

# The Spinning Heart

Comparative Study Guide

A SCENE BY SCENE GUIDE

Amy Farrell

SCENE BY SCENE  
WICKLOW, IRELAND

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# Contents

Chapter 1 - Bobby	2
Chapter 2 - Josie	15
Chapter 3 - Lily	21
Chapter 4 - Vasya	27
Chapter 5 - Réaltín	32
Chapter 6 - Timmy	37
Chapter 7 - Brian	44
Chapter 8 - Trevor	51
Chapter 9 - Bridie	57
Chapter 10 - Jason	63
Chapter 11 - Hillary	68
Chapter 12 - Seanie	73
Chapter 13 - Kate	79
Chapter 14 - Lloyd	83
Chapter 15 - Rory	88
Chapter 16 - Millicent	94
Chapter 17 - Denis	99
Chapter 18 - Mags	105
Chapter 19 - Jim	109
Chapter 20 - Frank	116
Chapter 21 - Triona	124
Cultural Context/Social Setting	135

Literary Genre	140
General Vision and Viewpoint	151
Theme/Issue - Relationships	158
Hero, Heroine, Villain	162
Selecting Key Moments	166
The Comparative Study: Comparing Texts	168

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## About This Book

This book is a companion guide for the Comparative Study of *The Spinning Heart*, by Donal Ryan. Ideally it accompanies a second, detailed reading and study of the novel.

Each chapter contains notes on Cultural Context/Social Setting, Literary Genre, General Vision and Viewpoint, Relationships and Hero/Heroine/Villain, and a set of questions on Cultural Context/Social Setting, Literary Genre, General Vision and Viewpoint, Relationships and Hero/Heroine/Villain. The notes are intended as a starting point for students, to provide something concrete for each mode that can be developed and built on by exploring the relevant mode-based questions.

Towards the back of the book, there are notes looking at each mode as a whole, across the entire novel, and accompanying questions (please note, there may be some similarity with earlier questions to draw attention to key ideas).

Lastly, there is a section of questions on each mode, designed to prompt comparisons between *The Spinning Heart* and other Comparative Study texts.

# Chapter 1

## Bobby

Bobby talks about his hatred of his father, how he lost his job and his wife Triona and how highly he thinks of her.

### Cultural Context/Social Setting

The novel is set during the economic recession, a time of financial collapse in Ireland. Bobby, a former foreman on building sites, is out of work and struggling financially.

This is a rural community, where everyone knows each other and one another's business.

Bobby finds it difficult to really talk and express himself emotionally to his wife, suggesting that men are not encouraged to act this way in this world.

1. Why did Bobby trust Pokey Burke?  
What does this tell you about the community?
2. What did Pokey Burke do to his workers?
3. Describe Bobby's financial situation.  
What made his turn of fortune so unexpected?
4. Why did none of the men care what sort of a man Pokey Burke was?  
What does this suggest about their priorities?

5. How did people react to the death of the Cunliffe boy?  
What does this reveal to you about this community?
6. What stopped Bobby from showing that he was clever in school?
7. Speaking of the Burkes, Triona says, “The whole village knows what they’ve done.”  
What insight does her comment give you into the world of the novel?
8. According to Triona, what makes local people think highly of Bobby?  
What does this tell you about their values and attitudes?
9. Speaking to Triona, Bobby says, “I laughed then, through my invisible tears.”  
Why are his tears invisible?  
What insight does this give you into this world?
10. How did the drinkers of Ciss’s front bar feel about Bobby’s father?  
What does this tell you about this world?
11. What was life like for Bobby and his mother, living with his father?  
What does this tell you about this world?
12. What did Triona’s friend say about Bobby’s family when Bobby met Triona at the disco?  
What do her comments reveal about this world and characters’ attitudes?

13. “Imagine it being found out, that you went to see a play, on your own.”  
What insight does this comment give you into the lives of men in this world?  
Fully explain your point of view.
14. What picture are you forming of this place?  
Include as many significant details as you can.

## Literary Genre

Bobby, the novel’s protagonist, speaks directly to the reader in this chapter. He is open, honest and sincere, and his voice instantly forges a connection with the reader.

Bobby reveals his intense hatred for his father, and details how vicious and cruel the man is. He admits to thoughts of murdering him, which adds excitement and suspense to his account.

Bobby’s stories and anecdotes add to the reader’s sense of him as a real person, while also explaining why he feels as he does about his father. This is an emotionally charged, confessional account, where Bobby tells the reader things he cannot bring himself to speak to his wife about. This makes us want to read on, while developing our sense of Bobby as a sensitive, troubled, caring character.

1. Read the first page of the novel again.  
How does it capture your imagination and arouse your curiosity?
2. What does the image of a “flaking, creaking, spinning heart” add to the opening?



3. Bobby says his wife let herself down by marrying him.  
What does this tell you about how Bobby feels about himself?
4. Bobby mentions the Cunliffe boy.  
What seems to have happened here?  
Does Bobby give a complete version of events?  
What is the effect of this on the story?
5. How does Bobby's exchange with Josie Burke add to your understanding of his character?
6. Bobby describes different ways he could kill his father.  
Comment on the imagery here.  
What do these descriptions add to the story?
7. What does Bobby's account of his father drinking out the farm add to the novel?
8. Bobby's father stopped drinking once his inheritance was spent.  
What does this tell you about him?
9. What are your impressions of Triona?  
What does she bring to the story?
10. What are your impressions of Bobby's father (Frank)?  
What does he bring to the story?
11. What are your impressions of Bobby after reading this chapter?  
Use examples to support your view.

12. Does it feel like Bobby Mahon is speaking directly to you in this chapter?  
How is this achieved?  
What is the effect of this on the reader?
13. Is the tone of this chapter confessional?  
Explain your point of view.
14. Are you sympathetic towards Bobby?  
Fully explain your point of view.

## General Vision and Viewpoint

The outlook in this chapter is dark and troubled. Bobby hates his father. This damaged relationship, his father's bitterness and Bobby's thoughts of murder, create a dark, bleak outlook.

Pokey Burke's treatment of his workers reveals the worst in human nature, as he absconds, leaving them without any hope of welfare assistance, having not paid what he should have to Revenue.

Speaking of his mother's death, Bobby's loss and regret are clear. His father destroyed Bobby's bond with his mother, another saddening aspect to the chapter's outlook.

Bobby's father's determination in drinking out the farm reveals how bitter and spiteful he is. He is a destructive character, delighting in causing hurt, revealing the vicious side of human nature.

There is also a positive aspect to this chapter. Bobby loves his wife, Triona and thinks the world of her. His devotion and sincere feeling here shows all that is warm and loving in human nature and life.

1. Bobby visits his father daily, hoping to find him dead.  
What is your response to this?
2. “There wasn’t a stamp paid in for any of us, nor a screed to the Revenue, either.”  
What did Pokey Burke do to his workers?  
How does this make you feel?
3. Bobby feels his wife let herself down by marrying him.  
How does this make you feel?
4. Describe how Bobby feels about his wife, Triona.  
Does their relationship highlight a positive or negative side of life?
5. What impact has his relationship with Triona had on Bobby?  
Has she made his life better?
6. Bobby refers to the death of the Cunliffe boy.  
How do the details of this story affect the mood at this point?
7. How did Bobby feel about going to see Josie Burke?  
How does this make you feel?
8. How did Josie Burke treat Bobby when Bobby went to see him?  
How does this make you feel?  
Does this highlight the good or the bad in people?

9. Bobby finds it difficult to speak openly with his wife about what is troubling him.  
How does this make you feel?  
How does this affect the general vision and viewpoint?
10. Bobby considers the different ways he could kill his father.  
How does this affect the story's outlook?  
How does this make you feel?
11. Why was Bobby jealous of Seanie Shaper growing up?  
How does this affect the general vision and viewpoint?
12. How does the story of Bobby's father drinking out the farm add to the general vision and viewpoint?
13. How did the other drinkers feel about Bobby's father?  
Is this a positive or negative aspect to the portrayal of life here?
14. Did Bobby's father make friends with the other drinkers?  
How does this affect the outlook?
15. What made Bobby's father drink out the farm?  
Comment on his motivation.
16. What sort of life did Bobby and his mother have, living with Bobby's father?  
How does this make you feel?
17. Bobby describes himself as "an orphan child, bereft, filling up with fear like a boat filling with water."

How is Bobby feeling?

How does this affect the general vision and viewpoint?

18. Bobby's last topic of conversation is his wife, Triona. How does this section affect the general vision and viewpoint?
19. How do you feel, reading this chapter? What stands out for you as being particularly positive or negative?
20. Is there darkness in this chapter? Explain your point of view.

## Relationships

Bobby and his father have a very negative, destructive relationship. Bobby hates his father, eagerly hoping for his death. His father is aware of this, and seems to spitefully enjoy it.

Bobby spends a lot of time thinking about killing his father, such is his hatred of him.

Bobby's father 'drank out the farm', spending every penny of his inheritance on drink to spite his own dead father. This shows how bitterly he hated his father, and gives an insight into the dysfunctional, destructive nature of his relationships.

Bobby and his mother could never be relaxed or happy around his father, who found fault with everything. Their relationship was eroded and compromised by Bobby's father.

When his mother died, Bobby wished he could go back and do things differently. There is a great sense of sorrow, regret and longing here, as

Bobby reveals what he has lost, and how his father stole his bond with his mother from him. Bobby's family relationships have led to hurt, suffering and sadness.

Bobby thinks very highly of his wife, believing that he is not good enough for her. Bobby wishes he were able to express himself properly to Triona, instead of her having to guess what he is thinking. He is unable to find the words to tell her what she wants him to.

1. Read the opening paragraph of this chapter again.  
What does it reveal to you about Bobby's relationship with his father?  
Is this a positive or negative relationship?
2. What effect did Bobby losing his job have on his father?  
What does this suggest about how he feels about his son?
3. How does Bobby view his wife?  
How does she feel about him?  
Is this a negative or positive relationship?
4. According to Bobby, how was his mother affected by her marriage to Bobby's father?  
How does this make you feel?
5. How did Josie Burke treat Bobby when Bobby went to see him?
6. How does Triona react to the way Josie treats Bobby?  
What does this tell you about how she feels about Bobby?

7. “I wish to God I could talk to her the way she wants me to, besides forever making her guess what I’m thinking.”  
What insight does Bobby’s comment give you into his marriage?
8. How does Bobby’s father feel about him, in Bobby’s opinion?
9. What made Bobby jealous of Seanie Shaper when he was growing up?  
What does this tell you about Bobby’s family?
10. What sort of relationship did Bobby’s father have with his own father?  
What does this add to your understanding of the relationships in this novel?
11. What will Bobby never forgive his father for?
12. What was it like for Bobby and his mother, living with his father?  
How did he affect their lives?
13. What did Bobby want to do on the day his mother was buried?  
What does this tell you about his relationship with his mother?  
What does this tell you about how his father treated Bobby and his mother?
14. Do Bobby’s parents sound like good parents?  
Use examples to explain your point of view.

15. Why was Pokey Burke afraid of Bobby?  
What does this tell you about Bobby's relationship with Pokey?  
What does this tell you about Bobby's relationship with Triona?
16. How does Bobby feel about Triona?  
How does Triona feel about him?  
What strengths do you see in their relationship?  
What weaknesses do you see in their relationship?  
Overall, is it a positive or negative relationship?  
Explain your point of view.
17. Describe Bobby's relationship with his father.  
How does he view his father? Quote to support your view.
18. From reading this chapter, do characters appear to communicate well with one another?  
How does this affect them?
19. Do relationships bring characters happiness or sorrow?  
Use examples to explain your point of view.

## Hero, Heroine, Villain

Bobby hates his father, wishing he were dead. He has suffered because of his father's vicious, bitter ways, and has missed out on the chance to enjoy his bond with his mother. He resents his father for this.

Bobby seems insecure and has a low opinion of himself. He feels that Pokey Burke took him for a fool, and does not believe that he is good



enough for his wife, Triona.

Bobby thinks very highly of Triona, feeling that he is a better person because of his relationship with her.

Bobby was scared to go and face Pokey Burke's father, Josie Burke. Josie Burke speaks down to him, and Bobby is disappointed in himself for taking this bad treatment.

1. How does Bobby feel about his father?
2. How does Bobby feel about his wife?
3. What stopped Bobby from showing that he was clever in school?  
What does this tell you about Bobby?
4. Why was Bobby disappointed in himself after talking to Josie Burke?
5. According to Triona, how do local people view Bobby?
6. What stops Bobby from telling his wife how he feels?  
How does his inability to be open with Triona make him feel about himself?
7. Bobby spends a lot of time thinking about killing his father.  
Is Bobby a dangerous man?  
Fully explain your point of view.
8. Does reading about Bobby's father drinking out the farm affect how you feel about Bobby?  
Explain your point of view.

9. How did Bobby feel about his mother?  
What damaged their relationship?
10. Is Bobby a 'good' man?  
Explain your point of view.
11. What stands out for you about Bobby in this chapter?  
Include examples in your answer.

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