

The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher Study Guide

**The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher by Hilary
Mantel**

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Plot Summary

The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher is a collection of short stories by Hilary Mantle. Each story is an independent narrative; however, the stories do share themes including friendship, marriage, appearance, and free will. The element of surprise is very much a part of each one, too.

“Sorry to Disturb,” tells about a married woman who is dealing with unwanted advances from a Muslim man who has intentions of marrying her.

In “Comma,” two children discover a deformed child and learn how appearances are not always as they seem.

In “The Long QT,” an undiagnosed heart condition claims the life of a married woman the second she discovers her husband is planning an affair.

A married couple in “Winter Break” unwittingly become a party to a murder when they cover up the crime. They cover it up because they don't want its occurrence to ruin their vacation.

In “Harley Street,” a receptionist who likes to know about all the happenings in a doctor's office cannot see that all of the patients are vampires.

“Offenses Against a Person” is the story of a seventeen year-old girl who watches as her father divorces her mother for a younger woman, only to repeat his behavior with another younger woman.

In “How Shall I Know You?” an over-the-hill writer condescendingly and cruelly leaves a twenty-pound tip for a deformed teenage girl who works at the inn where she is staying, only to have to the favor returned months later, leaving the writer wondering which of her flaws elicited the cruel gesture.

In “The Heart Fails Without Warning” a girl suffering from anorexia dies of a weakened heart, and serves as a metaphor for her own family, which is weakening from a metaphorical heart.

In “Terminus”, a young man attempts to track down the ghost of his father on a train, only to realize that in the end, no matter where people travel, or what they do in life, everyone is headed for a terminus of some kind, with the ultimate terminal being death.

“The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” lends its title to the front cover of the book. The narrative tells about a woman's apartment being taken over by an IRA assassin who kills the prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. The woman whose apartment is invaded ends up helping the assassin to plot an escape –even though she believes that violence never solves anything.



Sorry to Disturb – Comma

Summary

Sorry to Disturb – It is June, 1983. The narrator allows a Pakistani businessman named Muhammad Ijaz to enter her Jeddah apartment on Medina Road to use her telephone. It seems that Muhammad is lost. He speaks on the phone in Arabic, thanks the narrator for her time and telephone, and then leaves the building. The narrator explains the events of the day to her husband when he gets home that afternoon. Her husband works for a Toronto-based geological consulting company and the Saudi Ministry of Mineral Resources. As such, he and the narrator take whatever living arrangements the government can provide. Their current building is largely international, and mostly Arabic.

The next afternoon, Muhammad Ijaz returns to thank the narrator and to tell his own story. He is a graduate of a business school in Miami. He is married to an American. The narrator knows how few rights women have in Saudi Arabia and how Saudis look down on whites in general, considering them, at best, necessary evils. They look down even more on others from the Middle East, including Pakistan.

Ijaz begins to visit the narrator regularly. Though friendly, the narrator feels no attraction for him at all. The narrator is annoyed by his visits, for she cherishes isolation because she is ill. The medicine she takes must be imported from England. The other English wives believe they are fertility drugs. At the end of July, Ijaz brings his family for tea. His wife, Mary-Beth, is quiet and submissive. She is described as “faded”, and will not meet the narrator’s eyes. The next day, the narrator and her husband leave the country. While away from Jeddah, the narrator, secretly working on a comic novel, has left it with an agent.

Back in Jeddah, the narrator befriends two local girls, Munira and Yasmin. On December 6 after the narrator returns home, Ijaz begins visiting again, telling the narrator she reminds him of an American girlfriend he once had. She was nicknamed “Patches.” The narrator tells Ijaz about her book’s agent. Ijaz explains his wife has a kidney disease.

The narrator and her husband are invited to a dinner party with some of Ijaz’s family and friends. The narrator begins to wonder if she is being sized up as a wife for Ijaz. She also wonders if Ijaz, like many in Saudi Arabia, view Western marriages as meaningless. A few days later, Ijaz leaves the country on business with a stopover in England. On March 17, Ijaz calls the narrator to explain he has gotten rid of Mary-Beth. He will be keeping his son, and he does not care about his daughter. The next day, the narrator asks her husband to write to Ijaz to tell him to leave her alone. In a country where Islamic law rules, such visits and contact that Ijaz has been making, are dangerous at best. The letter works. The narrator knows she should have never opened the door in the first place.



Comma – The narrator remembers a time when she and Mary Joplin were eight and in the fields near the village, looking for snails. While exploring past the cemetery, they discover the Hathaway house, a home of the rich. There, they hide and await to catch a glimpse of the wealthy people who live there. Mary says she’s seen something kept in the house –a human comma. It is kept wrapped up in a blanket. At home, the narrator’s parents tell her not to hang around with Mary Joplin, whose family lives like pigs. Nevertheless, the narrator still spends time at the Hathaway property with Mary. In August, they finally catch a glimpse of the comma. The comma is a deformed child. In September, the narrator is sad to learn that Mary has been sent to a “daft school,” or special learning school. Decades later, the narrator encounters Mary on the way to a laundrette with a baby stroller. The narrator says hello, to which Mary pats and speaks to her pile of clothing in the baby stroller and nods at the narrator – a full stop.

Analysis

In the first two stories in the collection, “Sorry to Disturb,” and “Comma,” most of the themes found throughout the book are present in one form or another. In “Sorry to Disturb,” the reader should pay careful attention to the deceptively simple language that describes what appears to be only mild action. For example, the narrator notes that she opened the door. The narrator is not just physically opening a door, but she is metaphorically opening the door to the unknown and the unexpected. Muhammad Ijaz’s simple request to use the phone turns into an infatuation that causes him to get rid of his wife and set his sights on the narrator. He is finally dealt with by the narrator’s husband. Here, the reader should note the gentle irony in the narrator criticizing how little power women have in Islamic culture, only to have to rely on her own husband to protect her from Ijaz’s advances and intentions. The motif is apparent in this story: One never knows what one is opening the door to.

“Sorry to Disturb” also touches on the theme of marriage, which will become especially important in later stories. The narrator’s marriage to her husband seems to be happy, and the two seem to be in love. The narrator’s husband does not hesitate to intervene on behalf of his wife. Meanwhile, the marriage of the narrator and her husband should be contrasted by the reader with the marriage of Ijaz and Mary-Beth. Ijaz is clearly unhappy with his marriage and his wife. The reader should pay careful attention to use of the word “faded” to describe Mary-Beth. Mary-Beth presents what the narrator’s fate would be if she were married to Ijaz. Mary-Beth herself was once clearly a fiery and lively beauty. However, in her Islamic marriage, her spirit has been broken down into submission. Oddly, Ijaz wants a wife who is independent; yet, he also expects her to be submissive. In a Western marriage, the woman can be independent; but, that is not possible in an Islamic union. This also speaks to the notion of how little Ijaz thinks of his own marriage. He could have allowed his wife greater freedom, but his domineering nature is clear in her submission. At the same time, he has absolutely no respect for the Western institution of marriage, believing that he can entreat the narrator to leave her husband and join him. All of the events of the unwanted friendship occur because Mary-Beth opens the front door on that fateful day.



In “Comma,” friendship is a blinding thing. Two friends –the narrator and Mary Joplin – exist in their own world, despite the warnings of the narrator’s parents to stay away from Mary Joplin. As friends, both the narrator and Mary pay little attention to one another. They pay more attention to what they do together –namely, exploring and having fun. Whatever differences there are between them matter little, if at all. Everything appears to be normal about them and between them, but this is contrasted with the deformed child they later encounter, which Mary describes as a comma. Years later, the narrator encounters Mary, after Mary has been sent away to a special education school. Mary has gone crazy. She speaks to a stroller full of dirty laundry that she is pushing. As children, Mary’s tendency toward insanity is not seen in lieu of childhood friendship. As an adult, her normal appearance as a child gives way to the idea that not all is as it seems. Her own deformity is not physically apparent. However, her insanity has made her life come to a full stop, or period. The physically-deformed child is seen as a comma, meaning that his deformity is merely a part of his life, rather than the end of his life.

Discussion Question 1

Though the narrator in “Sorry to Disturb” is ill and prefers isolation, she opens the door to Muhammad Ijaz. Why? Would you have done the same? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Describe how appearances are not what they seem in “Comma,” paying specific attention to Mary Joplin and the deformed child.

Discussion Question 3

Why is Muhammad Ijaz seeking a new wife in “Sorry to Disturb”? Why does he target the narrator? How does she respond?

Vocabulary

mortises, distraught, conjured, impertinence, evasive, placate, polyglot, convoluted, monosyllabic, coda



The Long QT – Winter Break

Summary

The Long QT – A married forty-five year-old man and a woman named Lorraine make out in the kitchen at a party while his wife, Jodie, is nearby. They discuss a time to get together to have sex. Then, in walks Jodie. She immediately realizes what is going on. She drops her glass and falls to her knees. Then, she falls onto her side, dead. Jodie's autopsy reveals that she had long QT syndrome, a disorder of the heart's electrical activity which can leave to arrhythmia. In certain situations, it can lead to cardiac arrest and death. Shock and strong emotion of any sort can bring it on.

Winter Break – Phil and his wife are headed from the airport by taxi for vacation Phil's wife knows he would have been a good father, but Phil never wanted to have to deal with raising a child due to things like the cost and potential for drug-use. Half-an-hour from their destination, the taxi hits something. The driver gets out to inspect it. He looks up and down the road both ways to make sure that no car is coming. Then, he uses a rock to finish killing whatever has been hit. The driver bundles the corpse of whatever it might be and puts it in the trunk. The trip continues, and Phil and his wife arrive at the Royal Athena Sun hotel. They take their own bags out of the trunk of the cab, making sure the porter does not see the dead child inside.

Analysis

Whereas marriage ultimately proved to be a positive thing in the short story "Sorry to Disturb," marriage does not have the same effect in either "The Long QT" or "Winter Break." In "The Long QT," a married man plans an affair with another woman, one which his own wife discovers in the planning process. Her husband literally breaks her heart, for the woman has QT syndrome. If the syndrome is left undiagnosed and untreated, it can lead to cardiac arrest and death after a big shock or extreme emotional surges. Jodie's husband's adulterous intentions end his marriage. However, the ending is by death, not divorce.

In "Winter Break," the biggest disagreement Phil and his wife seem to have is whether or not to have children. Phil does not want children; his wife does. Nevertheless, the couple seems to be in love and devoted to one another, and their loyalty in marriage is clear. Nowhere is it more clear than their horrifying, mutual consent to cover up a murder so that their own vacation is not ruined. As a married couple, they now not only share love, but the aiding-and-abetting of a murder.

"The Long QT" and "Winter Break" should also be noted by the reader for their use of the themes of appearance –that not all is always as it seems –and the unexpected. Phil and his wife appear to be good people, but their willing complicity in covering up a murder belies a darker side to both of them –something unexpected by the reader.



Likewise, the taxi driver, who appears to be an ordinary driver, instead quickly becomes a murderer by bashing the skull of a child in with a rock after accidentally hitting the child with the taxi. Likewise, in “The Long QT,” the narrator’s wife appears to be in perfect health, but she has long suffered from QT syndrome. Unexpectedly –to both the narrator and the reader –she literally dies of a broken heart upon discovering her husband’s desire to have an affair.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the marriages in “The Long QT,” “Winter Break,” and “Sorry to Disturb.” How are these marriages similar? How are they different?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the narrator’s wife’s death in “The Long QT” unexpected by readers and the narrator, alike?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Phil and his wife help to cover up the murder of the child when they arrive at their hotel?

Vocabulary

quizzical, tender, bellicose, coherent, gawping, garrulous, laboriously, inarticulate, laudable, exuberant, vulgarity



Harley Street – Offenses Against the Person

Summary

Harley Street – The narrator, Miss Todd, is a receptionist and secretary at a doctor's office on Harley Street. She seems to like to know everything she can about everyone. She is friends with Bettina, who works in the basement office taking blood samples from patients. Bettina isn't always thrilled with her work, and she is even less thrilled with her attempts at dating. The patients, most of them from Harley Street, are not always happy with the prices charged by Dr. Shinbone, so nicknamed for the kind of work he does. All the doctors in the building receive nicknames based on what they do. Shinbone's patients always seem to be pale and thin. Mrs. Bathurst, who also works at the doctor's office, is also pale and tall.

One evening, Mrs. Bathurst, Miss Todd, and Bettina go out to dinner. A short time later, there is a robbery –which, according to Dr. Shinbone, seems to be aimed at stealing drugs, none of which are kept on the premises. The thief steals Bettina's blood samples. Soon after, Miss Todd dreams of encountering Mrs. Bathurst on Harley Street, who admits to having no sleep and no rest. The next day, Miss Todd is tired and on edge. She tells Mrs. Bathurst to change her style and her hair. She apologizes to Mrs. Bathurst the next day. At lunch, Bettina confides in Miss Todd that she is now seeing Mrs. Bathurst. Mrs. Bathurst is a vampire, and she has turned Bettina. Bettina considers the taking of her blood to be addictive. She can't stop. She invites Miss Todd over, but Miss Todd doesn't know if she'll go, for she is not oriented that way.

Offenses Against the Person – In the early 1970s, when she is seventeen, the narrator takes a job before college at her father's law office. Her father's secretary is Nicolette Bland, a beautiful girl of about twenty-six. She and the narrator's father are having an affair.

At Christmas, Nicolette leaves her job at the law office to work across the street at Kaplan's. The narrator's father says it has to do with the limited scope of his own firm's work, covering road traffic offenses and offenses against the person. The narrator realizes it must be something else –that her father is having an affair and moving Nicolette across the street will help to keep it a secret.

Nicolette's father soon takes the case of a landlord of a pub in Ancoats. The landlord is accused of battering one of his customers. At lunch, Nicolette gives the narrator some aspirin to deal with her menstrual cramps. That night, the narrator's father confesses the affair to his wife and secures a divorce. Her father then marries Nicolette, and they have twins. Now in early motherhood, Nicolette is more often in disarray than not. Ironically, she asks the narrator if her father often stayed out late on business before.



Analysis

The theme of appearances returns in the short story “Harley Street.” In “Harley Street,” Miss Todd –who seems to know everything about everyone –doesn’t realize that all the patients her employer sees are actually vampires. When the reader looks back at the story itself and sees the descriptive terms used for the patients –such as many of them are tall and pale –what first appears to be an ill human turns out to be a healthy vampire. Likewise, the blood stolen in the basement now makes sense with respect to the patients all being vampires. Likewise, Bettina’s work in the basement also seems apparent. She is not only doing blood tests, but giving up her own –an experience which she calls addictive.

In “Offenses Against the Person,” appearances are ignored. Nicolette willingly marries a man who leaves his own wife, only to have him cheat on her. Although this is not surprising to the reader at all, Nicolette is blind to her new husband’s new affair.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe that the narrator in “Harley Street” is unable to realize that the patients she deals with on a daily basis are vampires?

Discussion Question 2

How does the narrator in “Offenses Against the Person” come to the conclusion that her father is having an affair? Why can’t Nicolette do the same?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the theme of appearances in both “Harley Street” and “Offenses Against the Person.” Why is the narrator of “Offenses Against the Person” able to deduct that her father is having an affair, while Miss Todd of “Harley Street” is unable to figure out that the patients are vampires?

Vocabulary

predicament, alluding, jaundiced, judicious, diffident



How Shall I Know You? – The Heart Fails Without Warning

Summary

How Shall I Know You? – A writer, past the best years of her career, leaves London to speak to a small-town literary society. She has not been able to write a new book in two or three years. As such, she admits to feeling lost and drifting. Having no reason to turn down the literary society's invitation to speak, she plans to travel to the Rosemount, where she will be put up by the society. She will be paid a modest fee. A letter arrives saying that the Rosemount is closed for repairs and remodeling. The narrator will be put up at the Eccles House. When Mr. Simister, the secretary of the society, arranges to meet the narrator at the station, he asks how he will know her. She explains she looks a little older now than on the covers of her novels. She asks how she'll know him. When she arrives at the station, he is holding a copy of her first novel, "A Spoiler at Noonday". As he brings her to the hotel, he explains that they have renamed the society the "Book Club" to try to attract younger members.

Eccles House is old and stale. A young girl in her late teens collects the narrator's luggage. The girl is slightly deformed, limping as she walks. The narrator has a difficult time keeping up, ascribing it to a heart condition she did not know she had at the time. She also suffers from a migraine. The reading later occurs at a local school, where twenty members of the club have turned out. Afterward, Mr. Simsister tells the narrator the event was a great success. The narrator has a restless night. The next morning, the narrator heads to her cab. A teenaged girl, Louise, appears and says she would have been more than happy to help the narrator. She asks if the narrator might come back again. Instead, the narrator gives Louise twenty pounds and tells her to buy something nice.

Three months later, in early autumn, the narrator is at Waterloo Station, heading to Hampshire to give a talk at the branch library. A handsome young American man bumps into the narrator, causing her to drop her purse. Coins go flying everywhere. He helps her to collect the change. The next morning she realizes that she now has five twenty-pound notes instead of four. She wonders which of her own defects the young man noticed.

The Heart Fails Without Warning – In September, fourteen year-old Morna begins to lose weight. She becomes annoyed when she begins to grow hair in different places on her body. Eleven year-old Lola, Morna's sister, does not like that her sister is older. The family is making do with less, so that both girls can attend a good school. Because Morna has been looking at websites about how to be hungry and not be gross, her parents have taken away her internet privileges. Morna, who is struggling now with anorexia, commands the attention of her parents. They often overlook Lola.



They will not allow their daughters to have a dog while Morna is suffering. Morna's ribs easily show when she is undressed. She often wears layers of clothing to fool her parents –though it doesn't work. Lola takes every chance to spite her sister for her weight, including comparing Morna to the skeleton of an early, primitive female found by researchers. While using their father's computer, Morna and Lola discover BDSM pornography with a girl sexually arranged on a leash like a dog. It angers Morna.

In November, Dr. Bahttacharya comes to check on Morna. Due to funding cuts, she cannot be admitted to the hospital until the spring. The doctor explains that as long as her weight is stable, she will be fine. Through the winter, Morna suspects her parents will commit her again. In February, Morna's heart gives out, and she dies. By March, all traces of Morna are gone. However, Lola can see the ghost of her sister, holding a white dog on a golden chain.

Analysis

In “How Shall I Know You?” and “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” appearances once again come to the fore. In “How Shall I Know You?” an arrogant writer past the prime of her career condescendingly leaves a large tip for a lonely, deformed teenage girl who works at the inn where she is staying –only to later have the favor returned. The writer – who ironically as a writer should know not to judge a book by a cover –callously tells Louise to buy herself something nice with the trip she has been given. She is judging the deformed girl based primarily on her appearance, rather than who she is as a person. When the same thing happens to the writer months later, the writer –whose own appearance is normal –is left wondering what it was about her that merited the visiting of such a tip.

By all first appearances, the family portrayed in “The Heart Fails Without Warning” seems normal to others. But, the reader soon learns that things are not that normal at all. The elder, teenaged daughter, Morna, suffers from anorexia. Though she does not starve to death, Morna's eating habits have wrecked her heart, which ultimately fails on her. The parents, meanwhile, dote on Morna and ignore Lola, the eleven year-old younger sister of Morna. Lola, in turn, comes to hate Morna, and wishes that Morna was not alive so that she herself could be the center of her parents' attention. At the same time, distance is generated by their father, between himself and his wife, and between himself and his daughters, by his decision to view BDSM pornography, which ultimately is discovered by his daughters. The reader should note the irony of the father viewing pornographic material in which a young woman is treated like a dog, while he denies his own daughters the ability to own a dog. Morna herself comes to feel like a dog –trapped by her body and by her parents –even though her anorexia is of her own doing. When Lola sees Morna's ghost, she sees Morna with a white dog –symbolizing innocence – and a golden chain around the dog's neck –symbolizing imprisonment and a lack of freedom made to look like something beautiful, though a golden chain is still a chain.

In these stories, the unexpected again comes to the fore. In “How Shall I Know You?” the writer callously gives a deformed teen girl a large tip to spend on something nice,



only to have the favor returned to her months later by a handsome man. Since the writer appears normal physically, she is taken by total surprise. Truthfully, her deformity is of the soul, though she does not recognize this. She is left wondering which of her flaws the man noticed. In “The Heart Fails Without Warning” Morna dies unexpectedly of heart failure brought on by her anorexia.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the theme of appearances with respect to Louise and the narrator in “How Shall I Know You?”. What similarities and what differences are there between Louise and the narrator in terms of appearance?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the narrator of “How Shall I Know You?” so cruel to Louise? How does Louise handle the narrator? Is Louise to be praised or condemned for her handling of the narrator? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

In “The Heart Fails Without Warning” the family appears normal; however, it is far from perfect. What problems are there in the family? How do these problems affect the family as a whole?

Vocabulary

itinerant, pebble dash, syntactical, ineradicable, diminutive, spurious, inanition, vacuity, ethos, parlous



Terminus – The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher: August 6th, 1983

Summary

Terminus – On January 9, the narrator sees his dead father on a train bound for Waterloo. The narrator decides to search for his father at Waterloo. The narrator searches all over Waterloo Station for his father, but he never finds him. The man then heads on to keep a meeting. He knows that, eventually, he will find a terminus of his own. The narrator warns the reader to plan well if looking for anyone at Waterloo Station.

The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher: August 6th, 1983 – On April 25th, 1982, at No. 10 Downing Street, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announces the recapture of South Georgia in the Falkland Islands. In Windsor, near Holy Trinity Church, there is a hospital where Margaret Thatcher had eye surgery three days before her assassination. The narrator's house has a view of the back entrance of the hospital. The narrator is visited by a plumber who explains he is there to fix the boiler. The plumber has an accent that seems to originate from Liverpool. It turns out the plumber is not a plumber, but a photographer. The photographer puts together his equipment, which turns out to be a rifle referred to as a "widow maker." The photographer is actually an IRA assassin, and the narrator now knows that she is in trouble. While she herself is not a fan of Margaret Thatcher, she does not believe that violence solves anything. The assassin tells her to shut up and keep away, or he'll kill her, too. He explains it is all for Ireland. He expects to be shot and killed while fleeing. He tells the narrator that he'll leave her tied up and gagged, but the narrator suggests that he make it look like he broke into the apartment, instead. The narrator then goes on to suggest how the assassin may escape. Margaret Thatcher then emerges from the hospital, during which time the assassin takes aim.

Analysis

As the collection of short stories comes to a close, the themes of appearances and the unexpected again come to the fore. In "Terminus," it appears that the narrator is living a regular day as he is off to a regular meeting. Seeing his father's ghost, however, causes him to veer off the beaten path to find his father. The reader should pay careful attention to the author's use of the idea that both father and son are on parallel tracks. They are not merely, physically on parallel tracks, but symbolically as well. Life is a journey that takes people to many destinations and many places. Ultimately, everyone reaches their own terminus in the end. The greatest terminal of all is death, and no matter which way people go, their tracks are all ultimately parallel with one another, heading toward death.



In “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher,” a seemingly ordinary woman becomes witness to the assassination of Margaret Thatcher. Despite her protestations that violence never solves anything, she does nothing to try to stop or hinder the assassin. She goes so far as to help him plan his escape. Clearly, there is a darker and cruel side to a woman, who, by all appearances, seems quite normal. Indeed, the IRA assassin himself pretends to be a photographer posing as a plumber to gain entry into an apartment. This lends credence to the idea that not all things are always as they appear to be.

The unexpected matters greatly in both stories. In “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher,” the narrator unexpectedly becomes witness to and, eventually, part of an assassination. Unexpectedly, the plumber she admits to her apartment turns out to be an assassin posing as a photographer posing as a plumber. In “Terminus”, a young man’s ordinary day unexpectedly becomes something far more deep and profound, as his search for his father’s ghost becomes a philosophical contemplation about life, instead. The reader should note, here, the narrator’s use of careful planning while being at Waterloo Station. Planned lives seem to work better than unplanned lives in the long run.

The obvious historical reference to the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815 should not be overlooked. The battle was between the French forces of Napoleon and the Coalition forces under the Duke of Wellington. Though Napoleon had a general idea for a battle plan, he did not have rigid plans in mind. Also, he did not write down these plans. Ultimately, poor planning by Napoleon and impulsive acts by his commanders cost the leader the battle. Life can be much the same way. Having plans, according to the narrator in “Terminus,” can help.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator in “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” become a party to the assassination of Margaret Thatcher? What would you have done in her situation? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Explain what the narrator means when he says that he and his father are on parallel tracks.

Discussion Question 3

Explain how the theme of appearances factors into the plots of both “Terminus” and “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher.”

Vocabulary

rendezvous, terminus, extravagant, anorak, docile, torpor



Characters

Sorry to Disturb Narrator

The “Sorry to Disturb” narrator is a young, ill, and isolated woman who loves her husband. The couple live in Saudi Arabia while the husband does work for the government. One day the narrator allows Muhammad Ijaz into their apartment to use the telephone because he is lost. From that day forward, Ijaz tries to have an unwanted friendship with the narrator. The narrator worries that Ijaz intends to force her to marry him, so she appeals to her husband for help. Her husband immediately complies and tells Ijaz to leave his wife alone.

Comma Narrator

The “Comma” narrator is a middle-aged woman reflecting on childhood when she was friends with Mary Joplin. In her reflection, the narrator and Mary discover a deformed child that Mary refers to as a comma. Due to her friendship with Mary and her innocence as a child at the time, the narrator did not understand that all is not as it appears. While the child’s deformities do not mean the child cannot live, the mental illness that Mary ultimately is diagnosed with means she cannot live a normal life.

The Husband in the Long QT

The husband in “The Long QT” is forty-five years old. In the kitchen during a dinner party, he is planning an affair with his secretary. His wife stumbles upon the conversation. In shock, the woman dies of a broken heart instantly. The shock of the news of her husband’s affair led to her death from a heart attack because she suffered from QT syndrome. She had not been diagnosed with the syndrome; so, it was untreated. QT syndrome can cause one to die from cardiac arrest if they are under severe emotional stress. The news of her husband’s adultery was too much to bear.

Phil

Phil is the husband of an unnamed wife in the story “Winter Break.” He and his wife are headed out on vacation. Their cab driver accidentally runs over a child. The child is not killed instantly, so the driver kills it by a blow to the head with a rock. Then, he puts the child’s body in the trunk of the cab. Phil and his wife become complicit in the murder when they cover it up so as not to ruin their vacation.



Miss Todd

In Harley Street, Miss Todd is the receptionist and secretary at a doctor's office. Miss Todd is young and beautiful. She is friends with Bettina who works with the testing of blood in the basement. Miss Todd prides herself on knowing everything about the patients and the people who work in the building. However, she is blind to the fact that all of the patients are vampires and that Bettina herself has recently turned into a vampire. Bettina invites Miss Todd to try being fed off of by vampires, but Miss Todd doesn't believe she'll accept, for she is not of that orientation.

Offenses Against the Person Narrator

In the "Offenses Against the Person," the narrator is a pretty, seventeen year-old girl who works at her father's law office while awaiting college. The narrator discovers that her father is having an affair with a younger woman, Nicolette Bland. The narrator later deduces that her father, now remarried to Nicolette, is once again having an affair with another woman.

How Shall I Know You Narrator

The "How Shall I Know You?" narrator is an over-the-hill writer. Arrogant and cold, the narrator is lost and drifting, trying to get her career back. She accepts an invitation to speak at a reading club, during which time she stays at an inn called the Eccles House. There, a lonely and deformed teenage girl who works at the house tends to the writer and attempts to befriend her. The writer callously brushes off the girl, giving her a large tip and telling her to buy something nice. A few months later at a train station, the writer, herself not physically deformed, is left wondering what flaw a handsome young man sees in her when he leaves her a callous tip as well.

Morna

Morna is a pretty, fourteen year-old girl who is suffering from anorexia. She must deal with a dysfunctional family. Morna's innocence as a child has been taken by her anorexia, and she feels imprisoned by her parents. They dote on her and do everything they can to force her to eat and stay healthy. Ultimately, Morna's heart, wrecked by her anorexia, fails and kills her.

Terminus Narrator

The "Terminus" narrator is a young man on the way to a business meeting when he sees the ghost of his father on a parallel track bound for Waterloo Station. The man then veers off the beaten path to find his father, only to fail in the process. But in so



doing, he is able to reflect on the nature of life and death and how everyone comes to a "terminus" or death in the end.

Assassination of Margaret Thatcher Narrator

The "The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher" narrator is a relatively normal woman who has an apartment which overlooks the back entrance of a hospital in which Margaret Thatcher is being treated for her eyes. The narrator opens her apartment up to an IRA assassin who is pretending to be a photographer who is pretending to be a plumber. She is stunned to discover the truth. Though she is not a fan of Thatcher and does not believe in violence, she does nothing to try to stop the assassin. She even goes so far as to help him plan his escape.



Symbols and Symbolism

Letter

A letter is written to Muhammad Ijaz by the husband of the narrator in the story "Sorry to Disturb." The letter, brief and to the point, tells Ijaz that he must stop his attempts to woo the narrator in the effort to get the narrator to leave her husband and become Ijaz's wife.

Stroller

In "Comma," Mary Joplin is pushing a stroller filled with dirty laundry when she and the narrator meet again decades after their childhood friendship. Mary has developed a mental illness. She is speaking to the laundry in the stroller as though the laundry were a person.

Wine Glass

A wine glass is carried by the wife of the adulterous husband in "The Long QT." The wife drops the wine glass, which shatters, upon discovery of her husband's intent to cheat on her. The wine glass becomes symbolic of her own frail and broken heart, for she has suffered from undiagnosed and untreated QT syndrome, which can lead to cardiac arrest and death given a sudden shock or emotional extreme.

Rock

A rock is used by the taxi driver in "Winter Break" to bash in the head of a child he has just accidentally run over while driving Phil and his wife to their hotel. The rock is then discarded as the driver dumps the child's body into the trunk. The murder is covered up by the driver, Phil, and Phil's wife.

Blood

Blood is drawn for testing from the patients of the clinic in "Harley Street." Blood is later stolen from the basement lab by vampires. It is freely given by Bettina to Mrs. Bathurst in sexually-addictive feedings.

Court Case

A court case is being undertaken by the narrator's father in "Offenses Against the Person" on the day that he decides to leave his wife in favor of a younger woman.

Novels

Novels are written by the narrator of “How Shall I Know You?” These novels are years old, but they are still read by many people, including the reading group that she will address. As the narrator prepares to meet the secretary of the group, she asks how she’ll know him. He explains that he will be holding her first novel, “A Spoiler at Noonday.”

Hearts

The hearts of Morna in “The Heart Fails Without Reason” and of the wife of the adulterous husband in “The Long QT” prove to be deadly. Morna dies of heart failure after her heart is wrecked by her anorexia; and the adulterous husband’s wife dies of cardiac arrest brought on by an undiagnosed QT syndrome. The syndrome can cause cardiac arrest following any sudden surge of emotions. Hearts also prove to be symbolic. The woman dies of a broken heart, while Morna’s heart condition is symbolic of the greater corruption of the heart of her dysfunctional family.

Trains

Trains are ridden by commuters and travelers in “Terminus.” The narrator is on a train to a business meeting when he sees the ghost of his father on a train on a parallel track. The trains and tracks become symbolic of the different lives that people live and the different destinations they reach. The narrator reminds readers that all tracks become parallel eventually and all are headed to the same eventual terminus –death.

Sniper rifle

A sniper rifle is used by the IRA assassin in “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” to assassinate Margaret Thatcher. The assassin carries around the rifle in a work bag, disguising himself as a photographer disguised as a plumber in order to access a vantage point from which to take the shot.



Settings

England

England is an island nation off the continent of Europe, and is where many of the stories in the collection take place, between the countryside and the capital of London. The stories occur in England in both the present day, and the 1980s. These stories include “Comma,” “The Long QT,” “Winter Break,” “Harley Street,” “Offenses Against the Person,” “How Shall I Know You?,” “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” “Terminus,” and “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher.”

London

London is the capital city of England and the seat of power for the United Kingdom. London is a bustling city setting for many of the stories. It is seen in both the 1980s and the present day. The short stories “Harley Street,” “Offenses Against the Person,” “Terminus,” and “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” all occur in London.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is a Middle Eastern country in which the short story “Sorry to Disturb” is set. Governed by Islamic law, Saudi Arabian women have very few rights. They are expected to be submissive and quiet. Visiting foreigners, like the narrator, see Saudi Arabia as an oppressive and dangerous place, especially for women. When Muhammad Ijaz begins an unwanted friendship with the narrator, the narrator realizes the potential for danger in terms of marriage and in terms of Saudi law which forbids men and women from being alone together when they are not married.

Waterloo Station

Waterloo Station is a major train station in London, England. It figures into the story “Terminus” heavily, where the narrator sees the ghost of his father on a train bound for Waterloo. The narrator extensively searches Waterloo for his father, but he cannot find him. The station is a historical reference to the June 18, 1815 Battle of Waterloo between Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, in which Napoleon sought a victory he could not find.

The Hathaway House

The Hathaway House is located outside of an unnamed rural English village in the beautiful summer countryside. The Hathaway House is a massive manor owned by an incredibly rich family that is stumbled upon by the narrator and Mary in “Comma.” The

Hathaway family includes a deformed child that is discovered by the narrator and Mary. The child is referred to as a human comma.



Themes and Motifs

Irony of the Unexpected

The unexpected proves to be an important theme in the short story collection, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* by Hilary Mantel. Thematically, the unexpected is essentially a plot twist, an irony, or an unforeseen circumstance, incident, or result that occurs. The short stories of *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* are replete with the unexpected.

Irony is a major focus in many of the stories. In “Sorry to Disturb,” an ill and isolated woman finds herself the sudden friend of a Pakistani man, for she reminds him of an old flame –unlike his present wife, who has been forced into submission and silence by Islam. The woman frequently refers to the impropriety of the man’s visits, laments what has become of his wife, laments what becomes of most Muslim women, and dislikes the supreme male-dominance in society, only to turn, ironically, to her husband for his help when the friendship becomes too much for her to handle on her own.

Irony also appears in “The Long QT,” when a woman discovers her husband on the cusp of an affair. She, quite literally, dies of a broken heart when the shock of discovering the affair plunges her into sudden and fatal cardiac arrest. Her husband has broken her heart.

Irony In “Harley Street” occurs when a female receptionist, who seems to know everything about every patient and worker at the doctor’s office where she works, is unable to see that all of the patients are vampires.

In “Offenses Against the Person,” a daughter watches as her father has an affair with a much younger woman, leading to his divorcing his wife to marry the younger woman. Eventually, the daughter watches once more as her father cheats on his new wife, as well.

In the story “Comma,” two children –the narrator, and a girl named Mary –discover a deformed child, describing the child’s shape as a comma. Decades later, when the boy finds Mary again, she has gone insane, and her life –unlike the life of the deformed child –has come to a complete stop because of her illness, where the deformed child’s physical features have not handicapped him. He is a comma, meaning his life will continue on; Mary is a period, meaning her life will not. In “Winter Break,” a married couple go on vacation, only to have their taxi driver accidentally run over a child –and help him to cover up the crime so as not to ruin their vacation.

In “How Shall I Know You?” a writer who is past her prime, out of pity, gives Louise, a deformed teenage girl twenty pounds in order to buy herself something nice –only to have the same thing happen to herself several months later. While Louise’s deformity



may have been physical, the writer's was clearly not –and she is left to wonder for what flaw she has been given twenty pounds.

The unexpected also touches the stories in ways other than irony or in mere twists of the plot. The unexpected will occur on a much deeper level in some of these stories. In “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” Morna, a girl suffering from anorexia, does not starve herself to death, but cripples her body to the point where her heart fails, and kills her. Here, however, Morna's heart is not the only thing to fail. Her own illness has caused the family to suffer. Her parents dote on her, and ignore her younger sister. Her younger sister, Lola, considers that Morna is taking a place she herself should have occupied –as first in the eyes of their parents. Their parents are themselves also largely disconnected in various ways. For example, their father denies them a dog but watches BDSM porn in which girls are treated like dogs. At the end of the novel, Lola sees Morna's ghost with a white dog on a golden chain –symbolizing the loss of Morna's innocence to anorexia, and the golden chain symbolizing the imprisonment she felt while still alive. Only in death does she have the things which in life she was denied.

In “Terminus,” a ghost story about a son seeing his dead father on a train, reflects on how human lives are different, and how he himself will someday find his own terminus. In “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher”, the narrator becomes an unwilling participant to an assassination, and as the day unfolds, becomes a party to helping the assassin escape. The narrator reflects on how history can change in an instant –from something as large as the assassination of a public figure to the sound of an ice cream truck.

Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in important theme in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, a short story collection by Hilary Mantel. Friendship –the mutual, platonic affection, loyalty for, and enjoyment of spending time between two or more people. Friendship proves to be life-altering and essential the plot of several stories.

The entire plot of the short story “Comma” is based on friendship. When the narrator is eight years old, he befriends another eight year-old, Mary Joplin. The two of them care little for what home is like for the other, but merely enjoy spending time with one another. It is this friendship which ultimately brings them to the Hathaway house, where they discover a deformed child shaped like a comma. The narrator and Mary have discovered something uncommon in their staid village, and it is a discovery that binds them together as friends. However, their friendship also blinds them to their differences. Mary's family is impoverished, and live like pigs. Mary is ultimately sent away to a special education school, with the implication clear that she has some kind of learning disability not clear to the narrator as a child. Only as an adult does the narrator come to understand Mary's psychological issues, when he encounters her speaking to a stroller full of dirty laundry.



In “Harley Street,” friendship becomes more problematic. The narrator, Miss Todd, works as a receptionist and secretary at a doctor’s office, and seems to know everything about everyone at the building –patient and fellow worker, alike. Miss Todd befriends a pretty girl, Bettina, who works in the office basement drawing blood from all the patients that Miss Todd is instructed to send down. It is only later in the story that Bettina comes out to Miss Todd –but not as homosexual. Bettina comes out as a vampire, having been turned while allowing Mrs. Bathurst to feed from her. Bettina loves being fed off of, and invites Miss Todd –a trusted friend –to try it sometime. Miss Todd does not believe that she will, for this friendship with Bettina has now become problematic.

In “Sorry to Disturb,” friendship takes on an altogether unwelcome nature. The narrator is an ill and isolated woman who earns the friendship of a Pakistani man named Muhammd Ijaz. Ijaz comes to develop an emotional attachment to the narrator, for she reminds him of an old girlfriend. Ijaz’s own wife has been broken into submission by Islam and Saudi culture, and so Ijaz is obviously looking elsewhere for a new wife, as becomes clear to the narrator later in the story. However, the friendship that Ijaz seems to want to be building with the narrator is unwanted, for numerous reasons. First, the narrator is married and in love with her own husband. Second, the friendship is dangerous due to the fact that such meetings between men and women are forbidden by Islam and Saudi social protocol. Third, the narrator can easily see how Islam treats women, and how she herself will end up if she is to be the wife of Ijaz. As a result, she turns to her husband to put an end at the friendship that Ijaz is forcing on her.

Marriage

Marriage is an important theme in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, a short story collection by Hilary Mantel. Marriage, in the book, affects the course and outcome of various short stories in different ways –sometimes positively, and sometimes negatively.

In the short story “Sorry to Disturb,” a Muslim man who is dissatisfied with his marriage seeks to befriend and eventually marry the narrator. The narrator, lovingly married herself, marvels with dismay at how Middle Eastern men place no value on the integrity of Western marriage, as though Western marriage was beneath Islamic marriage. The man’s advances end when the narrator appeals to her husband for help. He writes a brief, but terse letter defending his wife and their marriage. He demands that the man stop. Here, marriage –specifically Western marriage –proves immensely important and positive. The narrator knows that she, like Muhammad Ijaz’s current wife, will be broken into submission by Islamic marriage. She does not want this for herself. This is the only story in the book in which marriage assumes a positive nature and effect.

In “The Long QT,” marriage shifts into the realm of the decidedly negative in nature. Here, a married man kisses another woman, intending to plan a sexual affair with her during a party, only to have his wife walk in on them speaking to one another. The wife is shocked at what is going on –and this causes her to go into cardiac arrest and die. The wife literally dies of a broken heart because of her husband.



In “Winter Break,” a married couple goes on vacation. Though they are clearly in love with one another, the husband, Phil, has no intention of ever having children, taking every opportunity to point out why as he is able to do so. However, when the taxicab driver accidentally runs over a small child, and then uses a rock to bash the child’s head in, the husband and wife help cover up the crime so their vacation is not ruined—a disgusting display of marital fidelity to one another.

In “Offenses Against the Person,” the narrator—a seventeen year-old girl—watches as her father begins an affair with a younger woman named Nicolette. Eventually, the marriage between the narrator’s mother and father leads to divorce, during which time, her father remarries to Nicolette. A few years later, after Nicolette has twins, the narrator’s father once again turns to cheating on his new wife, demonstrating his utter lack of regard and respect for the meaning and institution of marriage.

In “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” the parents of Morna seem to be more devoted to Morna than to one another, or to their younger daughter, Lola. Morna’s father, for example, spends a lot of time in his home office, not working, but watching BDSM pornography, which is discovered by his daughters. It angers Morna intensely that her father should be watching pornography, and angers her that any girl would willingly allow men to use her in that fashion. The marriage of her parents does not seem to be based on mutual love. They are together because of their child.

Appearance

Appearances are incredibly important in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, a short story collection by Hilary Mantel. Appearances—both those formed at first glance, and those intentionally made fraudulent—affect the plot of each of the short stories in various ways.

In “Sorry to Disturb,” the narrator allows Muhammad Ijaz into her apartment to use her phone, after which time Ijaz forces a friendship on the narrator, which she neither likes nor wants. While Ijaz presents himself initially in appearance as merely a friend, his true intentions are later revealed. He wishes to divorce his wife and marry the narrator, for the narrator reminds him of a girlfriend from many years ago. One never truly knows what one is opening the door to. In “Comma”, appearances mean everything to the plot. The misshapen and deformed Hathaway child—described in appearance as a comma by Mary—reveals, in conjunction with the descriptive term, comma, that his physical deformities are not the end, or period, of his life. Indeed, Mary, who appears to be as normal as any eight year-old kid, ultimately ends up with a severe psychological condition by the time she is an adult, leading to her talking to a baby stroller full of dirty laundry. Her own life is stopped by this psychological deformity—a period to her life, and to her normal physical appearance rather than a comma to it.

In “How Shall I Know You?” an arrogant but over-the-hill writer gives a deformed teenage girl a twenty-pound tip to buy herself something nice as a condescending and



cruel gesture –only to have the favor returned a few months later, leading her to wonder what flaw of her own has been picked up on, despite her own normal appearance.

In “The Long QT,” a married man seeks a sexual affair with another woman –only to have his wife discover the plan, leading her to die of sudden cardiac arrest. By all appearances, the wife is healthy and normal –but as is later revealed, she suffered from long QT syndrome, which, if left unchecked, will become deadly. In the case of the wife, a sudden shock or emotional surge –such as the one experienced by her discovery of her husband soliciting an adulterous liaison –leads to her heart breaking, literally.

Similarly, in “Winter Break,” a seemingly normal married couple travels on vacation, only to help cover up a murder in order to avoid the ruining of their vacation, leading the reader to realize that there is a dark side to the couple despite their appearance of normality.

In “Harley Street,” the patients who appear at the doctor’s office all appear to be ill or sick in some way, shape, or form –but are, in reality, vampires. Likewise, Bettina, who appears to be a normal girl, comes out as a recently-turned vampire, who finds a sexual addiction to being fed off of by Mrs. Bathurst.

In “Offenses Against the Person,” a seventeen year-old girl watches as her parents – seemingly happy by all appearances –end up getting a divorce when her father leaves her mother for a younger woman, whom the father ultimately ends up cheating on.

In “Terminus,” a son, who by all appearances is merely on his way to a run-of-the-mill business meeting, sees the ghost of his father, leading him to deeply ruminate on life, how everyone is taking a train somewhere, and how everyone will ultimately have their own terminus, often unexpected.

In “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” a seemingly normal family, by all appearances, gives way to a darker nature. Lola, for example, hates that her sister exists, and her father, rather than working from home, spends much of his time watching pornography. Morna herself, suffering from anorexia, dies of a weakened heart rather than starving – and her illness becomes metaphorical for the illness that is eating at the heart of the family itself, leading it to ruin –all despite appearances.

In “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher,” an IRA assassin disguises himself as a photographer disguised as a plumber to carry out the assassination, only to have the homeowner of the apartment –seemingly normal by all appearances –suddenly become an aider and abettor by helping the assassin to plot his escape.

Free Will

Free will is an important theme in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, a short story collection by Hilary Mantel. Free will involves the freedom and ability of an individual to make his or her own choices in life, and involves the idea that their choices and



decisions will ultimately determine events and situations in life, and that people are not fated to an inescapable end.

In “Sorry to Disturb,” no force of fate compels the narrator to open the door to Muhammad Ijaz, but the narrator does it willingly. While Ijaz’s intentions for marriage become clear later in the novel, the narrator has the free will to take her destiny into her own hands, to refuse to allow events to continue to spiral out of control. She enlists her husband’s help to this end, who himself in an act of free will writes to Ijaz, telling him to cease contacting his wife. It works, and the husband saves his wife.

In “The Long QT,” the husband’s decision to cheat on his wife is his own, and no one else’s. His agreement in the unfolding affair ultimately leads to his wife’s death through a bad heart condition and shock –his acts of free will ultimately negating the life of his wife.

In “Winter Break,” the taxi driver, who accidentally runs over a small child, chooses to kill the child rather than seek help or take responsibility for the accident. The husband and wife he is driving also willingly cover up the crime, for they do not want to be involved, and do not want to have their vacation ruined. They have acted freely to do as they please, and all three of them ultimately create a terrible injustice through free will, and at the expense of the life of the child.

In “Harley Street,” Bettina willingly allows herself to be fed on by vampires, while her invitation to Miss Todd to do the same are freely met with a polite kind of refusal to pursue that kind of a lifestyle. In “Offenses Against the Person”, the narrator’s father and Nicolette freely choose to enter into an affair with one another, and later get married. Ultimately, the narrator’s father’s free will means that he will elect to have yet another affair.

In “How Shall I Know You?” the narrator chooses freely to travel to give a talk to a reading group, and later freely chooses to be cruel and condescending to a deformed teenage girl who works at the inn at which she stays. The act is later freely returned by a male stranger to the narrator.

In “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” each of the members of the family make choices in their life that lead to the corrosion of the family. For example, the parents freely dote on their eldest child, claiming that her illness demands it. The father freely turns to BDSM pornography online, causing a distance between both he and his wife, and a disconnect between he and his daughters when they find the pornographic material on his computer.

In “Terminus,” people freely come and go as they will on trains, each with different places to head and come back from. Only the narrator realizes that he, and everyone else, will ultimately have some form of terminus of their own. In “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher”, the assassin does his hideous job freely, and the homeowner decides, of her own free will, to help the assassin plan his escape. As she says, chillingly, “History could always have been otherwise.”

Styles

Point of View

Hillary Mantel tells her collection of short stories, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, from both the first-person and third-person limited-omniscient perspectives. The limited-omniscient perspective creates an air of suspense and drama for the reader, allowing the reader to know only as much as the narrator, whether first or third-person in nature.

The first and third-person narrative modes themselves vary according to each story. “Sorry to Disturb,” “Comma,” “Harley Street,” “Offenses Against the Person,” “How Shall I Know You?,” “Terminus,” and “The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher” are all told in the first-person narrative.

The short stories “The Long QT,” “Winter Break,” and “The Heart Fails Without Warning” are all told in the third-person perspective. In many short stories, such as “Sorry to Disturb,” “Comma,” and “How Shall I Know You?,” the narrator is never named. In others, such as “Harley Street,” narrators are named in passing, such as in the case of Miss Todd. In stories like “The Heart Fails Without Warning,” important characters are named, such as Morna and Lola, though who is narrating the story in third-person is never revealed.

Language and Meaning

Hillary Mantel tells her collection of short stories, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, in language that is simple, but educated. Each of the narrators in her story share a similar voice and use of language to tell the story, clearly reflective of the author herself. While the language is relatively simple and straightforward, the use of higher-end words and terms in the novel speak to an education and a knowledge of the English language. For example, the words pebble dash, syntactical, ineradicable, diminutive, and garrulous are not used in everyday conversation. This similarity in narrative language, however, helps to provide a sense of continuity between so many different and diverse stories, characters, and locations.

Structure

Hillary Mantel’s book, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, is a collection of ten short stories that have no bearing or relation to one another, but do share common themes, such as free will and the unexpected. Some of the stories, such as “Winter Break,” are only a few pages long, while others, like *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*, are nearly forty pages in length. Each short story is preceded by a title page bearing the name of the short story, and the short stories themselves are arranged only by name, without numbers.



Quotes

I opened the door.

-- Narrator (Sorry to Disturb paragraph 1)

Importance: In this story, the narrator is forced to endure an unwanted friendship with a Muslim man who first appears at her door looking to borrow the telephone because he is lost. This quote sums up more than just a mere physical act, but an activity of greater importance. One never knows to whom or to what a door is being opened; when one opens the door, anything can come in. Even appearances may be false at first. It appeared that the man at the door was just lost and needed to use the phone. However, he became an uninvited guest who wanted an improper friendship.

Then, as if by some predetermined signal, we would flounce down again, so we would be half-invisible if God looked over the fields.

-- Narrator (Comma paragraph 1)

Importance: As a child, the narrator and Mary Joplin spend their summer exploring the countryside and surrounding area of their village. In the twilight years of childhood, little else matters except the events of the day and friendship. The narrator and Mary live in their own little world. They do not recognize the things that adults do. The narrator, for example, does not know that Mary will, as she ages, break down psychologically.

She did not speak. Her mouth worked as if she might speak, but only a squeak came out.

-- Narrator (The Long QT paragraph 14)

Importance: Appearances can be deceiving. After discovering her husband plotting an affair, his wife –long suffering from QT syndrome – dies instantly from a heart attack. When the heart is broken –literally or metaphorically –words fail the sufferer.

A shock will do it, he said, or strong emotion, a strong emotion of any sort.

-- Narrator (The Long QT paragraph 18)

Importance: Here, the narrator reveals the doctor's explanation of his wife's sudden death due to QT syndrome, resulting in a cardiac arrest. It may be brought on by a strong emotional reaction of any sort. Shock at her husband's desire to cheat on her was enough to break her heart, literally.

Not such a mystery really.

-- Mrs. Bathurst (Harley Street paragraph 10)

Importance: While speaking on matters of life and death, Mrs. Bathurst, a patient at the doctor's office where Miss Todd works, says that life and death are really not such a mystery. She would know. She is a vampire who is living death without having died as a human.



Occam's razor shaves you closer.

-- Narrator (Offenses Against the Person paragraph 10)

Importance: The seventeen year-old narrator of this short story wonders why her father refused to try to stop his young secretary, Nicolette, from switching jobs. As the narrator later discovers, no explanation her father offers is enough. The simplest explanation, such as is the case of the philosophical concept of Occam's razor, is true. The move has nothing to do with the job, but everything to do with the affair her father and Nicolette are having.

I was lost and drifting that year, I don't deny it. And as my bag was always packed, there was no reason to turn down the literary society.

-- Narrator (How Shall I Know You? paragraph 3)

Importance: Here, the narrator freely chooses to go and read to a literary society. While staying at a local inn, she will condescendingly and cruelly offer a deformed teenage girl a twenty-pound tip to buy herself something nice, only to realize, later, the true deformity does not belong to the girl, but to the narrator herself.

Lola's grievance was this: Morna was born before she was, already she had used up three years' worth of air, and taken space in the world that Lola could have occupied.

-- Narrator (The Heart Fails Without Warning paragraph 1)

Importance: Rather than being concerned for her anorexic sister Morna, Lola resents her. Lola hates how Morna is the center of attention when it comes to their parents. She wishes that she were the one in the spotlight. Lola's hatred of her sister is an example of how the metaphorical heart of the family fails.

We were on parallel tracks.

-- Narrator (Terminus paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator sees the ghost of his father on a train beside his own. This makes a simple, yet profound, statement. Father and son are not merely on parallel tracks on trains, but in life, as well. The narrator comes to learn that all people, despite their differences, ultimately come to a terminus of their own. The greatest terminal of all is death. Though everyone may be on different tracks headed in different directions, all tracks ultimately lead in a parallel fashion to that ultimate destination.

I tell you this: if you are minded to unite at Waterloo Station, lay your plans well and in advance. Formalize in writing, for extra caution.

-- Narrator (Terminus paragraph 9)

Importance: Here, the narrator reflects not only on seeking out the ghost of his father at Waterloo Station, but a deeper historical parallel is drawn to life in general. The narrator speaks in reference to the Battle of Waterloo, waged on June 18, 1815, between the French forces of Napoleon and the coalition forces under the Duke of Wellington. During the battle, Napoleon's plans, which were hatched together moment by moment,



came undone due to poor planning. His commanders often acted on their own without written orders. So, poor planning and impulsive acts cost Napoleon the battle. Life is much the same way. While anything can happen at any moment, a life unplanned is even more vulnerable to coming undone.

I am no friend of this woman, though I don't (I felt compelled to add) believe violence solves anything.

-- Narrator (The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher: August 6th, 1983 paragraph 63)

Importance: Here, the narrator finds herself the unwitting host of an assassin. She attempts to reason with the assassin, but to no avail. While the narrator is not a supporter of Margaret Thatcher, she believes there is no need to kill Thatcher.

History could always have been otherwise.

-- Narrator (The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher: August 6th, 1983 paragraph 164)

Importance: Here, the narrator references the importance of free will. Even the smallest actions are magnified in the end. Every single small step, every single decision, large or small, will ultimately impact and change the course of history.