by saying it would let him enter the war sooner. This is "valiant" on Michael's part as it shows his willingness to fight for his country. The fact that Helen believes the war will be quick mirrors sentiments in Britain early on in World War I. Michael, correctly, believes people are underestimating the scale of the war and this underscores his "valiance" in that he still wishes to enlist early.

Michael's battalion are "fortunate"; they are kept in Britain for a long period at the start of World War 1 and he gets several "leaves" during this time. They are finally sent to France on a day when Michael had planned to meet Helen for several hours while on leave. Once in France, "luck" helps the battalion again and they lead "a meritorious and unexacting life" doing maintenance on the trenches, helping build battlefields, and laying telegraph poles round Ypres in Normandy. Michael writes to Helen and tells her that there is "nothing special doing" where he is. One month later, Michael is killed by a **shell**. His body is hidden by a barn wall which collapses when a second shell hits it.

Michael's battalion are described as "fortunate" because, although Kipling felt that it was valiant to fight for one's country, the reality of combat was still something very frightening and dangerous. It is tragic and ironic therefore, that, when there is "nothing special doing," Michael is killed. The fact that Michael's body is hidden also reflects events in Kipling's life, as his son John was killed in World War 1 and his body was missing for several years.

By the time Michael is killed, the village in which Helen lives is "old in experience of war" and, "English fashion" has "evolved a ritual to meet it." The postmistress gives her seven-year old daughter the telegram, containing the news that Michael is missing, and sends her to pass the news on to Helen. As she sends her daughter on her way, she remarks that it is "Helen's turn now" to lose somebody and that Michael has "lasted longer than most." Unlike her mother, who reacts coldly to Michael's death, the child arrives at Helen's door crying because she liked Michael and "he had often given her sweets." Once Helen has received the telegram, she "finds herself" closing all the blinds in her house and saying to herself, as she closes each one, that "missing always means dead."

Millions of young men were killed in World War I and some villages and towns lost almost their whole male population. The postmistresses remark seems cold, but it is reflective of the way in which the community has grown used to grief. The community now treats loss as something banal, underplaying the emotions which surround it. This is also in in keeping with British ideas of propriety and reflects a society that prides itself on dealing with things in a stoic and emotionally reserved way. As soon as Helen receives her telegram, she privately accepts that Michael has been killed.

With news of Michael's death Helen "takes her place among the dreary procession" of grieving relatives and is "impelled to go through an inevitable series of unprofitable emotions." The Rector encourages Helen to remain hopeful and predicts that soon she will hear that Michael is alive in a prison camp. Her friends also try to keep her spirits up and tell her stories "about other women, to whom, after months and months of silence, their missing had been miraculously restored." Others "urge" her to write to organizations which look for missing relatives in prisoner of war camps. Helen complies passively with all these suggestions and "signs everything that is put before her."

The community around Helen encourages her to hold out hope for Michael's recovery, and to remain active by searching for him. This reflects British attitudes to World War I and the importance that was placed on maintaining a public image of optimism, patriotism, and stoicism. To deviate from this would have meant facing social judgement for being unpatriotic or for grieving in an improper way. Although Helen has internally accepted that Michael is dead, she "complies" with these social rituals, just as she conformed previously by hiding her true relationship with Michael. Although Helen has been outwardly dishonest, she is honest and realistic with herself privately about Michael's death.

During this time Helen remembers one of Michael's leaves when he took her to visit a munition factory and where they saw a **shell** being made: "from a blank iron to all but the finished article." Helen remembers that the shell was under constant supervision and never left alone for one minute. She thinks that she, now, is being "manufactured into a bereaved next of kin" as she writes off to organizations asking them to search for Michael.

There is something "manufactured" about the community's approach to grief. Helen feels that she is going through the motions as though she were a machine—like the machine that made the shell. In this sense Helen feels she is like the shell because, as a shell is only manufactured to kill people, Helen's search for Michael will only end in confirmation of Michael's death.

None of the organizations which Helen writes to have any success looking for Michael and, as time goes on, Helen feels "something give way within her" and "all sensation—save of the thankfulness for release—come to an end in blessed passivity." Helen now openly accepts that Michael has died, and the end of the war "broke" over her in a "blessed realization of relief." Although she has no interest in "any aftermath, national or personal," Helen finds herself sitting on "various relief committees" and "delivering" her views on the possible locations of the village War Memorial.

The passivity Helen feels is the relief of no longer having to keep up a public pretense of hope. This is mirrored in the relief that the end of the war brings more generally and refers to the excerpt from "The Burden," with its sense of a burden of responsibility being lifted. Helen is finally allowed to accept her grief. The image of Armistice breaking over Europe suggests that the end of the war is a mercy. The word "broke" suggests the break of dawn after night.

Helen receives Michael's watch and his army identity tag in the post, along with a letter confirming his death. From this letter she learns that his body has been interred in a war cemetery in Hagenzeele. She also receives the row number and plot number of his grave there. With this information, Helen finds herself "moved on to another process of the manufacture" and into "a world of broken and exultant relatives" who find relief in the idea that they might visit their loved ones' graves. From these people, Helen learns how convenient it is and "how little it interferes" with one's everyday life "to go and see one's grave." Driven by the "agony" of grief, Helen ventures "across the Channel" to Normandy to visit Michael's grave.

Although Helen is relieved to have Michael's death acknowledged, she finds that the process of visiting the cemeteries has also been ritualized by British society. Although there is a general relief among the relatives, Helen feels that British propriety has outwardly transformed grief into a matter of triviality and "convenience" rather than dealing with the emotional trauma of loss. Unable to find any outlet for her grief in this society, Helen is driven by her grief and "agony" to visit Michael's grave.

When Helen arrives in France, she learns that the cemetery at Hagenzeele can be "comfortably reached" by a train which fits in with the arrival of the boat. She also discovers that there is a hotel near the cemetery so that relatives can stay overnight and visit "one's graves" the next day. Helen learns this from a "Central Authority" who lives "in a board and tar-paper shed on the skirts of a razed city." As Helen is leaving the hut, a grieving woman bursts in and cries hysterically for help finding her son's grave. The Central Authority takes the woman inside, explaining apologetically to Helen that the relatives are "often like this." He checks that Helen knows Michael's grave number as, he says, "it makes such a difference."

Helen sees more evidence of grief is being hidden under a guise of propriety. The details of the trip have been made "comfortable" and convenient and the trip has a feeling of tourism even though the "Central Authority" is directing the visitors from a hut on the edges of a city which has been destroyed in the war. This is also more evidence of the fact that British society would prefer to ignore ugly aspects of life, even if they are in plain sight. These same social conventions have dictated Helen's life with Michael.

Helen moves has "tea in a crowded mauve and blue wooden structure" which carries her "still further into the nightmare." From here she goes to the station to find out about the train to Hagenzeele and there is joined by an English-woman, Mrs. Scarsworth, who is also travelling to the war cemeteries. Waiting for the train, the two women make small talk about their hotel arrangements and Mrs. Scarsworth tells Helen that this is her ninth time visiting the cemetery. She does not come "on her own account," she tells Helen, but comes to take photographs of the graves for relatives who cannot make the journey themselves and who pay her a commission for this service.

Although Helen is being treated like a tourist on a holiday, the real reason for her trip makes the reality of the journey a "nightmare" and the pretense of this comfort makes it worse. Helen is forced to endure more of this pretense with Mrs. Scarsworth's small talk. Mrs. Scarsworth however, unknown to the reader and Helen, is in the same position as Helen. She pretends to be very open about the motives behind her trip when, in fact, she is engaged in an elaborate pretense.

Helen and Mrs. Scarsworth get into a train carriage together, Helen "shivering" a little at Mrs. Scarsworth's descriptions of her commissions. Mrs. Scarsworth continues to talk cheerfully to Helen and asks her who she is visiting. Helen tells her she is visiting her nephew who she was "very fond of." Mrs. Scarsworth says she "sometimes wonders" what the dead experience after death and Helen replies that she does not think about this, "almost lifting her hands to keep" Mrs. Scarsworth off.

Helen shivers, signifying her distaste for Mrs. Scarsworth's seemingly callous attitude towards the dead. She believes that Mrs. Scarsworth is using others' grief to make money. Mrs. Scarsworth's conversation borders on improper when she wonders about life after death. This breaks the veneer of polite conversation and reminds Helen of her real purpose at Hagenzeele. Helen is so horrified by this that she almost physically tries to fend Mrs. Scarsworth off. This demonstrates the general reluctance to connect with people about emotional issues in polite, British society.

Helen is "grateful" when they arrive at the hotel, but Mrs. Scarsworth "insists" on sitting with her at dinner and showing her photographs of her commissions. Helen tries to escape Mrs. Scarsworth by going to bed early but Mrs. Scarsworth follows Helen to her room and knocks on her door. When Helen answers, Mrs. Scarsworth corners Helen and confesses that she "cannot go on any longer" without telling someone her secret. She reveals to Helen that she uses the commissions as an excuse to visit the cemetery. In reality, she keeps returning to visit the grave of a man who meant "more than anything in the world" to her, even though he "ought to have been nothing" to her.

Mrs. Scarsworth's confession connects Helen and Mrs. Scarsworth, as the reader learns that both women have been hiding a relationship, which transgresses the boundaries of propriety in some way, in order to maintain their reputations. While Helen has been forced to hide her relationship with Michael, Mrs. Scarsworth, who is married, has been in love with another man. The two women are associated with Mary Magdalene, who was rejected by society for being a prostitute.

Shocked, Helen asks Mrs. Scarsworth why she is telling her this. Mrs. Scarsworth cries that she is exhausted from constantly lying and that she is desperate to confide in someone. Mrs. Scarsworth laments that, when she isn't telling lies, "she has to act 'em" and "think 'em" and that she has had to "watch every word" she has said "for years and years." She wants to be honest with someone, for once, about her love affair because, although she says she has always been a dishonest person, she doesn't feel it is "worthy" of the man she has been in love with. Helen starts to say something to Mrs. Scarsworth but, without hearing her out, Mrs. Scarsworth rushes from the room crying; "Is that how you take it!"

Although the reader has not been given much insight into the strain that keeping her secret has put on Helen, Mrs. Scarsworth's confession vocalizes this struggle and draws attention to the fact that Helen has had to carefully construct her whole life around a lie in order to stay within the boundaries of propriety. Mrs. Scarsworth's desperation to be relieved from the "burden" of her secret, and the shame of constantly lying, have finally overwhelmed her. The fact that Mrs. Scarsworth immediately interprets Helen's response as coldness or judgement, before she has heard what she has to say, reflects the type of negative reaction that Mrs. Scarsworth expects from people in British society.

The next day, Mrs. Scarsworth leaves the hotel early and Helen travels to the cemetery alone. When she arrives however, she is surprised at how vast the cemetery is; "meeting the entire crowded level of the thing in one held breath." Although she has Michael's grave number, all she can see in the cemetery is a "merciless sea of black crosses" and she can "distinguish no order or arrangement" among them. She becomes lost among the graves, "wondering hopelessly by what guidance" she should ever be able to find Michael's grave.

While Helen expects to find order in the cemetery, with the graves being numbered and organized, she is surprised by the "chaos" which greets her instead. The "sea" of crosses is described as something relentless that provides no mercy, reflecting the ravages of World War I. The fact that the cemetery is described in these terms also reflects the "merciless" conventionality of British society in the story.

While she is lost in the cemetery, Helen sees a man kneeling among the graves and, assuming him to be **the gardener**, she hurries over and asks him for help to find her "nephew's" grave. The gardener looks at Helen with "infinite compassion" and tells her that "he will show her where her son lies."

In contrast to the unforgiving quality of the graveyard, the gardener provides Helen with relief through his "infinite compassion." The gardener is synonymous with Christ in the story, as he represents an alternative to the unforgiving conventions of society and, instead, represents the infinite mercy of God, who brings order and hope to the world. His immediate understanding that Michael is Helen's son suggests that all secrets are known to God and forgiven by him. Kipling parallels the story of Mary Magdalene searching for Christ's body, when she finds his tomb empty, after the Resurrection. Mary Magdalene meets Christ but, thinking he is dead, assumes that he is the gardener and asks him where to find Jesus's body. Although Mary Magdalene, like Helen, has been rejected by society because of her transgressions, her devotion to Christ is redemptive, just as Helen's devotion to Michael earns her redemption from the gardener.

As Helen is leaving the cemetery she turns back for "one last look." Again, in the distance, she sees the man she thinks is **the gardener**, and who has shown her to Michael's grave. He is kneeling over the flowerbeds, "bending over" the young plants which are starting to grow there amongst the graves.

The image of the gardener "bending over" the young plants reinforces the themes of forgiveness, redemption, and new life after death. For Kipling, it would be better for British society to encourage these values, rather than clinging to old ideas of propriety, especially after the traumatic losses of World War I. The idea of rejuvenation is also present in the fact that he is a gardener, representing the natural world, and the pattern of the seasons, in which spring follows on from winter.

The story closes with the full text of Kipling's poem, "The Burden." The poem contains four verses. The first three are written from the poet's perspective and are addressed to Mary Magdalene. Each verse asks her a question: the first, if there is greater pain than grief, the second if there is greater pain than being forced to lie, and the third if there is greater pain than fear. The fourth stanza is from Mary Magdalene's perspective. It tells the reader that the Lord gave Mary Magdalene one "burden," to guard Jesus's tomb after his Crucifixion, but that God, looking down from Heaven, saw her tears and "rolled the stone away" from the mouth of the tomb, relieving her burden.

The first three stanzas of the poem show some of the "burdens" of human life: grief, deceit, and fear. It is possible for God to remove these burdens, because of the sacrifice of Christ, just as the gardener removes Helen's burden in the story by showing her compassion. The final stanza of the poem connects Mary Magdalene's burden to Helen's burden, which is lessened by the simple act of kindness from the gardener. It demonstrates that acts of kindness can lessen the burden of people in pain and that it is better for a community to be forgiving and compassionate than to be intolerant and unkind.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Greenall, Lily. "*The Gardener.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Nov 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Greenall, Lily. "*The Gardener.*" LitCharts LLC, November 28, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-gardener.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Gardener* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Kipling, Rudyard. The Gardener. Borzoi. 1994.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kipling, Rudyard. The Gardener. New York: Borzoi. 1994.