

Nutshell Study Guide

Nutshell by Ian McEwan

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Plot Summary

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Nutshell by Ian McEwan is a modern retelling of William Shakespeare's classic play Hamlet. However, in this adaptation, the role of Hamlet is essentially played by an in-utero child within Trudy's (this version's Gertrude) womb.

The novel begins with the narrator learning that Trudy and Claude (this version's Claudius and the narrator's uncle) plan to kill John, Trudy's estranged husband and the narrator's father. This causes the narrator to become furious. Even though the narrator has never met his father, he respects his intelligence. In this section of the book, the reader also learns that the narrator, while not quite born, is wiser than many full-grown people. He is able to make inferences about the outside world and the actions of other people through his knowledge of Trudy's biological responses and his hearing.

The narrator is rather uncomfortable with Claude, as he has struck up an affair with Trudy. Eventually, the reader learns that Claude and Trudy intent to poison one of John's smoothies with anti-freeze, plant items in his car to make the death look like a suicide, and wear his hat to the smoothie store as to make it look like John had bought the smoothie himself. Prior to the day of the murder, John brings one of his poet friends, and seemingly new girlfriend, to his home (which Trudy and Claude now live in). John informs Claude and Trudy that he knows about the affair and requests that they move out of his house so he can move back in. They refuse because they want to sell the multi-million-pound home after John is dead. Later, during Claude and Trudy's sex, the narrator attempts to hang himself with his own umbilical cord.

The next day, John visits again. Claude and Trudy successfully poison his smoothie and trick him into drinking it. John leaves, and not long after, the police inform Trudy that John is dead. Initially Trudy shows a cold response to the news but later breaks down. Claude informs Trudy that they can either get rich together or be poor in separate prisons.

A Chief Inspector soon arrives to question the pair. They spin a story that John was depressed and how the death must have been a suicide. The Inspector plays along for a time until she reveals John's gloves (which the murderers would hope explain to the police why no fingerprints appeared on the anti-freeze bottle). The Inspector tells them they he could not have worn the gloves, as they were full of spiders.

Claude and Trudy panic and attempt to leave the country. Just as they are about to leave the house, the narrator decides that he wants to be born. Claude initially wants to leave Trudy behind but is forced into helping with the birth. The narrator is born, the police arrive, and the novel ends.



Chapter 1-3

Summary

The story opens by revealing that the narrator is actually an English in-utero child with seemingly clear awareness of the world outside of the womb. The unnamed child reveals that his mother, Trudy, and her love, Claude, have some sort of plot against the child's father (Trudy and the child's father are married but separated, while Claude visits the house, which is unknown to Trudy's husband). The baby decides that he will either stop the plot, or avenge it if he is birthed too late.

The child then narrates the current happenings outside of the womb. He describes that Trudy has drunk a glass of wine, essentially sharing it with the child. After Trudy and Claude return to Trudy's house, Trudy awakens from her sleeping telling Claude that they cannot do "it" because there is a chance that things could go wrong. Claude assures her that they can and will successfully accomplish the plot against John, Trudy's husband.

In the next chapter, the boy child tells the reader that his father is John Cairncoss, the head of a publishing house that primarily publishes poetry collections (one of which by an eventual Nobel laureate). It turns out that John himself is a poet, who has memorized hundreds of poems and used to recite poetry to Trudy. The child continues by stating that John comes over to the house sometimes, bringing smoothies, in an attempt to woo Trudy back. In fact, John is at the house during the time of this chapter. Here, we learn that the house that Trudy is living in is John's childhood home. The baby explains that John is too nice, and that not many people would allow their estranged wife to live in their house while they are separated.

The child explains that Trudy has intentionally let the house fall to near-ruin. The narrative is then interrupted by a recollection from the child. He remembers hearing some sort of broadcast telling the story of a woman who hit a dog with a car and then decided to be merciful and bludgeon the dog with a rock. The child explains that both he and his father have a hopeless love for his mother. Soon after, Trudy rushes John out, as Claude is set to arrive at the house soon.

The third chapter opens with the boy explaining that Claude is essentially a dull yokel with a limited vocabulary who likes cars and clothes. The baby then expresses discomfort with being in the womb and having his mother's lover's penis inches from his nose. The child describes Trudy and Claude's sex to be very non-sensual usually ending quickly (for both participants) and resulting in a shower with no physical contact. The child also shows discomfort with the sex actually occurring on John's childhood bed. After the sex, the baby has a dream about the state of the world being dim. He explains that war, climate change, the arrogance of the United States, and poverty is driving the world towards a sad fate.



Analysis

This chapter initializes a running literary parallel that will continue throughout the novel; essentially, the story is one very similar to William Shakespeare's tragic play, Hamlet. In this story, the Danish prince Hamlet goes mad and avenged the death of his father King Hamlet, after his mother Gertrude and her lover (and King Hamlet's brother) Claudius secretly kill him. However, the clear difference between Shakespeare's work and Nutshell, is that the character that is the parallel for the titular character, Hamlet, is not a character who actively interacts with the other characters, because in this story, the Hamlet character is in-utero.

Another difference between Nutshell and Hamlet is the time within the plot that it occurs. In Hamlet, the viewer does not actually ever see King Hamlet or the plotting that occurred before the murder. In fact, the play begins with King Hamlet being dead for about two months. In Nutshell, the parallel for King Hamlet, John, is still quite alive. It is very possible that the child's inability to do anything about the coming events is a symbol that relates to Hamlet, the play, in a very meta way. Before the opening of the play, Hamlet does nothing about the situation between Gertrude, King Hamlet, and Claudius. In a way, this could symbolize that the fact that the child is in-utero symbolizes the lack of visible action prior to the opening lines of the play. The fact that the narrator is in the womb also symbolizes the fact that the narrator witnesses the world through a filter; he must use his inferences and hearing in order to interpret the outside world. Another symbol that is introduced in this section is the narrator's umbilical cord which symbolizes the connection and dependence between the narrator and Trudy. The final symbol introduced in this chapter is poetry. As we will witness, only those who like poetry seem to be innocent, implying that poetry represents some sort of inherent goodness.

On another note, these chapters give a large amount of character development regarding the characters outside of the womb. We learn that John is quite smart, meaning that Claude seems like the complete opposite of him. However, as Trudy remarks, he is quite skilled at sex. This is a possible explanation for why Trudy is with Claude in the first place. This is supported through the lack of physical non-sexual intimacy between the two. Essentially, this relationship may be simply one of physicality than love. It is clear that Trudy loved John at some point, but it is clear that something went wrong, leading Trudy to create a relationship with someone who is completely different than John.

This estranged relationship becomes more apparent when the narrator tells the reader that Trudy is letting John's childhood home fall to ruin. This seems incredibly intentional. The narrator uses the word "let," leading the reader to believe that Trudy is completely aware of what she is doing. It is possible that Trudy is doing this in order to hurt John. At this point, the reader is not privy to this information, as limited knowledge regarding the mechanics of the relationship has been given.



Discussion Question 1

What parallels can be made between Nutshell and Hamlet?

Discussion Question 2

Describe how the narrator feels about Claude.

Discussion Question 3

What reasons could there be for John bringing Trudy smoothies?

Vocabulary

antecedent, puerile, emphatically, amorous, aporia



Chapter 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4 opens with Trudy sunbathing, in a bathing suit, drinking wine outside. The narrator finally reveals to the reader that Claude is actually his uncle, which is driving him to hate his mother for abandoning a poet for an idiot. The narrative then shifts to John's office, where Claude offers his brother a large sum of money, as he is falling behind on rent. John asks Claude if he wants to hear a poem about an owl, he refuses. John eventually takes the money.

Trudy then steps on some glass when coming inside. Claude comes home and finds her. He panics, as he thinks the blood is due to complications regarding the pregnancy. The two adults embrace and almost have sex on the bathroom floor. They talk about killing John and reveal that they are planning on placing the narrator in a home. The narrator is shocked and furious. The narrator fantasizes about using his umbilical cord to strangle his mother.

The next day, Claude arrives and Trudy is drunk and eating a large piece of cheese. The narrator expresses his discomfort with the fact that Claude has a key, but his father has to ring the doorbell. Trudy tells Claude a story about how, in a rage, she accidentally assaulted her old cat, causing it to die. Claude moves the conversation to be about John's impending murder and states that it needs to look like he was disassociated with the crime.

Later, the narrator fantasizes about killing Claude and his mother once he is born. But relents after thinking about jail. Trudy and Claude then lay out their plan. They decide that Trudy has to tell John that she is going to let him move back in and then give him a poisoned (antifreeze) smoothie. Trudy comments that she loved John once, and Claude comments that they are going to sell John's house for 8 million pounds. Claude comments again about being disassociated, and Trudy reacts in a rage stating that if she gets caught, he will too.

Analysis

A great deal more character development takes place in this set of chapters. Based on Trudy's actions in this section, such as constantly getting drunk, having rough sex, and sunbathing, all while pregnant, shows that Trudy does not care as much about her child as she probably should. This definitely is unlike the characters in Hamlet, as in the play, it is rather clear that Gertrude has quite a lot of affection for Prince Hamlet, just not his father.

But, there is one rather enormous connection to Hamlet that is revealed here -- Claude is John's brother. As John is the parallel for King Hamlet, Claude is the parallel of Claudius. This is only cemented by the fact that Claudius is such a similar name to



Claude. Another, less obvious, connection to Hamlet is in regards to John and Trudy's home. It is planned, after John's death, that both Trudy and Claude will sell John's childhood home for 8 million pounds. In the play, Claudius benefits from his brother's throne, just as Claude is benefiting from his brother's property. The choice of poison is interesting as well, as poison generally symbolizes deceit. The recurring theme of family really begins to pick up in this section as well, as the narrator wonders if he must show any loyalty to Claude because they are blood related. Essentially, he begins to question whether he has to consider Claude as a true member of his family. This section is also shows the introduction of the theme of justice in the novel. This theme appears when the narrator fantasizes about killing his Claude and his mother. This is significant as it creates a conflict within the narrator, as he questions whether committing vengeance against his family is right.

On the subject of Claude, the reader also becomes keen to Claude's priorities. Claude seems to initiate sex with Trudy regardless of the fact that she is very late into her pregnancy. He is also rather selfish. Other than the fact that he wants to kill his brother so he can gain his wife and his property, he does not seem attached to either thing. By telling Trudy that he needs to seem disassociated with his brother's death, he is essentially stating that he is perfectly okay with allowing Trudy to go to jail so he remains free. Based on his focus on the physical aspect of his and Trudy's relationship and his aspiration to sell his brother's home, it is very clear that he cares much more about sex and money than he does love and family.

Discussion Question 1

Why would Claude offer John money? What does this reveal, or suggest, about both men's characters?

Discussion Question 2

Is there any significance to the cheese that Trudy decides to eat?

Discussion Question 3

Does the narrator hold any respect for Claude?

Vocabulary

glycol, antithetical, clement



Seven-Nine

Summary

The narrator wakes to a meeting between Claude, Trudy, John, and the author of the owl poem John tried to recite to Claude. Trudy's pulse increases, a sign of rage or jealousy. The narrator learns that the poet's name is Elodie, who lives in a studio on a farm around 200 miles away from London. The narrator comments on the fact that a married couple is meeting with both of their lovers. Elodie and Trudy have a heated conversation about whether owls are vicious killers or shy creatures. John gives a speech about how he and Trudy tumbled into love, but now the love has run its course. He tells Claude and Trudy to move out. As John and Elodie leave, Trudy comments that the murder has to happen tomorrow.

The two get drunk, too drunk for sex (fortunately for the narrator). The two vomit. The next morning, the two prepare the kitchen. They put two empty glasses on the table to show that they had already had some of the smoothie and one of John's hats that Claude wore to buy the smoothies.

The next chapter then starts with the narrator writing a mental letter to his father before he dies, asking him not to accept the smoothie. John arrives and comments on Trudy's suitcase not being by the door. John reveals that he and Elodie got into a fight the night before, and Elodie argued that John still loved Trudy. Trudy states that they are not moving out of protest for John's neglect. During this conversation, Trudy keeps calling Elodie, Threnody. While John and Trudy are speaking, Claude goes outside to plant items into John's car.

Analysis

The interaction between Elodie and Trudy is a rather well-coded reference to Hamlet. In Hamlet, Ophelia tells a nursery rhyme that she was told as a child. In this story, Jesus enters into a town, enters a bakery and asks the baker's daughter for some food. She refuses and is transformed into an owl. While no one turns into an owl in this book, if we look to the baker's daughter's transformation as a negative consequence of her actions, this may be foreshadowing that there will be negative consequences for her actions against Elodie and John. It also seems like the author is using the various interpretations of the owl to symbolize the two women themselves, as their individual descriptions seem to match each woman.

This chapter also highlights the large amount of preparation that went into planning John's murder. It seems like Trudy and Claude have almost all of their bases covered. With that said, it makes it almost impossible that the first time they thought about committing this act was at the start of the novel. The plan is simply too complex for this to be true.



Trudy also calls Elodie "Threnody" in this section of the book. This is odd, as it is clear that Trudy knows what this means, the word is too specific for her to never have heard the word before. However, John catches the definition of the word and tells her that a threnody is a death song. It is possible that this is just an honest mistake, but the foreshadowing involved in using this word seems too significant for this to be so. Instead, it seems like Trudy may be cracking under the pressure.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the argument between Trudy and Elodie?

Discussion Question 2

Why might Trudy and Claude repeatedly get drunk?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Claude plant items in John's car?

Vocabulary

impervious, bedfellows, tedium



Chapters 10-12

Summary

While Claude is planting items in John's car, Trudy grabs John's hands and tells him that the separation is partially her fault. John recites a poem and reassures her that she will not have to deal with any more poems while she is with Claude. Claude returns and offers John the smoothie. He is initially hesitant, but after a conversation about migrants, and how after 5,000 years, race will no longer be a concept, he drinks the smoothie after a toast. The narrator comments that it is a toast for Eros and Thanatos. Claude gives John his forgotten hat and John leaves to try and start his car.

The narrator informs the reader that Claude planted the antifreeze bottle, a smoothie cup, a receipt, a bank statement with the word "enough" written on it, and John's gloves. The narrator theorizes that the police are probably understaffed and will immediately label it a suicide. John finally leaves causing Trudy and Claude to have sex. The next morning, the doorbell rings, and a constable tells Trudy that John is dead, probably of a suicide. Trudy tells the constable that it was probably due to his depression (that probably did not actually exist).

The next morning, Trudy gets physically upset when she realizes that John is actually dead. Claude changes the subject to the fact that a buyer has become interested in the house. Trudy proclaims that Claude always hated John because Claude could never be the man that John was. She also explains that all Claude does is get her drunk. Claude then refers to Trudy as his little mouse, arousing her.

Analysis

This section has some subtle references that reference Greek mythology. First, the narrator mentions Eros, the Greek representation of love. In the same sentence, the narrator mentions Thanatos, the Greek representation of death. With this in mind, the fact that the narrator describes the chapter's toast as a toast for Eros and Thanatos means that the toast is for Trudy and Claude's love (Eros) and John's death (Thanatos).

The symbol of gloves also appears in this section (it was mentioned before very briefly). The reader learns that John wears gloves in order to hide the skin condition on his hands. Therefore, the gloves symbolize John's shame.

Like many of the other sections, this group of chapters also makes subtle reference to Hamlet. Towards the end of the chapter, in order to seduce Trudy, Claude calls her his "little mouse." Act 3, Scene 2, Hamlet describes a play as "The Mouse-trap. Marry, how? Tropically. This play is the image of a murder done in Vienna." This has multiple meanings in the context of the novel. First, if Trudy is a mouse, she is essentially in a mousetrap. As shown in this section, even if Trudy becomes furious with Claude, just calling Trudy his "little mouse" makes her come running back to his bed. She clearly



cannot escape Claude's grasp, like a mouse cannot escape a mousetrap. The mousetrap also has meaning regarding John's murder. Basically, Claude and Trudy set a trap for John. It is also no coincidence that the play, "The Mouse-trap" that Hamlet mentions, is about some sort of murder, further connecting the scene to the novel.

Discussion Question 1

Does it seem like the police are convinced by Trudy and Claude's act?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the "enough" written on the bank statement?

Discussion Question 3

What does John's car say about him as a character?

Vocabulary

emphatic, glissando, elation



Chapters 13-16

Summary

The section opens with Trudy telling Claude she is not selling the house so he can get rich. Claude replies that they can get rich together or be poor in separate prisons. Trudy and Claude then read the newspaper report of John's death causing Trudy to begin sobbing. Claude seduces her and has sex with her in a very dangerous position for a pregnant woman. During the sex, the narrator decides to try to hang himself with his umbilical cord. He fails and decides that he wants to "become." They order food and the doorbell soon rings, it is not their takeout, but Elodie.

Elodie enters while crying and asks Claude and Trudy if 50 poets can visit as a memorial for John. They agree and give Elodie some wine. Elodie and John's relationship comes up and Elodie explains that they were never together. It is also revealed that Elodie identified the body, which had a disturbing grin. The narrator then comments on the fact that Trudy is starting to believe her story about John's suicide and depression, while Claude owns his crime. The narrator also recalls the day that he discovered his penis.

At the poetry reading, Trudy begins to speak about how great of a poet John was and how his art was due to his crippling depression. Some students speak about how John loaned them money, gave them food, and taught them well. After the readings, Trudy gives Elodie one of John's poetry books. After Elodie leaves, the doorbell rings, they first believe that it is the police, but it is actually their Danish takeout.

Analysis

The nature of Trudy's trap expands in this section. Here, Claude essentially states that if they both do not get money from selling John's house, he will make sure that they both end up in prison. As Trudy has been breaking down recently, it is possible that Trudy would be willing to let Claude take the fall for the crime, but this cannot be so because then, in turn, Claude would be able to provide enough evidence to have Trudy thrown in jail as well.

The narrator's suicide attempt is a subtle reference to a famous scene from Hamlet. In Hamlet, when the titular character utters the famous lines "To be or not to be, that is the question" (Act III, Scene I), he is questioning whether or not he wants to continue living. The narrator is doing the same thing in this section, as before attempting to hang himself with his umbilical cord, he questions whether he actually wants to "be" or not. This also follows the novel's recurring theme of existence. Here, the narrator decides that he wants to exist, even though, technically, he already does. Therefore, the novel is asking the question whether or not you have to be born in order to exist.



The Danish takeout is also a symbol representing the story's closeness to Hamlet. In Hamlet, Hamlet is the Prince of Danes, or in other words, the Prince of Denmark. This is certainly not unintentional, as Danish takeout is rather uncommon and very specific. A final Hamlet reference in this section is the hint that Elodie is supposed to be the parallel for Ophelia. Ophelia is Hamlet's love interest, who does not actually enter into a relationship with Hamlet. This is strikingly similar to the relationship between Elodie and John.

Discussion Question 1

Based on Claude's actions in this section, does Claude seem to love Trudy?

Discussion Question 2

What do the words of his students say about John?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the narrator recalling the day he discovered his penis?

Vocabulary

lozenge, indignant, compendium



Chapters 17-20

Summary

Trudy proclaims to Claude that if he was not in her life, John would still be alive. She also mentions that the house will probably end up selling for 4.5 million pounds. Trudy asks why she should trust Claude, and he replies that she has no choice. Trudy goes to sleep and the narrator has Trudy to himself. He thinks that they should be closer than lovers, and that maybe he should be telling her goodbye. The next morning, the phone rings and Chief Inspector Clare Allison tells Claude that she is coming to visit. Claude is confused because he believes that it is not a criminal matter. They go over their story and recite it back to Allison when she arrives. Trudy states that there was no affair between Elodie and John, Allison says she knows otherwise. Allison brings up the hat, and Claude becomes worried that his hair will be found in it.

Claude shows Allison where John's car was parked. Suddenly, Allison brings up the subject of the gloves found in the car. Claude explains that it was due to his skin condition. Allison relies that it cannot be so, as the forensics department found a nest of spiders inside. Allison then leaves. Claude and Trudy panic, try to pack, and try to find their passports. The narrator then has a fantasy about an undead version of his father appearing and killing Claude. They call a taxi and Trudy asserts that she must bring a specific large picture of her mother. Claude refuses. Then, the narrator decides to be born.

Trudy's water breaks and Claude asks for his passport. Trudy refuses to give it to him unless he helps her give birth to the narrator. The narrator is finally born, when the doorbell rings and four police officers stand outside. The narrator comments that it was chaos, and the novel ends.

Analysis

In this section, Claude and Trudy's plan finally begins to fall apart. The first nail in their coffin is the incorrect information that they give Allison regarding the relationship between Elodie and John. This may be a comment on a particular section of literary criticism regarding Hamlet. Many scholars believe that the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia was not an entirely chaste one. These scholars believe that Hamlet and Ophelia did have some sort of relationship. Other scholars also believe that Ophelia was manipulating Hamlet throughout the play, as Elodie seem to be doing to Claude and Trudy in this section of the book.

This section also flips the Hamlet analogy regarding Hamlet's death. In the play, Hamlet is cut with Laertes's poison blade, causing him to slowly die. Here, the Hamlet character, the narrator, is not dying, but being born. However, this could symbolize the death of the narrator character as the reader knows him. This is the crux of the recurring



theme of Birth/Death within the novel, as this event questions the concept of being born, even though the narrator has already been alive the entire time. It is truly unclear whether the event is supposed to seem like a birth of the new narrator or the death of the old one. Throughout the entire book, the narrator was incredibly smart, observant, and thoughtful. Generally, babies are none of these things. While we do not get any narration after the book ends, it is safe to say that the newly born narrator will not audibly be pondering the state of the world and its many factors. Or, the birth instead of death could be a comment on the fact that Hamlet, as a play, begins shortly after a death (King Hamlet) and after Gertrude and Claudius had already committed their crime.

Finally, a much more obvious Hamlet reference is the narrator's vision of his dead father. In Hamlet, Hamlet spies the ghost of his dead father right at the beginning of the play. Again, the Hamlet theme is flipped, as the narrator sees a vision of his undead father at the end of the novel. Here McEwan is making it very clear that his novel ends similarly to how Hamlet begins.

Discussion Question 1

Does it seem like Allison knew the truth the entire time?

Discussion Question 2

Why might the narrator decide to be born when he does?

Discussion Question 3

What may happen after the novel's end?

Vocabulary

mortuary, trochaic, lugubriously



Characters

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator of this novel is an in-utero fetus, living in the womb of Trudy Cairncross. The narrator is incredibly wise for his age and can make observations regarding the outside world using inferences and his listening skills.

It is very clear that he cares for his father and wishes for him to not be killed by Trudy and Claude. His relationship with his mother is much different. Sometimes the narrator states that he loves his mother to an almost unnatural extent, while at other points in the novel, it seems like he wants to kill Trudy. This seems to coincide with his struggle between wanting to exist and not wanting to live in the world ravaged by war, climate change, and poverty.

The narrator also mirrors the titular character in the William Shakespeare play, Hamlet. This is evident through the fact that his mother and uncle plan to murder his father, just as Gertrude and Claudius plan to and later murder King Hamlet. Many of the narrator's thoughts also mirror thoughts and behaviors of Hamlet, such as his struggle about wanting to exist ("to be or not to be").

Overall, while the narrator is the protagonist of the novel, he is a rather passive force within the plot. All the narrator can do for most of the book is kick in protest. However, at the end of the novel he decides to be born, derailing Trudy and Claude's escape plan, taking revenge on those that killed his father.

John Cairncross

John Cairncross, the father of the novel's narrator's, is the center of the book's overarching murder plot. Prior to the start of the novel, John was a poet who wooed Trudy with his intelligence when they were both much younger. However, before the marriage began falling apart, his publishing house fell into ruin, leaving him in a poor financial state. During this period, John also taught poetry to young artists, one of them being Elodie.

It is clear that John still has a level of respect for Trudy, regardless of the state of their marriage. He lets Trudy stay in their marital home for a time after their separation and is rather nice to her. He is also rather accepting when it becomes evident that his brother, Claude, has struck up a relationship with his wife. In response, John seems to begin a relationship with a young poet, Elodie. Right before his death, John seems to grow bolder and decides to force Claude and Trudy out of the home, showing a change in his behavior.



In regards to Hamlet, John is the parallel for King Hamlet. The primary evidence for this is that he is the father of the Hamlet character, he is poisoned by his wife and brother, and seemingly returns in an undead state.

Trudy Cairncross

Trudy Cairncross is the narrator's mother, wife to John Cairncross, and Claude's lover. Trudy is not an introspective and John or the narrator and clearly has different types of goals. Trudy's goals seem to be ones of satisfaction, as it is implied that she only continues her relationship with Claude for sexual satisfaction.

Her goal of satisfaction is also shown her delayed reaction toward John's death. After a period of numbness, she begins to break down and lashes out at Claude; she has remorse. However, she does not seem to show the same remorse towards the narrator, as she plans to find him an adopted home rather than raising him, and the plan does not change throughout the book.

Trudy is the novel's version of Gertrude. The evidence for this lies in her plot to murder her husband, her affair with her brother-in-law, and her later remorse regarding her husband's death. It must be noted that unlike her play counterpart, she does not die at the conclusion of the story.

Claude

Not much is known about Claude, John's brother, and Trudy's lover. The narrator mentions several times that he is rather dull and nowhere as smart or talented as John. In fact, the narrator has such disdain for his uncle, that he is scared that the sex between Claude and Trudy will alter his identity, making him more like Claude.

Claude does not seem to have any respect for his brother and is much more willing to kill John than Trudy is. This is probably due to his selfish nature. Based on his actions, it seems like he only cares about himself, as he is a selfish lover and almost abandons Trudy when her water breaks. Overall, Claude is essentially the main antagonist of the story. Claude is the parallel of Hamlet's Claudius.

Elodie

Elodie is a quick-witted young poet whom John enters into a relationship with. According to Elodie, she was once of John's poetry students. Her interactions with Trudy and Claude are few and far between, other than the two instances where she invited them to John's memorial and when she and John visit the house to ask Trudy and Claude to leave. During the latter instance, she enters into a heated argument (probably based on jealousy) with Trudy about the nature of owls.



Elodie is the parallel to Hamlet's Ophelia. The main parallels lie in the unclear relationship status between John and herself (granted that in the play, Ophelia is involved with young Hamlet, not his father). While this parallel is admittedly loose at best, not much other evidence exists to tie her to the Hamlet narrative.

Chief Inspector Allison

Chief Inspector Allison is the main investigator of the death of John Cairncross. While she initially makes her visit to John's house seem rather casual, it later becomes clear that due to the spiders in John's glove, she suspected that Claude and Trudy killed John all along. She is a rather good investigator, as she does not make her true motives known until she has determined the Claude and Trudy are lying to her.

John's Students

Little is known about John's students other than that he helped them regularly. According to one of the students at the poetry reading, John would often help them with housing, money, and poetic matters. The only student who is directly named is Elodie.

The Constables

The two constables who visit to Cairncross home are minor characters. Unlike Allison, the constables do not seem to suspect that Trudy and Claude are the murderers, most likely because the forensics department had not yet analyzed John's spider-filled glove.

Undead John

Undead John is a version of John that the narrator creates in one of his fantasies. In this fantasy, the ghostly John chokes his brother to death in revenge for his murder. This character is supposed to parallel the ghost of King Hamlet that Hamlet sees at the beginning of the play.

John's House

John's house is also a character in the novel. It symbolizes the state of Trudy and John's marriage and decays according.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Womb

The author uses the womb to symbolize the interpretation of the world through a filter. As the narrator cannot actually see the outside world, he must infer and use his sense of hearing in order to observe the outside world. Throughout the novel it becomes clear that due to this, the narrator has a different view of the world.

Umbilical cord

The author uses the umbilical cord to symbolize the narrator's dependence and connection to his mother. While it does provide nourishment to the narrator, it also provides him with alcohol, it demonstrates his mother's carefree connection to the narrator.

Owl

The author uses owls to symbolize women. This is shown in the heated conversation between Elodie and Trudy. Trudy sees owls as dangerous, like her, while Elodie sees them as somewhat innocent and wise, like herself.

Gloves

The author uses gloves to symbolize shame. According to both the narrator and Trudy, John is rather ashamed of the skin condition on his hands and utilizes gloves to cover the shame.

The Cairncross Home

The author uses the setting of the Cairncross home to symbolize both the state of the Cairncross marriage and John's property. Over time, the home has decayed just like Trudy and John's relationship. However, the house also is a symbol for John's life and property, that Claude and Trudy have taken from him.

Mouse

The author uses the mouse to symbolize the danger of a trap. Throughout the novel, Claude refers to Trudy as his "little mouse." She is the mouse in more ways than one. Both sexually, as Claude is probably intending, but also she is a mouse in a trap, as she cannot escape the murder plot without going to prison.



Poison

In the novel, poison is used as a symbol for deceit. Poison is usually considered the most stealthy of killing tools; John does not expect the poison just like he does not expect the deceit of his wife and brother.

Danish Food

The appearance of Danish food in the novel symbolizes the narrative's very explicit connection to Hamlet, as Hamlet is prince of the Danish people.

Poetry

Poetry is used throughout the novel to symbolize goodness. Out of all of the characters within the novel, the only characters who like poetry are those not involved in the murder plot alluding to the fact that the characters' attitudes towards poetry seem to be tied to their moral alignment.

Death/Birth of the Narrator

The birth of the narrator symbolizes the death of the narrator as the reader knows him. First, it seems like the reason that the narrator is so wise is that he has not yet been born into the outside world. So, with the birth of the narrator, the unborn version of the narrator dies and transforms into the narrator of the outside world.

Settings

The Womb

The womb is the most prominent setting throughout the story. The womb is a type of filter through which the narrator makes his observations and inferences. It also seems to be a sort of other world compared to the outside world. In the womb, the narrator is able to ponder the meaning of life and life's other various mysteries. During the final chapter of the book, the narrator finally breaks Trudy's water and escapes the womb.

The Cairncross Home

The Cairncross home is John's childhood home and the home where Trudy and Claude live throughout the novel. Even though Claude and Trudy intend on selling the house once the murder has been committed, they let it fall to ruin, in somewhat of a protest against John. The home represents a kind of kingdom that Claude gains from John, like Claudius gained the throne from King Hamlet.

The Smoothie Shop

The smoothie shop, one of John's favorite places, is where Claude obtains the deadly smoothie that, once dosed with glycol, kills John. Not much is told about the smoothie shop, other than it is watched by CCTV cameras.

John's Office

John's office is where Claude offers John a loan of 5,000 pounds. The office is messy, like most John's life. It seems to be a second home for John, as he lost his first home to Trudy and Claude for much of the novel.

The Morgue

The morgue is where Elodie identifies John's body. Not much is said about the morgue, other than while in the morgue, John's corpse showed a disturbing smile.



Themes and Motifs

Existence

Nutshell uses the recurring theme of existence in an attempt to make the reader ponder the actual nature of existence. There are multiple instances when the narrator asks himself, “what does it mean to be?” At times, the narrator decides that he does want to “be,” while at other times he does not. Technically, the narrator already exists because he is within the physical world. But, he does not seem to see it this way.

For the narrator, existence begins at birth, therefore, since he is not yet born, he does not exist. But, as stated before, there are points where he does not want to exist at all. The narrator makes mention of this when he realizes that John is going to be murdered and also when he ponders all of the horror that exists outside of the womb and later attempts to choke himself to death using his umbilical cord. Luckily, the narrator finally decides that he does actually want to “be” and is born. However, it must be noted that the narrator is sentient before his birth which seems to demonstrate that the only difference between his existence and his birth is his relation to the outside world. The narrator's views on existence clearly demonstrate the complexities of the meaning and nature of existence and existing.

This theme is also supposed to reflect Hamlet, as one of the most famous lines in the play is “To be or not to be, that is the question.” Just like Hamlet, the narrator argues with himself about whether he actually wants to “be” or not. Both characters make the same decision and move on.

Hamlet

Nutshell both parallels and reverses the plot of the William Shakespeare's play at times, making a basic understanding of Hamlet's plot pivotal to reader's full understanding of Nutshell. The plot of the novel begins right before John's death, which is a time period not actually explored in Hamlet. In the source material, the plot picks up after the death of Hamlet's father, King Hamlet. Essentially, the characters of the novel are reflections of the characters from Hamlet, but the plot's position in time is different.

The biggest similarity between the two works is the overall plot. In Hamlet, King Hamlet of the Danes is poisoned and killed by his wife, Gertrude, and his brother, Claudius (note the similar names). After the murder, Hamlet eventually discovers the plot and leads his mother and uncle to destruction while dying in the process. In Nutshell, while the narrator does not lead the perpetrators to their deaths, he does lead them to their capture (presumably, as the book ends right as the police arrive).

A variety of Hamlet references also appear in Nutshell. For example, the take-out that Claude and Trudy order is Danish food, referencing Hamlet's nationality. As stated in the section above, the narrator also contemplates whether he wants to live, just like Hamlet



does. There are also very minor references throughout the novel such as the appearance of a mouse (relating to Ophelia's nursery rhyme). John and Elodie's relationship is also a reference to Hamlet, as it is never clear if their relationship is a sexual one, just like the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia (which is a point of contention among critics). The final scene is also a possible reference to Hamlet (see the section of the theme of Birth/Death)

The final scene of the novel turns the Hamlet-based plot on its head. In the play, Hamlet dies at the end after being stabbed by a poison blade. The narrator, instead of being killed at the end of the novel, is born. This could be due to the fact that the narrator is not an active participant throughout the majority of the novel, but it could also symbolize a different type of death: the death of the narrator as the reader knows him.

Birth/Death

The novel uses the theme of both birth and death to ask the question "what does it mean to be born or to do?" Throughout the novel, the narrator uses different words to describe his state of being, some implying that he is a person and some not. For example, towards the beginning of the book, the narrator essentially states that he is a fetus and not quite a human. This brings up the heavily contested idea of what constitutes as a human.

The only character that refers to the narrator as if he is a human is the narrator. Trudy, Claude, and John do not seem to really acknowledge the narrator throughout the most of the book, and when they do, they refer to the narrator as "it" or use no pronouns at all. Essentially, the narrator struggles with whether he is in fact human; while the adult characters seem to not even ponder this question.

The book and narrator also imply that there are two types of existence along with two types of birth. Even though the narrator is unborn, he still has very complex thoughts and ideas about a society that he has never seen. In a way, he is already born, as he exists just inside the womb. However, much later, the narrator is born in the traditional sense, finally meeting the society that he has commented about throughout the entire work. It is possible that the narrator has now lost the type of existence that he had prior to his real "birth," and is born anew as a clean slate.

Justice

The novel uses the recurring theme of justice in order to create the conflict between justice and family, as the narrator is unsure of whether he should take revenge of his mother and Claude or whether he should live with their actions. In a way, the narrator wishes that justice would be served, and the perpetrators of the murder face the consequences of their actions. But at other points, he does not want to see harm come to his mother or be separated from her, as he probably would if she was forced to go to prison.



The narrator also wonders if taking revenge would actually solve anything. If Claude and Trudy are able to get away with the murder, should they be free to do whatever they please? For a time, the narrator entertains the thought of murdering his mother and his uncle in response to their crimes but realizes that their deaths would not change the fact that they murder succeeded; it would also take the narrator years to get to the point where he would be old enough to commit such an act.

His lack of ability to do anything regarding the justice for his father's murder is partially the reason that he imagines an undead version of his father murdering Trudy and Claude. At that point, the narrator is helpless, unable to do anything of consequence. So, he imagines an unrealistic representation of his father to commit the act for him, creating metaphorical and unrealistic justice. As this occurs towards the end of the novel, it suggests that towards the end, the narrator eventually believes that consequences should come to the murderers after all. The narrator's contemplation of this idea and his change in opinions demonstrates that justice is complicated and muddled, especially when family is involved.

Family

Nutshell uses theme of family in order to analyze what family exactly is. It questions whether one must consider a blood relative family or whether you actually have to like your family.

In this traditional family unit, consisting of John, Trudy, and the narrator, the character's opinions of whether they are actually a family differ widely. For example, the narrator's opinions towards his family are very complex. Often times, he feels love for both his mother and his father. However, during other periods, he is incredibly furious with his mother and even fantasizes about murdering her. John and Trudy's relationship is similarly complex, as at some points it seems like they despise each other, but at other points, it seems like they still care about each other (like Trudy's reaction to John's death).

The narrator also has a complex relationship with his uncle, Claude. At one point in the novel, the narrator realizes that he is 25% genetically identical to his uncle. He ponders what part of his uncle's identity is within him. This seems to worry that narrator, as through much of the novel, the narrator hates Claude for what plans to do with his father.

Another question that the narrator constantly thinks about is which family member is he supposed to protect? His mother gave him life, but wants to kill his father. In turn, he loves his father for who he is and does not want him to die. In a nutshell, he is unsure of whom he is supposed to root for, his life-giving but murderous mother, or his poetic yet distant father, questioning the idea of whether one has to support their family regardless of their actions.

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the first person perspective (as evident by the constant use of I) of an unnamed child living in the womb of Trudy. This character can hear what happens outside of the womb and interprets it for the reader. A strange aspect of this point-of-view is that the narrator is sometimes privy to information that is not apparent to him, such as the exchange within John and Claude in John's office. The emotion behind the narrator's point-of-view changes often, as his opinions of the other character's changes as the murder plot develops, such as the narrator's early thoughts of killing Claude and his mother which later change.

Language and Meaning

Even though the story is from the perspective of an unborn child, the language and the metaphors within the prose seems like that of a well-read adult. Oddly enough, it seems that regardless of the fact that the child has never been out of the womb, he is aware of references to poetry and Shakespeare works. An example of this is when the narrator mentions Keats and Owen in the line "But as warm as the embrace of brothers are John Keats and Wilfred Owen. I feel their breath upon my lips. Their kiss" (14). Since much of the story roughly follows the plot of William Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, the reader cannot understand many of the idiosyncrasies and references, such as character parallels and symbolism (like the owl and the mouse) within the narrative without having read it.

Structure

The structure of the novel is a simple chapter format. The book is separated into 20 similarly sized chapters of prose from the perspective of the unborn narrator.



Quotes

So here I am, upside down in a woman.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: The first line of the novel introduces the fact that the narrator is an unborn child to the reader.

In the middle of a long, quiet night I might give my mother a sharp kick. She'll wake, become insomniac, reach for the radio. Cruel sport, I know, but we are both better informed by the morning.”

-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 6)

Importance: This instance shows the interesting, while insignificant influence that the narrator has on his mother.

Not everyone knows what it is to have your father's rival's penis inches from your nose.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote from early in the book demonstrates the narrator's disdain for his uncle.

Pessimism is too easy, even delicious, the badge and plume of intellectuals everywhere. It absolves the thinking classes of solutions. We excite ourselves with dark thoughts in plays, poems, novels, movies.”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 13)

Importance: The narrator suggests why humans distract themselves with entertainment, like his father does with poetry.

We'll always be troubled by how things are—that's how it stands with the difficult gift of consciousness. ”

-- Narrator (chapter 3 paragraph 13)

Importance: The narrator discusses that because we have consciousness, we cannot be content with the current ways of the world.

My father by nature is defenseless, as I am by circumstance. My uncle - a quarter of my genome, of my father's half, but no more like my father than I to Virgil or Montaigne. What despicable part of myself is Claude and how will I know? I could be my own brother and deceive myself as he deceived his. When I'm born and allowed at last to be alone, there's a quarter I'll want to take a kitchen knife to. But the one who holds the knife will also be my uncle, quartering in my genome. Then we'll see how the knife won't move. And this perception too is somewhat his.”

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 4)



Importance: The narrator worries about part of Claude being in his genetic material and what his actions could be because of it.

I'm close to my mother's heart and know its rhythms and sudden turns. And now! It accelerates at her husband's voice, and there's an added sound, a disturbance in the chambers, like the distant rattling of maracas, or gravel shuffled softly in a tin. From down here I'd say it's a semilunar valve whose cusps are snapping too hard and sticking. Or it could be her teeth."

-- Narrator (chapter 7 paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator hints that Trudy may still actually care about John. However, it could also be possible that her increase in heart rate is due to fear.

When love dies and marriage lies in ruins, the first casualty is honest memory, decent, impartial recall of the past. Too inconvenient, too damning of the present.

-- John Cairncross (chapter 7 paragraph 13)

Importance: John seems to theorize that because of their past, Trudy and John may not be thinking about each other in a fair manner.

Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves, Confucius said. Revenge unstitches civilisation."

-- Narrator (chapter 14 paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator ponders how revenge destroys the person seeking the revenge.

Revenge may be exacted a hundred times over in one sleepless night. The impulse, the dreaming intention, is human, normal, and we should forgive ourselves.

-- Narrator (chapter 14 paragraph 2)

Importance: The narrator discusses that committing an act of revenge in dreams is perfectly normal, while committing revenge in the real-world is not.

Early in my conscious life one of my fingers, not then subject to my influence, brushed past a shrimp-like protuberance between my legs.

-- Narrator (chapter 15 paragraph 1)

Importance: The narrator discovers his male gender for the first time.

Don't unpack your heart. One detail tells the truth."

-- John through his student (chapter 16 paragraph 7)

Importance: Here, one of John's students reveals a line that he once said to him. The idea of truth in this quote is ironic, as the entire book is about deceit.