

# **Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders Study Guide**

**Fragile Things: Short Fictions and Wonders by Neil Gaiman**

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# Plot Summary

Fragile Things is a collection of short stories and poems by Neil Gaiman, most of which deal with supernatural or strange events. Many of the stories carry an element or undercurrent of horror.

"A Study in Emerald" is a murder mystery set in Victorian London in an alternate past, in which the Old Ones, terrible monsters from beyond the Earth, have taken over the world. The narrator helps a detective, who is implied to be Sherlock Holmes, to solve the murder of one of these Old Ones. They track the crime to an actor and a doctor, who turn out to be the real Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. They are outwitted by these 'criminals' who get away to fight the Old Ones another day.

"The Fairy Reel and Instructions" are poems that deal with the sinister and confusing nature of fairyland. Going Wodwo is a poem in which a person decides to cast off their life to return to nature.

"October in the Chair" is a story in which the months of the year tell each other tales. October tells the others about Runt, an overlooked and miserable boy who runs away from home and meets a ghost.

"The Hidden Chamber," "Bitter Grounds," and "How Do You Think it Feels" all deal with loss and painful memories. In "Bitter Grounds," the narrator has given up to the point where he becomes a zombie. He travels to New Orleans and gives himself over to the zombie Coffee Girls. In "How Do You Think it Feels," the narrator creates a magical Plasticine gargoyle to protect his heart.

"Forbidden Brides..." is set in a world in which horror clichés are normal everyday events, and what we consider normal is fantasy to them.

The "Problem of Susan" explores the girl who was left behind when all her family went to Narnia.

"Locks" explores the story of Goldilocks from a father's point of view, and "Inventing Aladdin" imagines Scheherazade's plight from One Thousand and One Nights.

The "Flints of Memory Lane" and "Closing Time" are two ghost stories that are claimed to be true, in which young boys witness something strange but never really find out the cause of it. "Good Boys Deserve Favors" also claims to be a true story, about a boy who mysteriously plays beautiful music on a double bass, before it breaks and he is never able to play it again. "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch" is another supposedly true story, in which the socially awkward Miss Finch is granted a wish by a magical cabinet in a circus, and disappears into a jungle world forever.

"Other People" explores the idea of what might happen to a person in Hell. In it, a man is tortured by a demon until he becomes a demon himself. Then, because time is fluid in



Hell, he realizes that he is the demon who tortured himself. "In the End" reverses the story of Genesis, ending with humankind regaining paradise.

"Keepsakes and Treasures" is told by Smith, a bad man who works for an even worse man called Mr. Alice, who always gets whatever he wants. In this story, Mr. Alice pursues and buys one of the Shahinai, a mythical group of people who survive by selling one of their extraordinarily beautiful men every hundred years. Mr. Alice and Smith appear again in "Monarch of the Glen," in which Shadow, a character from the novel *American Gods*, is forced to fight Grendel. Shadow refuses to kill the creature, and manages to turn the tables on Mr. Alice.

"Strange Little Girls and Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot" is a collection of very short pieces exploring the lives of different kinds of women, and some popular vampire tropes.

"Pages from a Journal..." is an ambiguous story in which an unknown narrator searches for a mysterious woman called Scarlet.

"My Life" is a poem about a person whose life is a sequence of bizarre events like those found in the *Weekly World News*.

"Diseasemaker's Croup" describes a fake condition in which a person is compelled to make up fake conditions.

"Harlequin Valentine" is a story about the trickster Harlequin, who tries to court a woman called Missy by pinning a heart to her door.

"Feeders and Eaters" tells the story of an old woman called Miss Corvier who eats creatures alive in order to regain her youth. After killing her cat, the man telling the story gives himself to her to be her next victim.

"Goliath" is a story set in the fictional universe of the *Matrix*, in which a very tall man is taken from the matrix to pilot a ship to fight aliens.

"How to Talk to Girls at Parties" explores what happens when two Earth boys crash a party full of alien girls.

In "The Day the Saucers Came," the world comes to an end in a variety of different ways, but this is not noticed because the person is waiting for a phone call.

"Sunbird" tells the story of an Epicurean Club who are obsessed with eating new and interesting things. They capture and eat the Sunbird, which turns out to be the Phoenix. Eating its meat keeps one member alive for thousands of years. However, the others are not so fortunate, and are burned up from the inside and destroyed.

# A Study in Emerald, and The Fairy Reel

## A Study in Emerald, and The Fairy Reel Summary

In "A Study in Emerald," the narrator meets and begins lodging with a detective in Baker Street. One day a policeman called Lestrade calls on them, and asks the detective to investigate the murder of one of the German royal family. The murder victim is one of the 'Old Ones,' an ancient race of creatures from beyond the Earth. They investigate the body and find the word 'Rache' written on the wall, which is German for 'revenge.' They are then taken to see Queen Victoria, who is also one of the Old Ones. They promise her they will solve the murder, and Victoria heals the narrator's injured shoulder.

The detective takes the narrator to a play at a theatre that the murder victim had visited. After watching three short plays, they go backstage to meet one of the actors, a man called Mr. Vernet. The detective pretends to be an American who wants to buy the play and the actors. He hopes to draw out the writer of the play, a limping doctor whom he suspects to be the murderer. They return to Baker Street to await his arrival, setting up a trap for him with the police. However, instead of the doctor, a boy with a message arrives. The message is from Vernet, and it tells the detective that he has been outsmarted. Vernet knew who he was all along. Vernet admits that he and the limping doctor committed the crime, explaining that they are Restorationists who believe that the Old Ones are evil. They want to return Earth to human rule once more.

Lestrade leaves to try to track the culprits down, but they have escaped. The detective suspects where they might be, but does not say anything to the police. The narrator is advised to burn the note, but he does not. The limping doctor is revealed to have possibly been a man called Dr. Watson. The narrator reflects that they may all soon be dead, following certain events in Russia.

"The Fairy Reel" is a poem in which the narrator wishes he had chosen differently in his youth. If he could live again he would give all of himself to the world of fairy, and not try to live partly in the world of men. He would love a fairy girl, who would one day tire of him. He would lose his heart to fairyland, and experience sweet pain, music and longing. However, he is too old now, and can only await death.

## A Study in Emerald, and The Fairy Reel Analysis

"A Study in Emerald" plays an interesting game with the reader. At first it seems to be a fairly straight Sherlock Holmes story, and fools the reader into thinking they know exactly what to expect. However, it soon becomes clear that all is not as it seems. The murder victim is not human, but is an 'Old One,' an ancient creature from beyond the Earth. This is the author's attempt to merge the world of Sherlock Holmes with that of The Cthulu Mythos. Sherlock Holmes is the fictional detective invented by the author Arthur Conan Doyle. The Cthulu Mythos is a collection of horror stories about



extraterrestrial gods, invented by the author H. P. Lovecraft and continued by many other authors since. Stories involving Sherlock Holmes are usually based on logic, fact and rational thinking. Lovecraftian stories focus on the supernatural, the unknown, fear and the irrational. Merging these two very different worlds and storytelling styles means creating a story that is full of contrasts and juxtapositions. The author combines rationality with the irrational, comparing the very precise and logical observations that are used to solve a murder, with the background of the supernatural and fearsome Old Ones.

The author also uses little asides at the beginning of each new section to create atmosphere and to emphasize the idea of the rational juxtaposed with the irrational. These asides include an advertisement for Victor's Vitae, an electrical fluid that will restore life to the limbs, Jekyll's Powders to cleanse the soul, V. Tepes the professional exsanguinator, and Jack's Boots, Shoes and Brogues. These ads all represent different Victorian stories and legends. Victor's Vitae is a reference to the story of Frankenstein, in which a man constructed from dead body parts is brought to life using electricity. Jekyll's Powders is a reference to the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a tale in which Dr. Jekyll drinks a potion to become the ugly and evil Mr. Hyde. V. Tepes is a reference to Vlad Tepes, or Vlad the Impaler as he is often known. Vlad, sometimes called Dracula, was a real man who is believed to have been the influence behind Bram Stoker's famous vampire Count Dracula. Jack's Boots, Shoes and Brogues, which will bring a spring into your step, is a reference to Spring Heeled Jack, a character from folklore who was said to make incredibly high jumps. He was described as having a devil-like appearance and according to several stories tried to rape women. These adverts not only provide humor with references to other Victorian tales, they also emphasize the superstitious atmosphere of Victorian London. The Victorian era, like this story, was one of great contrasts. Enormous progress was made with science, exploration and new inventions, and an appreciation of logic and rationality grew. At the same time however, interest in the supernatural and spiritual matters was very strong. Mediums were popular, ghost stories common, and stories about fairies and magic often told. Arthur Conan Doyle, the man who wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories, was also extremely interested in the supernatural. This story emphasizes and embraces these strange contrasts of the Victorian age.

There is another twist in this story that plays with the reader, and another way in which things are not necessarily as they seem. The reader is fooled into assuming that the narrator is Dr. Watson and that the detective is Sherlock Holmes. The narrator has been wounded in Afghanistan, just like Watson. The detective likes to use his mantelpiece for target practice like Holmes, and appears to think in a similar manner to him. Like Holmes he is a master of disguise. Even the title reflects Sherlock Holmes' first case, which was "A Study in Scarlet." This story is titled "A Study in Emerald" and the plot unravels in much the same manner as the beginning of the first Sherlock Holmes book. However, as the story progresses the reader is given many clues to suggest that Holmes and Watson are not actually the protagonists of this story. The detective does not smoke a pipe, and is even called out on his bluff concerning this. He makes several mistakes and is out-witted by Vernet, who is a tall, pipe-smoking man just like Holmes. Vernet writes the detective a letter which refers to the detective's book *The Dynamics of*



an Asteroid. This book was written by Professor Moriarty in the original Holmes stories. Vernet's companion is a limping doctor who could be Watson, and this is later confirmed to be true. The narrator himself does not appear to be a doctor, he describes himself as a crack shot, and he is introduced to Vernet as Sebastian. This makes it likely that he is actually Moriarty's friend Col. Sebastian Moran. Taken together, these clues lead to the conclusion that the protagonists are Moriarty and Moran, and that the men they are trying to catch are in fact Holmes and Watson.

This twist works on a number of levels. First, it gives the reader an interesting mystery to solve, with clues and red herrings to help and fool them. This puts them in the position of being a detective too. It also turns the traditional story on its head, reversing the roles of Holmes and Moriarty. Moriarty is a criminal mastermind and Holmes' enemy in the original books. In this world, however, evil has taken over and now dominates mankind, so it makes sense that an evil man would be 'good' and a good man might be 'evil.' It also plays once again with the idea of contrasting rationality and irrationality, since nothing in this story is ever quite what it seems to be on the surface. The reference to Jekyll in one of the ads also brings up an interesting idea, that Moriarty and Holmes are somehow evil and good versions of the same person. In different realities they may take different sides, but where one is 'good' the other must be 'evil.' Finally, this twist forces the reader to question the morality of the story. Are the Old Ones benevolent rulers, or are they evil conquerors who do not care about mankind? Victoria appears to have acted kindly to the narrator by healing his shoulder, and spoke to both men respectfully. However, Vernet's note contradicts this, describing the Old Ones as monsters who enjoy suffering and pain. Does this mean that murdering one of the Old Ones is not a bad act? It also leaves the reader questioning which man is actually the good one and which the bad; Holmes, or Moriarty?

"The Fairy Reel" is a very simple poem that is designed to be read aloud. The rhythm and pace change to suit the meaning of the words. In the first and final sections, as the poet reminisces about past mistakes and reflects on his age, the poem is much slower. The rhymes are very structured and rigid, and force the poem to be read at a more ponderous pace. This reflects the poet's mood and age, as well as the restrictions of living "in the world of men" (p27). In the middle section, however, as the poet describes fairyland, the pace of the poem immediately begins to pick up, until it is racing along at lightning speed. This is achieved through including more rhymes, repetition and language that evokes speed and action ("lightning tree," "burning brook," "danced along and sang and whirled and sank and trod" p27-28). This reflects the exciting and somewhat confusing nature of fairyland. When read aloud, it sounds like the lyrics to a very fast song, mimicking a joyful, wild dance. The rhyming structure suddenly loosens, making the poem seem less rigid and more free and youthful. This sums up the magic of fairyland and the joys of the poet's youth. The language at this point in the poem, suggesting pain as well as joy, and danger as well as excitement, also reflects the idea of fairyland as a wonderful but somehow slightly sinister place. It is a place where a person can utterly lose themselves, which is exciting but also frightening.

The meaning of the poem can be read on two different levels. It can be taken literally, as a poem about a man who regrets trying to live in two separate worlds, and remembers





the excitement of fairyland fondly. It can also be taken as a metaphor for an old man's regrets at not having lived the kind of life he should have. He wasted time on trivial things (the world of men) and did not spend enough time having fun and chasing danger and excitement (fairyland). He did not take any risks, and now that he is old it is too late. Now he looks at youth with envious eyes and wishes he did not still hear the call of fairyland. He lost his heart there, but now he cannot return. At this final stage of the poem it is unclear whether the poet wishes he had never gone to fairyland at all, or instead wishes he had given himself to it entirely.



# October in the Chair, and The Hidden Chamber

## October in the Chair, and The Hidden Chamber Summary

In "October in the Chair" the personifications of the seasons gather to tell stories. September starts by telling a tale about fine wine, but August finishes it for him; they have all heard it before. June then tells a quick story about a woman who fell in love with a man when she x-rayed his luggage at an airport.

October then tells his story, about a boy nicknamed Runt who runs away from home. Runt follows a river, comes to an abandoned farm and a pasture. He thinks the farmhouse looks creepy so he sleeps in the pasture. He wakes in the night to find a boy watching him. The boy is a ghost, who takes him to the graveyard and shows him his grave. The two boys then go for a walk and play in a tree, but when morning comes the ghost boy has to go. Runt says he would like to stay with the ghost boy, but the ghost boy tells him he cannot kill him. However, if he goes into the farmhouse, the things living in there might. The ghost boy vanishes and Runt waits outside the farmhouse, wondering whether he should go in. After a while, he walks inside.

June asks what happens next, but May says it is better not to think about it. November compliments October on his story. They then all part until next month's gathering.

In "The Hidden Chamber" the poet talks about the pain, memories and ghosts that linger in his empty house. He seems to have suffered the loss of someone he loved. The poet appears to be addressing a new love in his life. He tells her that she will find nothing to frighten her in the house, but that there is a locked room she will never find. If she is wise she will run away, but he will light a candle and hope she returns.

## October in the Chair, and The Hidden Chamber Analysis

In "October in the Chair," each personification of the month is given qualities and behavior that resemble the qualities of their month. September is a little more reserved and pretentious than August; September is a time for fine wines and slow evenings, whereas August likes beer and barbecues. June is described as hesitant and clean, which is fitting for the first month of summer. She is hesitant because summer is only just starting, and clean because at this point in the year everything seems new and fresh. She also behaves more gently and nervously than other months, reflecting how June usually carries a gentle warmth, rather than the fierce heat of the hotter summer months. June rushes through her story; she is eager but not very good at pacing



herself, reflecting how the month of June often seems to fly by. In contrast, April is sensitive but cruel, bringing to mind April showers and unpredictable weather. October is a great storyteller, and naturally his tale carries an element of horror and features a ghost. This reflects the fact that in October the evenings are getting darker and Halloween is coming. October evenings lend themselves to sitting around campfires and telling stories, so naturally October is very good at this. November is quieter and more subdued than October; he does not speak much, and when he does he claims that his stories are too dark. November evenings are much cooler and darker than October evenings, which still carry a lot of warmth in them. October is also a time associated with rich, warm colors and autumn festivities, whereas November begins to bring the year towards winter. October explains this to November, telling him that he is not as warm as October, so his stories naturally come across as darker. Through these personifications, each month is symbolized and brought to life beautifully.

Not only does this provide beautiful imagery for the changing year, it also reflects the different kinds of personalities that different people have. Rather than judging each other for the way they behave, the months accept that this is what they are naturally like. When November tells October that his stories are too dark, October tells him that his nights are longer and he is not as warm, and that this is just who he is. This makes November feel better. There are all kinds of people and personalities in the world and all of them are needed in order to keep a harmonious balance, just as different months and changing seasons are needed to keep the year and the world in balance. People, like November, should embrace the qualities that make them special and unique, rather than trying to change to be like somebody else. It is a shame that the boy called Runt in October's story could not learn this important message before it was too late. "October in the Chair" is a story about acceptance and identity, as well as being a fantasy story about the months personified.

October's story about Runt can be taken on two different levels, as a creepy story about a boy who meets a ghost and gives himself up to die, or as a metaphor for the loneliness and despair caused by feelings of isolation. It is a story about a child who has been ignored and let down. He feels worthless and alone. He does not recognize that he has his own strengths and unique traits that make him special, and that he could grow up to do whatever he wants. He will not always feel so isolated and alone, and should not give up on his life. He feels a connection with the ghost boy in the story, because Runt has become almost like a ghost himself, ignored and passed over by everyone. He longs to join the ghost boy so that he can remain forgotten forever, and never be made to feel inadequate again. However, there is a danger in becoming a ghost. The ghost boy calls himself Dearly because he has read the word on his gravestone. He cannot remember his own name, and seems to have completely lost any sense of his own identity. He is stuck forever as a forgotten, lost little boy. This will also happen to Runt, through his own choice. This makes the story a profoundly sad one, especially since there is a sense of inevitability to it that makes the reader feel that nothing could prevent the tragedy. The end of the story is left unvoiced, but the reader knows exactly what has happened to Runt. This story contrasts with the framing story in which it is placed, since the months of the year all have such distinct identities and



accept one another, whereas the two boys in October's story become identity-less and isolated.

"The Hidden Chamber" is a poem that explores loss and memories. It plays with the idea of the Bluebeard story, in which Bluebeard kills all his wives and locks them in a hidden room. When he marries a new wife he gives her a set of keys, telling her to go where she likes but not to enter that one room. He leaves for awhile, and she is overcome with curiosity and goes to the forbidden room. She finds the bodies of his previous wives and is terrified. When he returns he is angry that she disobeyed him, and says he will kill her. She locks herself in a tower room and her brothers come to rescue her. This poem references the Bluebeard story, but at the same time disassociates itself from it. It tells the woman not to fear because she will find nothing to scare her, no hidden rooms, old bones or blood. This is an ordinary house, with ordinary items such as a washing machine and a water heater. However, there is a hidden place, but it has no door. It is locked, but it isn't there. She will hear the sound of ghosts, but they will not hurt her. These things represent the poet's memories and losses, the things he cannot let go of or forget. They stay with him, but he will not share them with her, so they will remain forever hidden. She will probably come to resent this, or feel disconnected from him. He tells her that if she is wise she will run away, since the pain he carries might cause him to hurt her, and though she will try she will never fully be able to heal him. He will not follow her, because his pain and memories are too deep. However, he will light a candle, hope for her return and remember her. It is unclear at the end of the poem whether he is hoping for his new wife's return, or for his old love's return.

The poem is about memories and loss, and the hidden chamber mentioned is a metaphor for the memories and pain that the poet keeps hidden away. The title "The Hidden Chamber" reflects this idea, and also suggests that the hidden pain is in his heart. Other words and images in the poem are used to evoke the idea of memories, such as the ghosts that make noise but will not hurt anyone, and the trapped butterfly. There are also a lot of fragile and ephemeral things in the poem, such as the butterfly, the ghosts, the lacy shift in the night, and the flickering candle. This imagery reflects how memories are at the same time fragile, beautiful and lingering. This is also the case with love, and particularly with his love for his first wife. He suggests that all love will be like this for him, and that his current lover will also leave. There is no place in his empty house (his empty heart and soul) for joy and beauty now. Like the butterfly, his new lover will try to bring it back, but like the butterfly she will starve if she stays too long. She is described as 'fluttering away,' which reflects the butterfly imagery. She is also compared to summer, which is warm and beautiful, but fleeting. The candle at the end of the poem could be seen as a sign of hope, or as reflecting the poet's memories and love that still burn on inside him. Like the other imagery in the poem, a candle flame is beautiful but fragile; it flickers and will eventually go out.



# Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire, and The Flints of Memory Lane

## Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire, and The Flints of Memory Lane Summary

In "Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire," a man is trying to write a realistic slice-of-life story, but he cannot help making jokes and turning the work into a parody. He writes about Amelia Earnshawe, a young woman who is traveling to Falconmere Castle to be a governess. On the way, she is thrown out of her carriage by the coach-driver, and she runs in fear to a house and knocks on the door. An old man answers and tells her that she has a birthright, explaining about some dark ritual that takes place when the time is right. It has something to do with the alluring and mysterious Sir Fredrick for whom she was hired to work. However, as he warns her to flee, he is killed by a man with a crossbow. Amelia is surprised to see that the old man has been long dead, perhaps for a hundred years.

The man breaks off from writing his story. His older brother arrives and challenges him, claiming that the castle is his birthright. They fight, but the younger brother wins. The younger brother instructs his butler to remove the body, and returns to his writing. This time he places Amelia in a woodcutter's cottage, with ghouls closing in on her. She remembers the woodcutter's advice and looks in the escritoire. She finds a compact and reads it aloud, ordering the ghouls to stop. The ghouls agree, as long as she honors her end of the compact and brings them brides.

The man throws down his quill again, exasperated. He is just about to curse his ancestors when a raven speaks to him. It suggests that he try his hand at writing fantasy instead of these slice-of-life tales. The man is reluctant at first, but then decides to give it a go. Now he writes about Amelia at home, making breakfast for her husband. She realizes how she has come to hate him, as he takes her for granted. As the man writes this new 'fantasy' story about Amelia, he finds that he is enjoying it a lot more.

In "The Flints of Memory Lane," the narrator reminisces about something that happened to him as a boy. One day, when he was coming home from a friend's house, he saw a gypsy woman standing on the flint path. She smiled at him, a very unpleasant smile, and he was suddenly very afraid. He ran back to his friend's house and had to call his parents to pick him up, because he refused to walk home. He can offer no resolution or



explanation for the gypsy woman, but still remembers her smile and the fear it caused in him.

## **Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire, and The Flints of Memory Lane Analysis**

"Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire" at first seems to be a nonsense story in which events happen randomly with no explanation. However there is a point to it; it is actually a clever and funny little story in which the rules of what is normal and abnormal are reversed, as well as an exploration of the conventions of genre and storytelling. The story is set in an alternate universe in which the sorts of things that happen in horror and fantasy stories are normal, everyday occurrences. The things that are normal and humdrum in our world are considered abnormal and the subject of fantasy stories there. When the young man decides to write fantasy, he lists the stock themes as being such things as cars, housewives, police, commercials, credit cards and computers. The things that we would consider to be the stock themes of fantasy and horror stories, such as ghouls, ghosts, monsters, and curses, are perfectly normal and even boring to the young man in this story. This is why his attempts to write 'slice-of-life' stories are full of ridiculous, far-fetched and supernatural events. This also explains why his long lost brother suddenly appears and forces him to duel him. As the young man himself says, these sorts of things happen all the time in his world. The sections about Amelia, written in bold font, are the stories that the young man is writing. She goes through many traditional elements of horror stories, facing strange men and supernatural forces, but the young man is never quite satisfied. He cannot help himself from introducing 'fantastical' elements or poking fun at his characters, such as the ghouls asking if she can bring them bread rolls with their brides. These elements are as out of place in his stories as a monster would be in a realistic drama or romance in our world. When he finally gives in and decides to write fantasy, he places Amelia in a setting that is very familiar to us, but completely strange to him. She makes breakfast for her husband and reflects on their relationship, hating him for taking advantage of her. In the writer's world, people would worry about curses and monsters rather than these kinds of feelings.

This twist on what is normal and abnormal allows for a lot of humor. The author pokes fun at the conventions of storytelling, in which dramatic events are always happening, relationships are not as complex as in real life, and resolutions are more easily found. He also pokes fun at a very specific kind of storytelling within the horror and fantasy genre; the gothic novel. These are incredibly romanticized horror stories, in which the protagonist is almost always an innocent young woman faced with supernatural horror. There are strong sexual suggestions beneath the surface of these stories, in which the young woman is often seduced by the mysterious but cruel and monstrous man/creature. The author most famous for this style was Ann Radcliffe, an English author writing in the 18th and early 19th centuries. Among other books she wrote *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which is one of the books listed as a 'classic' by the young man in





this story. Other examples of gothic horror novels are *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Castle of Otranto*, and *The Monk*, as well as many incarnations of the modern vampire story, such as those written by Anne Rice, Charlaine Harris and Stephanie Meyer. These types of stories are mocked in the sections about Amelia, whose name even bears a resemblance to the main character, Emily, of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The attraction to the cruel and mysterious Sir Frederick, the references to birthrights and curses, and her over-emotional state all mimic conventions of this genre. Elements from the young man's own life also mock this kind of literature, including the sudden appearance of a long lost brother, the duel, the eyes watching him from a painting, and the strange butler. When the raven begins talking to him, a poem (*The Raven*) by Edgar Allan Poe is referenced when the raven says "nevermore" (p61). Edgar Allan Poe is yet another famous author of the gothic genre.

By examining a world in which the mundane is exciting and the exciting is mundane, the author also explores the point and worth of fantasy stories. The young man is at first reluctant to write fantasy, claiming that it is not real literature since it does not hold up a mirror to our world as 'real life' stories do. However, when he does decide to give it a go, he reflects that everyone needs escapism, and that many people simply find the real world too boring. People face the real world every day; when they read stories they want to be drawn into something new and different. Here, the common criticisms of fantasy literature are mocked. Fantasy is often claimed to not be worthwhile because it is too ridiculous and removed from real life. Here, the author has twisted things so that real life is fantasy, and the ridiculous is real life. Suddenly, this criticism of fantasy makes no sense anymore. The worth of fantasy is shown to be in its ability to help the reader find freedom and escape. Even in a world where the ridiculous and exciting happen all the time, people will still become bored with everyday occurrences and long for something different. The writer in this story claims that good literature holds up a mirror to real life, but this can apply to fantasy stories as much as to any other genre. Fantasy can sometimes tell us things or give us messages about our world by distorting it and forcing us to see things from another point of view. This is the case with this story, in which the author holds up a mirror for his readers, showing them their own lives from a different angle. He shows us that 'normal' and 'interesting' are only a matter of perspective.

"The Flints of Memory Lane" carries similar themes to the previous story, but told in a completely different way. Whereas the last story was a bold, funny satire, this one is told very subtly and gently. The author leaves the reader with no resolution or neat explanations. He explains that real life is not like a story, and so things will not happen in it in the same way that they do in stories. Events do not always have a purpose or an ending. Both stories have shown the reader the fundamental differences between stories and real life, reflecting on what a story is and what its purpose is. Here, the author is not aiming to give the reader a sense of escapism, but presenting them with something believable and 'true.' Details such as the author's Victorian house in America, the old girlfriend who doesn't know why she dates him, the bulldozing of their old house and the building of their new house, all help to add a sense of realism to the story. However, the story has still been constructed to evoke a certain response, for all that it claims not to really be a story. The black and yellow light of the lamp is repeated in the



black and yellow of the gypsy's clothes and the black and yellow of her smile. The author has also been careful to set the scene so that the reader is left with a sense of how isolated and alone the boy is on the long flint path, with no other houses around. These all add to the strange and creepy atmosphere, which helps to evoke the correct response to the woman. The reader knows that she is a ghost without having to be told, even though there is nothing in the story to really suggest that this is the case. Although the story claims to be a true story, it has been carefully constructed and follows certain conventions of the horror genre. As in the previous tale, the reader can never be quite sure what is reality and what is story.





# Closing Time, and Going Wodwo

## Closing Time, and Going Wodwo Summary

"Closing Time" is set in an old English club where professionals gather to talk and drink. There are four men there after midnight, the narrator, an actor called Paul, a computer gaming magazine editor called Martyn, and a strange ill-looking man. They tell each other ghost stories, then one of them offers to tell a true story.

He tells a story from when he was nine years old and used to walk home past an abandoned gatehouse. One day there were three boys outside the gatehouse, looking at a porn magazine. The boy joined them and helped them chase the missing pages. The older boys, Simon, Douglas and Jamie, took him to an abandoned manor house called the Swallows. They crept around the house into the gardens, where the older boys told jokes and urinated into a stream in a grotto. They then walked down a path to a playhouse with an evil looking doorknocker in the shape of an imp. They dared the boy to knock on the door with the knocker. He was frightened, but did not want them to think he was a baby, so he knocked. He then dared the older boys to go inside. The door opened on its own, and the older boys went in. As they turned to talk to the boy, the door slammed shut behind them. The boy walked around the playhouse looking in the windows but could not see the older boys inside. After awhile the door swung open but no-one came out. The boy left and walked home.

Paul asks the storyteller what became of the older boys. He tells them that he never saw the boys again, but that no missing children reports went out, and there were no searches. Martyn says he does not believe the story. The ill-looking man says that he does believe, and goes on to tell them about the older boys. Jamie died soon after their father did, and Douglas sold the Swallows. Douglas killed himself ten years ago, while the ill-looking man was in an asylum. Their father had never let them in the playhouse. After telling them this, the ill-looking man hails a taxi and leaves.

In "Going Wodwo," the poet sheds all his worldly possessions, gives up his old life and goes to live in the forest as a wild man.

## Closing Time, and Going Wodwo Analysis

In the beginning of "Closing Time" the men tell each other ghost stories. These are unsatisfactory because they do not make complete sense, and they already know the endings because they have heard them before. These stories are urban legends; stories that are passed along orally and retold over and over again. When told, the narrator will often state that the story is true, and that they heard it from a friend of a friend. The story is therefore disassociated from them enough for it to be credible that they don't know specific details, but close enough to them that it seems more immediate and believable. The main story that is told in "Closing Time" has a similar feel to an



urban legend. The narrator tells us about a club he frequented, and in that club someone told him a story. The story seems to be separated from the reader by two people, but remains immediate enough for it still to be believable and creepy. There are also many details left out; who were the boys and what happened to them? Who owned the Swallows and why was it locked up? However, though the story appears at first to be another urban legend, the ending of the story changes that. First, it is revealed that the narrator of the story about the boy is also the narrator of the framing story about the club. The story is not removed from us by two people, but is being told to us directly by the narrator. Secondly, the missing details are filled in by the ill-looking man. Finally, the ill-looking man himself confirms the story. Suddenly the reader is no longer faced with an urban legend but with a story that is true, and much creepier as a result. Neil Gaiman's introduction to this story also suggests that many features of the story were in fact true and experienced by him. If so, the tale might be taken as semi-autobiographical. The use of the framing narrative and the ambiguity surrounding the narrator, force the reader to question exactly what is true in this story, what is complete fiction, and what is urban legend.

The meaning behind this story is ambiguous and unclear. A young boy saw a creepy playhouse and witnessed three boys disappear inside it. The young boy has now grown up and is telling his tale. However, one of the boys from the tale, Simon, is now a very old man. He fills in the blank details and says that he believes the story. There are many odd facts about this. Firstly, Simon is clearly too old now for the narrator to have known him as a little boy. Secondly, Simon's facts about what happened to his brothers suggest that Jamie and Douglas both grew up and died before the narrator claims to have met them as boys. Douglas boarded up the house after Jamie died, but the house was boarded up in the narrator's story. Finally, the old man does not actually confirm the narrator's story, but merely states that he believes it. If he had played with the narrator as a little boy and gone into the playhouse, then he would remember the event and be able to confirm that the narrator is telling the truth.

So what is going on? There are many different possible interpretations of the story. One possibility is that when the narrator met the boys Simon, Douglas and Jamie, he actually met their ghosts. We know from the old man's facts that Jamie was dead at this point, and that Douglas could also have been dead. However, clearly Simon was still alive, since he lives to be an old man. One solution to this is that the old man Simon is also a ghost, but this seems unlikely. Another explanation is that time is more fluid for ghosts, allowing the boys to return to their past as ghost children. This possibility is perhaps the least satisfactory. Another possibility is that the three boys were some kind of past abstractions of their childhood selves, forever haunting the place where they played together. They have clearly experienced a lot of pain in their lives, evidenced by the cages they were locked up in, their father's 'games,' and the fact that one died, one committed suicide and one ended up in an insane asylum. This pain may have rooted their souls or essence to that place. A different possibility is that the three brothers did enter the playhouse as children, and that it somehow trapped them there. When the narrator came upon them they attempted to lure him into the same trap, but when he dared them to enter the house they could not refuse, and he was free to go. However, this explanation does not take the living old-man version of Simon into account. Finally,



it is possible that the three brothers suffered extreme child abuse at the hands of their father. Simon says they were sometimes locked in cages, and hints that his father built the playhouse for his 'games.' The fates of the brothers also suggests a very dark and painful childhood. If this is the case, the playhouse may represent the mind's way of dealing with these painful memories. This was a place that the brothers feared, represented by the evil imp door-knocker. It was a place where their innocence may have been taken from them, and they were made to 'disappear.' The supernatural elements of the story might represent a way of understanding and coping with this terrible abuse.

The story also works as a metaphor for the loss of childhood innocence. The narrator is a young boy, younger than the three brothers. When he comes across them they are looking at porn, and encourage him to join them. They tell jokes he doesn't understand, referred to as 'big boy jokes,' and they ask him if he is circumcised. He is embarrassed by this behavior, and shocked when they urinate into the stream, which he has imagined is part of a perfect fairy grotto. Clearly the narrator is still a child, and the brothers are on the cusp of becoming teenagers. The narrator finds that he is a little frightened of this 'big boy' world and does not feel himself ready to join in yet. This is represented by the playhouse and its scary knocker. He is encouraged to knock on the door and enter into the big boy world. He knocks, but he refuses to go inside. He is not ready to grow up just yet. When the other boys go ahead, he is happy to stay behind. When the door swings open and they do not come out, it symbolizes how they have moved on to another stage with new concerns. They cannot get the innocence of childhood back again. The narrator waits, and eventually feels that he is free to leave. He has made his choice, and will remain a child for a while longer. This story works on a number of levels, and can take on any combination of the above readings.

"Going Wodwo" is a poem about escape and freedom. In it, the poet dreams of shedding all his worldly possessions and his old life and becoming a wild man of the woods. 'Wodwo' is another word for the wild man or Green Man, a figure of folklore who lives at one with nature. The poem is a metaphor for shedding old worries and one's old life and starting again. In it, silence becomes a new language as a new way of life is begun. Nature is hard but free, just as changing can be hard but will be worth it. The poem has a similar message to "The Fairy Reel." Here the poet dreams of casting off the world of men to begin again, and to remember what is important to him or her. In "The Fairy Reel," the poet wishes he had done this long ago, and now mourns that it is too late.



# Bitter Grounds, and Other People

## Bitter Grounds, and Other People Summary

In "Bitter Grounds," the narrator goes to the store one day and decides to just keep driving. He throws his phone away and withdraws all his money. He sleeps in his car, and one night stops at a motel. As he is leaving, he encounters a man who is desperately trying to get a taxi. He offers to give him a lift. The man tells him he is a professor of anthropology, and that he is traveling to a conference in New Orleans. His car broke down and he came to the motel, but now needs to get back to the car to meet the pick-up truck. When they get there, however, he has forgotten his wallet. The narrator agrees to travel back to the motel to get the wallet and return. It takes him half an hour to find the car again, and when he does the professor has gone. The narrator takes his wallet and travels on, and soon takes his identity too. He drives to New Orleans and books in to the hotel where the professor was meant to be staying.

At the hotel he meets another professor called Campbell, who gives him advice and offers to help him through his first conference. They go out into New Orleans for drinks. At a bar, they meet two identical sisters, one wearing a white ribbon and one wearing a red ribbon. Campbell dances with the white ribbon girl, while the narrator and the red ribbon girl wander off together. They go to another bar, then see Campbell walking past outside. They go to find him, but a crowd engulfs him, and the next minute the red ribbon woman is gone. He goes back to the hotel. The following day there is no sign of Campbell, but the narrator decides to give his speech. He reads the script that the real professor wrote, and manages to bluff his way through the questions. He dines with one of the professors and sleeps with her that night.

The red ribbon woman comes back in the night and tells the narrator a story about a young man who came to New Orleans, hoping to read up on black magic. He dug something up that someone else wanted, and they doused him with zombie dust. The dust knocked him out for a few days, but after that he craved it. He was willing to do anything for the people who gave it to him, until he basically became like a zombie. The next day the narrator wakes up and there is no-one in his room, and nothing to suggest that there ever was. There is a tapping on the door and he opens it to see a Haitian coffee girl like the ones in the professor's paper. She offers him coffee and he drinks it, then he takes her hand and walks with her into the light.

In "Other People," a man enters Hell and is met by a demon who tells him that time is fluid here. He is tortured many times, then forced to relive his life over and over, going through it again and again until everything he ever did and felt is laid bare. He eventually completely opens up his heart. When he does, he realizes that the demon has disappeared. A man enters the room, and he understands. He tells the man that time is fluid here.



## Bitter Grounds, and Other People Analysis

"Bitter Grounds" can be read as a slightly sinister story about zombies and strange supernatural events in New Orleans, but also as a metaphor for depression, loneliness and giving up. Death and zombies are a recurring theme throughout the story. The professor the narrator meets in the motel has written a paper on Haitian coffee girls, who he says are a form of zombie. Later, the radio plays a sermon about Lazarus, who rose from the dead in the Bible, and there is an ad for coffee, bringing to mind the coffee girls again. In New Orleans, he is asked if he wants to go on a ghost walk. The red ribbon woman talks about death and zombies, and appears to be some kind of supernatural being herself. She also tells him a story about a boy who becomes little more than a zombie. Even the woman with whom the narrator sleeps is called Shanelle Gravely-King. References to death are everywhere. At the end, when the coffee girl appears to the narrator framed by a bright light, he drinks the coffee she offers, takes her hand, and goes into the light. This is symbolic of death, because the narrator finally gives up and leaves the world behind.

Throughout the story, the reader is made to question whether a person can be both alive and dead at the same time. The Haitian coffee girls were some kind of zombie, alive but dead, just like the boy in the red ribbon woman's story. The red ribbon woman talks about how a person can be alive but not really alive, present in the world but perhaps not present in their soul, going through the motions but no longer feeling anything. This is exactly what the narrator appears to be going through. He carries on, but does not seem to find joy or happiness in anything. He abandoned his old life and just drove without purpose, then stole another person's life in order to try to feel something again. He finds food tasteless that other people love, as if he has somehow lost the ability to experience life properly. At the beginning of the story we are given a clue as to the source of his depression. He says that he sometimes calls a woman, and we must assume that she has left him. Now he seems to have nothing else to live for, and has become little more than a walking zombie himself. The red ribbon woman questions at what point a person is really dead. The narrator knows he is fast approaching that point, and when the Haitian coffee girl appears to him he understands that he has crossed the threshold. He drinks the coffee, symbolizing that he has accepted his fate, and passes with her over to the other side.

It is interesting to note that throughout the course of the story, many people who interact with the narrator disappear mysteriously. First is the professor, whose identity the narrator steals. Next is Campbell, who gives the narrator useful advice and takes him to the bar. The next disappearance is the red ribbon woman, who explains to the narrator about being living but dead at the same time. Finally, the woman with whom the narrator sleeps has disappeared the next morning. When the narrator meets the professor, he tells him that people come into your life for a reason. All these people who the narrator meets but then disappear have helped him in some way or another. All of them are leading him to where he needs to be. The professor leads him to New Orleans, Campbell to the bar and the red ribbon woman, the red ribbon woman to certain conclusions and truths about himself. These people certainly seem to have come into



his life for a reason, in order to guide him away from being a 'zombie' and into death (or perhaps rebirth and a new beginning). These different people could represent the hand of a god or divine being, or simply his own consciousness guiding him to the truths he needs to accept.

"Other People" is also a story about the process of opening up and realizing certain truths about oneself. The main character in this story enters Hell, and is tortured over and over until he begins to understand everything that he has ever done and felt, and all the hurt he has caused anyone else. This is a process that takes countless years, and must be repeated over and over to work properly. In the end he has laid himself open and understands everything. He realizes that he has become the demon that has been torturing him. When the door opens and his former self walks through, he must now go through the process again from the other side. Time is fluid in Hell, and he has been both the man and the demon all along. This comments on the fact that there is a demon inside every man, showing that evil is something that we create, not a mysterious external force. The man who still holds his evil and pain inside looks normal, disguising his evil, whereas the man who has shed his lies and excuses now looks like the traditionally evil figure. He has finally shed his disguise, and shown what really lies beneath the surface. This is an extremely effective twist on the traditional ideas of Hell and purgatory.





# Keepsakes and Treasures, and Good Boys Deserve Favors

## Keepsakes and Treasures, and Good Boys Deserve Favors Summary

The narrator of "Keepsakes and Treasures" is an orphan, whose mother was sent to an insane asylum by her own father. She became pregnant there, probably through rape. She eventually killed herself. The narrator was brought up in an orphanage where the deputy-head sexually abused the boys. When he was still very young, he killed the deputy-head. This brought him to the attention of a man called Mr. Alice, who arranged for him to be brought up in a proper home. He found records of the boy's mother and potential fathers, which the narrator used to track down the men and kill them. After graduating from university, the narrator visited his grandfather and killed him too. He is very grateful to Mr. Alice and considers himself his loyal man.

One day he is standing in Earls Court Road in London waiting for Mr. Alice, who pulls up in his Jaguar. There is a professor of ancient languages in the back of the car. They travel to a house, where a foreign woman answers the door. She takes them upstairs to where two huge women with swords are guarding a door. Inside is the treasure of the Shahinai, an extremely attractive young man. Mr. Alice inspects him, then agrees to take him. He pays the old woman in diamonds, then takes the young man out to the car. The narrator travels home on the tube.

The professor gives the narrator a Shahinai phrase book he has made for Mr. Alice, and the narrator pays him with a lottery ticket that he assures him has the winning numbers on it. The two men then go for drinks, and the professor tells the narrator more about the Shahinai. They are an ancient people who survive through the beauty of their men. Every hundred years they sell one of their men for enough money to last for another hundred years. The professor admits that he found the young Shahinai man so attractive he would sleep with him, despite usually liking women. The narrator tells him he is more interested in young pre-pubescent girls. The professor is shocked and decides to leave. The narrator puts him into a taxi inside of which he will be killed.

The Shahinai man lives for eight months with Mr. Alice, then catches flu and dies. Mr. Alice is distraught. They return to the house but the Shahinai women have gone, and they have no luck trying to find them again.

"Good Boys Deserve Favors" is a story about a boy at school, who is allowed to pick any instrument he wishes to learn. He chooses the double bass, because he likes the idea of playing an instrument bigger than himself. He doesn't bother to practice much since he is too lazy, but he takes an interest in the history of the instrument and looks after it well. One day, he is in the practicing room when an Old Boy, who is now a movie star, comes into the room with his glamorous girlfriend. The head-teacher is showing



him around, hoping he will make a donation to the school. The Old Boy's girlfriend asks the boy to play something on his double bass. The boy sits down and begins to play. The music that comes out is nothing he has heard before or learned to play, but it is beautiful and they are all impressed. The next day, the boy trips and falls, and breaks the double bass. He gets it repaired, but the instrument is not the same again, and he can never play the beautiful music again. When he changes schools later, he does not take up music lessons again.

## Keepsakes and Treasures, and Good Boys Deserve Favors Analysis

None of the characters in "Keepsakes and Treasures" is particularly likeable. The narrator has many faults, but the author has managed to make him sympathetic nonetheless. By providing us with details of his past, the author shows the events and misfortunes that have formed him into the person he is today. He was raised in an orphanage where he was sexually abused, denied his mother and a family by his own grandfather, who put his mother into an asylum and refused to acknowledge or raise her child. When the narrator visits his grandfather, he reveals that he knows who he is, so must have known of his existence all along. He ignored the child, not wanting to be associated with him, and shows no interest in getting to know him now. The narrator has faced cruelty and abandonment all his life. When he killed the abusive deputy-head of the orphanage, he was taken to see Mr. Alice, who did not give him to the police for his crime. Instead he arranged for him to be raised in a good home by two people hired for the task. He has obviously enjoyed privileges and opportunities that he would not have had in the orphanage, since the narrator tells us that he graduated from university with two good degrees. He knows that he owes all this to Mr. Alice, but more importantly he is grateful to Mr. Alice for finding information about his mother. This has allowed the narrator to find some kind of closure, to get revenge for his mother and for himself, for the life they were never allowed to live together. It is no wonder that the narrator will do anything he has to in order to survive, and that he considers himself Mr. Alice's man completely.

At the beginning of the story there is a quote from a dog collar, written by Alexander Pope, which asks "whose dog are you?" This is included before this story because of its implication, that everyone is someone's dog. There is always someone to whom people answer, or serve, or will do anything for. The narrator is certainly Mr. Alice's dog, and is unashamed of it. The reader might judge him and look down on him, but this message indicates that they might not be entirely honest about their own freedom. At least the narrator is honest about whose dog he is.

"Good Boys Deserve Favors" is another story about growing up and changing. The boy likes the double bass and is interested in it, but is not willing to give up his life to it as his teacher claims a good bass player must do. The boy is granted one perfect performance before his lack of dedication becomes too apparent. Eventually he gives up the instrument for other pursuits, knowing that he will want to spend time with girls and other grown up things. That last piece of perfect music could be seen to symbolize





the magic of his childhood innocence, before he gives it up and moves on. The narrator wonders why he has never told this story to his own children, but perhaps it is because he is not ready for them to move on yet, to lose their childhood and grow up. Perhaps he also doesn't want to tell them a story about loss. He could have had something special with his instrument if he had been dedicated enough, but he lost it and can never get it back. Like many of the stories in this collection this is a very subtle story with only a faint supernatural element and an unresolved ending. This makes it seem more realistic, giving it the feeling of a wistful true story.



# The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch, and Strange Little Girls

## The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch, and Strange Little Girls Summary

In "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch" the narrator is a fantasy writer who has come to England to finish his book. He is called up by his friend Jonathon, who wants him to come out for dinner with his wife Jane and a woman called Miss Finch, whom they have been burdened with entertaining for awhile. Neither of them like Miss Finch much. The narrator agrees, and they go out to watch a circus, planning to have sushi afterwards. They are greeted at the door of the circus by a man dressed as Uncle Fester, who ushers them inside. The ringmaster comes out and explains that the audience will move from room to room seeing different acts, standing in an area that has been roped off for them.

In the first room a man throws knives around a woman strapped to a spinning wheel. The second room has a strong man and the third trapeze artists. In the fourth room a fake hypnotist pretends to cut a man's hand off. The fifth room has drinks and refreshments. The narrator talks to Miss Finch about animals, particularly about the prehistoric saber-toothed Smilodons. Miss Finch becomes very animated when she talks about them, and says she wishes there were still some left alive. Next they move to the sixth room, where a man endures various feats of pain such as hammering a nail into his nose. The seventh room has a rock and roll comedy act.

In the eighth room a strange hunched man tells them he has the Cabinet of Wishes Fulfill'd. He asks for a volunteer, then picks Miss Finch and leads her away. In the ninth room they see Miss Finch again, but she is now dressed like a jungle woman and holding a spear. Two Smilodons come out of the shadows and stalk around the audience. One knocks a woman over, but Miss Finch drags them back and smacks them with her spear to make them obey. Jungle mist seems to swirl around them and they hear jungle noises. Then the room turns dark and Miss Finch has gone. They wander into the next room, which seems to have been set up for a final act, but the circus people have gone. There is no sign of Miss Finch. They wait for awhile, but she does not reappear. They eventually decide to leave.

"Strange Little Girls" gives very short 'snapshots' into different women's lives. These include a murdered woman who reflects on her abusive relationship and decides it was love, a showgirl who reflects on her life, thinking about her daughter and the things that have kept her going, a girl who goes through the motions of life without really caring or feeling anything, a policewoman who investigates murders in a school, and a woman who either lived through the Second World War, or was picked up by the Gestapo and killed - it is up to the reader to pick which is true.



## The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch, and Strange Little Girls Analysis

"The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch" is a story about who a person really is underneath the surface, and about freedom, identity and wishes. It also carries the message 'be careful what you wish for.' Miss Finch at first seems an unlikeable, stuck up and opinionated person. She is socially awkward, and does not seem to understand when she is annoying or disgusting people. For example, she discusses the various diseases that they could get from sushi, not seeming to realize that this is an inappropriate topic of discussion at this point. She also seems to enjoy showing off her knowledge whenever possible. However, when the narrator begins to talk to her about animals, he begins to see a real passion that makes him start to like her. Once she is talking about the things that interest her, a warmth seems to come into her, as well as a sense of vulnerability beneath the surface. She loves talking about the Smilodons and tells them that she wishes there were still some left on the Earth. She seems saddened at the things man has done to nature, and perhaps feels that she is living in the wrong time. She would be happier in an earlier age, in which amazing new things still remain to be found and studied. The socially awkward Miss Finch seems like she would be more at home with animals and nature than with people, who she does not really seem to fully understand.

When Miss Finch is taken to have a wish granted by the Cabinet of Wishes Fulfill'd, it seems that she really has had her deepest desire granted. She appears as a jungle woman, in control of a couple of Smilodons. She is no longer awkward and reserved but completely confident and in control. She is in charge of the cats, and gives off an air of being in charge of any situation she comes across. She barely acknowledges the people in the room and happily wanders off with her cats into the jungle mists. When she is with her animals and at one with nature, she has become a different person, perhaps the true Miss Finch who was lurking under the awkward exterior all along. It would seem that this Cabinet has managed to delve right into Miss Finch's soul and find her deepest desire.

"Strange Little Girls" is a collection of micro-fictions describing different kinds of women with different lives and different problems. These were written to accompany the tracks on a Tori Amos CD called Strange Little Girls. As such, they tie in to the lyrics and feel of the songs for which they were written. It would therefore be advisable to listen to these tracks when studying the stories. With only a few words, the author manages in each case to illustrate the women's personalities and lives, and to hint at much more than he is telling us. The blanks are left for the reader to fill in, so interpretations could vary greatly.

"New Age" suggests a woman who is trying hard to stay composed and not to let anyone in, but through a moment of vulnerability shows everything that lies under the surface. Her mask is nothing like the woman beneath, rather like Miss Finch in the story before.



"Bonnie's Mother" is told from the point of view of a woman who has been killed by an abusive boyfriend. The song lyrics are from the point of view of the boyfriend, who is talking to his daughter. Here we see the silent woman's point of view, wondering what will become of her daughter. She convinces herself that the abusive relationship was one of love, still fooling herself even at the end.

"Strange," "Silence," "Rattlesnake" and "Happiness" all suggest a dark past and painful memories lingering beneath the surface, but these are coped with in different ways by different women. The girl in "Strange" attempts to hide her memories away and is always moving on. The girl in "Happiness" is determined never to let anyone hurt her again, and the girl in "Rattlesnake" also seems to have tried to cope by toughening herself, to the point where she feels nothing. In "Silence" the woman copes with a difficult life by focusing on the things in her life that make it worth living.

"Monday's Child" hints at a shooting or mass killing in a school, and explores the effect of such pain and tragedy on the woman who is forced to confront it.

"Raining Blood" is perhaps the most interesting of the stories, offering alternate futures for a woman caught in World War Two. Both stories could be true and perhaps both are. The point is that these and stories like them are shared by so many people, whose lives were completely overturned by the war. By providing two alternatives, it forces the reader to face up to the reality of what happened.



# Harlequin Valentine, and Locks

## Harlequin Valentine, and Locks Summary

In "Harlequin Valentine," Harlequin nails his heart to Missy's front door on Valentine's Day. She takes the heart to the morgue where she used to work, where the pathologist examines it and tells her it is a real human heart. He recommends incinerating it, but she keeps it. Harlequin disguises himself as an old woman and asks for a coin in return for a fortune. Missy gives the old woman a coin, and the old woman tells her that Harlequin has given her his heart. He tells her that she must learn its beat for herself, then cannot believe that he actually gave her information. He distracts her and disappears.

Missy then withdraws all her money and goes to the Salt Shaker Cafe, where she orders hash browns and ketchup, and asks for a steak knife. She then cuts up the heart and eats each little bit with ketchup. As she eats, Harlequin weakens, until he is sprawled on the floor and she can see him. She tells him to come outside, where she demands his mask, hat and stick. She tells him that now the costumes have changed and the roles are reversed. A car backfires and distracts him, and she disappears. He goes back into the cafe, where a girl addresses him as Pete and tells him his cigarette break is over. He wants to tell the girl he likes her but he can't raise the courage. Then he sees a tiny bit of heart on a plate, with ketchup on it. He eats it, and instantly feels better. He tells the girl "Happy Valentine's Day".

In "Locks," the poet tells his two-year old child the story of Goldilocks, as his child interjects with the right responses. The poet reflects on the poem and what it means to people of different ages.

## Harlequin Valentine, and Locks Analysis

"Harlequin Valentine" is a story about Harlequin, a character originally from the Commedia dell'Arte, a form of theatre very popular in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries. In it sketches would be performed involving certain key characters or character types. Amongst these were Harlequin the trickster, Columbine, who was his mistress, and Pierrot, who was Columbine's husband. Harlequin was a clever, trickster character who lusted after Columbine and liked to caper about and cause trouble. In this story, Harlequin continues to cause trouble wherever he can, disrupting people's relationships and playing practical jokes. He is not an unlikeable character though, and even turns a woman's life around for the better, ensuring that she will not die of cancer, friendless and alone. He may be a trickster, but he is a loveable one, and is capable of sympathizing with others. Harlequin also seems to be a supernatural being in this story. He can make himself invisible and remove his heart without dying. He can change people's fates with the power of a touch or a kiss. In this, he is similar to other mythical and literary trickster figures, such as the gods Pan and Anansi, or Puck from A



Midsummer Night's Dream. Like the Harlequin character from the Commedia dell'Arte, Harlequin in this story is obsessed with winning love, particularly that of his Columbine. He has identified Columbine in Missy, a young woman to whom he is attracted, but it is suggested that he may have found other Columbines earlier. He also identifies other characters from the Harlequinade, such as Pierrot, with various people who interact with Missy. Harlequin seems to be drawing the plays of the Commedia dell'Arte to himself, recreating the characters in real life people. His identity is tied up with certain stock characters and scenes and roles, and so he creates them over and over again for himself. Perhaps this is the spirit of Harlequin from the plays, an immortal figure who lives on forever reliving the same events over and over in an eternal dance.

The story takes a dramatic twist when Harlequin's chosen Columbine, Missy, decides to eat his heart. She takes his strength and his essence from him and he is revealed to her. When she takes his disguise, she becomes the new Harlequin, immediately beginning to think and talk as he did. He is left feeling cold and weak as she steals his identity. This suggests that Harlequin is not a specific person so much as an idea, or an archetype, a role that can be filled by anyone. When a new person takes on the disguise they become Harlequin, taking over the story and the dance. The reader is forced to wonder whether this has happened before, and who the first Harlequin might have been. The switching of the costume and the mask resulting in a role reversal, mimics the kind of masked dances that are associated with carnivals, as well as the confusion and role switching that was popular in plays at this time (particularly Shakespeare). This twist also suggests that Harlequin has finally met his true Columbine. The Columbine of the plays was very clever, often manipulating and outwitting Harlequin and others for her own purposes. Missy has done exactly this, leaving Harlequin helpless. When Missy vanishes, the switch is complete, and Harlequin has become a mortal man. His life is waiting for him, as if he had always existed as a mortal all along. However, he finds a tiny piece of the heart uneaten and eats it himself. As he does, a tiny diamond of ketchup falls onto his clothes. This represents the diamond motley costume of Harlequin, and symbolizes the fact that he has not lost all his power and strength. With that one piece of heart he has managed to hold on to a little of the Harlequin essence.

"Locks" is a poem about Goldilocks, but also a poem about storytelling, and how people of different ages might interpret the same story differently. As the father tells the story, his two-year old child repeats certain phrases back at him. The child has heard the story many times before and knows what to expect. The father reflects that it would be nice to have a child's certitude. He remembers hearing the story himself when he was child, and how he would also repeat the same phrases back. This storytelling has become a rite of passage, a connection between parent and child that goes back generations, linking them to the past and the future. The story and the act of telling stories have a very important role in life. The father reflects how the child's sympathies are automatically with Goldilocks, but that as a father he sympathizes with Father Bear. He locks the door before he leaves the house and checks the chairs and beds when he returns. This is because he has grown up, and sees dangers in different places. He has taken on the protective role. This idea links to the poem's title "Locks," which is a twist on Goldilocks' name and the idea of keeping a child and a home safe from invaders.



# The Problem of Susan, and Instructions

## The Problem of Susan, and Instructions Summary

In "The Problem of Susan," Susan dreams of walking across a battlefield littered with corpses, waiting for the lion to finish talking to the witch.

Susan is an old woman now, and a professor. She reads the obituaries in the morning paper as she has breakfast, and remembers a man called Charles to whom she lost her virginity long ago. She is visited by a young woman called Greta Champion who is writing a profile on her for the Literary Chronicle. They discuss children's literature and how it became so sanctimonious, then Greta asks about the Professor's family. She tells her that all her family died in a train crash, and Greta says that's just like Susan from the Narnia books. Greta tells the professor it made her angry that Susan was left out of paradise in the books, simply for being interested in lipstick and nylons. She tells her that her teacher said Susan still had time to repent. The professor tells her how horrible it is to have to identify the mangled remains of your family, and that no good god would inflict that on someone as a punishment. The professor then tells Greta she is feeling tired. Greta leaves, knowing that she will not be invited back.

That night, the professor dreams she is reading a book that was never written, in which Mary Poppins takes the children to heaven. God tells the children that he created everything and everyone except Mary Poppins, so he cannot control her. Greta dreams she is Susan and that she is in Narnia, holding her sister's hand. The lion and the witch have finished talking, and have agreed that the lion will take the girls and the witch the boys. The lion eats Susan but leaves her head and one hand. She watches as he eats her sister, and looks at the twisted remains of her brothers. She then watches as the lion and the witch have sex. Finally, the lion walks over and eats her head. She wakes up, and realizes that the professor was really Susan. She is not surprised to read that the professor died in the night.

"Instructions" is a set of rules for surviving if a person finds themselves in a fairytale.

## The Problem of Susan, and Instructions Analysis

"The Problem of Susan" is an exploration of the treatment of the character Susan in C. S. Lewis' Narnia books. In them, Susan visits Narnia as a child with her three siblings. They defeat the white witch with the help of the lion Aslan, and are made kings and queens of Narnia. One day they accidentally wander back into our world and find that hardly any time has passed; they are still children. They return in the book Prince Caspian for one more adventure, but after that Susan and Peter are deemed too old to re-enter Narnia. Later, the other two siblings also become too old, and a different two children continue their adventures in Narnia. In the last book, all the children who had entered Narnia die on a train in the real world, and so enter Narnia forever. All except





Susan, that is, who is the only one left in the real world at the end. This in itself is slightly disturbing, because Susan is left all alone and her poor family are dead. However, it gets worse when the symbolism of the Narnia books is taken into account. The first Narnia book, *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is an allegory for the story of Jesus. The lion represents Jesus, but also symbolizes God, since he is the god of the Narnia universe. It is strongly implied in the books that Aslan is also the God of our world; he just happens to take the form of a lion in Narnia. When Narnia comes to an end in the last book it mimics events of Revelations, in which the world ends and the final judgment is brought about. Those deemed worthy then enter heaven. When the children die on the train, they enter Narnia for the end of the world, and so are taken to paradise. The fact that Susan is left behind means that she has been denied heaven, and denied the love of God.

What could Susan have done to deserve this? In the books, she is denied Narnia once she becomes too old, but so are all the original children and the others are all allowed back at the end. Susan is condemned for being too interested in lipsticks and nylons and other things in which young girls who are becoming women take interest. These are markers of growing up, but they also represent sexual attraction and desire. Sex is notoriously looked down on by patriarchal religions as something that is necessary but still somehow tainted and sinful. Women who attempt to seduce men with their looks are considered sinful 'painted Jezebels.' There is an uncomfortable suggestion that Susan has been denied heaven merely because she has taken an interest in sex and so lost her purity. She has lost her childhood innocence, which the others managed to retain even when grown up. This is represented in this story by Susan's fascination with the centaur bodies, imagining how they mate, and by her interest in the witch's red lips. There are also sexual references and allusions throughout, culminating in an extremely disturbing scene in Greta's dream, in which the lion and the white witch mate. This scene suggests an Aslan who is hypocritical and self-centered, powerful and cruel. He does what he likes and gets away with it. He uses everyone around him for his own purposes and his own pleasure. He strings the children along and then turns on them, devouring them and playing with them as a cat plays with its prey. The idea of a sadistic cat torturing its prey is repeated three times throughout the story, drawing attention to the fact that although Aslan might be a god of Narnia, he is also a lion, a manipulative creature that enjoys inflicting suffering.

When Aslan devours the children, this is symbolic of their souls and their lives being consumed with the things he has taught them. The other children gave every bit of themselves to Narnia, holding on to their innocence and so never really growing up. In contrast, Susan embraced what is natural and moved on, living her life as people are supposed to. The fact that Aslan would punish her for this and stop the others from doing the same is shown here as a very disturbing and cruel thing. When Susan sees the mutilated things that her brothers have become it reminds the reader that they died horribly in a train crash, and that this was somehow interpreted as a reward. When Aslan and the witch mate, it seems that good and evil have become one, so that it has become impossible to tell the difference anymore. Was Aslan ever actually good, or has he been cruel and evil all along, just like the witch? Either way, he gets away with it, because he can simply lick himself clean as he does at the end of the story. Suddenly a





fairly innocent children's story has become an extremely disturbing and frightening tale of power, manipulation, sadism and cruelty. The author is forcing the reader to question the morals and messages that lie within such a famous children's story, and to ask whether a god that would allow such things is really a good god at all.

"Instructions" is a poem that gives instructions to a person who finds themselves stuck in a fairytale. It references a great many fairytales and stories, finding the common threads and tropes of them all. There are certain key themes that are often repeated in fairytales, and these can be used as a rough guide for understanding and getting around the magical worlds in which they take place. Most fairytales contain some kind of moral or life lessons within them, so it is not surprising that common themes involve being true to yourself, minding your manners, not taking from others and helping others when you can, and keeping alert for those who will hurt you. Identity is also a key issue, since many fairytales address fears about losing who you are, or never being able to return. The poem also includes references to Neil Gaiman's own stories within this collection, such as the red imp door knocker and the months of the year telling stories. The inclusion of the latter might explain June's comment in the earlier story that she feels like someone is watching them. That person might be the person being addressed in this poem. By linking his own stories to this poem, he is including them within the wider category of all fairytales, associating them with tales that have stood the test of time. "Instructions" fits into an important theme in this collection: stories and the importance of telling them. In this poem, stories have become living, breathing things that can trap people within them. However, they also carry some kind of internal logic or a system for understanding and dealing with them. Once this has been worked out, the story can be explored more deeply and left safely.



# How Do You Think it Feels? and My Life

## How Do You Think it Feels? and My Life Summary

In "How Do You Think it Feels?" the narrator has fallen in love with a woman much younger than himself called Becky. He has a wife and twin daughters but is prepared to leave them for Becky. One day he tells her so, and she tells him that he is no fun any longer and that their relationship is over. She goes into her room and locks her door. The narrator remains in her flat, getting drunk and moping. He finds some Plasticine and moulds it into the shape of a gargoyle, which he thinks of as his protector against falling in love with beautiful women, and from ever feeling anything again. He puts the gargoyle on his chest and sleeps. When he wakes he returns to his wife.

The years pass by and he channels his energies into building an entertainment empire. He meets other girls but does not feel anything for them. His twins grow up and go to college, and he leaves his wife to move into his own flat. One day he meets Becky again, who is much older and now runs the press office at a television network. She wishes she had stuck with acting. They go back to his flat and talk, then have sex. Becky no longer cares about being a home-wrecker, and seems to enjoy sex with him a lot more. As they are sleeping, the narrator dreams that the gargoyle has climbed out of his chest, leaving a split from his navel to his neck. As he watches, the gargoyle slides back in, clutching dark hair between its fingers. When he wakes Becky has gone, leaving a purple flower behind on the bed. The narrator wonders if he will see her again and realizes that he doesn't really care, because he feels nothing at all.

"My Life" is a poem in which a person relates all the crazy things that have happened in their life. These include his father leaving his mother when his eyesight was miraculously returned and he realized he'd mistakenly married the wrong sister, his mother changing her sex so that he grew up thinking she was dad, and his wife liquefying in bed one night due to a haunted dishwasher.

## How Do You Think it Feels? and My Life Analysis

In "How Do You Think it Feels?" the narrator creates a Plasticine gargoyle to protect himself from heartbreak. Gargoyles are stone monsters found on churches that are supposed to act as protectors against evil. He molds it in a fit of drunken anger and self-pity, and masturbates into it so that a part of him is also mixed with the Plasticine. He then baptizes it with whiskey and places it on his chest over his heart. By combining a part of himself with the Plasticine and baptizing it, he symbolically gives the creature life and power over himself. He charges it with protecting his heart, to ensure that he never feels anything again. At this point in time, he is so heartbroken that he really believes it would be better to feel nothing at all. Somehow, this drunken act works as a kind of ritual that really does give the Plasticine gargoyle life and power. As instructed, it protects the narrator from further heartbreak. It ensures that he never feels anything for



any other girls he meets, and instead of seeking happiness he pours all his efforts into his business.

However, when he meets Becky again all the feelings he had for her come rushing back. Becky seems to be more attracted to him than ever, perhaps trying to recapture something of her lost youth, or to feel the excitement of the past again. He falls for her all over again, and admits to her that although he once hated her, he no longer does. They have sex, and both of them seem to enjoy it a lot more than they ever did in the past. The narrator seems to be beginning to feel something again at last. As he sleeps, however, he dreams that the gargoyle crawls out of his chest and returns clutching black hair in its hand. The implication is that it has done something to Becky, either hurt her, forced her to leave, or even dragged her back down into the narrator's chest with it. When the narrator wakes, Becky has gone. He realizes that he is not particularly sad about this, because once again he feels nothing at all. The gargoyle has done exactly as it was asked to do, and protected him from feeling. When he was in danger of falling in love with Becky again, the gargoyle quickly removed her.

The story can be read on two levels. Firstly, it is a sinister story about a Plasticine gargoyle that is somehow brought to life, that gets rid of Becky in some unknown way in order to protect the narrator's heart. It can also be read as a metaphor for a hardened heart. The narrator fell in love with Becky but she did not return his feelings, seeing their relationship as a thrilling adventure rather than anything special. When she saw that the narrator was getting in too deep, she ended the affair. The narrator was heartbroken, and created the gargoyle to protect his heart from further pain. The gargoyle is a symbol of him hardening his heart. From this point on he does not allow himself to feel anything for anyone again, and channels his energies into his work instead. When he meets Becky again he talks with her and has sex with her, but will not allow himself to fall for her again. He keeps his heart hardened because he is too afraid to get hurt again. Perhaps Becky senses this, or perhaps she is not interested in a relationship either, because she leaves. The narrator is not hurt by this because he will not allow himself to feel anything again. His hardened heart is represented by a gargoyle because of its associations with protection, but also because it is a monstrous creature made from very hard stone. In hardening his heart, the narrator has made it ugly, creating a cold, unpleasant creature that will never find happiness again. He has tried to protect himself by doing this, but in the end he only condemns himself to a meaningless and empty life.

All that is left on the bed at the end is a purple flower. The flower reminds the narrator of an orchid, and its scent is salty and female. Earlier Becky had been described as opening like a flower during sex, and orchids are often associated with lust and sex; the name orchid even derives from the Greek word for testicle. Is it possible that Becky has somehow been transformed into a flower? Or does the flower represent their union, a last gift to remind him of one last night together? Perhaps the flower also represents what Becky will always be for the narrator; since he now feels nothing, their relationship could only ever be about sex.

"My Life" is a crazy poem about a person relating all the strange things that have happened to him. In his introduction, Neil Gaiman mentions that these events are



supposed to read like the kinds of stories that might be found in the Weekly World News. This is a spoof newspaper that publishes bizarre and factually incorrect stories that are often satirical. Some of these stories are made up, and others are sourced from members of the public who believe they are true, such as alien abduction stories. In this poem, the author imagines what a person's life would be like if everything that happened to them could be a story in the Weekly World News. As a result, the poem plays with the idea of storytelling and the line between reality and fiction. This is a theme often repeated in this book in poems such as "Locks" and "Inventing Aladdin" and stories such as "October in the Chair," "The Flints of Memory Lane" and "Closing Time."



# Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot, and Feeders and Eaters

## Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot, and Feeders and Eaters Summary

"Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot" contains fifteen short pieces about various different vampire tropes and legends. There is the mortal who desperately wants to become a vampire but is told by the vampire that it is no life at all. There is the supernatural manservant of a mysterious 'master.' A young woman claims to be a vampire on a chat show, though she can be seen in mirrors and on cameras. In a sci-fi piece, a super-race of humans is created and sent off into space. A vampire woman drags her lover into her coffin and his body is found there with hers, now pregnant. Later, she is dug up again and her belly is now flat. A vampire eats his doctor and jokes about it with the assistant. A vampire baby is condemned to death, but the butcher and his wife escape with it, having recently lost their own child. A female vampire explains that drinking blood is not all it's cracked up to be, and that vampires in China drink spinal fluid. An old vampire explains that all vampires originally came from a distant star in the Draco constellation. Finally, a vampire explains that vampires are just like normal people, only colder and forced to live without daylight and food. She wishes that she could feel something again.

In "Feeders and Eaters," the narrator is eating in a diner when a man calls him over. The man is Eddie Barrow, with whom the narrator worked once, but is now almost unrecognizable because he looks so thin and ill. Eddie tells him the story of how he came to be like this. He was boarding in the attic of a house, with a family and another boarder called Miss Corvier. Miss Corvier was an old woman who took a liking to him and began to leave him gifts outside his door. When he hadn't seen her for about a week, he decided to check in on her. She was lying in bed looking weak and asked him to fetch her some meat, which she then ate completely raw. One day the family cat went missing, and Eddie heard it mewling at night in Miss Corvier's room. Miss Corvier was out, and he went inside to see what was wrong with the cat. The cat was lying on the floor, its back legs and chest completely eaten away like a chicken carcass, but its front half perfectly normal. Somehow it was still alive but in a lot of pain. He killed the cat to put it out of its misery, but Miss Corvier came in and saw him doing it. She cried, and told him that she needs her meat.

Just then someone taps on the window of the diner and Eddie says he has to go. As he leaves, the narrator notices that Eddie's right hand has been gnawed like a chicken wing, with a few scraps of skin still clinging to it. He watches from the window as Eddie walks off with Miss Corvier, who now looks young and pretty.



## Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot, and Feeders and Eaters Analysis

"Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot" deals with some of the common vampire tropes and ideas in vampire fiction and legend. It also explores new and different ways of representing vampires, as well as the purposes behind vampire literature. It seems to be asking and attempting to answer the question; why are we so fascinated by vampires, and why do we keep telling stories about them?

Some common vampire ideas are dealt with, such as the vampire's self-pity and misery at having to live apart from the living, away from daylight, without food and love and warmth. Mortals often romanticize the vampire, thinking how wonderful it would be to live forever and be stronger and more beautiful. However, there is little point in living forever if life is not worth living as a vampire. This idea is very common in vampire literature, and so is repeated from different viewpoints in several of these short pieces. The older kind of vampire literature is referenced in the creaky old supernatural manservant and his ages-old 'master,' followed by a reference to newer vampire literature in which vampires enter the world of men and want to become known, represented here by a vampire on a chat show. This might also be a reference to living people in the real world who believe that they are vampires. There are some sinister stories reflecting the traditional role of the vampire as a horror story villain, such as the vampire in "The Lovers" who kills her lover and bears his baby. This story is revisited in "Justice" where a baby vampire is saved by two mortals who mourn their own lost child. At the end we are told that they make the prettiest family ever, which suggests they are now all vampires. This reminds the reader that vampires were once used in horror stories as terrible monsters who spread an evil curse. Today, however, the vampire has become more an object of lust than one of fear. Vampires are pitiable and often sympathetic characters, an idea captured in "Temperance, The Sun and The World."

Some more unique ways of thinking about vampires are also offered. In "The Chariot," a race of super-beings has been created to colonize other worlds. However, the ordinary humans are afraid of them, so make sure they remove the location of Earth from their ship's computer first. This idea is followed up in "The Star," in which a vampire claims that vampires originally came from a distant planet in the Draco constellation. The mention of Jesus in "The Pope" may seem surprising, but the author is referencing the fact that Jesus instructed his followers to eat his body and drink his blood, something that carries connotations of the vampire myth.

By exploring different ideas of vampires, the author is trying to find out what makes them so fascinating and compelling. He answers this in "The World," explaining that vampires are just like us, only better, because they do not die or suffer disease, are strong and carry the wisdom of ages. However, they are also doomed versions of us, since they are cursed creatures who cannot live in the sunlight or eat food. They are cold and dead. This makes them compelling, because they are super-versions of humans, but ones with a fatal flaw, and so are pitiable. They are better than us and stronger than us, which makes them frightening to us. Anything that can live for such a



long time and not get sick or die is something that has the potential to become monstrous, as explored in "The Chariot." It is also something that can easily be desired and romanticized, as in "The Fool." Vampires can be terrifying but also seductive, which, as explained in "Judgment," makes them a perfect metaphor for exploring sexual desire. They are also a great metaphor for the fear of death. The end of "The World" captures the ambiguity of the vampire figure; they are not fully dead or fully alive; they require sustenance but do not eat food. Are they the subjects of horror, romance, or tragedy? Are they villain or hero? They are fearsome, but also pitiable, and in the end are just like us. Do they have feelings, or are they just monsters? The vampire in "The World" claims not to feel, but she is a liar, and she is crying at the end. This suggests that the nature of a vampire is much too complex to simplify in these terms, and it is perhaps for this reason that they are so compelling.

"Feeders and Eaters" links to the last story because it is another way of telling a vampire story. It could either be a supernatural story about a woman who feeds on living creatures to keep herself young and beautiful, or a very disturbing story about a normal woman who happens to be a cannibal. The fact that Miss Corvier used to be old and is now young, and that the cat and the man both managed to survive despite appalling injuries, suggests a supernatural element and the former interpretation. Just like many vampire stories, Miss Corvier seduces her victim to her, but this time it is through her old and helpless appearance. Eddie feels sorry for her and so feels the need to help her. He appears to have been a willing victim at first, though his story and the pleading, helpless look he gives the narrator suggest that he now longs for it all to end. Miss Corvier seems to have the power to keep her victims alive long enough to eat every last bit of them, which means that poor Eddie has many years of torture left to endure. How does Miss Corvier keep him under her power? Is she stronger than him, using supernatural powers, or has he fallen in love with her and so has no way out? The reader is left in the dark, only adding to the creepy and sinister nature of the story.





# Diseasemaker's Croup, and In The End

## Diseasemaker's Croup, and In The End Summary

"Diseasemaker's Croup" is a description of the various stages of a fictional disease called Diseasemaker's Croup. Someone inflicted with the disease will find themselves troubled by headaches, an upset stomach, trembling and rashes. The disease will affect the person's speech and thought processes, causing them to interrupt normal speech with observations about made-up diseases and their cures. The people who suffer from it are often the people who are least suspected, making it difficult to diagnose. Eventually all conversation will dissolve into nonsense, though occasional bursts of sense will crop up now and again. This is pitiable, but the medical man must harden his heart, because made-up diseases have no place in the real world.

"In The End" tells the story of the end of mankind's life on Earth. Man and Woman return to the Garden of Eden, carrying a fruit. Man gives Woman the fruit, who gives it to the Serpent, who puts it on a tree. Man and Woman undress until they are completely naked, and God sees that it is good. He opens the gates and gives mankind the garden, and the Serpent once again walks on four legs. There is silence in the garden, except for the sound of another animal having its name taken away by Man.

## Diseasemaker's Croup, and In The End Analysis

"Diseasemaker's Croup" is a humorous story in which the writer is quite obviously suffering from the same condition he is trying to explain. As a result, his description is constantly interrupted with references to strange diseases and their cures, all of which are presumably made-up. As he explains the various stages of the disease, he appears to go through them himself. His condition worsens so that what originally made some kind of sense eventually dissolves into nonsense. The writer observes that the condition is difficult to diagnose because the people who suffer from it are often those who are above suspicion. In this case, it seems to be a man whose job it is to categorize and describe diseases, which makes it harder to notice when he is rambling about fake diseases. What makes the story particularly ironic is that the writer obviously is suffering from Diseasemaker's Croup, which means that it must be a real disease after all. However, since Diseasemaker's Croup causes a person to make up imaginary diseases, then the disease he is writing about, Diseasemaker's Croup, must also be imaginary. This is a paradox that the reader cannot get out of. Has the process of writing about Diseasemaker's Croup somehow caused the writer to catch it himself, or to inflict it upon himself, or is he simply completely mad?

"In The End" is a reverse of the Genesis story in which God casts Man and Woman from the Garden of Eden. It is a simple and wistful story about innocence regained and the slate being wiped clean. Unlike in Revelations, the end of the world here is a peaceful event in which mankind finally gives up the Earth and a life of knowledge,





deciding that innocence and naivety are better if it means an end to suffering. They embrace the simplicity of what they were supposed to be, and give back the gift of knowledge. Everything is carried out in reverse order of how it happened in Genesis. In Genesis, the Serpent tempted Eve to pluck the fruit and give it to Adam. Here, Man gives the fruit to Woman who gives it to the Serpent to hang back on the tree. With their innocence regained they shed their clothes instead of trying to hide their naked bodies. The Garden of Eden is reopened and the Serpent is given back its legs, becoming just another animal. The Serpent's transformation and re-hanging of the fruit on the tree symbolizes the end of evil, which was brought into the world through eating the fruit of knowledge. Without knowledge of morality, there can be no evil. Man and Woman are called Earth and Breath because God made them with earth and with his breath. Finally, all that can be heard in Eden is the sound of Man taking away various animal's names. This shows that it is not only the Fall that has been reversed, but the whole process of creation. The reader is left to imagine what will happen next, which can only be the removal of mankind, creatures, plants, the sea and the earth, the heavens and the stars, and finally light.



# **Goliath, and Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky**

## **Goliath, and Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky Summary**

The narrator of "Goliath" is an extremely tall man working as a bookkeeper for a carpet warehouse. One day the world seems to dissolve around him, and he sees a man in an Armani suit who tells him that they are just trying to get London reprocessed. Then suddenly the world is normal again. Time passes and he gets another job, and marries a woman called Sandra. Sandra eventually leaves him and takes their kids, and he gets a job selling computers. He is on the tube one day when reality seems to stop and start again a few times. Everything fades to white, and he sees the man in the Armani suit again, who tells him it has only been about thirty minutes since he saw him the last time. They have been running on accelerated time. He tells the narrator that they are now patching up after a missile hit. He says it was an alien attack. Then the narrator is back on the tube and reality proceeds as normal again. He begins talking to a girl called Susan, and soon after she moves in with him.

Time passes again and the narrator tells Susan what happened to him. She leaves him. Then one day he wakes up in 1975 again and is recruited by the RAF. He begins to pilot aircraft, and is soon bumped up to a secret project flying a spacecraft. Then one day he is removed from the matrix world into the real world and put into a craft. He is told that he will be fighting aliens, who are dropping asteroids onto the Earth. He fires his weapons into the nucleus of the alien ship and destroys it. He asks where to bring the ship down and is told that it was too expensive to incorporate landing mechanisms into the craft. The narrator will die in space instead. He only has a few hours of air left. The narrator requests to be plugged back into the 'real world' for his last few hours, and the machines do so. He lives his life again, marrying Susan and having a son. It has been fifteen years inside the Matrix and he is now forty. He knows he does not have much longer to live, but feels grateful for the life he did have.

"Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky" tells the story of an unnamed narrator who is searching for a person called Scarlet. He or she drives across America, following clues such as a postcard and overheard comments in a diner. The narrator



stops and asks people if they have seen Scarlet, but Scarlet always seems to be one step ahead. The narrator keeps a shoebox with things that he or she has found in it. This is where the journal in which he or she is writing now is kept. A man tells him/her that Scarlet is in Boston, but he/she does not find her there. Eventually, he/she receives a phone call from Scarlet telling them that they are loved. The narrator keeps searching for her.

## **Goliath, and Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky Analysis**

"Goliath" is a story set in the fictional universe of the Matrix films. The story was written for the films as a promotional piece to go on the website. As such, it would be advisable to watch The Matrix before studying this story. In The Matrix, the Earth has been taken over by machines. They have plugged the remaining humans into the 'matrix,' a simulated reality that makes its inhabitants think they are living in the real world. In fact, they are simply being harvested for energy by the machines, like living batteries. The matrix exists to keep them docile and inactive, unaware of what is really happening to them.

This story is told from the point of view of a man who becomes aware that 'reality' is not as solid as it seems, and that some all-powerful beings are really running the whole thing. At first he thinks they might be God, but soon begins to realize what is really happening. However, he still assumes that the machines are somehow on humanity's side, doing what is best for them. He agrees to help them fight the aliens that are attacking Earth, and thinks that he is a hero when he succeeds. Unfortunately the machines do not have emotions and see him as expendable, leaving him to die in space. Despite this, they do show a spark of kindness by allowing him to be plugged back into the matrix to live out years in his final few hours. He feels grateful to them for this, and reflects that although they may be heartless parasites feeding on humans for their own purposes, they do at least help humanity in their own way by cushioning them from the harsh reality of their world. This calls into question whether it is better to live in the matrix and be fooled but happy, or to know the truth and live in hardship and probable misery. This question is also integral to the film, but receives a rather different answer. In this story, the benefits of ignorant bliss are given a much better exploration, whereas happy ignorance is rejected for reality in the film. This story forces the reader down the more uncomfortable path of questioning what is truly real and what is not, and what reality means anyway. The fake world of the matrix was more real to the narrator than anything he found in the 'real' world.

"Goliath" also inserts the story of David and Goliath into the world of The Matrix, exploring the tale of a little man against something much larger and more terrifying than him. In this story, it is ironic that David is actually an extremely tall man himself; in fact he is a giant to all other people. He has been genetically engineered this way especially



to be of use to the machines, in order to take down the alien threat. The aliens are much bigger than the narrator, who is no longer an awkward giant when taken out of the false matrix world. He faces the huge alien ship and wins, just as David won against the huge Goliath. However, has he defeated the true Goliath, or been tricked into battling the wrong enemy? The machines are still there, a vast network of intelligence that dominates and uses mankind. The true Goliath remains to be slain.

"Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky" is a deliberately ambiguous story about a person who is searching for a mysterious woman called Scarlet. The narrator travels all across America looking for her but can never seem to tie her down. She is always one step ahead. There are several odd things about the story. The narrator seems to be both a man and a woman at different points, as he/she is addressed as 'ma'am' then later as 'sir.' The people he/she meets on the way all seem to know something about the quest to find Scarlet, but refuse to tell everything they know. And finally, the open-ended conclusion leaves the reader with no idea as to what the story was actually about. This leaves it up to the reader to decide, which means that interpretations of this story can vary greatly.

One idea is that the narrator represents every man and woman in America, and so is neither male nor female but everyone. They are searching for Scarlet, who is a personification of America itself, a red and beautiful land that is mysterious and hard to tie down. She travels a lot, ranging across the huge land that is so varied and tied loosely under one nation that encompasses so many different cultures. Scarlet is mysterious and ambiguous because America itself is so many things. America's identity is always changing, and is very difficult to pin down. A person could travel for a lifetime and lose themselves to the search completely if they tried to find out exactly what 'America' means. It is different to each person who lives there. However, Scarlet wants to let the narrator know that he/she is loved, symbolizing America's love for all her people, and their love for her. There are a few clues in the story that back up this reading. The narrator mentions the red people who lived here when the land was younger. When asked to sell their land they replied, "How can you sell your mother?" (p252) This suggests that land can be personified and thought of as a person with a deep connection to her people. It also suggests that if America were to be personified she would be red. Another clue is in the long journey that the narrator makes all over America, trying to find Scarlet by discovering things about the land and its people. Finally, the keepsakes in the shoebox could be seen to represent different aspects of America. A red thread in a blueberry bush highlights America's natural features and produce; a postcard of the wasteland beside Sunset Boulevard represents two conflicting images of the glamour and the waste of America; glitter in a bottle from Washington DC represents the monumental and 'showy' aspect of America, and its political power; and the casino chip represents Vegas and all its extravagance.

A different reading is that the narrator is actually searching for themselves, for their own lost identity. This would explain the gender confusion and the postcard with the word 'remember' on the back, which the narrator actually writes at the end of the story. Scarlet in this case would be a metaphor for the lost part of himself or herself that the

narrator is desperately trying to regain. This explanation also fits in well with the idea of traveling, since road trip stories are often about finding oneself and learning more about who a person really is inside.



# How to Talk to Girls at Parties, and The Day the Saucers Came

## How to Talk to Girls at Parties, and The Day the Saucers Came Summary

In "How to Talk to Girls at Parties," two teenage boys called Vic and Enn are trying to find the house of a girl called Alison, who is throwing a party. They find a house with a party and assume it is the right one, so they go inside. Inside there are a lot of girls, and Vic immediately latches on to a very beautiful girl called Stella. Enn wanders around with a cup of Coca Cola, trying to find someone he dares talk to. First he talks to a girl in the conservatory called Wain's Wain. She has been created by a being called Wain, but because she has a slightly imperfect finger, she was rejected and sent out into the universe to learn more about it and its life. She is not allowed to breed and must obey Wain. Enn goes to get her a glass of water, but she is gone when he gets back.

He wanders a bit more and sits down next to a girl on a couch, who says she is a tourist. She tells him that she did not want to visit the world, but that her parent-teacher made her. She thinks the world is less ordered and more dirty than she had imagined, but it is still amazing. She compares it to a world of children or elves. Just then Vic reappears and tells Enn that they crashed the wrong party by mistake. These girls are all on some kind of foreign exchange, but the two boys are still welcome if they want to stay at the party. He then takes Stella upstairs.

Enn turns back to the couch, but the girl is now talking to other people. He wanders a bit more and comes across a girl called Triolet. She tells him that she is a poem. Her people died long ago, but first created a poem to tell others of who they were. They transmitted the poem out into the universe. When others hear the poem it changes them and colonizes them, changing the way they think and affecting their lives. Eventually they have no more children since there is no need for anything but the poem, which continually spreads. Triolet says there are places the poem is not welcomed and they are quarantined and destroyed. She then offers to tell Enn the poem and he nods. She begins, but before she finishes Vic grabs him and drags him out of the party. Stella stands on the stairs looking furious. Vic explains that there is a point that people cannot cross, and says that almost happened to him tonight. Then he breaks down and cries on the pavement. Enn is left trying to remember the half-forgotten rhythm of the poem.

"The Day the Saucers Came" is a poem about the world ending in a number of different bizarre ways, and a person being too distracted to notice because they are waiting for someone to call.



## How to Talk to Girls at Parties, and The Day the Saucers Came Analysis

"How to Talk to Girls at Parties" is a fun and humorous story with a darker element to it beneath the surface. The boys think they are going to a party with girls they met on a German exchange trip. However, the party they actually attend is full of girls who are really aliens from a variety of different worlds, all visiting Earth. Vic jokes to Enn that it's easy to talk to girls and they are not aliens, but in this case they actually are aliens. This becomes obvious to the reader as soon as Wain's Wain begins explaining about herself, and is made even clearer when the girl on the couch explains how she came to the world, and what she thinks of its people. However, the boys seem to be completely oblivious to this, particularly Enn, whose one-track mind is entirely focused on trying to kiss one of the girls. This creates dramatic irony, because the audience know what the boys do not, and so increases the humor of their bizarre situation.

However, there is a darker element to this story. The aliens appear friendly enough, and are clearly visiting Earth to learn about it rather than meaning its people any harm, but there is a suggestion that this friendly attitude may not last. Wain's Wain was sent out to explore the universe and report back to Wain, language that suggests Wain is in a position of importance and power. There are also other more perfect Wains waiting in stasis. Why would an imperfect model be sent out into the universe while the perfect ones stay in stasis? This certainly suggests that Wain's purpose is not simply exploration. Is she waiting to find out as much information as possible before sending out the other Wains to conquer what has been found? The girl on the couch, too, does not necessarily seem to have the best at heart for humanity. She thinks of them as children, or elves, and regards the world as rather chaotic and unclean. Despite this, she refers to the world as a "jewel" (p260), suggesting that it might be something worth capturing, if the pesky humans were not messing it up. She reveals that the true form of her people is insect-like and huge, and would probably terrify humans. She seems to be here purely on a mission of exploration and learning, but the purpose behind that is not so clear. However, by far the most sinister of the aliens is Triolet, who is actually a kind of infectious poem. Once heard, it will transform a person and change them completely, then pass itself on like a virus until it has infected an entire race. The race will change to become like the poem, and so become the alien race that has died. They will no longer reproduce, and will exist only to pass on the poem. If Triolet tells this poem to Enn, it could mean the end of the human race. Thankfully Enn is dragged away in time, but it can only be a matter of time before Triolet tells the poem to another human.

"The Day the Saucers Came" also features aliens, and explores various different ways in which the world could end according to stories and films. These are alien attack, zombies, Ragnarok, fairytales taking over, great winds, the world freezing over, all plants dying, computers taking over, and a Time Machine arriving. These blend all the staples of sci-fi, disaster and fantasy movies in which the world ends, into one giant apocalypse. It is a humorous poem, since it pokes fun at these different clichés, but also a reflective one. In the end, all these fantastic events have gone unnoticed by a person who is waiting for someone to call. These last few lines transform the poem from one





about the end of the world, to one about hope and longing, and a very simple yet poignant event - waiting for someone to call. The person who is waiting, perhaps for a potential boyfriend or girlfriend to call, or for a mother, friend or child, is so consumed with their own worries and hopes and fears, that all other events seem unimportant and pale. For them, this is the earth-shattering event on which the end or continuation of the world rests. It is these simple events and troubles of real life that are really important, and that really change people's lives, not the clichéd events of movies and stories. These real events can hold as much magic and significance for one person as the end of the world might for everyone else.



# Sunbird, Inventing Aladdin, and The Monarch of the Glen

## Sunbird, Inventing Aladdin, and The Monarch of the Glen Summary

In "Sunbird," the members of the Epicurean Club lament that they have eaten everything in the world there is to eat. Crawcrustle suggests that they hunt and eat the Sunbird of Suntown, Egypt. After the meeting, the various members of the Epicurean Club seek out Crawcrustle individually to ask him more about the trip. Augustus TwoFeathers McCoy finds him eating lightning bugs. Jackie Newhouse and Professor Mandalay find him eating hot charcoal, and Virginia Boote finds him gargling with flaming meths. Despite their suspicions that something is not quite right, they all agree to go to Egypt with him. When they reach Egypt they stay at Mustapha Stroheim's coffeehouse. They go out behind the house, where Crawcrustle lures the bird down. The bird flies down to the grain and raisins put out for it, which have been soaked in alcohol. It eats them, sways about, then topples over into the mud. Crawcrustle takes it back to the barbecue and cooks it.

They all eat the bird, exclaiming at how exquisite the taste is. As they eat, it gets hotter in their mouth. Crawcrustle explains that the bird is also known as the Phoenix of Heliopolis, a bird that is reborn from the ashes of its flaming body when it dies. Those who eat it will also be consumed by its fire. If they have prepared like Crawcrustle did, they will shed years off their lives. Otherwise they will simply burn up. Crawcrustle admits to being a little over ten thousand years old. The others burn up and are gone, leaving only Crawcrustle behind. In the ashes on the barbecue, a baby phoenix sits up and flies back towards the sun.

Years later, Augustus' daughter Holly has grown up and is now the president of the Epicurean Club. They are once again beginning to grumble that they have eaten everything.

"Inventing Aladdin" is a poem that tells the story of Scheherazade. Her husband has promised to execute her the following day, but she manages to put off her death each day by telling a story at night, leaving the ending untold for the next night. Here she tells the story of Aladdin, leaving cliffhangers each night. When she is done, she begins the story of Ali Baba, saving her life for another day.

"The Monarch of the Glen" is an American Gods novella, telling what happens to Shadow when he visits Scotland. He stays at a small hotel and meets an old doctor called Gaskell. Gaskell asks if he is interested in some paid bouncer work at a private function nearby, and Shadow agrees to take the job. That night he dreams of a boat full of stranded men who beg him to release them. The next day Shadow goes for a walk along the North Coast and meets Jennie, the girl from the hotel bar, on his way. She



tells him a story about hulders, mountain creatures who sometimes come down into the valleys to marry farmers. Shadow heads back to the hotel again.

The next day a cockney man called Smith drives him to the big house for the private party. He is suspicious as to why he has been asked there, when there are already so many bodyguards. Later, the guests arrive, and a man called Mr. Alice who is running the whole thing. Shadow's job will be to keep the angry locals out. That night, Shadow dreams that Gaskell is taking photographs of a dead boy he has killed. The next night the party takes place. The guests all begin to bang loudly on drums, and Shadow is stripped naked and given a knife. Before long, an angry wailing is heard, and a bald creature arrives and screams at them to stop making noise. Shadow does not want to fight it but it attacks him. Shadow manages to knock the creature out, and the party guests approach, intending to beat it to death. Shadow tries to stop them but they begin to beat him too. He calls out for Jennie, and she appears. Suddenly the bonfires burst and the house and courtyard catch fire. Shadow takes the bald creature to the lake as the guests all burn. He gives the creature to its mother, who is waiting for him. Smith arrives and threatens Shadow, but the bald creature's mother tells him that she will come for him and Mr. Alice if anything ever happens to Shadow.

Back at the hotel, Shadow is given a hero's welcome. He catches a train south, where Smith tries to persuade him to leave the country. Shadow tells him he will leave in his own time, at which point he will return home to Chicago.

## **Sunbird, Inventing Aladdin, and The Monarch of the Glen Analysis**

"Sunbird" is a story about greed, excess and desire. The members of the Epicurean Club seek pleasure through eating, and are determined to eat everything they can on the Earth. This means eating some extremely strange and disgusting creatures, as well as many that have become or are going extinct. In their desire to top each new gastronomic experience with an even better one, they lose themselves, caring only about the next delight and where it will come from. Every time they try something new, the bar is raised and it will take so much more to impress them the next time. Eventually, nothing will do except the Sunbird, which is the mythical Phoenix. This is such an extreme pleasure that it is compared to eating the sun. Unfortunately, by eating it the members of the Epicurean Club doom themselves, as they go up in flames and burn out. This is symbolic of their desires and pleasures finally consuming them. They have now reached the pinnacle of dining experiences, and so there is nothing left to live for. No pleasure could ever be as great again. The Club members all seem to recognize this, since they are resigned to their fate and seem wistful or excited rather than angry and upset.

"Epicurean" means someone who is devoted to pursuing sensory pleasure, especially that of fine food, drink and sex. Epicureanism was an ancient philosophy based on pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. However, contained in this philosophy was the wisdom to seek only those pleasures that would not lead to more pain in the end. By



constantly giving in to the pleasure of fine food, for example, a person would crave better and rarer and more expensive food until they could not satisfy their desires at all. This would then only lead to greater longing, pain and suffering. In the end, the philosophy teaches, it is better to seek a moderate life and pursue happiness in the form of philosophy and thought. Indulging sensory pleasures can lead to no good. This story beautifully illustrates this lesson when the Epicurean Club are led to their own destruction by their constant need for new and more exciting food. They literally burn out in the end. Therefore, this is not just a humorous fantasy story, it is also a cautionary tale about greed and keeping one's desires in check.

"Inventing Aladdin" is a poem that tells the story of Scheherazade. Scheherazade is the princess from One Thousand and One Nights, sometimes known as Arabian Nights. Scheherazade's husband weds a new virgin each night, and kills her the following day. Scheherazade manages to save her life by telling stories, leaving the tale on a cliffhanger each night so that her husband cannot bear to kill her and so never know the end. Each night she finishes the story from the night before, then begins to tell a new one. In the book, Scheherazade manages to keep herself alive for one thousand and one nights this way, and in that time her husband falls in love with her. When she finally runs out of stories, he spares her life. This is the framing story for the rest of the tales in One Thousand and One Nights, which includes well-known stories such as Aladdin and Ali Baba. This poem captures the sense of tension and danger that hang over Scheherazade as she hangs on to her life by a thread. In it, Scheherazade makes up the stories on the spot, and we see her uncertainty during the day as she wonders how she will end the tale that night. She also seems to make up the next story on the spot, and we see her desperate thought processes as she grabs at random images and words from the day before. The reader is reminded that she is only safe so long as she continues to tell exciting stories. As soon as her husband becomes bored, she is dead. By including a poem on this subject, the author is again exploring the importance of storytelling and the power of a good story. In this case, it literally saves Scheherazade's life.

"The Monarch of the Glen" is a novella that is meant to follow the novel American Gods. The main character from the novel, Shadow, appears again here in another adventure. This story combines the character of Shadow, who is half man, half god, with two characters from a previous short story in this collection, Mr. Alice and his cockney man Smith. Having already encountered Mr. Alice earlier, the reader knows that he will stop at nothing to get what he wants. This means that Shadow is in great danger, and this time our sympathies lie fully with him and not with Smith or Mr. Alice. It is also very satisfying to see the pair beaten at the end. Mr. Alice's weakness is that he is entirely human, and so he is cowed by a supernatural power. After the earlier story in the collection, and its revelations about Smith's and Mr. Alice's less than savory actions and desires, this defeat is cathartic for the reader.

"The Monarch of the Glen" roughly retells the story of Beowulf, in which the Norse hero Beowulf helps to defend the hall of a great king from a monster. The monster, Grendel, was drawn to the hall by the noise the people made when feasting and drinking. Grendel would break in to kill and eat some of the men. Beowulf fought the monster and



killed it. In this story, Shadow has been recruited to act as a substitute Beowulf to defeat the monster who attacks the house. Sure enough, the sound of the drums being banged calls a bald monster to them, screaming about the noise. As Shadow battles his Grendel, he thinks that the people watching are really the monsters, luring the creature to them and demanding a sacrifice. They are filled with bloodlust and craving death. Shadow refuses to kill the monster, and calls on Jennie to help him out of the situation. Jennie is a hulder, a creature of Norse legend that comes out of the mountains to marry farmers. Hulders are strong, mysterious and magical. Jennie sympathizes with Shadow, seeing in him something that connects with her roots. Shadow is actually the son of Odin, and so has Norse connections himself. As such, he is half-man and half-god, not entirely human but living in the world of man, just like her. Unfortunately, it is this that keeps them from being together at the end. It is Shadow's half-god side that also makes him an excellent choice of hero, but it is also this side that allows him to sympathize with the 'monsters.' He takes the Grendel creature back to its mother, for which the mother is grateful and offers him her protection. In the real Beowulf legend, Beowulf fought Grendel's mother next, killing her too. For Shadow, this cycle of death has to stop here, and by breaking the chain of hero vs monster he releases all the trapped spirits, gods and monsters that have been calling to him.

Through the different kinds of people and evil portrayed in this story, the author explores the idea of what a monster really is. Jennie claims that at least you know where you are with monsters, and Shadow is surprised to be identified as a monster himself. Perhaps it is this that allows him to sympathize with the other 'monsters' and so with Grendel. Shadow sees that the real monsters are actually the ordinary people who do terrible things, such as Gaskell, who kills children and likes to photograph their bodies, and the people at the party who lust after blood and want to inflict pain.



# Characters

## The Detective (Sherlock Holmes/Moriarty?)

"A Study in Emerald" follows a detective as he attempts to solve the mystery of who killed one of the Old Ones, a member of the German Royal Family. The detective is clever and extremely observant. He can deduct things about people and events by simple things such as appearance, mannerisms and other small clues. He has very good forensic investigation skills. He is driven by rationality and logic, and even approaches supernatural people and events in the same calm, detached way. He is a master of disguise, using various costumes and disguises to infiltrate places and gain information. He solves the mystery very quickly and easily.

There are several red herrings in the story that suggest that the detective is Sherlock Holmes. The reader is led to assume this at the beginning of the story, which sees the detective living in Baker Street, using his mantelpiece for firing practice, donning many disguises, and solving a similar mystery to that found in the first Sherlock Holmes book, *A Study in Scarlet*. However, as the story progresses, clues emerge that the detective is not actually Sherlock Holmes after all. He does not smoke a pipe, and is even caught out in this lie by the actor Vernet. He is outwitted by Vernet and the doctor, making some foolish mistakes like trusting the cab driver. The limping doctor they are chasing turns out to be Doctor Watson, suggesting that it might actually be Vernet who is Sherlock Holmes. This is backed up by the fact that Vernet does smoke a pipe, has excellent acting skills, and outwits the detective. So if the detective in this story is not Sherlock Holmes, then who is he? The most obvious answer is that he is Professor Moriarty, Sherlock Holmes' nemesis from the original books. This is backed up by the fact that the detective has written a paper called "The Dynamics of an Asteroid," which was written by Moriarty in the original books. However, the detective is never named, so it is ultimately up to the reader to decide who he is.

If Moriarty is the 'good guy' in this story, then that would suggest that Sherlock Holmes is the villain. However, in this alternate history, the monstrous Old Ones have taken over the Earth. This means that it is a world where evil is now 'good,' and good is 'evil.' Moriarty may be acting as a good character by trying to solve a murder and capture a criminal, but he is working for the evil monsters who now run the world, and trying to capture one of the few men who dare to stand up against them. However, when Lestrade runs out at the end to try to find Vernet and the doctor, Moriarty reveals that he knows where they are. He does not turn them in, but instead reflects on their victory. He has done his job and solved the murder, but it is not up to him to catch the culprits. This could be an indication of apathy on his part, or it could suggest that Moriarty might not be such a bad guy after all. Perhaps he, too, is not happy with the Old Ones' rule. In the end, the detective is a very ambiguous character, and the reader cannot be exactly sure whether he is a hero or a villain.



## The Unnamed Narrator

Many of the stories and poems are told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. This is usually suggested to be a man, and often he seems to have the same voice, and the same kinds of feelings and reactions as the unnamed narrator in other stories. Several of these stories are claimed to be true, or at least semi-true, and some seem almost autobiographical. This suggests that the unnamed narrator may be loosely based on Neil Gaiman himself. This seems particularly the case with "The Flints of Memory Lane," "Closing Time," and "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch." In these three stories the narrator is a writer, just like Neil Gaiman, who claims to be relating a true story. He remembers the past wistfully, and seems to be concerned when true life does not fit neatly into a 'story shape.' He does not over-embellish his account of events, giving the stories a sense of realism, but he does structure them carefully for maximum effect. The stories are clearly being told by a master storyteller, but one who does not necessarily believe that he needs to embellish the truth in order to make it interesting. This makes the narrator likeable and trustworthy; he is honest but also playful and interesting. He also seems to be quite a good judge of character, as he captures what motivates different people and takes the time to explore them more deeply. He recognizes that although Miss Finch is annoying, she is beautiful and compelling when the harsh outer layer is stripped back. The character of Neil Gaiman also seems to come through in "Locks," in which a father tells the story of Goldilocks to his child. There is something very open, real and honest about the portrayal of the father here, and his adult concerns over the security of his home.

Other stories are told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator who probably does not reflect the author. Examples include "Bitter Grounds," "The Hidden Chamber," "How Do You Think It Feels?", and "Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky." In "Bitter Grounds" and "How Do You Think It Feels?", the narrator has become so depressed and hardened by a broken heart that he has stopped feeling anything and now seems to live a pretty meaningless life. This is worse for the narrator in "Bitter Grounds," but the narrator in "How Do You Think it Feels?" will probably reach this stage if he keeps going as he is. These narrators are men who have given up, and are now little more than zombies. In "The Hidden Chamber," the narrator is similarly suffering from heartache and loss, clinging on to the memories and locking away all the pain deep inside him. He lights a candle, and seems to at least keep some hope alive of being able to love again. "Pages from a Journal Found in a Shoebox Left in a Greyhound Bus Somewhere Between Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Louisville, Kentucky" has the most ambiguous narrator, since the reader cannot even be sure whether it is a woman or a man. This unnamed narrator may represent all people who are searching for their identity, or the people of America, trying to connect to their often ambiguous and misunderstood homeland.





## The Months of the Year

In "October in the Chair," the months of the year are personified and so brought to life. They sit around a campfire and tell each other stories, convening to do this each new month. Each month's personality and mannerisms cleverly reflect what their month is like. October is warm and friendly, reflecting warm autumn colors and bonfires, and he is naturally an excellent storyteller. His story carries a hint of horror, but it is focused on a child and not too dark, which is exactly what one would expect from a month that carries the holiday of Halloween. In contrast, November's stories are darker, reflecting the fact that his nights are longer and he is not as warm. September is quite stuck up with himself and pretentious, symbolizing warm evenings spent enjoying fine wine. He disapproves of August, who is more interested in beer and barbecues. To September, August seems uncouth, but to August September seems very dull. June is shy and nervous, rushing through her story and not telling it very well. She is hesitant but eager, representing how June hesitantly brings in the summer, rushing by in little nervous bursts before the weather really warms up in July. April is the most sensitive of the months but also the cruelest, reflecting April's unpredictable weather. All the months and their different personalities seem to complement each other nicely; they may squabble, but their differences and unique personalities are essential for creating a balanced year.

## Runt

Runt, in the story "October in the Chair," is a boy who feels that he has been let down by everyone. His brothers bully him and his parents ignore him, and everyone else just makes him feel inadequate. He has been failed by everyone around him, who do not seem to realize that a young vulnerable boy might need some support and friendship. It is not surprising that he makes the decision to run away from home. He follows a river and soon comes to an abandoned farmhouse, where he sleeps outside in the pasture. Despite being young and naive, Runt does seem to be quite an intelligent and perceptive child. He realizes that the farmhouse is dangerous and sensibly stays away from it. He dreams of making his own way in the world and becoming successful, but understands that he will not be able to look after himself for long before he is forced to return home or is found and brought back. He knows that this is merely a brief interlude in his life, and that everything will soon go back to the way it was. This is why he is so tempted by the idea of staying with his new friend Dearly, a ghost boy who does not judge him and offers him eternal friendship. It is sad, but inevitable, that Runt eventually chooses death over life. He goes into the farmhouse willingly, and it is strongly suggested that whatever lives inside will kill him.

## Amelia Earnshawe

Amelia Earnshawe is the protagonist in the young man's stories in "Forbidden Brides of the Faceless Slaves in the Secret House of the Night of Dread Desire." She is the creation of the unnamed young man who is attempting to write realism in a world where horror clichés are everyday occurrences. Amelia is a young, attractive woman who is



traveling to be a governess when she is suddenly thrown into an adventure of horror, curses and monsters. She is frightened and breathless, but takes it all in stride, bravely combating whatever comes her way. She is strangely seduced by the mysterious and dark Lord Falconmere, who seems to have some kind of control over her. She also seems to have some kind of birthright, which is tied up with doom and terrible curses. Amelia's story is fragmented and does not make a lot of sense. This is because her story is not necessarily important; it is the way in which it is told and her character that are being used to make a point. Amelia represents the typical heroine of gothic novels, the helpless but not so weak girl who is thrown into the midst of dark powers. This cliché, amongst others, is mocked good naturedly in this story. Later, when the young man finally decides to write fantasy instead, Amelia has become a disillusioned housewife who finds that she has grown to hate the husband who takes advantage of her. The irony is that she has become the kind of woman who most needs escapism, and exactly the kind of person who would love the gothic novel in which she was earlier starring.

## Smith

Smith is Mr. Alice's associate and right-hand man. He is little more than a thug, but has a surprisingly complex character and background. He had a miserable childhood, in which he was taken from his mother and put into an orphanage, abandoned by the remaining member of his family who wanted nothing to do with him. At the orphanage he was abused by the deputy head, who he eventually killed. He was then put into a better family by Mr. Alice and given certain privileges and a good education. He had to learn to look after himself quickly, and was forced to fight and kill at a very young age. He feels he owes a great deal to Mr. Alice, who helped him when no-one else would. As a result, he is Mr. Alice's man completely and will do anything he wants. Smith may seem like a thug who cannot think for himself, but his background shows exactly why he acts as he does. Although Smith is not a likeable character, he is a sympathetic one. Smith appears in two stories in the collection: "Keepsakes and Treasures," and "The Monarch of the Glen."

## Mr. Alice

Mr. Alice is an extremely rich, powerful and influential man. He is the kind of man who can get whatever he wants, but takes steps to make sure no-one has ever heard of him. He prefers to remain anonymous. It is left a mystery as to how he made his wealth or obtained his power, but it is clear that he acts outside of the law. In both stories in which he appears, "Keepsakes and Treasures" and "The Monarch of the Glen," he is shown as a man who is driven by his desires and determined to have whatever he wants. He controls everything and everyone around him and seems to enjoy playing God. He cares for those who help him, such as finding out information for Smith about his family, but he thinks nothing of harming those who get in his way. He also seems to have a good survival instinct, managing to be a step ahead of any dangerous situation. When the fire burns down the house in "The Monarch of the Glen," he is already long gone.



## Miss Finch

In "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch," Miss Finch is a geobiologist whom the narrator's friends have been roped into entertaining. According to the narrator, Miss Finch is not her real name, but suits her because it suggests a sudden transformation from prim and unlikeable to beautiful. Miss Finch is unlikeable, socially awkward and a bore. She likes to demonstrate her knowledge whenever possible, so will often talk about extremely inappropriate things at inappropriate times. She lectures the others, and comes across as boring and stuck up. However, when the narrator gets her talking about the things that really interest her, her passion becomes apparent and she suddenly seems animated and interesting. The narrator starts to warm to her. Miss Finch is a different person underneath, once her awkward outer layer is stripped away. It seems clear that Miss Finch would get along a lot better with animals and nature, her true loves, rather than people, who she just does not seem to understand. In the end, this wish is granted, as Miss Finch is transformed into a jungle woman. She now seems completely unselfconscious. She stands confidently and all trace of awkwardness is gone. When she is in her element, Miss Finch is beautiful. Perhaps this is who Miss Finch was meant to be all along.

## Harlequin

Harlequin is a character in the story "Harlequin Valentine," who tries to court a girl called Missy by pinning his heart to her door. Harlequin was a character in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, plays that were popular in Italy in the 16th and 17th centuries. These plays were in the form of sketches involving certain key characters, such as Harlequin the trickster and Columbine his cunning mistress. Harlequin is a trickster, a character who loves creating chaos and getting one up on everyone else. He is not completely malicious, however, and will even help people when he feels like it. He is, however, quite unpredictable. He wears a motley costume made up of red and black diamonds and a mask. This costume symbolizes everything about his character and who he is; whoever wears it literally becomes Harlequin. At the end of the story, Harlequin loses his power to Missy, who takes his costume and becomes the new Harlequin.

## Missy

Missy is Harlequin's chosen love interest in the story "Harlequin Valentine." She represents Columbine in the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the mistress of Harlequin and wife of Pierrot. Columbine is cunning and often gets the better of everyone else, just as Missy does in this story. She is not afraid when she finds a heart pinned to her door, but investigates instead. When she hears that Harlequin is courting her, she decides to shake up the relationship of power by eating his heart. Sure enough, her plan works, and she now has power over Harlequin. She sees him, and takes his costume from him while he is too weak to stop her. She then becomes the new Harlequin. Missy has refused to be a victim or a passive love interest, deciding to take the starring role for herself.



## Professor Hastings/Susan

The professor in "The Problem of Susan" is strongly implied to be the same Susan as the character from the Narnia books by C. S. Lewis. She is now an old woman, and does not like the fact that she is old. She laments her lost youth, and is constantly amazed by how young everyone else seems. She remembers her family wistfully, and carries a great deal of anger that she was made to suffer while everyone else she loved went to paradise. Like the Susan from the Narnia books, she chose to grow up and take an interest in sex and adult concerns. In her dream in this story, she is the young Susan once more, just beginning to open up to these new possibilities. She does not see why this should have caused her to be left behind, but forgets that this was her choice rather than Aslan's. She was the one who rejected Narnia and its magic. In the story, she dreams of Mary Poppins and once again seems to accept magic, as well as the presence of God in her life. However, the story is left on a sinister note rather than a happy one, because Narnia is depicted as a very disturbing place. Perhaps, the author seems to be saying, Susan was not left behind after all. Perhaps she is the one who escaped.

## The Epicurean Club

The Epicurean Club are a group of people who are intent on experiencing every kind of fine dining that they can. They have eaten absolutely everything, and so begin to lament that they will never be able to reach the next 'high.' Then they hear of the Sunbird and dedicate their efforts to catching and eating it. They do so, but literally burn out and are destroyed in the process. The Epicurean Club demonstrate how gluttony and giving in to sensory pleasure can only lead to ruin. They are found in the story "Sunbird."

## Scheherazade

Scheherazade is a character from One Thousand and One Nights. She appears in this collection in the poem "Inventing Aladdin." She is married to a cruel king who kills his wife each day and marries a new virgin each night. She has managed to keep herself alive by telling him stories at night, leaving the ending open as a cliffhanger so that he will have to let her live to hear the end. She will then finish the story the next night and start a new one, leaving this one unfinished too. Scheherazade is clever and brave, and an extremely good storyteller. Here she is shown embracing each day that comes to her, desperately wondering how she will end her story that night. Rather than planning and worrying, she lets the stories come to her in the moment, showing that she is a natural storyteller with a great imagination.

## Shadow

Shadow is a character from Neil Gaiman's novel American Gods, and appears in the story "The Monarch of the Glen" in this collection. Shadow is an honest and kind man



who has seen a lot of strange things and so is prepared for the supernatural whenever he faces it. He understands that things are not always what they seem to be on the surface, so is happy to accept Jennie for whatever she is, even if it is not fully human. He is strong and heroic, and could have won his fight against Grendel, but he is also sympathetic and just, and does not believe that the creature deserves to die. Because he is half-god and half-man, he can sympathize with both worlds. He recognizes that sometimes the worst monsters are the ones who hide behind a front of respectability.



# Objects/Places

## Victorian London

"A Study in Emerald" takes place in Victorian London, in an alternate past in which creatures from space have taken over. London in Victorian times was a crowded, polluted and smelly place. People used horse drawn carriages to get around. New scientific discoveries meant that new inventions and opportunities were available, but it was also a time in which people were very interested in spiritualism and magic.

## The Old Ones

The Old Ones are a monstrous and ancient race of creatures from beyond our world that have taken over the Earth in "A Study in Emerald." They are inventions of the horror author H. P. Lovecraft.

## Fairyland

Some of the stories and poems take place in Fairyland, a magical realm where normal rules do not apply. Magic rules here, and anything can happen. It is an exciting but often bewildering place, and can even be quite sinister. If a person becomes trapped here they will have to know exactly what to do and say in order to escape. Fairyland is the subject of "The Fairy Reel" and "Instructions."

## Magic

Magic is an ambiguous and sometimes sinister force. It can grant wishes and protect people, but it can also cause chaos and pain. Not everyone can use magic, and those who can cannot always be trusted. Magic seems above all to be a fickle thing. Magic features in almost all the stories and poems in this collection.

## Ghosts

Ghosts pop up in many of the stories and poems in this book. They are often wistful, sad creatures who will not or cannot do any harm to mortals. However, they can also be sinister and scary, as in "The Flints of Memory Lane." A ghost is never actually seen to hurt anyone in the book. Ghosts are also used as metaphors for painful memories.



## Wodwo

A Wodwo is a wild man of the woods, a person or creature that lives amongst the wild and the trees.

## New Orleans

New Orleans features in "Bitter Grounds," and is shown as a place of magic, voodoo and other sinister things. It is also a place where people lose themselves, and pain and despair are common. The narrator of the story would not have been able to understand that he is becoming a zombie through his own unhappiness and despair if he had not come to New Orleans. The events of the story have been driving him here, and lead to this revelation.

## Zombies

Zombies are undead creatures that have no will of their own. They are controlled by a zombie master. In "Bitter Grounds," the idea of real zombies is explored, since it is possible to exploit vulnerable people and force them to obey without question. The Coffee Girls of Haiti could be examples of such people, who were said to be controlled with zombie powder. Zombies are also used as a metaphor for giving up, either through severe depression or addiction to drugs.

## Hell

Hell is a place of punishment in which souls are tortured. In "Other People," Hell is shown to be a place where people experience every wrong they have ever done and every hurt they have caused, over and over until they accept their every failing and take responsibility for every action. Through this process, the person becomes a demon, who is then forced to torture himself. Time is fluid in Hell, so it is possible for the same soul to exist simultaneously in the same room. Hell also does not necessarily seem to be reserved for the very bad.

## The Shahinai

The Shahinai are a mythical race of beings who survive through the extraordinary beauty of their men. Every hundred years, they sell one of their young men for enough money to last another hundred years. The Shahinai feature in "Keepsakes and Treasures," in which Mr. Alice desires a Shahinai man of his very own.





## The Double Bass

The boy in "Good Boys Deserve Favors" owns a double bass, which he is too lazy to practice. One day, when asked to play something in front of a visiting Old Boy, the double bass seems to play through him, giving out a wonderful, magical melody. However, the next day the boy accidentally breaks the instrument and it is never the same again.

## Harlequin's Costume

Harlequin's costume is a motley suit of red and black diamonds, famously worn by the Harlequin character in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. When Harlequin is made powerless by Missy eating his heart, she steals the costume and becomes Harlequin herself. The costume appears to bestow the character on whoever wears it.

## Narnia

Narnia is a magical land that is connected to ours in certain places, such as through a wardrobe. It is the land that Susan, Lucy, Edmund and Peter entered as children. Susan was denied Narnia when she grew too old, but unlike her other siblings she has also been denied paradise in Aslan's country. Aslan is the ruler of Narnia. Narnia is the creation of C. S. Lewis, but it appears in the story "The Problem of Susan" when Neil Gaiman explores the fate of the character left behind.

## The Plasticine Gargoyle

In "How Do You Think it Feels?", the narrator fashions a gargoyle out of Plasticine and masturbates into it, creating a guardian for his heart. The gargoyle can either be seen as a real magical creature that stops the narrator from falling in love again, or as a metaphor for a hardened heart.

## The Matrix

The matrix is a fake reality created by machines in order to fool humans into thinking their world is still as it was. In reality, the Earth is controlled by machines and humans are plugged into the matrix to keep them docile while their energy is harvested like living batteries. This is the concept from a popular film, also called *The Matrix*. It is explored in the story "Goliath" in a different way by Neil Gaiman.

## Epicureanism

Epicureanism is the philosophy of pursuing pleasure and rejecting pain. However, since sensory pleasure can be transitory and leaves a person constantly unsatisfied, the true



pleasures that should be sought are those gained from higher pursuits such as philosophy. The story "Sunbird" illustrates this point, as the Epicurean Club dedicate their lives to eating every kind of animal, unsatisfied until they can find the next gastronomic delight, only to go up in flames at the end when they consume the meat of the Phoenix.

## **The Phoenix of Heliopolis**

The Phoenix is a mythical bird that dies in flames and is reborn from the ashes as a new chick. As such, the Phoenix never actually dies, but is constantly reborn again. According to myth it makes this transformation in the Egyptian city Heliopolis, which means city of the sun, or Suntown.



# Themes

## Stories and Storytelling

The importance of stories and storytelling is an important and recurring theme in the stories in this collection. Stories are shown as a way to connect one generation with the next, and to pass on important messages. In "Locks," the poet is telling the story of Goldilocks to his child and reflecting on how he was told the same story by his parents. This is a story that is passed down the generations and repeated over and over, with children learning the correct responses to certain phrases. It teaches certain lessons, such as the danger of excess curiosity, but also teaches the child the importance of stories, of magic and the imagination. Different things can be gained from stories at different ages, however, a point illustrated beautifully by the poem "Locks" and the story "The Problem of Susan." What may not trouble a child will cause an adult to reconsider certain characters and events. Whereas a child may sympathize with Goldilocks, her father will feel for Father Bear and worry about the security of his own home.

There are many stories and poems in the collection in which characters tell each other stories, including "October in the Chair," "Closing Time," "Bitter Grounds," "Good Boys Deserve Favors," "Locks," "My Life," "Feeders and Eaters," and "Inventing Aladdin." In many of these, framing narratives are used so that a story within a story effect is created. Even stories that are told 'straight' are often told by an unnamed first person narrator, making it feel more like the story is being told to us, rather than reading about characters in a book. Stories do not just have to be fantastic imaginary events or great works of literature; sometimes they can be simple, true events, as in "The Flints of Memory Lane." All our lives are spent telling stories to each other, reading and watching stories, and everything that happens to us is the creation of another story. However, there is a distinct difference between reality and fiction, which is emphasized in stories such as "The Flints of Memory Lane," and in the poem "The Day the Saucers Came." Real life tends to be messier, without neat endings or satisfying conclusions. Despite this, one person's simple heartache or longing can be just as interesting a story as any amount of bizarre events, because it is more important to us. This is shown in the conclusion of "The Day the Saucers Came."

In some of the pieces in this collection, the art of storytelling is explored more deeply. In "October in the Chair," the months of the year tell each other stories, and some are better at it than others. October reassures November that just because his stories are darker does not necessarily make them any worse. There is a place for all kinds of stories, and stories will often reflect the personality and beliefs of the person telling it. Through stories, November can learn to accept himself for who he is and be proud of it. In "Forbidden Brides...", the young man desperately attempts to write realism, but he cannot help himself from mocking it. His world is a place in which all the typical tropes of gothic novels are commonplace occurrences. This gently mocks the stereotypes and clichés that can so often creep into stories. When the young man tries his hand at fantasy, he suddenly begins to feel happier and embrace his passion. Just as in



"October in the Chair," through storytelling he can come to accept who he really is. In this way, stories can be an important means to explore and understand issues of identity and acceptance.

Another question is asked several times throughout the book: What is the worth of a story, and of fantasy in particular? In "Forbidden Brides...," the young man reflects that fantasy is about escapism and the freedom for which everyone longs. It is about letting go of the mundane world for a time and embracing imagination. In "Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot," the purpose of vampire stories is explored. They are shown as a way to explore sex, desire and fear of death. In "The Problem of Susan," children's literature is discussed. The idea of separate books for children was really invented in the Victorian period, and attitudes of morality and purity were attached to it. What children really need, it is suggested in the story, is the truth, even if the truth can get a little frightening or grisly at times. The way in which an author deals with his characters is also brought into question in this story. If an author acts as a god to his created world, then he must have respect for the characters he creates. Susan was used as a lesson, to illustrate a point, without thought to what she might actually be going through. In this story, Susan is a real living person, but she exists in the same world as the book. It is as if the characters have stepped out of the book, fully aware that they are both fictional and at the same time real. This symbolizes the vividness with which stories can bring people and events to life, and how readers can form strong attachments to literature. For many people, stories are not merely stories, but more powerful entities that somehow take on a life of their own. This also seems to be the case in "Harlequin Valentine" and the poem "Instructions," in which stories have quite literally come to life. This is also an idea explored in "How to Talk to Girls at Parties," in which an alien race's poem is spread like a virus, infecting all who hear it and taking on a very definite life of its own.

Above all, stories are shown to be incredibly powerful things. They have the power to strongly affect people, connect generations, and teach us lessons. For Scheherazade in "Inventing Aladdin," they can even save lives.

## Magic

Magic in these stories is a very ambiguous, tricky and elusive thing. It is something that can be controlled by those who know how to use it, but can entrap those who are not prepared. It comes in a number of forms, from strange creatures and fairytale lands, to ghosts and demons and curses. In fairytales, magic is often portrayed as a slightly sinister thing, and those who wield it are notoriously fickle. This is also the case in Neil Gaiman's stories and poems. In "The Fairy Reel," the poet explains how a person can lose themselves completely to fairyland. Their heart will be trapped and played with, and their soul will always remain in another world, even if they attempt to live in the world of men. In "Bitter Grounds," some kind of voodoo magic has led the narrator to New Orleans. Through strange encounters and disappearances it teaches him what he needs to know, but then quietly urges him to his death. In "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch," Miss Finch's wishes are brought to life, but she is lost forever



from our world. It is unclear whether she is better off or not. In "Sunbird," the magic of the Phoenix can help a person live forever, or consume them entirely. In "Harlequin Valentine," the magical figure of Harlequin is both tricky and kind, enjoying causing chaos but also curing misery. He is completely unpredictable, just as all magic seems to be in these stories. The poem "Instructions" is written as a way for a person to survive if they find themselves in a fairytale. This highlights the point that fairytales are not safe, magic is fickle, and a person must know exactly what to do in each situation to survive.

Magic is also often shown as something that children invariably understand and embrace more easily than adults. Children seem to recognize certain things straight away, such as Runt knowing that Dearly is a ghost, the boy in "Closing Time" sensing the evil of the playhouse, and the girl in "Locks" knowing exactly what to say. In "The Fairy Reel," the poet laments that he is too old to answer the call of fairyland now. He spent too much time concerned with the world of men, something that children naturally do not care so much about. This idea crops up in "The Problem of Susan," in which the idea that Aslan might punish her by denying her heaven is criticized, but her loss of childhood innocence is not questioned. Susan was not allowed to return to Narnia because she grew up. Despite the fact that her siblings were able to return, Susan seems too grounded in the real world and in adult concerns to go back. When she sleeps, however, she dreams of Mary Poppins, and in embracing magic once more she dies and perhaps returns to Narnia. Although Narnia is represented as a sinister place and Aslan as a disturbing god, it is still clear that magic is deeply connected to childhood, for good or bad. Many of the other stories that contain magical or ghostly events are presented as memories from childhood or happen to children. In "Locks," the poet does not focus on the magic of the fairytale but thinks instead of protecting his house and of being a good father. Adult concerns distract from the world of magic.

Magic is often used as a metaphor in the stories and poems in this collection. It can represent the excitement and risk-taking of youth, as in "The Fairy Reel," or something more sinister, as in "The Problem of Susan." Magic is used to represent heartache in "How Do You Think it Feels?", in which a magical Plasticine gargoyles symbolizes a hardened heart. "The Hidden Chamber" is also a poem about a broken heart, and about loss and memories. In "Closing Time," the magical playhouse seems to represent something terrible that has happened to the boys in the past, as well as representing the fear of growing up and entering a new stage of life. In "Other People," zombification represents giving up and losing oneself, whether it be to grief or to drug addiction. In "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch," the magical cabinet and the wish it grants might represent shedding of the persona that is presented to the world to get at the true person underneath. In "Sunbird," magic is used to illustrate the dangers of excessive greed and giving in to one's desires.

## Fragility

This story collection is entitled Fragile Things, and there is no shortage of fragile things within the stories. Fragile things are shown to often be the best and most important things in life, and though something might be fragile, it can also be enduring. Common



fragile things in the stories and poems are ghosts, memories, love and hope, but these are also often the most lingering and enduring. Youth is another fragile thing, but something that passes all too quickly. In "The Fairy Reel," youth and life are shown to be fragile. If the wrong choices are made early on, there will be no chance to get them back. In "The Hidden Chamber," everything in the poet's life is fragile, from the ghosts of his memories and the fluttering butterfly, to his new relationship and the candle he keeps lit in the hope of his lover returning. These things are also enduring, since his memories, pain and love will stay with him forever. In "Good Boys Deserve Favors," the double bass is extremely fragile, and is broken when the boy is careless. Along with it he breaks his chance to play the magical music again, and also says goodbye to his childhood. In "Strange Little Girls" and "Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot," hearts are extremely fragile and easily broken, along with a person's spirit. Hopes and dreams are also fragile in these stories. In "How Do You Think it Feels?", the narrator creates a gargoyle to protect his heart from being broken again, because he considers it fragile and vulnerable. However, in stopping himself from feeling anything, he dooms himself to a non-life in which there is no meaning and no love. This shows that sometimes the best things in life are fragile, and that if we try to protect ourselves too hard we will miss the point. Fragile things may be difficult to keep from breaking, but they are worth the effort.

Stories might also be seen as another fragile thing. Stories do not have form or substance, and are ephemeral like ghosts. They cannot easily be tied down, and if the author and reader are not careful they can develop a life of their own. Despite being fragile, stories are also one of the best examples of something that is enduring, since they connect the generations and are repeated over and over again. A story may only be formed of words and voices, but it is a very powerful thing.



# Style

## Point of View

Most of the stories within this collection are told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator. In some cases, this narrator is a writer who seems to bear a lot of resemblances to Neil Gaiman himself. This adds realism, especially to stories that the author claims are true. In particular, these are "The Flints of Memory Lane," "Closing Time," "The Facts in the Case of the Departure of Miss Finch," and "Locks."

Most of the other stories and poems are told by first person narrators, either named or unnamed, which helps to make them more personal because it feels like the reader is being told a tale rather than reading a carefully crafted piece of literature. This helps add a sense of realism as well as connecting the reader to the main character. It also means that events might be told from a biased point of view, and that the reader rarely gets to see or know anything that the storyteller does not know. With ghost stories, this approach to storytelling creates the atmosphere of being told a tale at a friend's house or around a campfire, a traditional way for ghost stories to be told. This is extremely effective, and heightens the creepiness of the story. In "A Study in Emerald," the use of a first person narrator who is also a character in the story helps to give the story a Sherlock Holmes feel. The original Sherlock Holmes stories were all narrated by Doctor Watson. Here, this fact is used to fool the reader into thinking this story is also narrated by Doctor Watson, allowing for an interesting twist.

It is very rare for Neil Gaiman's stories to have an omniscient 'voice of God' third person narrator who sees everything and can report on all the characters from a detached position. In "October in the Chair," the story of Runt is told in third person, but it is being told by October, a character to whom we have just been introduced. This means that the narrator is not the voice of the author, but an actual character with his own framing story. This allows for a more omniscient storytelling approach without removing the personal touch. "Forbidden Brides..." is told by a third person narrator, but this is necessary for the point of the story, in which clichés of gothic horror novels are mocked. "Harlequin Valentine," "Other People," "How to Talk to Girls at Parties," "Sunbird" and "Inventing Aladdin" are told in third person but from the point of view of their main characters. Only "Strange Little Girls," "Fifteen Painted Cards from a Vampire Tarot" and "In the End" are told from more neutral third person perspectives.

## Setting

Most of the stories and poems in the collection are set in England, or in a magical 'fairytale land' in which fairytales and stories are true. Occasional stories are set in America. A "Study in Emerald" is set in an alternate past in Victorian London, in which the Old Ones, which are monsters from beyond the Earth, have taken over the world. In this London, the supernatural can sit alongside the rational and ordinary, and nothing is





quite what it seems. This is a unique twist on the usual setting of Sherlock Holmes stories, merging the Sherlock Holmes world with that of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulu mythos.

Stories and poems set in a fairyland include "The Fairy Reel" and "Instructions," in which fairyland is portrayed as a sinister but exciting place. It is a place where people can become lost unless they know the rules of what to do to survive. Even then, it can trap a person's heart and soul, so that even when they return to the world of men, they constantly long for fairyland. Other stories are set in worlds in which stories come true, such as "The Problem of Susan" and "Forbidden Brides...".

Many of the ghost stories in the collection are set in nondescript, lonely areas of the English country. This gives them an isolated feel which heightens the creepiness and tension of the story. These include "October in the Chair," "The Flints of Memory Lane," and "Closing Time." It is rare for any of the stories to be set in a city, as most of them have a lonely, wistful feel that suits more remote locations better. One exception is "Keepsakes and Treasures," which is set in London and presents it as a gritty and often contradictory place that is home to all different kinds of people, from the very rich and respectable to the most hidden of criminals. Other exceptions are "How to Talk to Girls at Parties," which is set in the suburbs and contrasts normal human life with fantastic and strange aliens, and "Bitter Grounds," which is set in New Orleans and reflects its magical, feverish and slightly sinister atmosphere. There is also one story, "Other People," set in Hell, and one, "In the End," set in the Garden of Eden.

## Language and Meaning

Most of Neil Gaiman's stories can be read on two or even three levels. They can be read as straight stories of the supernatural or the strange, but they can also be read as metaphors for various different things. Magic is often used as a metaphor for lost youth or childhood, and ghosts are often symbolic of painful memories. In "Closing Time," the sinister playhouse perhaps represents some terrible event in the past involving the abuse of the three brothers at the hands of their father. These painful memories have been associated with supernatural events as a way to cope with them. The playhouse can also be seen as a symbol of lost childhood innocence. The boy fears it because he is not yet ready to grow up and play 'big boy games.' However, the playhouse can also be understood as exactly what the story says it is; a supernatural or evil place that seems to swallow the three brothers and trap them within. This is a good example of a story that can be read on at least three different levels. "Bitter Grounds" uses zombies to symbolize depression and giving up, whether caused by loss or drug addiction. "How Do You Think it Feels?" uses a magical Plasticine gargoyle as a metaphor for the narrator hardening his heart, and so never allowing himself happiness and love again.

The type of language used in the poems and stories tends to depend on the setting and the atmosphere of the story. "A Study in Emerald" incorporates a lot of old fashioned speech and Victorian phrases, and "Forbidden Brides..." uses the kind of overly romantic and flamboyant language the reader of a gothic novel might expect. "How to Talk to Girls at Parties" uses simple language that teenage boys would use and



understand, and the aliens in the story are distinguished by their more mature and learned language and phrases. "Sunbird" features some very expressive and antiquated language, reflecting the bizarre nature of the story.

## Structure

Many of the stories within this collection feature framing narratives, in which the narrator explains who he is and tells us about his tale, then goes on to relate it, or in which characters are introduced who then go on to tell a story of their own. Good examples of this framing technique include "October in the Chair," "Closing Time," and "Feeders and Eaters." There is even a poem, "Inventing Aladdin," which explores the story of Scheherazade, the famous framing story in *One Thousand and One Nights*. By including framing stories, the author is able to keep the stories feeling more personal, like a tale being told to the reader rather than a constructed piece of literature. The framing stories also allow for the exploration of storytelling technique, and an emphasis on the power of stories. This is a recurring theme throughout the collection. Framing narratives are also particularly effective in the ghost stories in the collection, because this is a traditional way in which to tell ghost stories and helps to heighten their creepy atmosphere.

Another feature of the stories within this collection is unresolved endings. The endings are often left open, and sometimes have no satisfying conclusion at all. This is because true life is not 'story shaped' and many of these tales claim to be true. This technique helps add a sense of realism as well as one of mystery and intrigue. In stories so full of metaphor, it is also useful to end them more openly so that the reader can put their own interpretation on events.



## Quotes

"If I were young as once I was, and dreams and death more distant then, I wouldn't split my soul in two, and keep half in the world of men." *The Fairy Reel*, p. 27

"I like your stories. Mine are always too dark.' 'I don't think so,' said October. 'It's just that your nights are longer. And you aren't as warm.'" *October in the Chair*, p. 43

"Is not the highest impulse in mankind the urge towards freedom, the drive to escape?" *Forbidden Brides...*, p. 62

"I like things to be story-shaped. Reality, however, is not story-shaped, and the eruptions of the odd into our lives are not story-shaped either. They do not end in entirely satisfactory ways." *The Flints of Memory Lane*, p. 65

"True madness takes or leaves us in the wood halfway through all our lives." *Going Wodwo*, p. 83

"There are doors, after all, between the living and the dead, and they swing in both directions." *Bitter Grounds*, p. 106

"We owe it to each other to tell stories." *Locks*, p. 179

"The hypothesis is set forth that there was originally no distinct branch of fiction that was only intended for children, until the Victorian notions of the purity and sanctity of childhood demanded that fiction for children be... 'Well, pure,' says the professor." *The Problem of Susan*, p. 184

"Susan. All the other kids go off to Paradise, and Susan can't go. She's no longer a friend of Narnia because she's too fond of lipsticks and nylons and invitations to parties." *The Problem of Susan*, p. 185

"I suppose I could claim that I had always suspected that the world was a cheap and shoddy sham, a bad cover for something deeper and weirder and infinitely more strange, and that, in some way, I already knew the truth." *Goliath*, p. 235

"How can you sell your mother?' That was what the first people said, when asked to sell the land they walked upon." *Pages from a Journal...*, p. 252

"They hate themselves, all shades of pink and brown, and so small.' It is what I experience, even me, and I am not grown. It is like a world of children, or of elves." (Referring to humans and Earth) *How to Talk to Girls at Parties*, p. 261



## Topics for Discussion

Why do you think the author has titled this collection *Fragile Things*? What things are fragile in the stories and poems?

Discuss the theme of stories and storytelling in these stories and poems.

Discuss how magic is presented in these stories and poems.

What is the symbolism of the zombies in "Bitter Ground," the gargoyle in "How Do You Think it Feels?", and the empty house with its hidden chamber in "The Hidden Chamber"? What do these stories have in common?

How does the author use framing narratives and first person narrators to enhance the effect and atmosphere of his stories and poems? Give examples.

What is actually going on in "Closing Time"? Discuss the different possible readings of this story. Why do you think the author left the ending without a firm conclusion?

In what ways does the author twist typical science fiction, fantasy and horror ideas and clichés to create stories and poems that are original or surprising? Do you think he succeeds in this?

Discuss the controversial story "The Problem of Susan." What do you think the author is trying to do with this story? Has he been unfair to the vision of C. S. Lewis? Has he missed the point? Is this story successful?

Do any of the stories or poems in this collection contain a moral, or lessons that are important to learn? How does the author use the story as a medium to convey this?

Discuss the different ghost stories in this collection. How does the author portray ghosts? Are the stories creepy or frightening, and if so, how has the author achieved this? Do ghosts symbolize anything in these stories? You should concentrate on "October in the Chair," "The Flints of Memory Lane" and "Closing Time," but you can bring others into your discussion where appropriate.

What is your favorite story or poem in the collection and why? Which story or poem do you not like? Do any fail in what they set out to do? Give reasons for your answers.