

Mr. Fox Study Guide

Mr. Fox by Helen Oyeyemi

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Plot Summary

NOTE: Due to the structure and nature of the novel, this study guide references page numbers. This guide specifically refers to the November, 2012, First Riverhead trade paperback edition.

“Mr. Fox,” a novel by Helen Oyeyemi, is about reality and creativity. The author weaves messages about love and identity throughout the story, too. The main character, Mr. Saint John Fox, a fiction writer, seeks to repair his relationship with his wife, Daphne, as he contends with his invented muse, Mary Foxe. When the novel begins, Mary Foxe appears to Mr. Fox for the first time in seven years. Mary is unhappy with Fox for always killing the women in his stories. Fox wonders why it has been so long since he has seen Mary. Mary tells Fox that he does not take his fiction seriously enough, while he contends that fiction is only a game. It seems that Fox’s marriage has hit a rough patch because his wife Daphne suspects him of having an affair.

Mary Foxe and Mr. Fox challenge one another to games by way of short stories that they craft. Mary wants to soften Fox’s heart toward women and help him to better understand love. Mr. Fox takes neither his writing nor his romantic life seriously. He is quick to quit things. However, he is quick to try to prove that he does not quit anything without reason. Fox’s first story, “Dr. Lustucru,” features a talkative woman unwilling to compromise. Consequently, her head is cut off and only reattached for conversations. This backfires, however, as the woman comes to repeat the same thing over and over again. Eventually, she flees. Next, Mary Foxe takes control by telling a story of a young, aspiring female writer who seeks out the advice of an older, handsome, but dismissive male writer. The male writer stands up to the young writer. He instructs his secretary to burn the young writer’s stories.

Fox and Mary Foxe put their souls and hearts into these stories as the novel progresses. Each story slowly becomes less violent on Fox’s part and more sympathetic on Mary Foxe’s part. Fox comes to take a greater interest in his stories. He stops killing his female characters, while Mary Foxe’s stories become more open to compromise. Eventually, love develops between the characters Foxe and Mary Foxe base on themselves. When this happens, Daphne suspects that Mary Foxe is real, and she accuses her husband of having an affair. Fox insists Mary is only made-up, which Daphne accepts but does not completely believe. The lines between reality and fiction have been blurred. They become even more blurred when Daphne herself begins to see Mary. She also has conversations with Mary Foxe.

Both Mary Foxe and Daphne come to realize they are in love with the same man. Daphne is intensely jealous because she is competing with an invented woman. Mary Foxe longs to be an independent, real creation that can both love Fox and live her own life. Fox genuinely feels bad that Daphne believes he would prefer her over an invented character, though he tells Mary that he would run away with her if she were real. Mary urges Fox to go back to his wife instead. Fox slowly comes to realize that he truly does

love his wife. He writes the story so that Mary is free to leave. Fox and Daphne decide to start over again, as both realize just how much they love one another.



Section 1: Pages 1 – 71

Summary

(Untitled Chapter) – Mr. St. John Fox is at home in his study writing while his wife, Daphne, is upstairs painting. Mary Foxe, Fox's muse, enters the study for the first time in seven years. Fox throws a telephone at her. He then declares that he still loves her. Mary asks if Fox would love her if she were someone else. Fox responds that he would. Mary thinks Fox only loves her for her body. She tells Fox he must change because he is a villain. She explains that Fox is a villain because he murders all the women in his books, from Roberta bleeding to death to Louise being shot to death to Mrs. McGuire hanging herself. Fox contends that fiction is all games. Mary disagrees, but she argues that if they are playing, they should play "shriek." Fox takes the bait and decides to play along, for which Mary commends him. Mary places a hand on his neck, while Fox places his hand over hers.

Dr. Lustucru – Dr. Lustucru, a crazy doctor, beheads his talkative wife so that he can replace her head only when he wishes her to speak. But, his plan goes awry. When he does restore her, his wife asks and answers the same question about whether there will ever be another war after the Great War. Dr. Lustucru locks her in the nursery. He discovers the next morning that she has escaped through the window. Dr. Lustucru then realizes he has been bad to his wife. He fears her return, wondering how he will answer for his actions. His wife never returns.

(Untitled Chapter) – Fox recognizes that he and Mary are the doctor and his wife and that he and Mary have somehow switched positions. Mary has attempted to take control of the story, but she has not been successful. Fox claims he did not know the characters in the story were them, but Mary tells him she knows he knew otherwise. She then says the next move is hers.

Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold – In a series of letters written in the summer of 1936, Mary and Fox talk about Dr. Lustucru and why Fox never includes a picture of himself on his books. Fox says that he is very ugly and that he has had a series of dogs named Nestor who have run away from him because of this. Mary responds that she is insulted, and it is unlikely that dogs should be so repelled by a man who is on his third marriage because women are so easily attracted to him. Fox responds, marveling at how easily insulted Mary is. Mary responds that Fox seems bitter. She asks if he is having trouble with his next book. Fox responds, asking if they have met before, if he has wronged her in some way, if he can make amends, and if "Mary Foxe" is her real name. Mary replies by saying she finds the questions asinine.

Fox responds, saying it is not the day and age to waste paper, ink, and stamps. He asks what Mary wants from him. Mary explains she wants him to read some of her stories.



She has chosen him because she admires his work, which has been an inspiration to her own. Mary notes that she would resent the situation if it were reversed. Fox is suspicious. He responds that the same article that noted he was on his third divorce slammed him as being a “harsh destroyer of the feminine creative impulse.” Mary replies that Fox should not be suspicious of her. She explains she is twenty-one, British, and unattractive. She is a descendant of the author of the sixteenth century’s “Foxy’s Book of Martyrs.” She also explains she works as a tutor and companion to a fourteen-year-old girl who has stopped attending school after frightening her classmates. Mary explains that everything she writes in her notebooks, she types up when the girl and her family leave town each weekend. Before consenting to read Mary’s work, Fox arranges a meeting with her on Sunday at 7 PM at Mercier Hotel’s lobby bar.

Mary reads the letter and meeting arrangements while at breakfast with her family, the Coles. Katherine, the girl, does her best to do a British accent, but she is unsuccessful. Mitzi Cole, the matriarch, has decked out everything in the kitchen in shades of yellow. She writes poetry. Mary assigns Katherine the task of reading the books “The Woman in White” and “The Count of Monte Christo” so that she will understand the word “villain.” Mary types up copies of three stories for Fox on Sunday morning while the Coles are out at their house on Long Island. Mary then borrows clothing from Katherine’s closet and heads to the Mercier Hotel bar ahead of time to see if she can spot Fox on his way in. Fox does not show. Angry and sad, Mary heads home. She writes an angry letter but does not send it.

Mary comes to consider that her typewriter is like an empty city. While going for a cup of tea in the kitchen, Mr. Cole grabs Mary and squeezes her breast. Mary is too stunned to feel angry or violated. That night, Mitzi hosts the Women’s Club. Katherine hides out in Mary’s room with Mary. Katherine uses Tarot cards to read Mary’s fortune. According to the cards, the future is not good. Mary realizes she is unhappy. She decides to hold on to something and wait. After grading Katherine’s homework, Mary sits at her typewriter and imagines being finished with all the writing. She imagines typing “The End.”

Mary receives a letter from Fox, offering to make things right for the failed meeting. Katherine confesses to sending Mary’s angry letter just for fun. Mary decides to follow through on the meeting proposed for Salmagundi’s on Lexington and 61st with Fox’s secretary. The secretary explains she found Mary’s letter amusing and that she collects Mary’s stories. Weeks pass. Katherine worries that either the secretary, or Fox, is going to steal Mary’s stories. Katherine says Mary’s stories are good, which prompts Mary to hug Katherine.

Mary then goes to retrieve her stories from Fox. The secretary answers the door and hands Mary’s stories back to her. Mary sees that some parts of the stories have been underlined. Fox believes Mary should find love instead of being a writer. Mary then asks the secretary if she is Fox, but the secretary denies this. The secretary then tells Mary that Fox told her what to do next. The secretary then lights Mary’s stories on fire. Mary holds on to them, even though it burns her hands and puts smoke in her eyes.



(Untitled Chapter) – Mary Foxe feels bad burning Mr. Fox’s stories, but she knows that it will take a lot to make Mr. Fox change. Mary is in great pain since she realizes it will take a lot more effort and work than previously expected to get him to change. Mary has a dream in which she is a thirty-eight year-old spinster living alone in an attic after the death of her mother. She rents out the rest of her house to Mr. Pizarsky, a solicitor. Mary dreams of being a successful romance novelist writing under the pen name Wendy Darling. Mary goes for a walk one day. On her return home, Mr. Pizarsky presents her with a birthday cake. He explains he had found an old birthday card for her and decided to celebrate her birthday with a cake. Mary pretends to be delighted and has cake with Mr. Pizarsky. Pizarsky explains he is from Poland. He is abroad due to rioting at home. He also explains he used to be a poet.

When she goes to sleep that night, Mary considers casting Pizarsky in one of her novels, but she knows she will have to make him taller and dashing to do so. Mary wakes up the next morning feeling refreshed. She is worried that if Mr. Fox knows she is in love with him, he will somehow play it against her. She wonders if she might find someone like Pizarsky out in the world. She then realizes her pillow case is covered in writing in the form of numbered paragraphs. The paragraphs are ramblings that say to read on if “he” is not there, since he is the easy option; that the writer is better at English than Mary, sings Christmas carols in June, and so on. Mary begins to wonder if Pizarsky is even real, then realizes she does not recognize her surroundings. She notices a vase of foxglove on the nightstand.

The writer’s traumatic experiences in World War I and his fiancée leaving have affected him deeply. He has spent time thinking about Mary and wondering if Mr. Fox is better looking than he thinks. The writer tells Mary she is slipping, and Mary realizes the game is still on.

Analysis

“Mr. Fox” is a novel about fiction and love by Helen Oyeyemi. One of the main characters, Mr. Saint John Fox, is a writer. In the story, he seeks to repair his relationship with his wife, Daphne. He is also contending with his invented muse, Mary Foxe. The novel focuses heavily on creation, the creative process, and writing. The story blurs the lines between reality and fiction, often to the extent that the two are not easily separated. This is often accomplished through the theme of metaphor, which in turn works hand-in-hand with the various other themes found throughout the novel.

The theme of identity through metaphor is key. Mr. Fox acts both as his own character in the novel and as a character in the stories that he and Mary Foxe tell as the two struggle for dominance. The stories themselves become a metaphor and a battleground for this struggle to make the other see his or her own point. Oftentimes, the metaphors are clear and easy to interpret, such as Dr. Lustucru standing in for Mr. Fox, while Mrs. Lustucru stands in for Daphne and Mary Foxe. The talkative, uncompromising Mrs. Lustucru is beheaded for the sake of Dr. Lustucru. However, Mary’s attempts to subvert and control the story by having Mrs. Lustucru not behave as expected and run away are



a direct challenge to Fox, and a demonstration that Mary and Daphne must have things their own way. Mary unwittingly proves Fox's point in her struggle to get Fox to come around to her side.

Often, the characters of Mr. Fox and Mary Foxe are indistinguishable in their stories and the reality of the novel. Despite Fox's dislike of the uncompromising nature of women, he himself is no stranger to stubbornness. Because Mary Foxe is a creation of Mr. Fox, there is an immense part of Fox in her. This comes by way of Mary's own stubbornness. Mary comes to be Fox's equal and greatest challenge—a fight he relishes because his greatest challenge is not a metaphorical character, but himself (the masculine self of Fox, and the feminine creation of Foxe). There are issues which Fox must work out himself which he does through fiction. Fox always takes the easy way out of romantic struggles, as reflected in his stories. In real life, he breaks up with the women. In the stories, he kills the women.

Mary does not feel that Fox takes his fiction very seriously. She urges him to write about love rather than death. These attempts at making Fox see her side of things—metaphorically presented through Mary's short stories in the short story "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold"—end in disaster, as Fox has the stories burned. Fox has read (and heard), but not bothered to actually understand (or listen). For Fox, everything is a literary, metaphorical game. Mary contends that there is truth and reality that appear even in fiction which people take seriously. Such things include love.

Reality becomes utterly important thematically—and very much blurred—as Fox engages in what he condescendingly considers to be games with Mary, while Mary is driving harder at Fox's soul to make him understand deeper and more important things about reality and the way reality is contained in fiction. The lines of reality are blurred not only by Fox and Foxe appearing as characters in the stories that they are creating, but in that Fox speaks and addresses Mary Foxe as though she was actually real. In many ways, Mary Foxe is very much real. The creative process involves the creation of fictitious worlds that do come to exist, at least on paper. But for the creator of this process, what has been created is very much real.

As Mary struggles as a young writer in "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold," she comes to consider her typewriter. She likens it to a city with no inhabitants. The keys and machinery of the typewriter are compared to an empty city—the promise of a community but without the people to make it a community. The same is true of the worlds that writers create. There is always potential for something more, for a city full of life and the living—but only if the writer creates it as such. The writer comes to exist in a world he or she has created, and so can interact with that world—and its inhabitants. Mary herself is one such aspect of creation that has been made real. Because so much of one's self is put into that creation, emotional exhaustion takes an emotional and physical toll on the writer.

Fox's fiancée left him after World War I—a traumatic real-world experience that has come to deeply resonate within, and impact, his fiction. He is turning his real pain into fiction. Fox believes he is escaping reality through the crafting of games of fiction, but



reality cannot be escaped. People either decipher the reality in fiction, or the writer – knowingly or unwittingly – puts much of reality into fiction. This is often why fiction has such a hold both on the reader and the writer. This is clearly the case of Fox and Mary. As noted earlier, because Mary Foxe is a creation of Fox, it is as if Fox is at war with himself through his games with Mary.

Even though Mary is a creation of Fox, she is very much an independent being. He is not totally in control of her. Mary can still exercise her free will. This reflects the nature of God's creation, referenced throughout the novel. God creates and oversees man; however, man maintains his free will. Further blurring the lines of creation and reality, it should be noted that the author, Helen Oyeyemi, is a devout Catholic who places emphasis on faith. As an author, she is acting as a God-like figure by crafting the characters of the story. She grants them freedom to do as they will.

The author introduces names, terms, and symbols which will continue to have a significant presence throughout the novel. For example, the use of “fox” – as in Fox, Foxe, and foxglove – is not accidental. Foxes are swift and clever hunters, very much reflecting the nature of Mr. Fox himself – a clever, but merciless writer who is swift to come to conclusions. Mary Foxe is the feminine identity of Mr. Fox. She represents the attributes which women use in their role as defenders of love. Foxe is the loving nature of Fox denied and suppressed. Likewise, the presence of foxglove – a flower that has been used medicinally for heart conditions – will appear throughout the novel when the heart of a character is either at its weakest or its strongest. That it appears when Mary is at her most vulnerable self in “Be Bold” is fitting. She is at her lowest, and the recognition of the foxglove comes when she does not recognize her surroundings and feels brokenhearted.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mary consent to playing games of fiction with Mr. Fox? What do Mary and Mr. Fox hope to prove to one another? Why?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Mary Foxe purely a creation of Mr. Fox? In what ways is Mary Foxe unnervingly real to Mr. Fox?

Discussion Question 3

What seems to be the original source of Mr. Fox's antagonism toward women, reflected both in his life and in fiction? How has this affected Mr. Fox, both in life and in writing?



Vocabulary

muse, saunters, traitorous, oaf, transcend, presumptuous, asinine, brevity, imposition, simultaneous, simpering, gruesome, abominable, nefarious, vile, absconded, fastidious, crestfallen, languorously,



Section 2: Pages 72 – 136

Summary

Fitcher's Bird – Miss Foxxe works as an assistant to Mrs. Nash, a florist. Miss Foxxe loves flowers and her simple, small world. She also loves fairy tales, especially the transformations that characters undergo. Eventually, Miss Foxxe comes to believe she needs more than flowers and fairytales. She decides to find a man. She does everything she can to attract a man, even going to seedy bars where even ugly girls are find men, to placing an ad in the papers at Mrs. Nash's suggestion. A man named Fitcher sends a bouquet of foxglove to Miss Foxxe. The two correspond and decide to meet. They enjoy their time together and have much in common, so they begin dating. Fitcher buys Miss Foxxe a nightingale and gold-painted cage. She then invites him to her flat, where she feeds him and begs him to cut off her head as in the fairy "The White Cat." In the fairy tale, the same act transforms a cat into a beautiful girl. Fitcher agrees, expecting that Miss Foxxe will be beautifully transformed, but this is not what happens.

(Untitled Chapter) – Fox enters his study, having no idea where he has just been or what he has just done, apart from the fact that he knows he has been with Mary Foxxe. Fox's study is a wreck. Daphne enters the study, saying she has not finished yet, and declaring she should burn down the house. Editions of Fox's books begin to fly at him. Daphne demands to know who the woman is that Fox is seeing. Daphne then says she will be going to Reno and that Fox had better not contest the divorce papers. Fox insists he is merely working and that he and Daphne can go away together in another week or two. Daphne says the girl Fox has on the side has been calling nonstop, but Fox says it is all made up, that he has made Mary up. Mary is like a character in one of his stories. Daphne accepts this and goes out for a movie with her friend, Gretchen. Fox knows Mary is trying to ruin him. Mary then emerges from under Fox's desk, sits in his lap, and the two watch the rain falling outside. She asks him if he can die next time, but Fox says no. Mary then says it is all just a lot of games.

Like This – A Yoruba woman and an Englishman are very much in love, though their relationship is rocky and full of fights. One day, the woman stamps her foot and wishes the man dead, killing him. She then suffers heartbreak and wants the man back. She goes to see a witch about it. The witch grants the return of the man in exchange for the woman's fertility. The man is very tired on his return and wishes an end to the fighting. The two agree to part ways on a journey, where the man will leave the woman in Paris. In Paris, the woman strikes out on her own, horribly sorry for the past.

A woman in blue comes out of a café and gives the Yoruba woman some espresso and some fountain pens. She explains the Yoruba woman, who loves to write, will one day be good at it. The woman in blue says she was originally meant for the man, but a mistake decades before prevented it. The woman in blue directs the Yoruba woman to a bright blue door so that she may take her place while the woman in blue handles everything else. By entering through the door, everything else will be forgotten. The



Yoruba woman does not want to forget the man, but reluctantly agrees. In her new house, the woman finds a desk with more fountain pens and a fresh pad of paper. A note comes under the door that urges the woman to write the stories. More notes like this follow. The woman feels as if she has lost something, but she cannot decide when. locals begin to call her Madame La Folle (the Mad Woman).

Meanwhile, the Englishman commences a search for the Yoruba woman, while the woman in blue moves in on him. The two get married, but the man is never fully happy. When the man tells the woman in blue to go away, she refuses, saying that the things the man feels for the Yoruba woman will fade in time. At the same time, the Yoruba woman comes to think he must be grieving for someone who is dead. In the cemetery, a skeletal man named Reynardine confronts her, asking her why she just won't write the stories. He represents the woman's Yoruba ancestors, who seek the stories as offerings, for they have begun the stories long ago. Reynardine agrees to restore what the woman has lost in exchange for the stories. The woman sits down to write, and is amazed at all the stories she writes. Reynardine then brings the woman the man she has lost, but he is dead. The woman feels tricked, but Reynardine encourages her to join him. She does so by dying. She and the man are then buried in a vault, where they return to life in death.

(Untitled Chapter) – Mr. Fox recounts how he once wrote a story about an idealistic young man who joined up to fight in the trenches of the Great War. Mr. Fox recounts how he was unable to write and placed a gun to his head only to be stopped by Mary. Mr. Fox remembers how Mary once left him, even though he had given her everything. She would not come back to him so he killed her by beating her up and slitting her throat because he loved her too much to lose her. In the present, Fox is relieved to learn that the memory is only a story, though Mary herself is worried.

The Training at Madame De Silentio's – Madame De Silentio runs an academy for young delinquent men, aged sixteen to eighteen, which turns these young men into respectable and marriageable material by the time they are twenty-one. She does this by focusing exclusively on an education of necessity, only teaching her students that which is absolutely essential to know. The primary goal of students is to be able to answer the question of their wives, "How can I make Her Happy?" As such, families with prospective daughters pay huge sums of money for appropriate matches. Sixteen year-old Charles Wolfe and seventeen year-old Charlie Wulfe meet at De Silentio's, believing that although they are very different, they must be brothers because of their names. The handsome and outgoing Charlie has been sent to Madame's because he has turned to drugs and a life of waste as the child of rich parents. Charles is quiet, unattractive, a thief, and the son of a government official to India.

While swimming in a lake, Charles and Charlie discover a man trapped at the bottom in chains and a padlock. Madame explains the man is named Reynardine and that he is her prisoner. Madame refuses to say why. Charles and Charlie wonder how Reynardine is still alive. They are determined to set him free. Charles, the thief, manages to steal keys from Madame. Charlie frees Reynardine in exchange for a dose of opium. Madame learns of Reynardine's escape from the news of murdered women that



reaches her, for Reynardine is a woman-killer. Other killers are inspired by Reynardine, and follow suit. Charles and Charlie are horribly saddened by what they have unwittingly done. At graduation, Charles is sold to a formerly fat girl named Helene, who finds it an insult whenever he cooks and whom she refuses to show off to her friends because he is ugly. Only by wearing a mask does Helene allow him to be in public with her. Charlie is sold to a plain but good woman named Laurel. Laurel, feeling inferior to Charlie, makes him wear a mask to hide his good looks. Charles and Charlie never communicate again. The narrator, who admits to being the son of one of the boys, wonders if the boys fell in love with each other

Analysis

The lines between reality and fiction continue to be blurred not only through the stories that the invented Mary and the real Fox tell, but in the confusion of reality by the characters in the stories themselves. The Mary Foxe of “Fitcher’s Bird” cannot distinguish reality from fantasy, wanting very much to be transformed as though in a fairy tale. Unfortunately, Fitcher cannot distinguish the two. At Mary’s insistence, he beheads her. Instead of becoming a beautiful girl, Mary dies. Here, the blame is placed primarily on Mary –but it cannot clearly be determined who is telling the story. While the death of Mary may on the one hand be seen as endemic of a Fox creation, Foxe’s confusion upon returning to his study indicate that he himself may have had no hand in the story itself. As such, the story may be seen as Mary’s metaphorical recognition that she herself needs to separate what is real from what is fiction. On the other hand, it may be that the story was a creation of the creation of Mary, but one which Fox took over, thus blurring the lines and causing him to lose grasp of what is real, signaling his disorientation on his return to his study from the world of fantasy.

The situation becomes far more surreal when Daphne gets wind of Mary Foxe. Daphne comes to believe that her husband is cheating on her. Fox contends this is not the case, that Mary is made up. This is in keeping with both the themes of reality and creativity, in which Fox invents worlds and people in his writing. These can seem very real. The same is true of Mary, he explains, arguing that Mary is kind of like a character in one of his stories. With such blurring of reality and fiction, Daphne wonders if the creative process has made Fox insane. Fox goes on to say that he is not crazy because he remembers that Mary is only an invention, even if at times he forgets this in the passion and rush of creativity. Things can seem very real even when they are not when passion is involved. Daphne’s automatic assumption that her husband is having an affair certainly generates a tremendous amount of passion, making Mary seem all the more real.

As the stories continue to be told, the stories themselves become more vague through stronger metaphor. Fox and Foxe are no longer mentioned by name, nor do they outright appear in the stories after “Fitcher’s Bird.” Likewise, they do not appear in these stories in whole form, either. Only aspects of them are presented. Some possible



reasons for this include the personal investment in the stories has been too exhausting and too dangerous; that Fox and Foxe are changing so they are choosing to focus on their aspects and ideas rather than themselves; or that the stories have become too real and have too dangerously blurred the lines of reality. For example, the story “Training at Madame De Silentio’s” is an example of this new approach. Reynardine is the destructive impulse of Fox, set loose by his heartache and jealousy represented by the characters of Charles and Charlie. The slew of murders inspired by Reynardine and unwittingly made possible by Charles and Charlie is metaphorical for the heartache that Fox has felt and the destruction he has set loose through his fiction.

In the story “Like This,” the Yoruba woman and the Englishman are representative of Mary Foxe and Mr. Fox. They can also be seen as representative of Daphne and Mr. Fox. It is clear that both Mary and Daphne are in love with Fox, as the Yoruba woman is in love with the Englishman. Also, both Mary and Daphne seek a break from Fox, which results in the Yoruba woman wishing the Englishman dead. However, it is only in the face of losing that which they love more than anything else that they realize what they truly stand to lose –and regret their decisions immediately. Daphne is enraged with Fox, but does not want to lose him. Mary is angry that Fox is lackadaisical in his writing, and callous toward women. However, she does not want to risk losing him. By choosing to join the Englishman in death, the Yoruba woman comes to see things from the side of the Englishman. This is something that Mary and Daphne, for all of their criticism of Fox’s uncompromising nature, have failed to do themselves until now.

As Daphne learns, only a break from reality –a placing of faith in fantasy through the creation of Mary –saved Fox from committing suicide after the war. At the same time, Fox’s writing is actually beginning to trouble him. It is very possible that, in terms of fluid identity, Fox is actually the Yoruba woman who comes to regret wishing the death of her loved one. Their love might not be perfect, but it is still love. Fox himself has been wishing to destroy any love that is even in the mildest way troubled or difficult. Now he is having second thoughts. Playing games with Mary is one thing, but losing her is something else. Difficulties with Daphne prove to be one thing as well, but actually losing her is something that Fox cannot stomach. In either case –Mary or Daphne –Fox will be experiencing failure and loss all over again. In the past, his fiancée leaving was something out of his control. Now, the future with Daphne and Mary is in his hands.

Discussion Question 1

While Daphne believes the creative process may have made Fox insane, Fox argues that he is not crazy. What is the argument that Fox uses for his sanity? In your opinion, is Fox crazy? Justify your opinion.

Discussion Question 2

Why does Fox find it horrific that he may have slit Mary’s throat? Why is he so relieved to learn that it was merely fiction?



Discussion Question 3

Why do you believe the stories that Fox and Mary are telling are becoming more vague and less direct with respect to Fox and Mary?

Vocabulary

prescribed, overtures, insinuations, voracious, bemused, vehemently, listlessly, jovially, delinquent, impervious, philanthropic



Section 3: Pages 136– 200

Summary

(Untitled Chapter) – Mr. and Mrs. Fox argue before hosting a dinner party, while Mary Foxe watches through the window. Mr. Fox insists Mrs. Fox wear her wedding ring to keep up appearances for their friends, while Mrs. Fox does not wish to wear it. She argues that it gives her swelling and rashes. Outside, Mary tells Mr. Fox he is not likely to change. Mr. Fox says he is not. He explains he is currently working on a story about an accountant who goes out driving and running over women, mainly hookers, to relieve stress. Mary counters that Fox cannot see that he is building a world. Fox replies that people read their own logic into stories, seeing what they want to see and believing things that make sense to them. Mary argues that it matters how someone dies. Fox apologizes for wasting Mary's time and asks her if she wants to stop playing. As the guests begin to arrive, Fox and Mary notice that Mr. Pizarsky and his wife are among them. Mary notices Mr. Fox and Pizarsky casting glances at one another over Mrs. Fox, which leads Mary to wonder if Mr. Fox considers a rival.

What Happens Next – Yelena, a Ukrainian woman in her late fifties, dies of cardiac arrest on the plane back to London from New York. Since Miss Mary Foxe has taken cough syrup to help her sleep through the flight, she does not realize that Yelena (who is sitting next to her) has died until Yelena is being taken away. Miss Foxe begins to cry. A handsome, older passenger named Saint John Fox comforts her. Fox reveals he is a psychiatrist. He is on his way home after presenting a paper. He has an interest in fugue state patients, but he is not allowed to discuss whether he is working with any such patients. Both Fox and Miss Foxe wonder if they are somehow distantly related due to their names. When they arrive in London, Fox leaves his card and number with Miss Foxe so she can call him to let him know she is okay. Miss Foxe accepts the card and calls the move bold. Fox asks if it is too bold, then walks away. Miss Foxe believes Fox is married, so she leaves his business card in the taxi she takes, but the driver notices this and calls her back to grab it.

At home, Miss Foxe goes through her mail. Among it is a letter from her father, addressed to Miel Shaw. Her father apologizes for writing to her since he knows she does not like him. He explains that he is dying of colon cancer in the prison hospice. He asks for a visit or a call, just to know someone else is there. Miss Foxe's childhood was horrible because of her father, so she knows struggles with the choice of what to do. She begins to examine Dr. Fox's card and wonders if a fugue state is coming on her. She recalls how after her parents had split and her mother was living with a new boyfriend, her father had stabbed and killed her mother when she came by the house to pick up some things. Miss Foxe is still haunted by her father's reasoning. He killed her because her mother was taking her away from her. Miss Foxe is still grateful, however, to have been taken in by her cousin Jonas and his family.



Miss Foxe calls Jonas, now studying to be a priest, to talk about Yelena's death and the letter from her father. Miss Foxe's family encourages her to go and see her father. In the morning, she looks up Fox online and discovers his wife, Daphne, had committed suicide some years before. Miss Foxe then calls Dr. Fox, and the two arrange to meet up soon. Miss Foxe's memories begin to blur the present and the past. Reality seems warped. Miss Foxe often loses her short-term memory, forgetting what she is doing or where she is going. She has dinner with Dr. Fox; the two go back to his hotel room. They end up kissing, and Miss Foxe asks if Dr. Fox killed his wife. Dr. Fox smiles. Miss Foxe says that she has been waiting for a man like him. She puts his hands around her throat, but he tells her to stop it. The two then have sex, after which Miss Foxe apologizes for her earlier behavior.

Miss Foxe later speaks with Jonah, who is angry that Miss Foxe has been out of touch. He explains her father has died and that he will be cremated after Miss Foxe views the body. Jonas goes with her to make it easier. Miss Foxe later begins to think that her family was a mistake, including her. She tells Dr. Fox she thinks she is going to have to go. Fox tells her to come visit him at his new home in the country, which she decides to do.

When Miss Foxe visits, the entire house is newly remodeled but largely unfurnished. Dr. Fox tells Miss Foxe that he tried to help his wife and that he had nothing to do with her death. She will be sleeping in Daphne's old room, which has a vase of foxglove flowers. She and Dr. Fox then have sex, after which time Miss Foxe imagines what it must have been like for Daphne in her final moments. This sexually excites Miss Foxe, who suddenly realizes she has been masturbating.

Miss Foxe and Dr. Fox go for a long walk in the country the next morning. While Dr. Fox works in his study that evening, Miss Foxe goes through Daphne's old things. Among them is Daphne's suicide note, where she says she has drunk bleach. Miss Foxe then reads the Bible, coming to focus on a passage in Luke where an unclean spirit will return to the house where he came out, with seven spirits more wicked than himself. The rocking chair in the room begins to rock. The rocking startles Miss Foxe. Dr. Fox then finishes work, and he and Miss Foxe have sex. Afterwards, Miss Foxe asks where all the furniture in the house is. Dr. Fox explains it is in the basement, then consents to bringing it all out and arranging it with Miss Foxe. They go swimming the next day, and Miss Foxe realizes she is happy.

Dr. Fox then arranges a dinner party with four friends, for which Miss Foxe goes out to buy the food. Back at Fox's, Miss Foxe notices a number of dead birds, all on their backs, around the house. After turning on the gas oven, she almost passes out from the fumes. Suddenly, she feels that she is without a purpose. It is then that the ghost of Daphne arrives. She tells Miss Foxe that she is okay and that Miss Foxe will have a good thing with Dr. Fox if she does not mess it up. Daphne also tells Miss Foxe that it was not Dr. Fox's fault for her suicide. Daphne urges Miss Foxe to make sure Dr. Fox knows this. Daphne then leaves.



Analysis

As the game continues, and as the lines between what is real and what is imagined continue to blur, in another story, Mary must deal with the death of her father in “What Happens Next” while growing closer to Dr. Fox. Mary notes that the dead and the living can creep up on a person when they aren’t expecting it –in this case, in both death and in love. Memory by way of her father, and the future by way of Dr. Fox, begin to work at Mary’s mind, confusing her already uncertain state. This demonstrates just how influential the past and the future can be on a person, and can warp reality. Yet again, the line between reality and fiction is blurred as the vagueness of previous stories disappears for a closer examination of the hearts and souls of Fox and Foxe.

Mary continues to argue that Fox cannot see he is building a world –a world that necessarily exists, if only in the realm of fiction, because Fox created it. To those characters in the novel, the world is real. To the reader, the world becomes real in a sense –just the way that Mary has become real to Daphne. Slowly, Fox is being made to understand what Mary is speaking of. Mary’s attitude toward Fox has become less antagonistic, while Fox’s attitude toward Mary is softening.

The theme of identity once again becomes crucial here. (Also note that Dr. Fox is studying fugue states –a kind of reversible amnesia relating to personal identity.) In this instance, Mary and Daphne might be replaced for one another. Mary comes to realize that she is truly happy with Fox; Daphne comes to realize she does indeed love Fox, and does not want to lose him. At the same time, Fox might be Mary and Daphne, and Mary and Daphne might be Fox: Fox, who looks for the slightest pretense to throw away a relationship out of fear of getting hurt is very much like Mary, who is ready to commit suicide.

Suicide comes to represent the death of a relationship or marriage. Metaphorically, Daphne, the dead wife (as Mary) tells Mary (as Fox) that she can indeed be happy with Fox (as Daphne) so long as she does not mess things up and commit suicide (with suicide being the demise of Fox’s real-life marriage). The reader should also note once more that foxglove is in Daphne’s old room. This is a symbol of Fox’s broken heart, and it also symbolizes the healing that he will find through Mary.

As Mary has argued previously –from the start of the novel –there is reality in fiction. Her argument is valid. Fiction can be very real. It can affect that which is real by making points that matter in the real world.. Fox himself is coming to accept that what he writes does actually matter –just as what he does in real life matters. Where Fox is Fox in “What Happens Next,” Fox is able to move beyond the death of his wife to find real love with a new woman (in this case, Mary, but in real life, Daphne). Having realized this, the consequences for Fox, Mary, and Daphne will be immense as the novel moves into its next phase.



Discussion Question 1

What purpose does the near-suicide of Mary in “What Comes Next” serve? Interpret the characters of Fox, Mary, and Daphne as they relate to the context of the occurrence.

Discussion Question 2

Why do the identities of Fox, Mary, and Daphne seem so fluid in “What Comes Next”? For example, how and why does Mary come to represent Fox?

Discussion Question 3

Mary’s argument that there is reality in fiction surfaces once more in this section of the novel. In your opinion, is she correct about reality making a difference in fiction? Justify your reasoning.

Vocabulary

ineffectually, obscene, posh, malaise, paraphrase, insubstantial, ascertained, embellishments, malignant



Section 4: Pages 200 – 276

Summary

(Untitled Chapter) – Mr. Fox does his best to repair his relationship with Daphne, spending more time with her and teaching her how to drive. He brings her to the shore to see the lighthouse he owns. It was passed down through the family by his grandfather who won it in a game of cards. Daphne thinks the place looks evil, but she also thinks Mr. Fox must have loved the place as a kid. While Daphne looks through some old logbooks, Mr. Fox packs some books from the lighthouse cottage study that he wants to bring back with him. It is then that he sees Mary Foxe emerging from the sea. Mr. Fox tells her that he realizes they are both trying to fall in love through their game, but they are trying to do so without danger and pain. Mary tells Mr. Fox to turn to his wife, instead. Mr. Fox contends he would run away with Mary if she were real. Mary calls him cruel, but she says that she would like to be real. If she could be real, she would run away with Mr. Fox. Daphne then appears, saying it is getting dark and she is ready to go.

Hide, Seek – In Asyut, east of Cairo, Egypt, a very small boy is born. The boy's parents and the midwife believe the son will not be strong or capable, so they decide to do away with him by giving him to a woman dressed in black who says she is seeking a seeker. A girl is born in Osogbo, heavy, healthy, and a quick learner. However, her parents realize soon the girl is too docile. She has no mind of her own. When the girl begins to follow a street vendor home not knowing any better, the girl's father brutally beats her in the hopes that she will feel something. The girl merely apologizes. The boy grows to be appear confident, though his eyes betray sadness. The boy's adoptive mother travels the world with the boy, collecting pictures of body parts and putting them on display in the house to make a woman. At last, the mother finds a worthy face. It is the face of a girl who has been butchered with her family by the neighbors after being told to do so by a radio broadcast. The only thing now missing is a heart.

Meanwhile, the Osogbo girl feels the pull of her open, heavy heart, into which things rush in and out. People prey on her kindness and goodness. They take advantage of her. The girl decides she must hide her heart somewhere until she is strong enough to carry its weight. She leaves her heart in a wall in the shrine overseen by her ancestors. The boy, meanwhile, searches for the heart that is missing as the girl becomes lighter and happier. She only cares about her heart once, but she overcomes its call. The boy's mother declares the heart in the shrine is the heart that is needed and sends the boy out to collect it as he is a seeker. The boy brings the collection of body parts to the shrine and the heart. He waits for the heart's owner before taking it. The owner never comes, even though the boy urges the heart to call for its owner.

(Untitled Chapter) – Daphne does not know what to do to make her husband like her, even when she tries to engage him in intellectual conversations. Her parents love her for who she is, but she struggles with the idea that her husband does not. Daphne



admits to having fallen for Saint John Fox because he is unlike the boys from her childhood, such as John Pizarsky and Sam Lomax. Daphne wishes for a common ground on which she could meet her husband. Daphne blames herself for the distance between them. Since she was a young teenager, she wanted to be with a man who was her superior. She recalls having met Fox at the party of Clara Lee, a family friend. She fell for him very quickly because he was difficult to understand. Now this frustrates her because the same trait which drew her to him causes her to remain unsettled about the existence of Mary Foxe. She continues to wonder whether Mary is real or imagined. It is difficult because Daphne can even hear Mary sometimes. However, some experiences such as once feeling a hand on her knee in her husband's study (which turned out to be her own hand), make her feel like she is merely imagining things.

Eventually, Daphne finds her husband's comparison list of reasons why he loves her and reasons why he loves the fictional Mary. This angers Daphne because she has to compete with an invented woman. She realizes that she can, perhaps, give her husband a child, which Mary could not do. It is then that Mary suddenly appears out of thin air, rising up from the carpet. This terrifies Daphne. Suddenly, the doorbell rings. Mary disappears. At the door is Pizarsky, who invites Daphne out to play croquet with him, his wife Greta, and some friends. Daphne quickly agrees.

My Daughter the Racist – The narrator's eight year-old daughter, who has turned tomboy to hang out with the local boys, declares she is a racist. The narrator and her daughter live with the narrator's mother-in-law, since she and her own mother have bad history, and since her husband, a university professor, is dead. The village is watched over by soldiers, whom the local men and boys glare at and hate. The narrator's daughter announces to her mother that she is racist against the soldiers. A local man named Bilal, who is interested in the narrator and has proposed to her several times, comes to visit. Suddenly, the narrator's daughter rushes out to hurl insults and stones at passing soldiers, causing the narrator to rush after her. A very thin soldier approaches the narrator's daughter, and offers her a stick of gum which the girl refuses. The soldier calls the daughter very brave, and says they will be leaving the following day, though more will come to take their place. The soldier shakes the daughter's hand, and the daughter tells him he is okay.

The encounter makes the narrator's daughter a hero among the other kids, and the talk of the town. The thin soldier later comes to visit while he is off-duty several times. The narrator's daughter is happy to see him. The soldier says he might use her name one day for his own daughter. When the narrator later asks her daughter if she is still racist against soldiers, the daughter responds that she doesn't know what her mother is talking about. The closeness between them makes the girl an outcast with her friends, and many of the local villagers turn away from the narrator. The pressure causes the narrator to write an angry letter to the soldier, forbidding any more visits. Her daughter is heartbroken by this, telling the narrator that mothers have no feelings and are enemies of progress. The narrator responds that the friendship her daughter has made will make friendships in the future possible, and will make the world safer because of it.



(Untitled Chapter) – Now living in America, Mr. Fox considers growing a beard, but can't remember the last time he grew a beard, or how long it took to grow. He goes to the library, but after enough girls begin to check him out, he leaves. Mr. Fox drives around for hours then, trying to figure out where to go or what to do, knowing that back home, his wife has become difficult to read lately. For example, he has found a book entitled "Happy Husband", and she has encouraged him to write a book about her being flirtatiously combative with him. Meanwhile, Mary has disappeared. No matter what Fox does, he cannot get her to appear. Meanwhile, while out and about, Fox listens to countless discussions about another European war. Back home, he finds Daphne and Pivarsky discussing fairy tales. Both have been drinking, and their closeness concerns Fox, so he listens in.

Pivarsky tells a fairy tale about a man named Fitcher who went about with a basket begging for food. A young woman jumps into the basket and goes home to be the man's wife. Pivarsky relates that each woman the man married was given the test of not looking in a room, or being chopped to bits. Pivarsky explains the newest wife was terrified, so had to work hard to make sense of reality, the past, the present, the future, and so on, and is able to turn herself into a bird and escape. Daphne considers the wife must have gone insane, and says she thinks she is going crazy herself. Pivarsky asks Daphne if she knows the story of Mr. Fox. Daphne says she does not. Pivarsky says it is an English fairy tale which involves Mr. Fox and Lady Mary. Suddenly, Mary appears to Fox, asking him to come away, but Fox ignores her to listen to the story, willing her to lose her voice so he can listen.

However, Pivarsky and Daphne hear him. They say hello. Daphne asks for ice, and to host a luncheon for underprivileged inner-city girls on Wednesday so she can join Bea Wainwright's Culture Club. Mr. Fox agrees to this. Back in his study, Mr. Fox discovers the comparison list between Daphne and Mary, and realizes Mary is now writing things down. Mr. Fox realizes Daphne must have seen the list. Mr. Fox tells Mary such a thing was childish, and to never do it again. He then tears up the list. He begins to reflect on whether or not Christ rose from the dead; and realizes that he is not capable of love. He begins to wonder if love even exists, or if it is just covetousness. Mr. Fox can feel something terrible in the world coming on, and that too many people are actively trying to make it happen.

Analysis

In the story "What Comes Next," Fox comes to realize that he does not want to lose Daphne. For the first time, Fox tries to reach out to his wife. Daphne's love for Fox is apparent, as she struggles to find ways to make her husband like her. Fox and Daphne can be compared to two ships passing in the night, seeking to establish contact with one another. Both Fox and Daphne are also like the girl and the Seeker searching for the heart in "Hide, Seek," as both are looking for love in one another. They are growing closer.



Their efforts to find one another become muddled and further confused as reality and fiction cross paths. Daphne comes across the comparison list which contrasts Mary and Daphne. Daphne is terrified to think that she is competing with an invented woman – essentially Fox’s dream woman –to which she believes she will never measure up, let alone outdo. For Daphne, this is worse than her husband actually having an affair, because it means that Mary is the ideal that Daphne is not. Mary composed the list, not Fox. Actually, Fox condemned Mary for making the list.

Fox’s distress at the list and that Daphne seems to be moving closer to Pivarsky (a real person) compel him to begin to doubt everything around him –from religion to love itself. Fox temporarily considers his feelings over Pivarsky and Daphne to be jealousy. However, his feelings constitute love, which encompasses the fear of losing the beloved. The reader should note the scene where Fox nervously watches Daphne with Pivarsky and how he refuses to come away with Mary, in favor of seeing what happens to Daphne. Fox not only realizes that he loves Daphne and fears losing her, but he understands that Daphne is trying to make an effort in their marriage. The book “Happy Husband” is important in this section.

Perhaps the vaguest story –and the most seemingly unrelated –is “My Daughter the Racist.” At first glance, this story does not seem as though it should be included in the novel, but the relevant subtleties are strong. The story essentially recounts a little girl changing her mind about the soldiers in her village. She goes from hating them to loving one. The girl is heartbroken when her mother tells the soldier to leave them alone. Fox is the little girl; the soldier represents Daphne and love in general; and the mother sending away the soldier is the loss of love in the little girl’s/Fox’s life. Once again, metaphor is immensely important, and the fluidity of identity is critical.

Meanwhile, reality continues to break down for Daphne as she attempts to grow closer to her husband. As she comes to more deeply understand him –including his past and his creative process –she begins to realize how very real fiction is to Fox, even if Fox himself did not previously recognize realism in fiction. Daphne herself begins to experience Mary in ways that her husband has experienced Mary –speaking to her, feeling her presence, and believing she is felt by Mary. Fiction is a very powerful thing because it can contain truth and reality. Pivarsky’s strange and disturbing story is a testimony to searching for the truth when reality becomes vague.

Discussion Question 1

How do the short stories “Hide, Seek” and “My Daughter the Racist” reflect the struggles of Fox, Mary, and Daphne? Why do you believe these stories appear more subtle in their revelation of the truth than more recent stories?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Fox worry about Daphne spending so much time with Pivarsky –especially given the time he himself spends with Mary? What is Fox’s reaction to seeing Daphne so close with Pivarsky?

Discussion Question 3

How does Daphne attempt to grow closer to her husband and to make him happy? Why does this matter so much to her? What happens as a result of Daphne trying to understand things from her husband’s point of view?

Vocabulary

unassailable, docility, remonstrated, bereavement, inexhaustible, calamitous, tyrannical, loftily, haughtily, tactical, exaggeration, inscrutable, presumptuous, languid



Section 5: Pages 277 – 324

Summary

31 Rules for Loves (Circa 1186) – This section presents 31 rules from “The Art of Courtship” by Andreas Cappelanus. The rules include the following: marriage is not an excuse for not loving; one who is not jealous cannot love; no one can be bound by a double love; good character alone makes any man worthy of love; a man in love is always apprehensive; and, nothing forbids one man from being loved by two women, or one woman by two men.

(Untitled Chapter) – Daphne stays in bed to see if her husband will notice. She wonders what he will do if he does notice her. Mr. Fox works. Mary arrives, completely naked, to visit Daphne and to tell her that Fox will probably be at work all night. Mary also believes she is naked as a punishment. Daphne gets her some clothes. Daphne wonders if she will lose her husband to a younger woman, or Mary. Both Daphne and Mary admit to loving Mr. Fox. They decide to go out to dinner together. Daphne tells her husband she is with Greta. This makes Fox worry that Pivarsky might be going along, too.

At dinner, Mary gets plenty of looks from the other men. Mary is introduced to friends of Mr. Fox, the Comyns and the Nesbits, as his second cousin.. Mary encourages Daphne to write a book. Mary explains she has existed since Mr. Fox was in the war and that his life after the war was very basic and very poor. Mary notes that over the years she has done her own reading. She says that if a female character is rendered evil, it is morally important to kill them in the story. Mary goes on to say that she and Fox have been playing with one another in stories as though with matches and gasoline.

At home, Mr. Fox confronts Daphne with her lie about dinner, saying Greta called while Greta was supposed to be at dinner. Daphne finds it amusing to think that Fox thinks she has been to dinner with Pivarsky. She then goes to bed in the guestroom, but she is unable to sleep as she keeps thinking of how incredibly jealous she is of Mary. Daphne then gives up and goes down to her husband’s study, where she asks him to read his newest work to her. He agrees. Daphne then confesses her love to her husband, who asks her if they can start all over again and make things right. Daphne agrees to this. They end up kissing and laughing. They go to the lighthouse the next morning, where Mary has left a note saying she has gone away for a while. She is on her way to Virginia. The note is in Fox’s handwriting, which makes Daphne believe a break from Mary will be good for a while.

Some Foxes, I – The little girl and the little fox cub fear one another at first. Over time, they become used to one another. The young girl loves mysteries and secret knowledge. She lives with her widowed mother and older sister in a house at the edge of the woods. The fox grows to be all about business, traversing the woods and getting to know how things work, but the cub is fascinated by the girl. Because of her, the fox comes to know beauty in addition to business. To thank her, he collects berries in a leaf



for the girl, but the fox notices the girl is going out more and more with her older sister as the girl becomes interested in young men. The fox leaves the berries for the girl after she has had a falling out with her latest young man. The berries are delicious. The girl wishes to thank and know the fox. When the girl cannot find the fox, she begins to cry – something sad which is still beautiful to the fox. A search party sets out to find the girl, who manages briefly to touch the fox before the search party arrives. The fox knows such loveliness could never last and returns to fox business.

Some Foxes, II – A gray fox, responsible for turning hen hutches into bloodbaths, constantly seeks to avoid angry people who hunt such foxes down. This fox has no one. The narrator explains there is a difference between being alone by choice and being alone because everyone has been taken away. The gray fox decides he no longer wishes to be a fox, so he heads to a farm where a woman commands her dogs after him. The dogs do not attack because they know the fox is sick. Rather than kill the fox, the farm woman feeds the fox. The woman then shoots after the fox, urging it to live and run. The woman explains she has come to love the fox after seeing the shape of a star in its white fur on its head. The gray fox comes so steal a dictionary from the woman, which confuses him because he can't understand the book at first. Slowly, over time, words come to the fox. He returns with the dictionary to speak to the woman. The fox explains he no longer wishes to be a fox. Over time, the fox learns to behave as a human. He slowly turns into a man. Years pass, and the changed fox and the woman forget how long they have been together.

Some Foxes, III – The narrator says there is one more wicked fox to talk about, but she will not do so because the reader is tired of hearing about foxes.

Analysis

The effect of the games that Fox wished to play is not what he originally anticipated. While Fox had expected to prove a point and emerge victorious against Mary, he has subsequently learned something far more valuable –about love and reality. He emerged victorious because he has managed to bring about love in real life with his wife all over again. Fox has learned that there is indeed reality in fiction. What he writes does matter. It matters not only to readers, but to his wife, who has had the traumatic experience of contending and competing with an invented woman.

What is terrifying to Daphne at first is that the woman she is competing with – supposedly imagined –becomes real for her as well. Mary becomes a living, breathing person with whom Daphne interacts. This demonstrates that Daphne has entered – knowingly or unwittingly –into her husband's world. A halfway place is determined: Mary meets Daphne toward reality, as Mary wants to become real; Daphne meets Mary toward fiction, since Mary is not real. Both women vie for the heart of Fox.

Interestingly, Fox tells Mary he would run away with her if she were real. Mary tells Fox to stay with his wife. As Mary is essentially a part of Fox himself, this conversation is the self-realization of Fox that he needs to turn to his wife, to Daphne. All of the lessons



from the stories that Fox and Mary –essentially Fox himself – have been telling have been an evolution of thought and attitude toward love and toward Daphne over time. Problems can be worked out in fiction; Fox’s broken heart from the past is a problem worked out by invention, consideration, and truth in fiction.

Daphne, whom Fox had previously considered to be distant and just like all the other women he has had to deal with, is determined not to be so. Daphne is different. Daphne is Fox’s true love. It has taken a metaphorical journey into his soul through fiction writing for Fox to be able to understand that Daphne is the woman he is meant to be with. As such, he writes Mary out of the picture –but he does not kill her. He sends her off on an adventure with free will, so that she essentially becomes real, and her own person.

The novel concludes with three short stories about foxes, who metaphorically represent Fox, Daphne, and Mary Foxe. Each fox represents all three characters. For example, in the first story, the fox seeking beauty represents Mr. Fox as he seeks love. It represents Mary as she seeks to become real and Daphne as she seeks to make her husband happy. Likewise, the girl in the first fox story and the woman in the second story represent Daphne. The fox in the second story becomes a new person through learning to love, just as Mr. Fox makes the same transformation.

Discussion Question 1

Explain the transformation of Mr. Fox throughout the novel. What is he like when the novel begins? How is he when the novel ends? Is Mary, Daphne, or Mr. Fox himself responsible for the transformation? Justify your reasoning.

Discussion Question 2

Is Mary Foxe real? Justify your reasoning.

Discussion Question 3

Fox argues early in the novel that fiction is not real. It is just a lot of games. He says that people choose to read things into fiction. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Vocabulary

betrothal, mischievous, scenario, inconspicuous, excess, bewildered

Characters

Mr. Fox

Mr. Saint John Fox is a famous writer. While his age is never given, it is noted that he is older than Mary and Daphne. He is very committed to his work as a writer, even if he does not take what he writes very seriously at first. A veteran of World War I, Fox was deeply affected by life in the trenches. Upon his arrival back home, his fiancée left him. To cope with the depression, Fox turned to fiction and the invention of his character Mary Foxe to see him through the worst parts of his life, until he married Daphne.

In the present, Fox worries about Daphne's distance and is ready to give up on his marriage. This is reflected by the violence and blood in his short stories. These are the elements which Mary Foxe, his muse, returns to criticize. Mary contends that Fox has become a villain and must recognize the truth. She says that reality can be found in fiction and that fiction has an effect on people. Fox then engages in a mental game of stories with Mary, expecting to prove her wrong. He comes to realize that he must take his work more seriously and that he must recommit to Daphne and his marriage, which he successfully does.

Mary Foxe

Mary Foxe is a young woman of about twenty-one. Fox creates her after World War I and after being left by his fiancée. Mary, like Fox, is a writer. In some ways, she becomes the manifestation of his gentler, more loving side. He battles this part of himself throughout the novel for fear that his current marriage may end up like his almost-marriage. Mary essentially acts as Fox's conscience, urging him to recognize that there is reality in his writing and that his writing has real-world implications. She also encourages Fox to recommit to his wife, after which time Fox sets Mary free through his writing.

Daphne Fox

Daphne Fox is the wife of the writer, Mr. Fox. She struggles throughout the novel as she attempts to grow closer to her husband, despite the distance between them and with the thought that her husband is having an affair with an imaginary woman. As Daphne comes to understand her husband, she recognizes how the fiction he writes can be real. She also comes to understand that her husband is much gentler and more loving than he has been allowing himself to be in the past. This, in turn, renews Daphne's desire to close the distance between them and to recommit to her husband.



Pivarsky

Pivarsky is a friend of the Foxes, who has married Daphne's closest friend, Greta. Pivarsky appears both in the real world and in some of the stories. He grows very close to Daphne in both worlds. He serves as a symbol of jealousy for Fox, who worries about how much time Pivarsky and Daphne spend together. Pivarsky tells Daphne a fairy tale with a message about the importance of discerning reality and fiction.

What Happens Next Fox

What Happens Next (WHN) Fox is a psychiatrist in the short story "What Happens Next." WHN Fox is a reflection of both Fox and Daphne in real life. WHN Fox, reeling after the death of his wife, WHN Daphne, opens his heart to love from WHN Mary. Here, WHN Fox represents Fox himself. At the same time, WHN Fox also comes to represent Daphne in her struggle to find love with her husband.

What Happens Next Daphne

What Happens Next (WHN) Daphne is the deceased wife of WHN Fox in the short story "What Happens Next." WHN Daphne has died as a result of suicide, which she says was not WHN Fox's fault. WHN Daphne can be seen as representative of Fox, who is on the verge of committing suicide. WHN Daphne's urging of WHN Mary not to give up can be seen as indicative of Fox urging himself not to give up on the marriage.

What Happens Next Mary Foxe

What Happens Next (WHN) Mary Foxe is a young woman dealing with the heartache of her estranged father's death when she falls for WHN Fox in the story "What Happens Next." WHN Mary is saddened, however, by the idea that her happiness may only be temporary. When she attempts suicide, WHN Daphne urges her to stop. She tells WHN Mary that she will be happy, provided she does not mess up things with WHN Fox. In this instance, WHN Mary comes to stand in for Fox, who will be happy in marriage with Daphne, provided he does not mess things up.

Reynardine

Reynardine is a murderer who appears in the stories "Like This" and "The Training at Madame De Silentio's." Reynardine comes to represent the destructive impulse of Fox. Reynardine is set loose in Fox's writing by Fox's heartache and jealousy, which are represented by the characters of Charles and Charlie.



Charles and Charlie

Charles and Charlie are characters who factor into the story “The Training at Madame De Silentio’s.” In the story, both Charles and Charlie are juvenile delinquents who cannot seem to get their acts straight. They come to release Reynardine from his prison. Charles and Charlie are seen as metaphorical for the heartache that Fox has felt. Charles and Charlie, as heartaches, make possible the destruction Fox has set loose through his fiction.

Andreas Cappelanus

Andreas Cappelanus is a Twelfth Century writer who in 1186 pens the book “The Art of Courtly Love,” from which thirty-one rules for lovers are extracted and copied in the novel. Andreas is a master of understanding love with all of its agony, jealousy, happiness, and beauty. Andreas has many important things to say about love. For example, he says that he who is jealous cannot love and that marriage is no excuse not to love. These observations are directly reflected in the novel. One such instance is when Fox is jealous of his wife (Daphne) and Pivarsky.



Symbols and Symbolism

Typewriter

A typewriter is used by Mary as she struggles as a young writer in “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold.” She comes to consider her typewriter. to be like a city with no inhabitants. The keys and machinery of the typewriter are compared to an empty city and its buildings –the promise of a community but without the people to make it a community. The same is true of the worlds that writers create. There is always potential for something more, for a city full of life and the living. However, this is only true if the writer creates it as such. The writer comes to exist in a world he or she has created. The writer can interact with that world and its fictitious inhabitants. Mary herself is one such aspect of creation that has been made real. When a writer puts so much "self" into a character, exhaustion takes an emotional and physical toll on the writer.

Short Stories

Short stories are the method by which Fox and Mary Foxe come to compete with one another through the course of the novel in the attempt to outdo one another and prove their own respective points. Fox wishes to demonstrate that stories are just stories and have no real world bearing. Mary contends that they do. Mary also wants Fox to focus more on love rather than on manifesting his broken heart through the deaths of his female characters, who are always at fault. As the novel progresses, each story comes to change Fox. He moves toward taking writing seriously and love.

Foxglove

The foxglove is a flower whose name origin is unknown. The flower has been medicinally used for heart conditions such as heart failure. The foxglove appears throughout the novel when the heart of a character is either at its weakest or its strongest. When the character is weakest, the foxglove appears to symbolize healing. When a character is strongest, the foxglove appears to symbolize a healed and happy heart. Its appearance when Mary is at her most vulnerable in “Be Bold” is fitting, for she is at her lowest. The recognition of the foxglove comes when she does not recognize her surroundings and feels brokenhearted. In “Fitcher’s Bird,” Fitcher gives Mary a bouquet of foxglove when Mary is most hopeful about the promise of love.

Nightingale in a gold-painted cage

A nightingale in a gold-painted cage is given as a gift to Mary by Fitcher in “Fitcher’s Bird”. The nightingale comes to represent Mary, both in the story and as a creation of Fox. Mary in the story feels like a bird trapped in a cage because she cannot find and be freed by love, no matter how beautiful her surroundings might be. As a creation of



Fox, Mary cannot find happiness or freedom no matter how lovingly the world into which Fox has created her may be.

The White Cat

“The White Cat” is an old fairy tale in which a white cat is beheaded to transform into a beautiful girl. Mary, in the short story “Fitcher’s Bird”, hopes that she may be transformed as well, and so asks Fitcher to decapitate her in the same fashion. Instead of being transformed, Mary is killed. This represents the danger between being unable to tell reality from fantasy.

Fountain pens

Fountain pens are given to the Yoruba woman by the woman in blue in the story “Like This”. The fountain pens are seen as the source, or fountain, of the worlds a writer creates. The fountain pen puts into existence that which the writer imagines or dreams, and therefore represents promise and potential. The Yoruba woman, being given the pens, comes to represent Fox himself, who has the ability to determine the promise and potential of his own future.

Comparison list

A comparison list is written by Fox as though he was Mary. The comparison list compares and contrasts Daphne and Mary, who they are, and what they mean and relate to Fox. Daphne finds the list, and is horrified to imagine that she is having to compete with an ideal, imagined woman. Fox later chastises Mary for having written the list at all, and tears it up. The list has done its damage, however, as Daphne reels from having found it, almost driving her away from Fox but in the end turning her back toward him.

Happy Husband

“Happy Husband” is a self-help book for wives seeking to make their husbands happy that Fox finds in the laundry one day. The book belongs to Daphne, who is desperately trying to find a way to make her marriage work. Fox comes to understand that this is a testament to Daphne’s effort to make things better, and so warms his heart toward her and helps convince him to make things work with Daphne.

The Art of Courtly Love

“The Art of Courtly Love” is an 1186 book by Andreas Cappelanus, which offers wisdom, guidance, and rules for true love. Thirty-one rules are extracted from the book, which reflect the contents of the entire novel itself. For example, Cappelanus notes that love is



not possible without jealousy –and Fox clearly becomes jealous of Pivarsky while Daphne becomes jealous of Mary. Another rule notes that marriage is no excuse not to love –and as the reader comes to discover, Fox and Daphne repair their marriage by the end of the novel by falling in love with one another all over again.

Farewell Note

A farewell note from Mary is written by Fox and left behind for Fox and Daphne to find. The letter explains that Mary is headed off on her own to explore, adventure, and discover, and is currently in Virginia. With Mary going away, Fox is able to focus on reigniting his love and marriage to Daphne. Daphne herself is thrilled with the farewell note, for it means she has won against the dream girl.

Settings

Fiction

The settings in “Mr. Fox” are fluid and frequently change frequently. At one point, Fox and Mary live in London, while at another point without warning, they live in New York, while at another point they are close to the shore. Likewise, the fluidity of the settings in the novel speak to fiction itself being a setting –the imagined and created realm that Fox has brought into existence. As such, the settings based on real-world places change and shift as needed by the story, as does the fictional realm that Fox and Mary, and Fox and his invented characters, inhabit. This blurs the lines between reality and fiction in general, and underscores themes of reality and creation to confuse readers, just as Fox, Daphne, and Mary come to be confused by the fluidity of fiction: there is not necessarily any solid ground on which to firmly stand.

Time

In keeping with fiction as a setting, time also emerges as something of a setting. Just as the settings themselves vary, so too do the times and eras in which the stories themselves take place. Some of the stories, such as “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold” rely heavily on dates as a setting. “Be Bold” relies on the mid-to-late 1930s for the sending of letters through the mail between Fox and Mary, creating the antagonistic and impersonal relationship between them, and setting the stage for darker times to come. Stories like “My Daughter the Racist” seem to take place in a far more modern time, perhaps even contemporary. It is suspected the setting of this particular story’s time might be in the Middle East or Africa in the 2000s-2010s. The intentional confusion of dates underscores the blurring of reality, and the fluidity of the novel and the short stories in it.

London

London is the capital city of England, and is the city to which Mary and Fox are journeying in the story “What Happens Next”. London is a place of sadness and overwhelming aloneness for Mary, especially when she must confront a difficult past with her father as her father dies. It is from London that Mary later travels to meet Fox at his countryside home. Leaving London is representative of Mary leaving her past, and her sadness, behind.

New York

New York is a major city and state in the United States of America. For at least some of the novel, Fox and Daphne live in New York. In keeping with the theme and setting of fiction, at some points, it appears as if Fox and Daphne live in the city, proper, while at



other points, it seems they live out in the country. In the short stories, especially “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold,” New York is the primary setting of the novel, as the fictionalized form of the fictional Mary lives in New York as a nanny, but aspires to be a writer. It is there in New York that Mary likens her typewriter to an empty city waiting to be populated.

The lighthouse

The lighthouse and its cottage are located on the shore, presumably in New York. The lighthouse was won by Fox’s grandfather in a card game, and passed down through the family. In the present, Fox and Daphne travel to the lighthouse and cottage to enjoy the afternoon and so Fox can pick up some books to bring back home from the cottage’s library. While at the lighthouse, Fox and Daphne discover a note from Mary saying she has left head out into the world on her own. The lighthouse serves as a beacon for both Fox and Daphne bringing them to each other in love, just as the lighthouse safely guides ships home to safe harbor in storms.



Themes and Motifs

Creation

Creation is an important theme in the novel “Mr. Fox” by Helen Oyeyemi. Thematically, creation involves bringing something into existence which did not exist before –in this case, through the written word. The act and process of creation and creativity in turn heavily influence not only the plot of the novel, but the themes of reality, identity, love, and metaphor as well.

Helen Oyeyemi herself acts as a God-like figure in her crafting of the novel “Mr. Fox”, giving life to a world and the characters of Fox, Daphne, and Mary Foxe, and creating the world in which these characters operate. The characters themselves are immensely contingent upon creation in that creation becomes the focal point of their lives. As a writer, Fox creates. As a character, Mary is a creation dependent upon Fox. As Fox’s wife, Daphne is an inspirational part of Fox’s creative process.

Even the characters that Fox and Mary create in order to outdo one another deal with creation. Mary, as a character in “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold” is an aspiring world, creating worlds and characters in her short stories. She comes to consider her typewriter an empty city waiting to be populated by a people and a community which she creates. Likewise, the Yoruba woman in “Like This” is given fountain pens to write and to create, with the fountain pens themselves speaking to the promise and potential of creation.

The investment a writer must make in the things he or she creates is also immense. Creation is an immense act of love in which life is both inspiration and transcribed. As Mary argues, there is truth in created fiction, and there is much of reality in this creation –which also influences and impacts the real world. Because a writer is so invested in creation, the creation itself becomes real. When done effectively, what has been created by one becomes real to another, such as is the case when Mary becomes real to Daphne later in the novel. When a reader invests his or herself in the creation of another, the creation does indeed become real –again, such as the case with Daphne and Mary. Thus, creation blurs the lines between reality and fiction.

Reality

Reality is an important theme in the novel “Mr. Fox” by Helen Oyeyemi. Reality, thematically, has to do with existence which has, or has not been, invented, created, imagined, or believed to exist. Reality –that which does actually exist –is contrasted with fantasy –that which actually does not exist. Oyeyemi bends and blurs the limits and boundaries of reality and fantasy to such an extent in the novel that what appears to be real and what appears to be fiction is impossible to determine.



When the novel begins, the reader understands he or she is beginning a work of fiction and is therefore not real. Yet, in the fictional novel itself, what the reader believes to be fiction the characters believe to be real. To the reader, Fox is fictional; to Fox, Fox is real. As Mary argues but Fox initially denies, there is a tremendous amount of reality in fiction, and fiction can influence and determine that which is real. To Oyeyemi and the reader, the world created is both fictional and real –but to Fox, there is a clear distinction between the games he plays with fiction, and the reality as Mary understands it to be. Mary may be created, but the world in which she exists is very much real to her.

As noted in the theme of Creation, the act of creating fiction is a very real endeavor designed to create a world which did not previously exist, but which now exists –and is real per se –by way of having been written into existence. The emotional investment that writers put into the things which they create is an utterly immersive experience in which they themselves cannot distinguish real from invention. This is the case of Mary, a character clearly invented by Fox, but to which Fox speaks, responds, and treats as if she was actually real. This confusion of what is real and what is fiction is further confused in the novel by fluid settings, identities, and times, and by the short stories in which Fox, Mary, and Daphne appear either in fictionalized form based upon their real selves, or wholly in fictionalized form based upon their real selves.

To blur reality and fiction is dangerous, notes Pivarsky later on in the novel. Blurring reality and fiction has driven Fox away from his true love in Daphne, while Daphne struggles to compete with an invented woman to keep her husband. But as Daphne comes to better understand her husband, she also comes to better understand his creative impulse –and how his real past of heartache has affected both his fiction and his life. By understanding her husband, Mary becomes real to Daphne. By growing closer to his wife, Fox is able to send Mary away so that he might return to reality to be with the real woman who really loves him.

Identity

Identity is an important theme in the novel “Mr. Fox” by Helen Oyeyemi. Identity, thematically, includes that which forms a person’s being –everything from physical attributes such as age, eye color, skin color, height, weight, and so on, to who that individual is as a person, including his or her beliefs, ideas, dreams, hopes, fears, what they do for a living, and so on. In the novel, identity is fluid –meaning that identity is both something which cannot actually be determined, or is difficult to establish –as the themes of fiction, reality, and creation confuse who the characters as individuals actually are.

When the novel begins, identity seems relatively straightforward. Fox is a writer; Daphne is his wife; and Mary is a creation of Fox. Fox and Mary challenge one another to a contest of wills through short stories to prove the other is incorrect in their assumptions about the craft of writing and who they are seen to be. For example, Mary determines Fox’s identity to be that of a villain who would rather kill than love. Fox



disagrees –but the events of the novel and the unfolding of Fox’s past reveal him to be more of a tragic figure recoiling against heartbreak than an actual villain.

As reality and fiction blur in the novel, the stories that Fox and Mary become not only a battleground against one another, but confuse and blur their identities as well. For example, the very first story being told by Fox –“Dr. Lustucru” –is hijacked by Mary so that the ending is not what Fox had intended. When Fox comes to from the story, he is startled to see that he and Mary have switched places. In other stories, Fox and Mary alternatively war against each other or fall in love, depending on the situation in which they find themselves. In some stories, both struggle for control of the narrative to the extent that they themselves become disoriented and cannot remember what they were doing –such as Fox after the story “Fitcher’s Bird”. The three fox stories at the end of the novel likewise blur the identities of the characters, as each fox may alternatively be seen to incorporate aspects of each of the three primary characters –such as the fox seeking beauty in I which represents Fox in his seeking of love but may also be seen as Mary seeking the ability to become real or Daphne seeking to make her husband happy.

That a confusion of identities exists is reflective of the fact that Mary is a creation of Fox, and that much of the novel is a creation of Fox. Mary Foxe represents the more gentle, loving side of Fox, playing a feminine Foxe to the masculine Fox. In other words, Mary is Fox. Fox and Foxe represent a battle for the evolution of the writer Fox as he comes to take his writing more seriously, his marriage more seriously, and as he comes to understand that he himself is capable of loving again.

Love

Love is an important theme in the novel “Mr. Fox” by Helen Oyeyemi. Thematically, love comes in many forms, but it is primarily romantic love and creative love which are so important to the plot of the novel. Romantic love is something which Fox struggles, comes to cope with, and ultimately embraces, while creative love is something which Daphne struggles to understand, and comes to understand her husband all the better when she does.

When the novel begins, Fox is not a fan of romantic love. Still brokenhearted from his fiancée leaving him after World War I, Fox is inclined to be married but not to love, and not to trust. Mary confronts him with this fact, noting that he kills off all of his women, all of whom happen to be villainous in some way. Mary accuses Fox of being the real villain, but Fox does not see the situation this way. Fox himself loves Mary, as he later explains –and notes that he would run away with Mary if she was real. Mary –Fox’s own better self –urges him to remain with his wife, which he does. The two ultimately fall in love with one another and recommit to each other through their love and their marriage as both, in part, are jealous and fearful of losing the other.

The romantic love experience is reflected in the thirty-one rules of love extracted from the 1186 book “The Art of Courtship” by Andreas Cappelanus. These rules, observations, and advice for love reflect directly the experiences of Fox and Daphne.



Among the rules are that he who is not jealous cannot love (Fox grows jealous of Pivarsky spending so much time with Daphne) and that marriage is not an excuse not to love (Fox comes to truly fall in love with Daphne by the end of the novel, and the two recommit to one another with a loving marriage). This is largely possible due to Daphne's desire to better understand her husband and the love of his creative process.

To create is an act of passionate love. A writer invests himself immersively in the worlds and characters that he creates—as is the case with Fox. That which Fox creates is real to Fox, signified by his relationship with Mary. The love a writer pours into creation makes what fiction has been invented seem all the more real both to the creator, and to the reader. As Daphne comes to grow closer to her husband and to understand how much effort goes into creation—and as Daphne suspects Mary as a rival—Mary becomes real to her because she can sense the love her husband has put into his creation. It is a love for Mary that Fox ultimately gives to Daphne instead.

Metaphor

Metaphor is an important theme in the novel “Mr. Fox” by Helen Oyeyemi. A metaphor is a way of comparing (or even contrasting) two things, or in the use of one thing standing to represent, symbolize, or reflect something else. The novel is replete with metaphors, with the novel itself being a metaphor for the creative process, love, identity, and reality.

Mr. Fox is a creator, and stands as a metaphor for Helen Oyeyemi. The creative process Helen undergoes is represented and detailed in the creative experience undergone by Fox and Mary (where she appears in short stories as a writer). Likewise, Mary, as a creation of Fox, becomes representative of Fox's more gentle, loving side—a side which he has denied for a long time but which he has been seeking in vain until the present. Mary likens Fox to a villain for taking his creations so casually, and for pushing away love in his stories in favor of murders and bloodshed. These murders and bloodshed are reflective of Fox's own past of heartbreak, in which his pain is manifested in villainizing the women in his stories. Likewise, Fox's pain and heartache appears symbolically through the characters of Reynardine, Charles, and Charlie in the story “The School of Madame De Silentio”.

In the stories that Fox and Mary tell one another, the use of fictionalized and partitioned versions of themselves come to serve as metaphors and symbols of the struggles they endure. For example, in “What Happens Next”, the fictionalized version of Mary attempts suicide, and the fictionalized version of Daphne urges her not to. Daphne tells Mary that she will be happy provided she does not mess up things with the fictionalized version of Fox. In this instance, Mary comes to stand in for Fox, who will be happy in marriage with Daphne, provided he does not mess things up. The story “My Daughter the Racist” recounts a little girl changing her mind about the soldiers in her village, going from hating them to loving one—and then being heartbroken when the girl's mother tells the soldier to leave them alone. The entire story is full of subtle metaphors: Fox is the little girl; the soldier represents Daphne and love in general; and the mother sending away the soldier is the loss of love in the little girl's/Fox's life.



Metaphors also appear through the use of symbols and objects. (Only a few will be discussed here. For more discussion, refer to this guide's "Symbols and Objects" section and this guide's analysis sections.) A typewriter is used by Mary in the short story "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold." Mary comes to consider her typewriter to be like a city with no inhabitants, a world yet to be created. The keys and machinery of the typewriter are compared to an empty city and its buildings –the promise of a community but without the people to make it a community. Foxglove is another important symbol in the novel, and becomes metaphorical for the healing of the heart. Foxglove is a flower whose name origin is unknown but has been medicinally used for heart conditions such as heart failure – and appears throughout the novel when the heart of one character or another is either at its weakest or its strongest. The lighthouse which serves as a beacon for ships seeking safe harbor in storms becomes a metaphorical beacon for both Fox and Daphne, bringing them to each other in the safe harbor of their love for the other.

Styles

Point of View

Helen Oyeyemi tells her novel “Mr. Fox” in both the first and third-person narrative modes. Most of the untitled chapters are told from the point of view of Mr. Fox, while some are told from the point of view of Daphne. The titled sections and short stories are told in both the third and first-person points of view, with some being told from Mary’s point of view. The fluidity of the narrator –sometimes changing without warning and constantly alternating –reinforces the idea of fluid identity. The varying narrative perspective also creates a blur between reality and fiction, as the narrators also change between the fictional stories and the real characters of the novel. For example, the first untitled chapters is told in the first-person by Mr. Fox, while the subsequent chapter-story “Dr. Lustucru” is told in the third-person. The next chapter, untitled, returns to Fox’s point of view in the first person, while the next chapter “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold” is told in the first-person by both Mary and Fox through their letters to one another, but with the bulk of the story of the chapter after the letters being told by Mary in the first-person point of view –and yet, the very next chapter, untitled, follows Mary in the third-person.

Language and Meaning

Helen Oyeyemi tells her novel “Mr. Fox” in language that is poetic and rich in metaphors. Given the themes of the novel –including love and creation –it is fitting that the language be both poetic and richly symbolic. While reflecting on his time with Daphne, for example, Fox tenderly recalls his honeymoon where he describes his wife leaping around from rock to rock singing an utterly romantic song on page 201; or on page 303 where Daphne describes the moment of reconnection between herself and Fox, in which she describes his hand gently grazing her cheek and her spine melting under Fox’s touch. In terms of creation, because true creation is an act of love and beauty, is it only natural that poetic and symbolic metaphors be used. For example, the appearance of foxglove –a flower traditionally used medicinally for bad hearts –appears each time a character is emotionally weak or emotionally strong. In “Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold”, Mary describes her typewriter as being an empty city waiting to be populated, and being a world waiting to be written.

Structure

Helen Oyeyemi divides her novel “Mr. Fox” into untitled chapters and chapters that also double as short stories. The lack of numbers and titles in the untitled chapters –as well as the varying points of view in narration –underscores the fluidity of the novel in which reality and fiction become blurred together and oftentimes, impossible to distinguish. The chapters that double as short stories are titled but not numbered, and become



metaphorical for the battle of wits the rages between Fox and Mary that ultimately results in love, understanding, and awakening. The short stories themselves either directly reflect Fox, Mary, and Daphne, or subtly reflect aspects of their characters. Whereas Fox, Mary, and Daphne are largely apparent in “What Comes Next”, they are more subtly defined in “The School of Madame De Silentio” and “My Daughter the Racist”. This further adds to the blurring of the lines between fiction and reality. While the short stories may themselves stand alone independently of the novel, they are only truly understood in contest of the plot and amid each other.



Quotes

Would you love me if I were your husband and you were my wife?

-- Mary Foxe (Section 1: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: Mary Foxe visits Mr. Fox, and confronts him about his supposedly missing her. Immediately attesting to themes of identity, Mary asks Fox if he would love her if she was something different, or their roles were reversed. Fox reveals that he would indeed love her if she was other than what she was, but Mary is not convinced of this at all.

You simply have to change. You're a villain.

-- Mary Foxe (Section 1: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: Mary is deeply disturbed not only with her belief that Fox only loves her because she is what he wants her to be, but that he has such a violent streak when it comes to the women in his novels. Mary tells Fox he is a villain because he murders all the women in his books –from Roberta bleeding to death to Louise being shot to death to Mrs. McGuire hanging herself. The women that Fox kills in his stories speak to his lack of seriousness as a writer about certain things, but this will soon be remedied.

It's ridiculous to be so sensitive about the content of fiction. It's not real. I mean, come on. It's all just a lot of games.

-- Mary Foxe (Section 1: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: Fox contends that his writing is essentially nonsense. This underscores his lack of seriousness in writing. He explains that writing is all games, but to Mary, writing is much more than games. However, to meet Fox on his own level, she will play games with him to make him see the truth and the light. Likewise, though the worlds and people that writers create are only creations, they can seem very real, and take on a life of their own. As such, they are more than mere games.

I looked inside my typewriter. There's a city in there. Black and grey columns and no inhabitants.

-- Mary Foxe (Section 1: Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold)

Importance: As Mary struggles as a young writer, she comes to consider her typewriter. She likens it to a city with no inhabitants. The keys and machinery of the typewriter are compared to an empty city, which is the promise of a community but without the people to make it a community. The same is true of the worlds that writers create. There is always potential for something more, for a city full of life and the living –but only if the writer creates it as such.

Miss Foxe's other passion was fairy tales. She loved the transformations in them. Everybody was in disguise, or on their way to becoming something else.

-- Narrator (Section 2: Fitcher's Bird)



Importance: In one of the games, Fox and Mary Foxe are set up as the shy and fairy tale-obsessed Miss Foxe and the fairy-tale obsessed Mr. Fitcher. Miss Foxe loves fairy tales because they often deal with transformations –from the bad to the good, and from the ugly to the beautiful. So caught between reality and fiction, the real and the romantic, Miss Fox urges Fitcher to cut off her head so that she might transform, but Miss Foxe instead dies.

I'm not crazy. At time I remain fully aware of her status as an idea."
-- Mr. Fox (Section 2: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: When Daphne gets wind of Mary Foxe, she believes that Fox is cheating on her. Fox contends this is not the case, that Mary is made up. This is in keeping with both the themes of reality and creativity, in which Fox invents worlds and people in his writing –and that these can seem very real. The same is true of Mary, he explains, saying that Mary is kind of like a character in one of her stories. He goes on to say that he isn't crazy because he remembers that Mary is only an invention, even if at times he forgets this in the passion and rush of creativity. Things can seem very real even when they are not.

As soon as I saw it I remembered writing it, and I was flooded with relief. Thank God it wasn't me. Thank God I wasn't capable of doing such a thing.
-- Mr. Fox (Section 2: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: The fine line between reality and fiction blurs as Fox has a memory where he kills Mary. As he later learns, the memory is no more than a story. With the boundary between what is real and unreal so thin and rapidly eroding, both Fox and Mary are beginning to lose their nerve and their grip on what they know to be truth and invention.

What you're doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say, 'Yes, he is talking about things that really happen,' and they keep reading, and it makes sense to them.
-- Mr. Fox (Section 3: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: Mr. Fox and Mary once again debate the subjects of Mr. Fox's stories. Mary insists that Fox is building worlds, while Fox insists people read things into his stories that they want to read into them. One of these things is believing that what happens in the stories is true, or in some way reflects something that happened in real life. Fox contends this is nonsense because it is obscene to apply reason to fiction in this way.

The dead are capable of creeping up on you when you aren't looking, just as capable as the living are.
-- Miss Mary Foxe (Section 3: What Happens Next)

Importance: As the game continues and as the lines between what is real and what is imagined continue to blur, Mary must deal with the death of her father. At the same time,



she is growing closer to Dr. Fox. Mary notes that the dead and the living can creep up on a person when they are not expecting it –in this case, in both death and in love. Her father's memory and thoughts about the future begin to work on Mary's mind, confusing her already uncertain state. This demonstrates just how influential the past and the future can be on a person and how both can warp reality.

Things were tough enough without this girl coming between us. And the sound of her crying.

-- Daphne Fox (Section 4: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: The difficulties of determining what is real and what is not real do not begin and end with Fox and Mary. They extend to Daphne as well. As both a reader of her husband's writing and as someone who deals with her husband on a daily basis, Daphne herself has difficulty determining what is real and what is invented. This is true of trying to determine the reality of Mary, made complicated by the fact that Daphne already knows her husband is a complicated man.

I sat with my head in my hands, shaking. Because the situation was so much worse than I'd thought. My husband was trying to choose between me, his wife, and someone he had made up.

-- Daphne Fox (Section 4: Untitled Chapter)

Importance: The difficulties with Mary increase for Daphne when she begins to accept that Mary is made-up and discovers a list her husband has made. The list notes the things that her husband loves about her and Mary. This horrifies Daphne, because she is competing with a made-up woman, perhaps even worse than having to compete with someone who is flesh and blood. This especially blurs the lines between fact, fiction, reality, and invention.

I've said that foxes are solitary, but there's a difference between having no one because you've chosen it and having no one because everyone has been taken away.

-- Narrator (Section 5: Some Foxes, II)

Importance: As the novel comes a close, the narrator reflects on how Fox – representative of the fox –is a solitary character. He is alone both because he was left by his fiancée, but also because he cannot bring himself to love and trust Daphne at first. Fox is one and the same, and only through moving beyond the past and seeing the potential of the future with Daphne can Fox come to love and be loved by Daphne.