

Can't and Won't Study Guide

Can't and Won't by Lydia Davis

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Contents

[Can't and Won't Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....4](#)

[Section One: A Story of Stolen Salamis,The Dog Hair,Circular Story, Idea for a Sign.....6](#)

[Section One: Bloomington, The Cook's Lesson, At the Bank, Awake in the Night.....8](#)

[Section One: At the Bank: 2, The Two Davises and the Rug, Contingency \(vs. Necessity\), Brief Incident in Short a, Long a, and Schwa.....10](#)

[Section One: Contingency \(vs. Necessity\) 2: On Vacation,A Story Told to Me By A Friend, The Bad Novel, After You Left.....13](#)

[Section One: The Bodyguard, The Child, The Churchyard, My Sister and the Queen of England16](#)

[Section One: The Visit to the Dentist, Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer, The Cornmeal....19](#)

[Section Two: Two Undertakers, I Ask Mary About Her Friend, the Depressive, and His Vacation, The Magic of the Train, Eating Fish Alone.....21](#)

[Section Two: Can't and Won't, Pouchet's Wife, Dinner, The Dog.....24](#)

[Section Two: The Grandmother, The Dreadful Mucamas, Reversible Story, A Woman, Thirty...26](#)

[Section Two: How I Know What I Was Like \(Six Versions\), Handel, The Force of the Subliminal,Her Geography: Alabama.....29](#)

[Section Two: The Funeral, The Husband Seekers, In the Gallery, The Low Sun.....32](#)

[Section Two: The Landing, The Language of the Telephone Company, The Coachman and the Worm, Letter to a Marketing Manager.....34](#)

[Section 3: The Last of the Mohicans, Grade Two Assignment, Master, An Awkward Situation...37](#)

[Section 3: Housekeeping Observation, The Execution, A Note from the Paperboy, In the Train Station.....39](#)

[Section 3: The Moon, My Footsteps, How I Read as Quickly as Possible, Notes During a Long Phone Conversation with Mother.....41](#)

[Section Three: Men, Negative Emotions, I'm Pretty Comfortable, Judgment.....43](#)

[Section Three: The Chairs, My Friend's Creation, The Piano, The Party.....45](#)



[Section Three: Cows, The Exhibition, Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company, Her Geography: Illinois..... 47](#)

[Section 4: Odon von Horvath Out Walking, On the Train, The Seals, Learning Medieval History 50](#)

[Section 4: My School Friend, The Piano Lesson, The Schoolchildren, Molly..... 53](#)

[Section 4: The Letter to the Foundation, Revise:1, Short Conversations, Revise:2..... 56](#)

[Section 4: Waiting for Takeoff, Industry, Two Characters, The Language of Things, The Washerwomen..... 59](#)

[Section 5: My Childhood Friend, Hello Dear, Not Interested..... 61](#)

[Section 5: Old Woman, Old Fish, The Song, Two Former Students..... 63](#)

[Section 5: A Small Story about A Box of Chocolates, Writing, The Rooster..... 65](#)

[Section 5: The Old Soldier, Two Sligo Lads, The Woman in Red..... 67](#)

[Section 5: If At the Wedding at the Zoo, The Gold Digger of Goldfields, Local Obits, Letter to the President, Nancy Brown, Ph.D..... 69](#)

[Characters..... 72](#)

[Symbols and Symbolism..... 74](#)

[Settings..... 76](#)

[Themes and Motifs..... 77](#)

[Styles..... 80](#)

[Quotes..... 81](#)



Plot Summary

Can't and Won't Stories by Lydia Davis offers a look, often comedic, sometimes tragic, into life and its many insights. Included in this collection are a series of letters from Gustav Flaubert, writer of *Madame Bovary*, to his lover, Loise Colet. Included in this collection are also a series of complaint letters to various groups, foundations, organizations, and individuals.

The book, itself, is divided into five sections and begins with the story group beginning with *A Story of Stolen Salamis*, which features the narrator's son and an incident with his landlord. From this group in Section One the reader sees a grouping of stories that speak to ordinary occurrences that had further reaching implications. This is true of the story, *The Dog Hair*, where the family's beloved pet has died and no one can bring themselves to throw even the stray hairs that are still in the house, away. Additionally, in this first section, the reader, if they are not familiar with Davis's microfiction, will find stories that are no more than a few sentences long. Very often, however, much like a poem, each word and sentence is structured to deliver a masterful thematic punch, or evoke a feeling in the reader. This is true of the story called *Contingency* (vs. *Necessity*). Likewise, in Section One, the reader is given a taste of the symbolism in *The Two Davises* and the *Rug* story. This first section seems to concern itself with themes of loss, acceptance, and human connection.

Section Two concerns itself with more cerebral and metaphysical issues, such as dreams. This is especially true of the story called, *The Magic of the Train*, where the theme of things not being as they appear to be is introduced. The narrator observes two women walking away from her in the train, and the narrator guesses their ages to be somewhere in their mid-twenties. However, when the women walk back through the train car, the narrator realizes that she's been mistaken and the women are actually in their late forties or early fifties. In the story, *Eating Fish Alone*, this theme is again evident in that the narrator wonders if her actions have appeared strange to the chef whose fish she is eating. The title piece of the collection, *Can't and Won't*, is also in this section. This introduces the author's sense of humor and dry wit, as she indicates that she was at one time turned down for a writing award based on the fact that she used too many contractions. There are many dream sequences in this section where the narrator has encounters with the moon, strange people and monks.

Section Three concerns itself with the theme of human connections and addressing/finding the meaning in life. In the story, *The Last of the Mahicans*, the narrator visits her mother who is in a nursing home. The mother feels as if she is the last of a dying kind of person, those who are her age and are from her hometown. In another story, the narrator confronts a Master and claims to also be a Master. The true Master tells her that she is not. In a letter from Flaubert to his lover the reader sees that mankind is still bloodthirsty even centuries beyond the gladiatorial days in ancient Greece. The narrator has a sequence of dreams where she is meeting and speaking to a Monk in red. Later, the narrator has an encounter with the moon that fills her room with such light that she is changed inwardly. The story *Negative Emotions* is also



focused on Monks and religious hypocrisy, which illustrates the themes of human connection, the meaning of life, and time.

Section Four continues with the theme of time as evidence in the story, Odon von Horvath Out Walking. In this story Odon is out walking and comes across a hiker who has died on the trail. Upon examining the rucksack he finds a postcard that has never been mailed...it says, 'having a great time'. It is evident that in this section that the author will use quiet and often dry humor as a vehicle for deeper themes concerning the passing of time, the waste of time, and the use of time. One of the longer stories in this section is called, The Seals. Though the theme of Loss is also present in this piece, it is evident that the loss of a sister is more about allowing time to slip away and then suddenly to be faced with all of the things that were not done, and of all the good intentions that will never come to fruition.

Section Five deals with the past and relationships. The section begins with the short story called, My Childhood Friend. Both the narrator and the childhood friend don't recognize one another at first, because there's been such a passing of time. But, of course, when they do figure out who the other is, are glad to have run into one another once again. In the story, Not Interested, the narrator talks about a book that she despises reading, and that this dislike for the one book has also made it impossible for her to enjoy other novels, too. Tongue-in-cheek the narrator tells the writers of the books to stop sharing their imaginations with her and leave her alone. In the story, The Song, which is a dream that the author had, the narrator hears someone in a house singing a beautiful song, but then someone yells at him and he has to stop the song. Strongly symbolic, this story, as well as many others in this section, suggest the connection between people, and the loss of that connection as happening on many levels.



Section One: A Story of Stolen Salamis, The Dog Hair, Circular Story, Idea for a Sign

Summary

A Story of Stolen Salamis

In this story the author states that her son in Brooklyn, had a landlord that was Italian, and, as a hobby, the landlord cured and smoked salamis. One night someone broke into the shed and stole all of the salamis. The newspaper carried the story and called the salamis, sausages, which upset the landlord. They were NOT sausages. It mattered to him.

The Dog Hair

In this story the protagonist has lost a beloved pet. There are dog hairs still around the home, and on their clothes, which continue to remind them of how much they miss their dog. They miss him jumping up on them, barking at the front door, and all of the doggie things that he did. His absence is noticeable.

Circular Story

This story is, literally, a circular story. The author is upset because on Wednesday mornings the trash truck comes by very early and wakes her up. She ends the story by repeating the same information, thus making it a circular story.

Idea for a Sign

The author talks about how people select seats on various modes of transportation, when they haven't been assigned seats. She speaks about how it would be nicer if everyone wore a sign on them specifying what will or won't be tolerated or which tasks will or won't be undertaken by the person wearing the sign. She goes into a long litany of things that she will most likely do on a long excursion, stating implicitly that she strives to be a good neighbor at all times, even while engaged in the tasks she proposes to do.

Analysis

A Story of Stolen Salamis

In this short story (one paragraph in length) the author is suggesting that distinction matters, labels matter, and in this short story, the theme of cultural pride is evident in the



fact that the Italian landlord was determined that the meat was a salami and not sausages.

The Dog Hair

In this story the theme and tone of loss and grief are evident. The family finds hairs that belonged to the dog everywhere that they turn, but are unable and unwilling to throw them away. Symbolically the hairs are memories and reminders of a beloved part of their family.

Circular Story

The story is humorous in that the title tells the reader that the story will be circular in structure, and it is. The author starts with the inciting incident, the trash truck's arrival and consequent noise, and then she ends with the trash truck coming by, again, the following Wednesday. On a deeper level, the author is showing (and telling) the repetition of something that she finds completely annoying.

Idea for a Sign

The author in this short piece demonstrates the theme of human connection. While listing all of the things that she does on a long trip, after each one she is quick to imply that she will engage in the activities in the most appreciable way possible and will in no way inconvenience or upset anyone around her. She is almost apologetic in tone, and continues to suggest that she really is a nice person and a good traveling companion.

Discussion Question 1

How does the author evoke the tone of grief and loss in the story, The Dog Hair?

Discussion Question 2

In An Idea for a Sign, how does the author demonstrate the theme of human connection?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme of cultural pride in The Stolen Salamis.

Vocabulary

congratulate, array, refuse, decisive, gracefully, unattractive, parish, parishioner, admire, midsummer



Section One: Bloomington, The Cook's Lesson, At the Bank, Awake in the Night

Summary

Bloomington

This story almost doesn't qualify as a story as it is, literally, one compound sentence. She states that since visiting Bloomington, she can say with confidence that she still doesn't believe she's been there.

The Cook's Lesson

In this short story the protagonist has taken a cooking class with a very young French teacher. The student asks about the king of France and remarks that France is now a republic. The teacher says she could care less. The author is struck with the wisdom of the comment.

At the Bank

The protagonist has taken some loose change to the bank to be counted. There is a contest whereby if the person bringing in the change can guess close to the amount being counted that the person will win a prize. The protagonist does get within a dollar or so of the amount and qualifies for the prize. The protagonist must choose between several objects, finally opting for a Frisbee with its own carrying case.

Awake in the Night

The protagonist of this story is out of town and having trouble falling asleep in the hotel room. The protagonist feels that this might be so because their usual sleeping partner is not there. Hearing someone come in to the room adjacent, the protagonist believes that maybe this person will substitute for the sleeping buddy not present.

Analysis

Bloomington

This shortest of stories is sarcastic in tone and indicates that the author found nothing of any significance in Bloomington to hold her attention, or to set it apart from any other place on the planet. There were no significant details, no outstanding anecdotes that she heard or experienced, and all in all, found Bloomington to be so bland as to not really exist in her memory at all.

The Cook's Lesson



This is written from a historical perspective and the author seems to be suggesting that while history may seem to be important, to the ordinary people of the day, matters that do not directly involve them are of little consequence. This particular story is taken from letters that Gustav Flaubert (author of *Madame Bovary*) wrote to his lover. The author of this short story collection has included them throughout the collection in order to bring emphasis to the section's tone, as well as directing thematic material.

At the Bank

The theme of finding meaning in life (in this case in the mundane) comes through in this piece. The reader can clearly see how the protagonist is quite pleased at having guessed the amount in the cash counter. The protagonist speaks about how all of the other customers congratulate them and that the bank teller acts very pleased to hand the protagonist a prize.

Awake in the Night

This story suggests the theme of home and loneliness in a faraway place. The protagonist states that it is a strange city and that sleeping alone is a strange sensation. The fact that the protagonist has been away all night, and that it is now four in the morning, would seem to suggest the foggy thinking and the random placing of ideas next to one another. When the protagonist decides that the person in the room next to them might make a great sleeping partner, it is evident that the sleep deprivation has removed propriety from the equation.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of the meaning of life in the story *At the Bank*.

Discussion Question 2

How is a feeling of loneliness evoked in the story, *Awake in the Night*?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the story *The Cook's Story* with the story *At the Bank*.

Vocabulary

merely, baffled, rapt, outfit, fortress, correspondence, intellectually, compatible



Section One: At the Bank: 2, The Two Davises and the Rug, Contingency (vs. Necessity), Brief Incident in Short a, Long a, and Schwa

Summary

At the Bank: 2

In an almost direct duplicate to the earlier short story, *At the Bank*, the protagonist has entered the bank with another collection of coins to be counted by the machine. This time the protagonist guesses right, but there is only one prize to choose from, and this time the protagonist can actually tell if the teller is male or female. The protagonist observes that the teller is still bald, but the name tag on the woman's jacket clues him in that she is a woman.

The Two Davises and the Rug

There once lived two neighbors who had the same last name of Davis. The first Davis decided to take an old worn Native American rug out of her house and sell it in the local parish's yard sale. She originally tagged it to sell for ten dollars, but the parish appraiser thought they could get fifty dollars for it. The day came and went and many people admired it, but none bought it. Meanwhile, the second Davis had come by the sale and admired the rug.

He left without buying it but thought about it all day long. After the sale was over, he came back to the yard sale, but it was all finished. However, he saw the first Davis and asked if the rug sold. The first Davis said that it had not been sold but that she'd decided to keep it for a while. The second Davis understood and told her (first Davis) that if she were to ever change her mind that he would love to purchase it after all, at least to try in his house to see if he liked it.

Both began talking and both confessed to having trouble making decisions about little things. The first Davis began to feel guilty about keeping the rug, and the second Davis felt as if he had pushed too much and offended the first Davis. Finally, in the end, the first Davis offered to let the second Davis put it in his house to see if he really liked it after all. But, still, in the end, she wasn't sure about the entire arrangement.

Contingency (vs. Necessity)

Though this is considered a short story (or flash fiction, even) it could also be viewed as a piece of prose or unrhymed poetry. The story speaks about a dog that could be the



family dog, but the dog they are considering is not their dog, and the dog they are considering barks at them.

Brief Incident in Short a, Long a, and Schwa

This short story is created using short a, long a, and a schwa, in reference to phonics and grammar. Utilizing words that include any of the above, the writer creates a story where an ant, a cat, and a man interact, resulting in the ant changing paths twice, the cat becoming alarmed and backing away, and the man laughing at everyone's antics.

Analysis

At the Bank: 2

This story indicates that the protagonist expected something to happen, and it didn't. In an ironic twist, there is only one prize, so a limited choice, but in an optimistic upswing, the protagonist is still happy because at least this time the protagonist knows that the teller is a woman. The significance of the tape measure is of note, in that a tape measure indicates the size, shape, and even the nature of something. This represents the set of expectations that the protagonist has for the teller now that the protagonist can tell the teller's gender.

The Two Davises and the Rug

This story is about indecisiveness and what happens as a result of it. The reader sees two people with the same last name agonizing over the decision to purchase, or sell, an old rug. Being bogged down in the minutia, neither is able to come to any conclusions about whether to sell, or buy, the rug.

On a deeper level, this story is about the first Davis's life. Her son doesn't live at home any longer and her home is immaculate, except for that old rug. She decides that it is time for a change, that she wants to take her life in a different direction, but change is frightening and she vacillates in her decision....much like the rug. Therefore, the rug becomes a metaphor for her ability, or inability, to embrace change in her life, even if it is what she truly wants.

Additionally, it is interesting to note that the rug is valued more by someone on the outside, than by the actual owner. It is only when others begin to admire the rug that the owner begins to see its worth, too, opting to hold onto it. In other words, she begins to see with new eyes that her life is really worth more than she thought it was and that it really is beautiful after all.

Contingency (vs. Necessity)

The title of the piece gives away its theme, in that the author's dog has died, and they had no contingency plan, or at least their contingency plan included at some point getting another dog. Yet, it is clear that while they thought they were ready to have



another dog, upon contemplating the new dog, they realize that they aren't really ready for a new dog, that this new dog isn't like the old dog, and that they really don't need a dog yet.

Brief Incident in Short a, Long a, and Schwa

It is apparent that the writer is playing with words and is setting herself a task to create a useable story in which all of the phonemes are used.

Discussion Question 1

In the story, The Two Davises and the Rug, what does the Rug actually represent?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the ironic twist in the story, At the Bank: 2

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the author's likely choice of the title: Contingency vs Necessity

Vocabulary

exchanged, morgue, compartment, hackney, yawn, shawl, harnessed, breeching band, steppe, skewer



Section One: Contingency (vs. Necessity) 2: On Vacation, A Story Told to Me By A Friend, The Bad Novel, After You Left

Summary

Contingency (vs. Necessity) 2: On Vacation

In a parallel to the first Contingency story, this story is not about a dog, but about a woman watching a man that she admires. Unfortunately, the man is with another woman and does not notice the protagonist.

A Story Told to Me By A Friend

This sad tale is about a man who meets another man via an internet dating site. After many months of correspondence they determine that it is time to meet as they are 'in love'. The first man flies down to North Carolina to meet his internet love but when he arrives at the airport, the internet lover isn't there. The man goes to the address that the internet lover gave him and was told by the neighbor that the man that lived in the home had a heart attack. The first man went to the hospital only to learn that his internet lover had died of a heart attack only a few hours before. Despondent, the man asked to see his internet lover in the morgue. And so it was that he met face-to-face, the man he thought would be the love of his life, in the morgue.

The Bad Novel

The protagonist in this short story has a novel that is proving difficult to read. Nonetheless, instead of giving up on it, she continues to take it along with her and each time comes to the same conclusion...the novel is just bad. However, there is a comfort in that knowledge.

After You Left

This is another letter from Flaubert to his lover at their parting. Flaubert indicates that he was despondent after his lover got onto the train, so much so that he paced and smoked a cigar and listened to the lover's train until it was long gone into the distance. He writes that he met up with an old friend on his own train home and that when he disembarked he met up with another friend and they walked all the way home together.

Analysis

Contingency (vs. Necessity) 2: On Vacation

The theme in this story is much the same as in the previous Contingency story, in that the protagonist felt that she was ready for a new dog, or in this case, a new husband. However, upon finding a new husband, she realizes that while her contingency plan involved eventually finding a new husband, it is more complicated than she imagined and realizes that having a husband is not a necessity. The mention that she is on vacation can also be taken to mean that the protagonist is taking a vacation from propriety as well since she was entertaining the notion of taking someone else's husband.

A Story Told to Me By A Friend

This tragic story has as its theme, Loss. What is interesting to note is that both men made a relationship out of online dating, getting to know one another over a period of time without actually meeting face-to-face. Presumably, both men felt strongly about the relationship, enough for the first man to fly down to North Carolina to meet him. There were expectations and hopes, which were dashed when the first man learns that his internet lover had died of a heart attack. Symbolically, the internet lover's heart failed to function.

The Bad Novel

This book is about habit and routine. The protagonist routinely takes this bad novel with her when she travels, even though she inherently knows that it will bore her, even filling her with dread. And yet, she's done it so many times that not taking the novel along feels wrong, too. The author is suggesting that routines bring comfort, even if the actual items that comprise the routine are not that enjoyable. There is a peacefulness in a routine.

After You Left

This short story/letter is included because of its theme of friendship. Though the protagonist has been separated from his lover, he finds comfort in the casual and mundane conversations with friends, and that these conversations helped to ease the pain of the separation from his lover.

The symbolism of the moon should be noted, as it represents Flaubert's love for his lover. He mentions that it is full, high in the sky, and calls to him. It is mentioned three times in the several paragraphs that comprise the letter.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of the moon in the story, After You Left.



Discussion Question 2

How is the story, *The Bad Novel*, about habit and routine?

Discussion Question 3

How is the theme of Loss exemplified in the story, *A Story Told to Me by a Friend*?

Vocabulary

enclosure, cradling, harp, empire, impressed, grocer, disabled



Section One: The Bodyguard, The Child, The Churchyard, My Sister and the Queen of England

Summary

The Bodyguard

This is a story about the protagonist's bodyguard. What makes this particularly odd is that the bodyguard does not open his eyes, get out of a chair, or is particularly mobile on his own. He has to be carried about by his own caregivers.

The Child

This story is about a child that has died. The mother is tenderly viewing the child's body that lies reposed on a raised table. She decides that she wants to take a picture of the child, just one more time. Reflecting that in life the child never stayed still for a picture, now she will have one where the child doesn't move.

The Churchyard

This story has the protagonist possessing the key to the churchyard. She unlocks the gate and, once open, a lot of people come in and sit in the grass, enjoying the sunshine. There are some girls raising money for their mother-in-law, and there are a couple of women who are very upset and disapproving of the protagonist. However, the protagonist doesn't give the women any credence since she, herself, is cradling the form of Jesus, who is quite alive in this sequence. There is a large crowd of people lying near them.

My Sister and the Queen of England

This story is about the protagonist's sister who receives recognition from the Queen of England for all of her charitable works. What impresses the protagonist more is the fact that her whole life her sister has never 'measured up' in their parent's eyes. Now, of course, with the Queen of England stating that their daughter is an amazing person, they have to stop pointing out all of her flaws. At least for a little while.

Analysis

The Bodyguard

This short story is derived from a dream that the writer had. It would seem to be suggesting that some desire to protect herself is failing to accomplish its task and that



what she considers a protection, isn't really a protection at all, and instead is more of a liability than a protector.

The Child

This macabre story is another dream that the writer had. In it, a young child is laid on a table and the mother is viewing the child. The theme would not only be that of loss, but of denial. The mother wants to take a picture of the child because at last the child is still enough for her to get a good picture of it....as if the child will soon waken.

The Churchyard

This is another short story created from a dream that the author had. The symbolism of the key and unlocking something deeply hidden may lead some to believe that the author had a desire to reconnect with an older belief system, one that many might not approve of, but one that others, in the past, were quite comfortable with and that many would benefit from.

My Sister and the Queen of England

In this story, the protagonist speaks to the theme of Family. The reader sees that the parents see their daughter as deeply flawed and nothing that she does is good enough. The reader understands that this is so bad that the daughter leaves the U.S. and marries an Englishman (and another one when the first one dies) in order to stay away from the parents. However, when someone of importance notices the daughter, all of a sudden the parents are there and have to remain silent, keeping their usual negative observations to themselves. The other sister is proud because at last her parent's negative comments have been stopped. This indicates the strength or the destructive nature of a family dynamic.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story, The Child, demonstrate the theme of loss?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the key in the story, The Churchyard.

Discussion Question 3

How is the theme of Family explored in the story, My Sister and the Queen of England?

Vocabulary

muddled, guillotine, condemned, manufacturer, depicted, moreover, deceptive, decoration, harsh, appealing



Section One: The Visit to the Dentist, Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer, The Cornmeal

Summary

The Visit to the Dentist

This is another letter from Flaubert that the author has reinterpreted. In this letter Flaubert has had to go to the dentist because he is experiencing some tooth pain. The dentist has urged him to adopt a 'wait and see' mentality to see if the pain may, in time, go away. It does not and Flaubert's tooth becomes infected. He makes an appointment to go back to the dentist to have it pulled and dreads it. On his way to the dentist's office he crosses the square where executions used to take place. He remembers that, as a boy, he had once walked past there just after an execution had taken place, seeing all of the blood. Now, as he's on his way to have his tooth pulled, he is filled with a dread and wonders that the people who were getting ready to meet their doom felt, on a greater scale, the same dread.

Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer

This is an actual letter that the author wrote to a Peas Manufacturer about the art on the packaging and how it was most unattractive. The mundane nature of the letter goes into detail about the lettering, the illustration, the angle of the peas, and a comparison of the artwork to other peas manufacturers. The writer of the letter tells the manufacturer that they like the peas that are produced by the company but that the artwork on the cover will make people not want to purchase them.

The Cornmeal

This story is an observation that the author made in regards to an action that she took one morning. She set a plate as a cover on a hot bowl of cooked cornmeal and there was condensation on the underneath.

Analysis

The Visit to the Dentist

This short story suggests the theme of connection. There is the connection of the place of execution, of the blood that will be spilled, or was spilled, and of the dread that he feels and those who died in the past, felt. He also speaks about having a dream about the guillotine and that his niece, sleeping in another room, also reported having the



same dream. Flaubert muses that perhaps dreams are fluid and can flow from one to another.

Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer

The fact that this is a mundane and ordinary task acts only as the vehicle for this short story. The deeper underlying issue is the myopic view of life for the single solitary moment when the writer is focused only on the illustrations on a bag of peas. Worlds may collide and crumble, there may be famine, disease, and social unrest, but for that moment, there is only the matter of the peas manufacturer. The author seems to be suggesting a couple of things. First, that there is a comfort in focusing on accomplishing and righting wrongs within one's sphere of influence, and secondly, that human beings can be some of the most humorous and complicated creatures on the face of the planet.

The Cornmeal

The theme in this short story is about more than just breakfast. In this short story which demonstrates the theme of meaning in life, the author is stating that everything acts and reacts according to its own nature, that she has felt privileged to witness a universal law in action. Each are taking their own actions, as proscribed by their own natures.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of meaning in life exemplified in the story, The Cornmeal?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of human connection in the story, A Visit to the Dentist.

Discussion Question 3

What is the author's purpose in writing the story, Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer?

Vocabulary

texture, maturity, droplets, condensation, restraint, witnessed, deceased



Section Two: Two Undertakers, I Ask Mary About Her Friend, the Depressive, and His Vacation, The Magic of the Train, Eating Fish Alone

Summary

Two Undertakers

This is a story about two undertakers who are transporting bodies to the south. Both of them, driving in separate cars, both determine to stop for a bit of lunch in the same café. They recognize one another and decided to eat together. They discuss whom they are carrying south. Seated at a nearby table are the relatives of one of the deceased.

I Ask Mary About Her Friend, the Depressive, and His Vacation

This is more a dialogue than a story. The author asks her friend Mary where her friend is, who is generally a depressed individual. The friend replies that he is in the badlands, and then the next year when they meet up, Mary says that the friend is in the Black Hills.

The Magic of the Train

The author has taken a train trip and engages in people watching. She and her traveling companion observe two well dressed women, wearing tight black jeans and high heels. The author believes that the way they move and behave that they must be in their late twenties. However, when the girls turn around, they aren't girls at all, but grown women.

Eating Fish Alone

This story is about the author's habit of only ordering fish when she is alone. She does this because fish is often smelly and so she only fixes it at home when no one else will be there. She also eats it when she goes to restaurants. The writer talks about two instances where she had fish and was delighted, and that the people who served her and cooked for her were as much a part of the pleasant experience as the fish.

Analysis

Two Undertakers

This story is about irony. Of all of the people and all of the possible restaurants and routes that could have been taken, the undertaker has taken the same route, and has



decided to eat at the same diner as one of the bodies that reclines in his vehicle. To the undertaker, the body is just a product, a commodity, a service he is providing. But, to the people seated at the table next to him, that is their mother. The irony and the comment on perspective are evident.

I Ask Mary About Her Friend, the Depressive, and His Vacation

This is perhaps a play on words. The depressive is a friend of Mary's. When asked how this friend is, Mary replies that the friend is in the Badlands and then in the Black Hills. Both places indicate that the friend is still in a 'bad' place, and that his/her mood is still 'black'.

The Magic of the Train

The symbolism of the train is evident in this piece. The journey is life, and the girls start out young and full of life and promise. When they turn and make the trip back down the aisle, the author sees that they are older women, but that their grace and beauty is of a different kind.

Eating Fish Alone

The way in which the author treats this short story indicates that perhaps she intended it to be taken as a religious metaphor. She uses the delicacy of fish, an often looked for treat, as metaphor for a spiritual practice. This is particularly evident in the last paragraph where the protagonist has ordered a marlin steak and the chef had been particularly attentive to making it just right for her. However, it is such a large steak (and a little chewy....though she doesn't tell the chef that) that she can't finish it. She asks for a box and takes it home, but feels badly that she didn't eat it all, chastising herself, saying that she could have eaten it all and done that for him. In other words, the author seems to be suggesting that when one commits to a spiritual experience, that one should commit fully or that there will be regrets.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism in The Magic of the Train.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the religious implications found in the story Eating Fish Alone.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the author's use of irony in the story, Two Undertakers.

Vocabulary

hearse, depressive, platform, ample, stride, excursion



Section Two: Can't and Won't, Pouchet's Wife, Dinner, The Dog

Summary

Can't and Won't

The title story for the book, this short story shares that the writers was told many years prior that she was a lazy writer because she used contractions. In a sarcastic and playful mood, she restrains herself and purposely refuses from that point on to use contractions at all...which makes the language stilted and ultimately hilarious.

Pouchet's Wife

This is another letter from Falubert that has been included in the collection. This is a letter detailing the death of an acquaintance's wife. She had been riding with her husband through the streets when she had a stroke and fell from her horse. She died instantly. Flaubert relates how their neighbor, a friend of his, watched them bring the body back into the house. Just as they were doing so, a bouquet of flowers that she'd ordered for the house arrived. Flaubert exclaims, "Ah Shakespeare".

Dinner

This short story is from a dream that the author had in which her bed was in the kitchen. Her friends arrive for dinner and she hasn't gotten anything prepared. She gets out of bed, finds some hamburger, then thinks that she can make a meatloaf. But, just to be sure, she goes back to bed to consider what else she might do.

The Dog

This is a dream that the author has written about. It revolves around the loss of a dog. In the dream she and her family see their dog lying very still on a gurney. There are two roses laid on the body, one is red and the other is white. The author looks away for just a moment, then back again to see the body one last time, but it is gone, taken into the shed.

Analysis

Can't and Won't

The writer is making a point about rules and regulations in regards to art. Art is not about rules and regulations, but more about function and aesthetic pleasure.

Pouchet's Wife



Irony is the basis for this inclusion. The mistress of the house, a true companion to her husband and greatly loved, has died on the streets. When she is delivered to her home, with great dignity and care, an order of roses are delivered to be laid with her.

Dinner

This dream suggests that service to others is a prevailing drive for the author, and that pleasing people matters to her. The reader sees this in her desire to get out of bed, that her bed is in the kitchen to begin with, and that she is thinking of everyone else's comfort at the moment.

The Dog

There are several short stories that involve the death of a dog, which seems to have been a traumatic and emotional experience for the author. In this dream sequence she is traveling in a car away from the place where the dog has been laid out on a gurney. Whether they've brought the dog there to have him cremated, or whether they've brought him there for burial is unclear. The roses have been laid on his neck, a white one, which represents a pure soul, and red which indicates love. The theme is that of grief and loss, and that one can fully and deeply grieve anything that one was emotionally connected to.

Discussion Question 1

What is the author's purpose in writing *Can't and Won't*?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the author include Flaubert's letter titled, *Pouchet's Wife* in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What are the roses symbolic of in the story, *The Dog*?

Vocabulary

aimlessly, steadily, abruptly, savage, bothered



Section Two: The Grandmother, The Dreadful Mucamas, Reversible Story, A Woman, Thirty

Summary

The Grandmother

This is another dream that the author had where she was visited by two elderly people, one whom is carrying a peach tart. The old woman has to be helped into the house, and she tells the old man that she likes his teeth. There is another man there too that shouts in the old woman's face, but it doesn't even seem to faze her. She just keeps eating cashews. Later, at the nursing home the old woman spits out what she thinks is a bad cashew, but in reality, it was her hearing aid, which she has been chewing on the whole afternoon...and is why she didn't hear all of the commotion from the older men.

The Dreadful Mucamas

In this story the narrator has moved into a flat that came with its own housekeepers, a mother and daughter whose names are Adela and Luisa. Both of them are from Bolivia originally and shout everything, though it isn't clear if they are hard of hearing. They have superstitions regarding string which continues to fluster the renter. Though they have been hired to do the housekeeping most of the time they refuse to do it. The renter ends up having to wash her own clothes, especially her undergarments. The renters decide to have a party and give the housekeepers a list of things that they will need, but the housekeepers argue about who will go. Eventually, the renters end up doing it themselves.

Reversible Story

In this story the reader learns that Mr. and Mrs. Charray have been renovating their wine cellar. They have also taken out fire insurance and the renovations are to protect their extensive wine collection and fine art pieces. The author states that while they may have great taste in wine and art, their furniture is very common and passé.

A Woman, Thirty

This story is about a woman who is still living at home with her parents at the age of thirty. The woman has never been married and thinks about being married, but quickly dismisses the idea since a husband will only boss her around and shout at her. Still, she thinks she would like someone to admire her, and as a result she likes to undress in front of the window now and again.



Analysis

The Grandmother

This story seems to revolve around the focus of the old woman and her ability to remain calm in the midst of a storm. Her secret, the reader learns, is to not listen or hear what the naysayers around her are saying. Of course, what the reader also learns is that she inadvertently dropped her hearing aid into the bowl of cashews and started chewing the hearing aid instead of her cashews, and had the tenacity to chew on it steadily for two hours. Thus, the old woman didn't give up, was focused on the task at hand, and didn't let those around her distract her from the task....even if that task was something as simple as chewing a nut.

The Dreadful Mucamas

The tone of this short story is one of frustration and anger, though the theme of acceptance is what comes shining through. The absurdity of the two housekeepers, both farcical in nature, make the point of the absurdity of human nature when there are larger issues in the greater world. The narrator is upset about a button and having to take the shirt to the dressmaker to have it put back on, demanding that the housekeepers do it. They shout that there are no buttons in the house, completely flustering the renter.

Additionally, there is the symbolism of the string. There are a number of strings. The first string is one that the narrator needs cut from something she is tying. She asks one of the women for a pair of scissors, who can't remember where they are. Finally the renter finds the scissors in a sewing box, which has a string hanging out of it. The narrator takes the scissors and cuts her own string, and then cuts the string that is hanging out of the box, to the horror of the two housekeepers.

Essentially, then, the string may well represent a person's lifeline, in much the same way that the two old women housekeepers represent the Fates. The fact that the narrator is a woman could complete the set of the three Fates, each arguing and shouting loudly at one another as to a proper course of action. That there are no buttons are also symbols, as buttons fasten things together, holding them in place, and Fate cannot be fastened down.

Reversible Story

This story is called the reversible story because any one of the sentences can be used as the first line, and the rest thrown in around it. Literally, the story can be constructed front to back, and back to front. This is the writer's use of facility, a way of playing with the words. Additionally, the context of the storyline would seem to suggest a hint of smugness toward the 'establishment' in that the writer is saying that there may be many fine things in a structure (such as a sentence or a paragraph, or a story) but in the end, if all you have are passé furniture (words) then it cheapens the entire collection.



A Woman, Thirty

The theme of this short story is that of identity. The woman, who is thirty, still sees herself as a young girl, and in many ways is still an infant. The fact that she sees no good reason to leave her parent's home, that her only perspective of husbands is that they shout a lot and are bossy is much like the opinion of a pre-pubescent child. However, the fact that she likes to undress in front of the windows in the evening, also indicates that she is lonely and would like someone to admire her in some form or fashion. This is a woman who is stuck between being a child and being a woman and is unsure of which she would prefer.

Discussion Question 1

What is the tone of *The Dreadful Mucamas*?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the string in *The Dreadful Mucamas*.

Discussion Question 3

What is the author's purpose in writing *The Grandmother*?

Vocabulary

crow's feet, mayonnaise, sautéed, pointless, scallops, toxic, deliberate



Section Two: How I Know What I Was Like (Six Versions), Handel, The Force of the Subliminal, Her Geography: Alabama

Summary

How I Know What I Was Like (Six Versions)

This interior monologue is written six different ways, each one more complex than the next. The gist of the entire scene is that the narrator sees something that she thinks she might like, but offers it to her friend, who has much the same tastes as the narrator. The friend says it is good and the narrator reasons that since her friend likes it, she may also like it.

Handel

The story, itself, seems rather innocuous. A husband and wife are at a crossroads. He likes Handel and she does not. She's tried to like it, and she knows lots of other couples that seem to enjoy Handel and go to great lengths to experience Handel in live concerts, or enhance their Handel experience by traveling to hear great Handel performances. However, no matter how hard she tries, Handel just isn't her thing. She says it is causing trouble in their marriage and that she's located a Handel-therapist who might be able to help them, but her husband refuses to go.

The Force of the Subliminal

In a casual discussion with a friend named Rhea, the narrator suddenly recalls that their mutual friend, Ellie, is having a birthday that very day. Ellie had moved out of the country, making remembering her birthday difficult. And, in a cascade of memories, she recalls that she remembered that Rhea's birthday was coming up because a few months prior Rhea had been embarrassed by a dinner party she'd thrown where she'd had no napkins and the guests had used toilet paper to wipe their hands at the table. Being completely upset by the event she told the narrator, who had then made a mental note to get linen napkins for Rhea on her next birthday. She thinks that even though Ellie was not there to remind both she and Rhea that it was her birthday, she had, subliminally done so anyway.

Her Geography: Alabama

This short story (it is two lines long) is about someone who mistakenly believes that Alabama is a city located in Georgia.



Analysis

How I Know What I Was Like (Six Versions)

This story is about the unknown, and that no matter which way one looks at the unknown, it is simply....not knowable until attempted. The narrator thinks that by having her friend, who is much like herself, try whatever it is that she might see if she, too, would like it. However, when her friend tries it the narrator is still left with the same question she had at the beginning, which is wondering whether or not she will like this object. In the end, the message is clear: second hand information is never as good or as clear as firsthand information.

Handel

If one were to substitute the word Handel for the word 'sex', then the meaning of the entire story would become clearer. The wife likes various types of sex (music) but just can't like this one kind of music: Handel. She's tried, but she can't bring herself to enjoy whatever it is that the husband enjoys.

At one point the wife says that she's talked with her friend about liking Handel (this kind of sex) and the friend, who was a died in the wool Hank Williams fan only a few weeks ago, swears allegiance to Handel, now. This frustrates the wife and makes her feel as if there is something wrong with her.

The author is clearly making a reference to the overt emphasis that is placed on sexual prowess and experimentation within a relationship, and in particular, the emphasis that is placed on it by society. It should be enough, she reasons, to like most kinds, but not all kinds, of music (sex).

The Force of the Subliminal

This story is about the force of a thought to cascade onto another and bring up memories which assist in remembering things that are important. Of note is the fact that the memory is associated, each time, with an emotion. At first there is the memory of her friend's embarrassment, and then the feeling of giving her friend the napkins so she wouldn't be embarrassed. Then, she recalled with pride that she'd remembered her friend Ellie's birthday without the usual suggestion from her friend.

Her Geography: Alabama

In this 'story' the narrator states that she met a girl that thought that Alabama was a city in Georgia. In essence, this story is about someone whose personal geography makes sense to her, and who was the narrator to correct her? As far as the reader knows, or the narrator is concerned, the girl has every right to believe what she wants to believe. It's her life and she can make of it what she will.



Discussion Question 1

What point is the author making about the subconscious mind in the story, The Force of the Subliminal?

Discussion Question 2

How is the metaphor of sex handled in the short story titled, Handel?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the narrator still left with an unanswered question in the story, How I know What I was Like?

Vocabulary

tasty, endangered, savor, marlin, alternative, impressed, enthusiasm, stoop, zoology



Section Two: The Funeral, The Husband Seekers, In the Gallery, The Low Sun

Summary

The Funeral

This is another letter from Flaubert to his lover. This time Flaubert says that he has attended his friend's wife's funeral. He also states that people all around him were having the oddest conversations about fruit trees, museums in Egypt, and the libraries in the Middle East. The priest does the service all in French and this upsets some of the attendees who are Catholic and feel it should all be done in Latin. Flaubert states that writers only think that they write the fantastic but that reality wins every time.

The Husband Seekers

This is a dream that the author had where she witnessed a flock of young women who were seeking mates from a faraway island where handsome young men lived. If they were rejected, they would continue to blow away from the island until they were cast adrift in a pile offshore.

In the Gallery

This is a dream that the author had where a visual artist is attempting to hang her own art work. The work is a single line of text that is hung behind a transparent curtain. The problem is that the artist is up on a ladder and can't get down. She's turned the wrong way. She comes down from the ladder and asks people to help her get down...when clearly she already is. The people become annoyed and leave.

The Low Sun

This is another dream by the author. This dream is about a college girl telling another, younger, college girl that the sun is low on the horizon and that its light is probably filling the caves by the sea.

Analysis

The Funeral

A tone of impropriety permeates this short letter. Here a death has gathered everyone to a service, but it is clear, that other than the man whose wife has died, no one there is truly mourning her loss. Everyone's attention and conversations indicate that they have little regard for the person who has died, nor very little for the survivors. Flaubert notices



this and is appalled at their conversations and their actions stating that reality is harsher than anything that a writer's imagination could dream up.

The Husband Seekers

This story is about ideas and dreams; that they yearn for life, for love, for light and laughter, but if they are rejected languish on some far and distant shore.

In The Gallery

This story is one of frustration and disgust. Both the artist and the audience are put off by the other's insensitivity and understanding. This duplicates the delicate balance between artist and their intended audience. The audience, the author seems to be saying, don't want their artists to come down off of the ladder, and are even less willing to help them to do it.

The Low Sun

This story involves a sharing of light from one female to a younger female. This younger female is a dancer, and one can extrapolate that it is not only one female to another, but one artist to another. The older artist is telling the younger one where the light goes and where it hides and what its purpose is.

Discussion Question 1

In the story, The Funeral, what upsets Flaubert about those in attendance and why?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the women depicted in the story, The Husband Seekers?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the 'sun' in the story, The Low Sun?

Vocabulary

bouquet, vanished, rigid, accosted, shrieked, crisp, untidy, protested



Section Two: The Landing, The Language of the Telephone Company, The Coachman and the Worm, Letter to a Marketing Manager

Summary

The Landing

This story is about a rather harrowing airplane flight that the narrator experienced. She was always nervous when she flew, but this time it was worse as one of the flaps on the wings was malfunctioning. She writes about being terrified but because none of the other passengers seemed alarmed, and since the steward and the pilot were talking so calmly that maybe it was okay. Then the narrator realizes that contemplating what measure of control she had over the situation, and realizing that she had none, there was an inner peace that followed her. Later, when they had landed and she was trying to write down the experience, she was grateful for that insight and thought about how it might apply to other circumstances.

The Language of the Telephone Company

This is a funny recounting of the misuse and double innuendo that is suggested by the telephone company's recording.

The Coachman and the Worm

This is another letter from Flaubert to his lover. He remarks about a mutual friend of theirs who has become a carriage driver. The man is a strange one, Flaubert writes, as this person claims to have a tapeworm in him and that the driver has named his tapeworm and defers to the tapeworm's wishes. He begins to go quite mad, Flaubert writes, as the driver claims that the worm is trying to fully possess him and make him do his bidding. In a final attempt to win back his own dominance, the man swallows poison. He both won and he lost.

Letter to a Marketing Manager

This is a letter that has been written to the manager of a mental institution who has claimed in their newsletter that the author was once an inmate. They have claimed that she was a former inmate and/or alumni. The writer of the letter is kind but pointed in the fact that she has never been incarcerated there, though she had a very distant relative that did stay there for a short time and was never violent to any extent. She asks for a retraction.



Analysis

The Landing

The theme of control is demonstrated in this chapter when the narrator realizes that there are certain instances in life where one cannot have any real measure of control. The narrator realizes this when she is many thousands of feet in the air and the plane has a malfunction. She takes her cue from those around her, and then realizes that it doesn't matter what they think or say, that in the end it is her choice to panic or not panic in her final moments (if indeed those were her final moments). Her ability to let go of things and just exist in the moment brings startling clarity for her that lasts well after they safely land.

The Language of the Telephone Company

This suggestion that this story has is that communication is often interrupted by the smallest of incidents, like sentence structure, or a power line. Language and communication is contingent upon the right words being used and conveyed. The telephone company definitely failed to communicate in this instance, both literally and figuratively.

The Coachman and the Worm

Flaubert reports that the human mind and behavior are something that constantly amaze him. In this story he suggests that what was inside the man attempting to move him was not really a worm, but metaphorically, was an intent to lead a life that he wanted to lead. However, he is not able to lead the life he wants to lead, and instead, commits suicide.

Letter to a Marketing Manager

This seems to be a continuation on the 'can't and won't' remark by a group that refused to publish her work stating that she used contractions and that her work was just too inappropriate for their publication and so forth. In this story, she responds to the misrepresentation of her mental state much as she might have to the panel that rejected her work, by stating that while she may look crazy and even act crazy, she is in fact, not crazy.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of control depicted in the story, The Landing?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Flaubert write about the Coachman and his Worm in his letter?



Discussion Question 3

What is the author's purpose in writing the story, Letter to a Marketing Manager?

Vocabulary

mineral water, barbarians, underthings, occupations, luncheon



Section 3: The Last of the Mohicans, Grade Two Assignment, Master, An Awkward Situation

Summary

The Last of the Mohicans

This is a story about visiting the narrator's mother in a nursing home. The old mother is saying that she likes it at the home, stating that she knows people in there. She says that most of them don't speak or see, or hear very well. The narrator remarks that she knows her mother doesn't see well, either. The mother remarks that she's the last of the Mohicans, so to speak.

Grade Two Assignment

In this story a second grader attending a bible class is asked to cut out fish and follow directions for creating a stringer full of fish. Through a series of logical statements the child is told to believe that Jesus will gather friends and that the child should be a friend to be gathered, like the fish.

Master

This short story is about the narrator feeling that she has mastered something only to have the real master tell her that she knows nothing.

An Awkward Situation

In this story a writer has been hired by a former lover to correct a manuscript. The former lover refuses to pay her. She turns to her ex-husband who is understanding, but is working on his own project. The former lover's mother even urges the man to pay the writer. He refuses and taunts her. At the end of the story, the writer wonders where her current husband is and why he isn't helping her out of this very awkward situation.

Analysis

The Last of the Mohicans

In this story the tone of acceptance and grace is demonstrated. The mother knows that her children want to hear that she is doing okay and that she is well taken care of and happy. She tells them that she knows many of the people in the home from her hometown. Though they all have various disabilities, now, she still feels a kinship with



the others at the home, especially those from her own hometown. Many of them have died, but she has accepted that her turn will come soon.

Grade Two Assignment

This story indicates that the author is showing how young children are often offered a view of religion that may be confusing or even humorous when viewed by adults. In this story, the logical progression goes from Jesus being a friend, Jesus gathering friends, to the child being a friend of Jesus. Therefore...the child must conclude, Jesus will put me on a stringer like a bunch of fish to be eaten at the next dinner. Of course, this part is left out of the actual story, but is implied in the presentation of the message at the end of the story.

Master

The message, here, is that there is always more to know about something and that one is never really a master of anything.

An Awkward Situation

This story would seem to follow the old adage: do under others, or you reap what you sow. The writer has been cruel to her former lover who is taking this opportunity to be cruel to her. Likewise, the ex-husband is indifferent to her plight. In a telling moment, the writer wonders where her current husband is and stands on all of this. This would indicate that she only now realizes how she's used people and treated them badly, and as a result it is now coming back to haunt her.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the character depicted in the story, The Last of the Mohicans.

Discussion Question 2

Why has the author chosen to depict a scene from a Sunday school in the story, Grade Two Assignment?

Discussion Question 3

What does the dialogue between the two characters in the story, Master, indicate?

Vocabulary

nourishing, capricious, primitive, hor d'oeuvres



Section 3: Housekeeping Observation, The Execution, A Note from the Paperboy, In the Train Station

Summary

Housekeeping Observation

This story is a reflection of how clean things really are under the dirt.

The Execution

This is another letter from Flaubert. In this letter he remarks on a remarkable case where a convicted criminal was set to be executed for a heinous series of crimes. He was so hated and despised that more than ten thousand people attended the execution.

A Note from the Paperboy

The narrator is amused at the note that the paperboy has left indicating that he would prefer to leave the paper outside of the gate since he's run into several animals, like skunks, that make him fearful. However, the way he has written it makes it sound as if it were the animals who were delivering the paper, indicating that the paperboy was fairly illiterate.

In the Train Station

This is a dream that the author had where she was in a train station and sees a monk who is lost and looking for track 3. She shows him the way.

Analysis

Housekeeping Observation

This one sentence story indicates that when one strips away what one can see that there is often a better world underneath it all. Appearances are deceiving.

The Execution

The narrator seems to be suggesting that mankind has not evolved from the old gladiatorial days when the bloodthirsty could come to see a spectacle. Flaubert is suggesting that when more than 10,000 people came to see this one man put to death by guillotine that they were no better than those who attended the gladiator fights in ancient times.



A Note from the Paperboy

This short anecdote is about communication and channels not being completely clear. While the narrator finds it humorous, her husband is upset that the paperboy would write the note at all.

In the Train Station

This dream indicates a search for spiritual connection, which the author finds and initiates. The fact that she sees the monk, and then watches him, confirms that she longs for this connection and is willing to assist the spiritual journey of the monk (and in essence, herself). She shows him where track 3 is. The number 3 must be significant as well, and it does figure prominently in many religions.

Discussion Question 1

What is Flaubert's point in writing a letter about The Execution?

Discussion Question 2

What is the symbolism of the monk in the story, In the Train Station?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the theme inherent in the story, A Note from the Paperboy.

Vocabulary

envious, Handel, composers, therapist, specializes



Section 3: The Moon, My Footsteps, How I Read as Quickly as Possible, Notes During a Long Phone Conversation with Mother

Summary

The Moon

This is a dream that the author had about the moon being so full that it flooded her bathroom when she went in there to see it. When she goes back to bed she thinks that the moon has followed her as the light in there is also bright. But, when she looks out of the window she realizes that it is the sun and that dawn is upon her.

My Footsteps

This is a dream where the narrator is told that she has power in her steps, but that she can't go fast or she won't realize her full potential.

How I Read as Quickly as Possible Through My Back Issues of the TLS

This story lists out the way that the author quickly maximizes the reading of a magazine that she receives regularly. As she hasn't had time to read all of them, they have now piled up and she's come up with a strategy to read them all as fast as possible, without missing the good parts.

Notes During a Long Phone Conversation with Mother

This story is a collection of random thoughts, doodles, and notations that the narrator made when she had a conversation with her mother.

Analysis

The Moon

For many the moon has represented mystery and the deeper self, while the sun has represented the light of knowledge. By beginning with the moon, and perhaps an understanding of herself and her place in life, she begins to understand more of where she is and what she must do to obtain her own desires. The dawn signifies a beginning.

My Footsteps



This story is a direct metaphorical message indicating that she needs to carefully observe each step and direction that she takes, so that she can enjoy the full benefit of the decision. There seems to be someone directing her steps and instructing her on how to make the most of her personal power.

How I Read as Quickly as Possible Through My Back Issues of the TLS

The theme is that of meaning of life. Through the narrator's choices of what she will read, the reader gains a glimpse into the interior landscape of the narrator. Also, the reader understands by her actions that she is a fairly efficient person, and that she is a busy person who has to have a strategy to get through a great deal of information.

Notes During a Long Phone Conversation with Mother

The narrator heard her mother as she said she needed a new dress and preferred that it be cotton. However, the permutations on the page of the word 'cotton' indicate that she let her mother ramble about things and she, herself, tuned out.

Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphorical message in the story, My Footsteps?

Discussion Question 2

What was the author's purpose in writing the story, The Moon?

Discussion Question 3

What does the story, Notes During a Long Phone, depict the narrator and her relationship with her mother?

Vocabulary

accost, subliminal, mutual, efficiency



Section Three: Men, Negative Emotions, I'm Pretty Comfortable, Judgment

Summary

Men

This story is about women who go through their lives surrounded mainly by other women, and that their lives are punctuated by brief appearances by men.

Negative Emotions

This story is told with a touch of humor and involves monks. In particular, one monk has an epiphany about negative emotions and how to weather them, as if they were a storm. He quickly sends this out to his fellow monks. They respond angrily and with many negative emotions.

I'm Pretty Comfortable, But I Could Be a Little More Comfortable

This is a litany of small inconveniences that build towards a state of being uncomfortable.

Judgment

This story is about the realization that everything has a type of judgment.

Analysis

Men

This story is a cautionary tale about people who become so insular in their associations with people, places or things, that they become suspicious or resentful of anything that doesn't fit into their narrowly perceived notion of the world.

Negative Emotions

This short story is about irony, and in particular religious irony. The monk was only trying to help his fellow monks in case negative emotions should try to blow over them like a storm. Telling them the way he'd understood how to release the negative emotions had just the opposite effect, however, and instead his colleagues were upset.

I'm Pretty Comfortable, But I Could Be a Little More Comfortable



This story shows how just one small thing can set off a cascade of negative emotions that cause your mind to dredge up all sorts of perceived problems or ills, magnifying them out of proportion.

Judgment

The narrator sees a ladybug come to a crossroads and have to make a determination of which way to go. The ladybug, an insect, something that the narrator doesn't often give thought to, is observed making a quick judgment about what to do and where to go. The narrator concludes that judgment is a very weighty thing, but it also fits into the tiniest of spaces when allowed (metaphorically speaking).

Discussion Question 1

What does the story Men seem to suggest about insular living?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the religious irony evident in the story, Negative Emotions.

Discussion Question 3

What is the author saying about judgment in the story, Judgment?

Vocabulary

miracle, acquired, admired, semester, medieval, politeness



Section Three: The Chairs, My Friend's Creation, The Piano, The Party

Summary

The Chairs

This is another letter from Flaubert. His friend has told him that one can tell a great deal by observing the personal chairs that parishioners sit in each Sunday. He describes various chairs and people who sit in them.

My Friend's Creation

This is a dream that the author had where four Egyptian goddesses are in profile on a hill near a clearing. There is a large pole and a man with a pipe sits at the top of the pole, and plays and sings for people. Her friend says that she created him and asks the author what she should have him sing for her.

The Piano

This is a dream that the author had that involved an old piano. They are looking for a new piano because the other one is too damaged to save. They are told that the only thing left to do with the old piano is shove it off of a cliff. They make plans to do that.

The Party

In another dream sequence by the author she and a friend are attending a party and she is riding in the car but she doesn't know who the person is, only that they are known to the narrator. The party is in an old windmill. When they arrive they are directed to the large room where they find a giant carousel with white horses.

Analysis

The Chairs

The author includes this letter because it makes the point that human beings impact many things and after awhile even their own personalities can be imprinted onto inanimate objects.

My Friend's Creation

This story indicates the nature of friendship. That her friend has created a special and sacred space for herself and is willing to share it with the author, indicates that the friendship is a deep one and worth treasuring.



The Piano

This is a story that revolves around letting things go and embracing the new. In this story the author talks about the problems that the old piano had and how they kept it for longer than they should have, not deriving any joy from the broken piano. Letting things go that no longer serve a person can be as liberating as shoving an old piano off of a cliff.

The Party

The narrator is going to a party at an unknown destination with a person she is only remotely familiar with. She arrives at a windmill that is full of party goers though she still doesn't know where she is. This story's tone is that of the unknown, but of also being curious about the unknown and trusting one's own ability to make friends, to figure out a plan and to come out okay.

Discussion Question 1

What is the observation that Flaubert makes after examining the chairs in the story, The Chairs?

Discussion Question 2

What is the message in The Piano?

Discussion Question 3

What does the narrator realize as a result of the dream called, The Party?

Vocabulary

acknowledgement, auditorium, condolence, pecking, oily, deli



Section Three: Cows, The Exhibition, Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company, Her Geography: Illinois

Summary

The Cows

One of the longer short stories in the collection, this is a stream of consciousness observation about the narrator's neighbor's cows. There are three, initially, and then two of the cows have calves. The taller, older cow does not have a calf because she was too stubborn to get into the van to go to the bull to be bred. Then, when the neighbors decided she should go to the butcher, instead, they still couldn't get her in the van, so she had just stayed...the farm's matriarch.

The narrator discusses in detail the various ways in which she watches the cows and in all types of seasons, remembering one winter when the neighbor boys decided it would be great fun to throw snowballs at the cows. The cows didn't care, they walked away. The snow didn't faze the cows, either. The narrator is fascinated by the way the cows walk, seeming more graceful from the side, than from the front. She thinks they live a simple life.

The Exhibition

This is a letter from Flaubert to his lover. In this letter he speaks about attending an exhibition of work by some Kaffirs who were all looking half starved to death. He says that the exhibition looked half starved to death, too. The exhibition consisted of the 'savages' dressing in traditional tribal costumes and portraying normal life in their village. At one point an old woman who was part of the troupe decides to sit next to Flaubert and seems to be telling him that she loves him. Flaubert asks the manager what the woman is saying but the manager has no idea. Later Flaubert learns that the troupe were abandoned by the manager and they accumulated a huge hotel bill. It was settled by the consul who put them on a train to Paris.

Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company

The narrator has written a letter of complaint to a candy company in regards to a tin of peppermint candies that were purchased. The purchaser argues that the candies appear to look soft, but aren't, and that the advertised price on the side of the tin was not equal to the amount of candy that she actually received. She would like to have some money returned, or have the discrepancy explained.

Her Geography: Illinois



This is a story about someone who knows that she lives in Chicago, but is not aware that this is in the state of Illinois.

Analysis

The Cows

The tone of this piece is that of a bucolic lifestyle, of having lazy days and watching the cattle in the pasture so much that the narrator gets to know each cow's personality and preferences. She anthropomorphizes them assigning them emotions for one another and imagining conversations that they have with one another. She uses imagery to describe their motion, their graceful gait when viewed from side to side, and then in describing the calves she compares them to a twig or a black staple against the green grass.

The narrator is drawn to the cows because she finds watching them to be a peaceful pastime. She doesn't view them as the owner of the cows views them, but rather as a diversion and as a way to relax and think about the lives of cows, whose lives are predictably simple and without variation. The narrator believes that there is a peace and a wisdom in having a simple and repetitive routine, much like the cows. Then, one would be able to push aside or walk away from minor inconveniences, like boys throwing snowballs.

The Exhibition

This is included, no doubt, by the author because Flaubert wonders aloud why he seems to attract the weird people of the world, in reference to the old woman and her protestations of love. The author agrees with the sentiment and offers the reader an insight into why certain people tend to have interesting experiences with odd sorts of personalities. She seems to suggest that it is because certain people put themselves in places and push the boundary of normal activities which puts them in a position to have new experiences, and often those new experiences include odd people.

Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company

This letter's tone is about disappointment. The narrator is disappointed several times throughout the short vignette. First, she is disappointed when she takes the tin to the counter to pay for it and finds out that it is quite expensive for candy (nearly fifteen dollars). Then, she expects the candy to be soft, but it almost locks her teeth together. Then, she notices that she has not gotten the amount of candy in the tin as was advertised on the side of the can. As she hasn't received her money back, or a response, the reader can only assume that there will be a continuance of the disappointment.

Her Geography: Illinois



The tone is one of blissful ignorance, and the narrator, in describing the person, is amused, and finds this person endearing in their ignorance.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator envy the cows in the story, *The Cows*?

Discussion Question 2

What is Flaubert's observation about odd people at *The Exhibition*?

Discussion Question 3

What is the tone in the story, *Letter to a Peppermint Candy Company*?

Vocabulary

witnessed, poultry, sociable, epaulets, ruminating, platter



Section 4: Odon von Horvath Out Walking, On the Train, The Seals, Learning Medieval History

Summary

Odon von Horvath Out Walking

A man named Odon finds a skeleton while he is out walking. He assumes that the skeleton was a hiker that had gotten lost and died still wearing his knapsack. He decides to find out who the hiker was and opens the rucksack. In the sack is a postcard that says he is having a wonderful time.

On the Train

The narrator is a man traveling in a common area, much like a bus, train, or plane area. His seat mate, another man, and he observe two women who are talking loudly. Both men frown and pass silent judgment on the women as they are showing bad manners. Later, the narrator looks over at his seat mate and notices that he is picking his nose. The narrator realizes that he's dripped tomato down onto his newspaper. He decides that he and his seat mate have bad manners, too.

The Seals

This is one of the longer short stories in the collection and revolves around the untimely death of the narrator's older sister. The sister was older than her by 14 years, and was really a half-sister by a different father. The narrator discusses how the family had traveled for the funeral, discusses that the sister was always very kind and considerate to remember birthdays. For the narrator's birthday the older sister would always send some sort of animal themed gift. The last present she'd ever sent were a collection of baking soda seals that the narrator could put in her refrigerator to keep away the bad odors.

The narrator remembers how during the time that passed since the older sister left home, that their relationship had become loosely defined and that she often wondered what they really were to each other. She says that when she was growing up she viewed her as her protector, a surrogate mother figure in some instances.

The narrator shares that shortly after the sister's death, her father also died. The double death brought up feelings of loneliness and loss. In the train on the way to the funeral there are all sorts of people, and at one point some of her family invites her to come to the café car where a large family is having a party and has invited everyone.

Learning Medieval History



This is a discussion with oneself about the facts in history involving Ottomans and Turks.

Analysis

Odon von Horvath Out Walking

The tone for this piece is ironic, since it is evident that the backpacker was not having a fine time....as he is dead. The theme may also be assumed to be that of a life not lived, or something not quite finished. This is evident in some food that was uneaten, a sweater that was not worn, and a postcard not sent.

On the Train

The pervasive tone in this story is that of hypocrisy and redemption. The man sees the women behaving rudely, in his mind, but then later notices that he and his seat mate are just as bad, or worse, than the women. He revamps his earlier judgment on the women.

The Seals

The theme of this story is that of loss. It is demonstrated in many ways throughout the story. First, the reader sees it when as a small child the narrator loses her sister when her mother remarries and the older sister decides it would be best to go to college. Then, the narrator feels loss when her sister moves very far away and starts her family. Then, the narrator feels an even greater sense of loss when her sister dies without warning and all of the things that she had hoped they would eventually get around to doing will now never be done.

The last loss involves the loss of both her father and her sister within the same year and how, for her, life has slowed down, taken on new meaning. She misses them and she can't quite come to terms with the idea that for her loved ones that are dead, life will not proceed forward any longer. She admits that she is not ready to acknowledge that, even though she knows on some level she must do so. At the end of the story, she remembers feeling the loss keenly when her relative asks her to come to a party in the café car, which the narrator feels is inappropriate since they are going to a funeral and there's been an obvious loss to the family.

Learning Medieval History

Social and cultural identity are important, and are the theme of this collection of sentences.

Discussion Question 1

What is ironic in the story, Odon Out Walking?



Discussion Question 2

Give some examples of the theme of loss in the story, The Seals.

Discussion Question 3

How is hypocrisy suggested in the story, On the Train?

Vocabulary

perpetual, squint, transition, nothingness, paralyzed, infirm



Section 4: My School Friend, The Piano Lesson, The Schoolchildren, Molly

Summary

My School Friend

This is a Flaubert story involving a trip that he took to the botanical gardens. He recalls that the original home and gardens belonged to a friend of his who at the age of 17 killed himself because a girl would not return his love.

The Piano Lesson

This is a dream the author had. The narrator is with her friend Christine whom she has not seen in a long time. She promises to give the narrator a piano lesson, but tells her it will take some time. They discuss where to have the piano lessons and can't decide between Italy or elsewhere.

The Schoolchildren in the Large Building

This is another dream sequence. The narrator is in a huge building, the size of a warehouse, but there are paintings on the wall like an art gallery. A school group comes in to see the paintings and ask if they can stay in the building overnight. The narrator, who lives there, asks why they can't go to a hotel. The teacher says they school wouldn't fund the hotel because he, the teacher, is a homosexual. Later, she doesn't feel as if she lives in the warehouse any longer but is still there with the children. She decides she needs to go to the toilet, so she asks one of the boys where it is. She finds it and proceeds, only to find out that the bathroom is also an elevator. She wonders how the plumbing works, but figures out that it has been worked out.

Molly, Female Cat; History/Findings

This is a summation of a cat's history that the narrator has made the acquaintance of. The chart tells the narrator that the cat is spayed, is female, was three years old, was most likely abandoned, and was found by the narrator in early spring at the roadside. The narrator says that she adopts the cat and that it refuses to eat at first, but then later does. It refuses to play with the other cats, but will play with the owner when no one is looking.

The list continues on in scientific fashion, listing the condition of the cat's organs, coat, antics, and the frequent urination in inappropriate places. Finally, after many years, the cat is nowhere to be found. The owners search for it and find it lying under a tree in the backyard, covered in flies. The cat dies at age 11.



Analysis

My School Friend

The tone and theme of the story is that of changing perceptions. The scene for a tragedy has become the scene of beauty where all can come visit, have picnics, and hold weddings. The irony, of course, is that it is the site of a gruesome suicide due to unrequited love.

The Piano Lesson

This dream would seem to embody the tone of friendship and how it can enrich ones' experiences.

The Schoolchildren in the Large Building

This story is about things not being as they seem. At first the warehouse 'feels' as if it is her home, but then it isn't. The bathroom appears to be a toilet, but it is actually also an elevator. The students appear to be on a field trip, but the narrator learns that they are not. The teachers appear to be heterosexual, but they are not.

Molly, Female Cat; History/Findings

The author is portraying companion animal husbandry as a clinical experience, devoid of emotion or connection. However, in presenting the story in this way the human mind fills in what is not being said. For example, the fact that the cat will not play with the other cats, but plays with the owners in secret, suggests that the cat was shy and eventually came to trust the owners. The cat would not scratch them and would sit docilely in their laps. It can also be understood that the owners actually cared a great deal about the cat because they brought the cat in and sat with it until it passed away.

Discussion Question 1

What is the overarching theme in The Piano?

Discussion Question 2

What purpose does it serve to write Molly, Female Cat, as the author did?

Discussion Question 3

What is the theme demonstrated in The School Building?

Vocabulary

coarse, recited, aligned, immense, horizon, consisting, intervals



Section 4: The Letter to the Foundation, Revise:1, Short Conversations, Revise:2

Summary

The Letter to the Foundation

This is a letter written to someone named Frank and a foundation. The narrator has received a writing grant from the foundation after many years of applying for it. The narrator confesses that after she was given the award that she didn't believe that she had actually been given it. She also confesses that at the time she never fully planned to write faithfully each day of the two year grant.

She reconstructs the moment when she first received the grant. The phone call had come and the woman on the other end had congratulated the narrator. She was then told to call a man who might not be in his office, but to try and call anyway. The narrator does and the man, who says to call him Frank, teases her by pretending not to know about any grant. The narrator does not find this funny but doesn't say anything and then Frank corrects it in the end, anyway. The narrator confesses that receiving the grant money was a godsend since teaching does not allow her much money, is hard work, and she never seems to have enough time or money to pursue the writing. She was, at the time, hopeful that she could leave teaching to focus on writing. She remarks that she was wrong about that assumption.

She likens the desire to write full time to riding on a bus and looking out to places in the distance that she longs to visit and knows that she might never visit. She also talks about teaching and that while she is not a bad teacher, she feels very removed from the experience. She also states that she feels like an eternal observer of people, and hasn't felt like a part of the human race for a long time. The grant has given her a new perspective on what she might accomplish with her life aside from teaching.

Revise: 1

This is a list of revisions that have been requested by an editor or a publisher. The narrator, who is the writer of the piece, is lamenting some of the revisions.

Short Conversations

A woman sitting in an airport asks another woman if the sweater the first woman is wearing is a new sweater. The first woman says that it is not. They stop talking.

Revise: 2

This is a continuation of the first Revise story.



Analysis

The Letter to the Foundation

This story is about broadening one's horizons. The narrator receives a two year grant which she hopes will launch her into a new career, open more doors for her, or allow her to leave teaching. While it doesn't quite pan out as she planned, she does understand more about herself and what it is she wants from life. She admits that she likes reading what the students write each week, and that there are moments that aren't as awkward in a classroom when she enjoys what she does. She also confesses that the money made her fear death, that somehow she would die before she could enjoy the money.

Being afraid of success is at the heart of this short story as the reader watches the narrator worry, opine, and wail about having obtained success and having to deal with the pressures of what to do with the money, and being worried that not enough was being done with the money in the end. She apologizes for having taken so long to write the thank you letter to the foundation for the grant....the grant having long since been over (more than a decade). But, now the narrator has finally figured out what she had wanted to say all of those years ago.

Analysis: Revise: 1

Revisions, though necessary, are not always painless.

Short Conversations

In this short scene one woman is reaching out to be friendly to another one. However, they fail to connect and the communication is cut short.

Revise: 2

Revision, whether it is one's life, or one's manuscript rarely makes sense completely.

Discussion Question 1

What does the story, Letter to the Foundation show the reader about the protagonist?

Discussion Question 2

Compare Revise: 1 to Revise: 2

Discussion Question 3

In Short Conversations, how is the theme of human connection depicted?

Vocabulary

irregular, habitual, acquiring, tentacles, ceremony, trailing, pavilion



Section 4: Waiting for Takeoff, Industry, Two Characters, The Language of Things, The Washerwomen

Summary

Waiting for Takeoff

The narrator comments and observes the bad and unusual behavior by her fellow travelers when they are stuck sitting on the tarmac in an airplane waiting for take off.

Industry

This is a letter from Flaubert. He speaks about the factories that belch out black smoke and the noise of industry.

Two Characters in a Paragraph

This is a dream sequence where the narrator sees her writing as a physical road, where her characters were dropped off at the beginning of the paragraph, were supposed to be at the end, but removed themselves and were back at the beginning again.

The Language of Things in the House

The narrator is playing with the assonance and consonance (susurrations) of words, much like a poet might. She says that various things in her home make sounds that form words in her head. For example, the washing machine will sometimes sound like it is saying the words, Pakistani, Pakistani.

The Washerwomen

This is a letter from Flaubert about a trip he took back to a village that he had once visited many years before. He says that nothing changed and the women that he had seen washing their clothes in the water were still there doing the same thing.

Analysis

Waiting for Takeoff

The feeling of claustrophobia is clear in this passage. The mention of murder, of candy bars as weapons, of an ice cube taking out an eye, all give evidence that most of the passengers felt trapped and constricted and were having violent thoughts as well as bad tempers.



Industry

Flaubert is saying that mankind is becoming so busy that it does not stop to take a moment to live life, to experience nature. He says that mankind will never be able to match nature's industry with its own.

Two Characters in a Paragraph

This indicates a writer's fears about revision and plot development.

The Language of Things in the House

The narrator is suggesting that mankind's mind, because of the way it is designed, holds on to various sounds and provides words to go with the sounds, even if one is not aware of it.

The Washerwomen

This is included because the author wishes the theme to be presented, which is that life continues to move forward even if one is not aware of it.

Discussion Question 1

What is the tone of the story, Waiting for Takeoff?

Discussion Question 2

What is Flaubert's observation on human nature in the story, Industry?

Discussion Question 3

What is the author's purpose in writing The Language of Things in the House?

Vocabulary

assembled, Hasidic, poised, officiate, craned, briskly



Section 5: My Childhood Friend, Hello Dear, Not Interested

Summary

My Childhood Friend

This is a short scene where the narrator recognizes a childhood friend and calls out to him. When he turns he does not recognize her at first.

Hello Dear

This is a short email full of broken English from someone that presumably knew them in the past. The woman, Marina, is asking the narrator to contact her by going to her webpage or email and reconnect with her.

Not Interested

The narrator has a collection of books but can't seem to raise the interest to read them. She also has to pick up sticks in the yard, and often doesn't want to do that either.

Analysis

My Childhood Friend

The tone of this piece is that of growing old but still feeling young inside. And, it is about a person not seeing the own march of time on themselves when they see it readily in others.

Hello Dear

The overall tone of this is of someone reaching out to reconnect with a friend that was considered long lost.

Not Interested

In this story, the picking up of sticks is interspersed with the desire to pick up a book and read it. The narrator says that she doesn't mind picking up sticks. The sticks can be said to represent ideas, and that the narrator doesn't want to read the books because she doesn't want to pick up any additional ideas, or insights, or admonitions to do something more than just read the book. So, she just doesn't do it. It isn't, after all, cut and dried like picking up sticks.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss the symbolism of sticks in the story, Not Interested.

Discussion Question 2

What is the tone in the story, A Childhood Friend?

Discussion Question 3

What is the theme of the story, Hello, Dear?

Vocabulary

gazing, accordion, reception, pheasants, cremated, compassionate



Section 5: Old Woman, Old Fish, The Song, Two Former Students

Summary

Old Woman, Old Fish

This is about an old woman who ate a fish that should not have been cooked.

The Song

This is a dream by the author. In this dream something happened in a house that should have caused people to be upset, but no one is. Someone starts to sing but a man yells at the singer and the music stops.

Two Former Students

This is a dream as well. This dream involves two students who are afraid that the narrator will see them. They are both in the snow, and one tells the other to go away. They separate, but at that moment the narrator looks out of the window and sees both of them apart and realizes and recognizes them anyway.

Analysis

Old Woman, Old Fish

Since the narrator is a writer, it can be assumed that she is discussing on a deeper level, the digesting of a theme that was well past its prime and has given her imagination indigestion.

The Song

The overall tone is that of talent that doesn't get a chance to be enjoyed or fully explored. There is a governance on it that is upsetting.

Two Former Students

This is a recognition of talent, no matter where it shows itself, what form it takes, or what hardships it has had to endure.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Old Woman Old Fish and the significance of digestion.



Discussion Question 2

What does the story, Song, imply about talent?

Discussion Question 3

Compare the Song to the story, Two Former Students.

Vocabulary

psychiatrist, executor, sorted, sleekly, squawking, dollops



Section 5: A Small Story about A Box of Chocolates, Writing, The Rooster

Summary

A Small Story about A Box of Chocolates

This is the story of a woman who was given a nice box of chocolates by a nice man. The woman took it home to show her husband, but after opening the box she simply took it to her desk and opened it from time to time to look at, never eating any. She decided four weeks later to share them with her students. After she passed them around she thought she'd lost the box, but she hadn't. She still could not seem to bring herself to eat one rationalizing that it needed to be a special occasion. She tries to buy more chocolates to have the same experience that she has had when she finally eats some of the chocolate but she is unable to recreate the same feeling.

Writing

The narrator is considering giving up writing because writing has become a drag and she is becoming more aware of the fact that she can't manage.

The Rooster

The narrator's neighbor, Stefwan, has had a magnificent rooster that has been killed on the road. She goes to offer condolences and learns that Stefwan will not be getting a new rooster to replace the old one. The road is too dangerous.

Analysis

A Small Story about A Box of Chocolates

This is a story about living life. Like the chocolates, the author seems to be suggesting that many people simply admire what they have, talent or otherwise, but never do anything with it. They don't participate in the life they've been given. When it is eventually shared with her students, she begins to understand what she is missing and eventually eats some of the chocolates herself. When she goes overboard and tries to buy chocolates, some that are bigger than the smaller ones in the box, she is underwhelmed by them, failing to recreate the chocolate (life) that has been deliberated upon and consumed after great consideration.

Writing



The writer is contemplating the fact that being a writer is often a solitary profession and is seldom understood. Writers that have a long career are those who can manage to put outside judgments aside and simply write.

The Rooster

This scene is about talent and art, and the artist. Letting all of the metaphorical chickens and roosters out there to run around is the farmer's greatest worry and concern. What will happen? Will they be safe? The answer is, the narrator shows, not all of them will be safe, and the road can be dangerous.

Discussion Question 1

In the story, The Rooster, what is the author saying about talent and works of art?

Discussion Question 2

What is the author's purpose in writing the story, Writing?

Discussion Question 3

In the story, A Small Story about A Box of Chocolates, discuss the symbolism of the chocolates.

Vocabulary

intent, pavement, squawk, avid, exalted, predeceased



Section 5: The Old Soldier, Two Sligo Lads, The Woman in Red

Summary

The Old Soldier

This is a letter from Flaubert. He has returned to an old ruins that he used to visit in his youth. He goes to a small tavern where he sees an old man dressed in his uniform. Flaubert speaks about how things will be when he is old.

Two Sligo Lads

The narrator sees two boys on their way to work in a factory. Suddenly they are scooped up onto a carnival ride, and they shout out at the narrator. Their cries sound like seagulls.

The Woman in Red

This is a dream. The narrator sees a woman in red who protects her from a red snake that rears up. The woman gets rid of the snake by laying down three red hats on the surface of a puddle of water.

Analysis

The Old Soldier

The tone of this piece is of remembrance and honoring one's memories.

Two Sligo Lads

This seems to be sending the message that work in mindless industries silences the cries of the young, like seagulls over the sea.

The Woman in Red

The woman in red could represent the narrator's talent, ability, or self. There are those things in the environment that would like to attack the narrator, but the woman in red is in control and knows what to do.

Discussion Question 1

What is the tone in Old Soldier?



Discussion Question 2

What is the symbolism of the woman in red in the story called, The Woman in Red?

Discussion Question 3

What was the author's purpose in writing Two Sligo Lads?

Vocabulary

revolve, irregular, intervals, murmur, assembled, changed



Section 5: If At the Wedding at the Zoo, The Gold Digger of Goldfields, Local Obits, Letter to the President, Nancy Brown, Ph.D.

Summary

If At the Wedding at the Zoo

The narrator talks about a trip to the zoo and the sequence of events that happened that day because they all took their time to notice everything around them.

The Gold Digger of Goldfields

The narrator's husband, Jim, has had a death in the family. The narrator and Jim travel to the family's home for the funeral. When they get there they are greeted by Jim's sister Lisa. The narrator calls her the golddigger. She is looking for additional money and gold coins that Jim's father might have had lying around. The gold digger says they are owed additional money for taking care of him and that the cremation cost them a lot of money.

The narrator says that there were coins all over the house, but they were the only ones to find them, not Lisa. Later, on the way back home they hit a deer and since they are in a rental car they have to fill out a lot of paperwork and end up having to pay \$1,000 anyway. The narrator says that all Jim wanted was something to remember his father by, a silver belt buckle.

Local Obits

This is a collection of obituary entries by the narrator.

Letter to the President of the American Biographical Institute, Inc.

This is a letter that the author wrote to the ABI Foundation when they stated that they wanted to select her as the Woman of the Year. However, they misspelled her name.

Nancy Brown Will Be in Town

Nancy Brown is leaving town and is giving away many of her things. The author will miss her and her tennis lessons.

Ph.D.



The author has thought that she's had a Ph.D. all along, but then finds out that she doesn't.

Analysis

If At the Wedding at the Zoo

The theme of this story is that when one is aware of things around them, then a person's experiences are multiplied and life is enjoyed more fully.

The Gold Digger of Goldfields

There has been a death in the family, and what is interesting to note is that the gold digger, Lisa, can seem to see the gold, or the precious items, lying right in front of her. This could mean that the things that were really of value to Jim and the narrator, such as a silver belt buckle, or other memorabilia, were the true treasures and Lisa, who was focused on actual money, couldn't see them.

Local Obits

The collection of obituaries are arranged so that the reader begins to get the personality of the deceased by the listing of their favorite hobbies.

Letter to the President of the American Biographical Institute, Inc.

This brings into clear focus, by the author, the silliness of awards, and how bestowing honors cannot be done if one doesn't feel honored in the least. Especially since she is also asked to pay \$200 for the dubious inclusion of her in their book.

Nancy Brown is in Town

This is about letting go and saying goodbye to friends, and things.

Ph.D.

Expectations aren't always what one thinks they are. This was a dream that the author had where she dreamed that she hadn't actually done all of the work and her degree had been revoked.

Discussion Question 1

What is the author's purpose in writing the story, Local Obits?

Discussion Question 2

In Gold Digger, discuss the metaphor of the gold coins.



Discussion Question 3

What is the author's message in If At the Wedding at the Zoo?

Vocabulary

reception, photographed, klezner, fragrant, pavement, ruffled



Characters

Italian Landlord

In the story, *The Stolen Salamis*, the landlord of the narrator's son, makes salamis as a hobby. When they are stolen he is more upset that they were mislabeled as sausages than the fact that they were stolen.

Gustav Flaubert

Gustav Flaubert wrote the novel, *Madame Bovary*, and also wrote numerous letters to a woman he was involved with during that time period. The author of this collection has included many of the letters because his observations on human experiences align with her own. The reader sees that Flaubert is philosophical, caring, shrewd, and adventurous.

The Bodyguard

This character is supposed to be a bodyguard, but in the narrator's dream, he can't move.

The Sister

This is the narrator's sister who has been honored by the Queen of England. The narrator is glad of this because the sister never won any recognition from their parents, who were very critical of her, always. The narrator is glad that now they will have to remain silent while the narrator's sister is honored in front of them.

Pouchet's Wife

This character appears in one of Flaubert's letters. The woman, who was dearly loved by her husband, died while riding her horse beside him in the streets of France. When her body was taken to the home, some flowers arrived that she had ordered the day before and they laid them across her body.

The Grandmother

This character shows up in Section Two and is in a dream sequence that the author had. The old woman is shown to be tenacious and determined. This is shown when at the end of the day, after chewing on what she thought was a nut, she spits out her hearing aid, instead.



Adela and Luisa

In the story, *The Dreadful Mucamas*, the two sisters' names are Adela and Lusía. Adela shouts everything and the narrator thinks that she must be deaf. Luisa is lazy and doesn't like things to deviate from their previously constructed schedule.

A Woman, Thirty

This character is not given a name, but the reader learns that she still lives at home. The character does not really want to be married because she's under the impression that all husbands do is yell at their wives and bully them around. But, she wants to be admired, so each night she undresses on purpose in front of her window.

Rhea

This is a friend of the narrator's whose last birthday spurs the narrator to remember her other friend's birthday. Rhea had a disastrous dinner party where she didn't have any napkins. So the narrator bought her some immediately afterward for her birthday so she'd never be embarrassed again.

Odon von Horváth

This is a man that lived in the Bavarian Alps that discovered the skeleton of a man who had been a hiker. He finds a postcard in the man's backpack that hadn't been mailed. It said on it that he was having a great time.



Symbols and Symbolism

Dog hair

In the story, *The Dog Hair*, the dog hair represents the memory of their beloved pet.

Davis's Rug

In the short story, *The Two Davises and the Rug*, the rug represents the first Davis's son and that time in her life.

The Moon

The symbolism of the moon should be noted, as it represents Flaubert's love for his lover in the story, *After You Left*. He mentions that it is full, high in the sky, and calls to him. It is mentioned three times in the several paragraphs that comprise the letter. Additionally, it is mentioned in a dream sequence where the moon represents the author's internal landscape and the mysteries of the inner mind.

The Key

The symbolism of the key and unlocking something, in the story, *The Churchyard*, deeply hidden may lead some to believe that the author had a desire to reconnect with an older belief system, one that many might not approve of, but one that others, in the past, were quite comfortable with and that many would benefit from.

The Train

The symbolism of the train, in the *Magic Train*, is evident in this piece. The journey is life, and the girls start out young and full of life and promise. When they turn and make the trip back down the aisle, the author sees that they are older women, but that their grace and beauty is of a different kind.

String

There is the symbolism of the string, in *The Dreadful Mucamas*, are a number of strings. The first string is one that the narrator needs cut from something she is tying. She asks one of the women for a pair of scissors, who can't remember where they are. Finally the renter finds the scissors in a sewing box, which has a string hanging out of it. The narrator takes the scissors and cuts her own string, and then cuts the string that is hanging out of the box, to the horror of the two housekeepers. Essentially, then, the



string may well represent a person's lifeline, in much the same way that the two old women housekeepers represent the Fates.

Handel

The author is clearly making a reference to the overt emphasis that is placed on sexual prowess and experimentation within a relationship, and in particular, the emphasis that is placed on it by society. It should be enough, she reasons, to like most kinds, but not all kinds, of music (sex).

Flock of Young Women

In *The Husband Seekers*, the young women cast ashore are This story is about ideas and dreams; that they yearn for life, for love, for light and laughter, but if they are rejected languish on some far and distant shore.

The Sun

In the story, *The Low Sun*, This story involves a sharing of light from one female to a younger female. This younger female is a dancer, and one can extrapolate that it is not only one female to another, but one artist to another. The older artist is telling the younger one where the light goes and where it hides and what its purpose is.

Monks

Monks are in several of the stories and usually represent some sort of spiritual awakening, realization, or lesson learned.

Settings

Farm

There are several stories that take place on a farm, or near a farm. The narrator speaks about her neighbor's chickens, roosters, and cows in the pasture.

Sleep/Dream

Many of the stories take place as a dream when the narrator is sleeping.

France

The letters from Flaubert are written when in France and most of the places he visits are in and about the French countryside and in the cities nearby.

Trains and Planes

Dozens of the stories take place when the narrator is either traveling by train or plane, or sometimes a bus or car. This is where she observes various people and their interactions with one another.

Restaurants

The narrator likes to people watch, and sitting in cafes and restaurants are good ways to do this.



Themes and Motifs

Regret

A number of stories feature a feeling of regret. Sometimes the feelings of regret can come from a lack of inaction, such as in *Eating Fish Alone*, where the narrator eats alone on purpose, but then later regrets actions that she did not take while at the restaurant.

Most notable is the feeling of regret that permeates that of the story, *The Seals*. In this story the narrator has lost her sister and is going to the funeral. She thinks and remembers all of the times when, as a child, her sister was always there. She also recalls all of the instances since then that she thought about reaching out to be more connected to her sister, but other things took priority. Now that her sister is dead, the narrator regrets the time that she didn't take to spend with her sister.

Regret is also suggested in the roads that are not taken professionally and personally. In *Contingency (vs Necessity)* the narrator is regretting being alone, while in the story *Women Seeking Husbands*, the narrator has a dream where her ideas and talents don't meet up with their intended course of realization and are discarded.

Human Connection

The theme of Human Connection is evident in many of the stories that run throughout the collection. A first glimpse into this theme shows up in the story, *A Visit to the Dentist*. It is a letter from Flaubert to his lover, but the author has included it in this section because of its tangible theme of connection. In this story Flaubert writes that he wonders if dreams trickle downward, and believes that dreams connect people to one another.

In the Train Station is also another story involving connection. In this dream sequence, the author is searching for a religious connection to herself, and with others. In the dream she shows the Monk where to go to catch his train, thereby indicating that the dreamer knows and has made the connection herself.

The theme of human connection also shows up in the story, *The Cows*, and *The Rooster*. In both of these, though the focus seems to be superficially about animals, it is not about animals, but about the people who owned the animals. In *The Cows*, the narrator finds happiness and her own connection with others through watching the cows as they live their lives. In *The Rooster*, the narrator finds a connection to the man that lost his rooster, and the neighbors who also know what a loss it is for him to have lost it.



Control

In the story, *The Landing*, the theme of control is exemplified. In many stories, the control is something that is gained, but in this story, it is something that is lost. The narrator is on a plane and there is a malfunction while they are in the air. They finally land, but just before this happens, the narrator has to come to the point where she makes her peace with not being able to do anything about her situation.

The Woman in Red is also an example of control. In this dream by the narrator, a woman in red knows exactly what the narrator (in the dream) needs in order to survive. She offers assistance just when the narrator needs it. Later, this same measure of control by outside, but trusted, sources will come back into play, again.

In *The Schoolchildren in the Large Building*, which is another dream, the narrator learns that having control over a situation, doesn't always mean that it makes one feel secure, or happy. Things are not as they appear in this dream, and the measure of control that she thinks she has to direct the dream is quickly shown to be a figment.

Family

The theme of Family runs throughout the entire book. Almost every section has some reference to a family member, even extending that designation to animals in the family. The *Dog Hair* story indicates that the loss of a family pet has left the entire family bereaved to the point that they are not able to part with a single stray hair.

In the story *The Seals*, the narrator has lost her sister, and then her father all within the same year. She talks about how each member supported her throughout the years, and how each person's death touches her in a different way.

In the story, *Gold Digger*, the narrator has a different view of family in that one of the family members is only focused on the material gain that will come as a result of a member's death. She is appalled at the relative's callous nature and wonders that their priorities are out of whack.

Cultural Pride

The theme of Cultural and Historical Pride appears several times in the collection. The first mention of cultural pride is in the first story, *Stolen Salamis*. In this story, the narrator's son's landlord, who is Italian, makes Salamis as a hobby. One night they are stolen, but the police call the Salamis, sausages, and this upsets the landlord. To him, they have ignored his culture by simply calling the Salamis something as common as a sausage.



In Learning Medieval History the narrator makes a point of stating the difference between the Ottoman and the Turks, placing emphasis on the fact that it matters, even if it is something that happened thousands of years ago.

Then there is the story called, The Dreadful Mucamas. These are two Bolivian women whose cultural norms clash with their renter. Though they are there to assist her as her maids, they have very different views of what that entails. Neither is willing to budge and it is shown that the communication can't happen when one does not respect the heritage of the other.

Styles

Point of View

For the most part this collection of microfiction is told in first person point of view, either from Flaubert's point of view or an unnamed narrator. In many instances - especially in the case of the unnamed narrator - the gender of the speaker is not always discernible.

Language and Meaning

Lydia Davis's use of language is experimental and are often most likened to a snapshot in time, a captured thought written down. There is little setting, narrative, descriptions, characters that have names, and in many instances, the writing can be considered more a form of prose or unrhymed poetry.

The author, herself, in several interviews has stated that many of the stories are actual meditations that she's had, but to start labeling everything in the collection differently was going to be problematic. Therefore, she opted for the loose term of stories. She also states that she was most influenced by Kafka and the surreal texture of her sentence structures, and the double meanings behind words, the intense and overlapping symbolism, leave little doubt to his influence.

Structure

The collection has over 121 entries, some comprising no more than ten words, and one sentence. This is often called micro-fiction. There are five sections, with each section loosely touching on one or more themes, which include regret, loss, human connection, and others.

Many times the reader will find themselves reading a laundry list, a listing of obituaries, a litany of sounds that the appliances make, an errant doodle while conversing with her mother, and other atypical formats and lengths. Several stories play with the structure, as one can see in the 'Reversible Story' and 'The Circular Story'.



Quotes

We still find his white hairs here and there around the house and on our clothes. We pick them up. We should throw them away. But they are all we have left of him . We don't throw them away.

-- Narrator (Section One paragraph page 4)

Importance: This quote is from the story, The Dog Hair, and discusses the significance of loss.

Now that I have been here for a little while, I can say with confidence that I have never been here before.

-- Narrator (Section One paragraph page 8)

Importance: This is the author's sarcastic way of saying that the place she visited was very bland.

I wonder if thoughts are fluid, and flow downward, from one person to another, within the same house.

-- Narrator/Flaubert (Section One paragraph page 31)

Importance: This happens when Flaubert has a dream and then finds out that his niece has had the same dream.

Oh, we writers may think we invent too much— but reality is worse every time!

-- Narrator (Section Two paragraph page 68)

Importance: This is the narrator's way of saying that truth is always stranger than fiction.

Once she was gone, every memory was suddenly precious, even the bad ones, even the times I was irritated with her, or she was irritated with me. Then it seemed a luxury to be irritated.

-- Narrator (Section Four paragraph page 156)

Importance: This was in the story, The Seals, when the narrator's sister had died and she was missing her.

That fall, after the summer when they both died, she and my father, there was a point when I wanted to say to them, All right, you have died, I know that, and you've been dead for a while, we have all absorbed this and we've explored the feelings we had at first, in reaction to it, surprising feelings, some of them, and the feelings we're having now that a few months have gone by — but now it's time for you to come back. You have been away long enough.

-- Narrator (Section Four paragraph page 159)



Importance: This is from *The Seals* and the narrator is still grief stricken because her sister died, and then within the same year, her father died.

There was also some confusion in my mind, in the months afterwards. It was not that I thought she was still alive. But at the same time I couldn't believe that she was actually gone. Suddenly the choice wasn't so simple: either alive or not alive. It was as though not being alive did not have to mean she was dead, as though there were some third possibility.

-- Narrator (Section Four paragraph page 161)

Importance: The narrator is coming to terms with the loss of her family members.

Sometimes I did exactly what I wanted to do all day — I lay on the sofa and read a book, or I typed up an old diary — and then the most terrifying sort of despair would descend on me: the very freedom I was enjoying seemed to say that what I did in my day was arbitrary, and that therefore my whole life and how I spent it was arbitrary.

-- Narrator (Section Four paragraph page 205)

Importance: The narrator has received a grant and is enjoying the freedom that it gives her.

I'm not tired of all good books, I'm just tired of novels and stories, even good ones, or ones that are supposed to be good. These days, I prefer books that contain something real, or something the author at least believed to be real.

-- Narrator (Section 4 paragraph page 240)

Importance: This is the narrator's sarcastic and ironic commentary about modern novels.

Please spare me your imagination, I'm so tired of your vivid imagination, let someone else enjoy it. That's how I'm feeling these days, anyway, maybe it will pass.

-- Narrator (Section Four paragraph page 241)

Importance: This is the narrator's musings about modern novels and the often contrived plotlines.

What I should do, instead of writing about people who can't manage, is just quit writing and learn to manage. And pay more attention to life itself. The only way I will get smarter is by not writing anymore. There are other things I should be doing instead.

-- Narrator (Section Five paragraph page 252)

Importance: This is the narrator trying to rationalize quitting writing.

When we got there, we kept finding coins all over the house. Piles of coins. Lisa, the gold digger, didn't find them.

-- Narrator (Section Five paragraph page 265)

Importance: This is the narrator's experience with her sister-in-law and the death of her father-in-law.