

Please Look After Mom Study Guide

Please Look After Mom by Shin Kyung-sook

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Plot Summary

This novel, translated into English from the original Korean, explores how individual members of a family are traumatized by the sudden and unexplained disappearance of "Mom." As the narrative explores the loss, self-recrimination, and in some cases, self-discovery experienced in the aftermath of Mom's disappearance, it also considers themes related to the self-sacrifice of mothers, the relationship between past and present, and the shifting nature of identity.

The first part of the story, "Nobody Knows," is written from the first-person perspective of Mom's eldest daughter, whose name is not revealed until the novel's second section. Her narration describes the family's attempts at finding Mom who got separated from her husband, Father, while they were hurrying through Seoul's busy train station, contemplating the various unusual circumstances that might have brought Mom and Father to the station at that particular time. The narrator also contemplates the narrator's relationships with Mom and also with the narrator's younger brother, the over-achieving and much resented Hyong-Chol, to whom Mom devoted much of her time and energy.

The novel's second section, "I'm Sorry, Hyong-chol" is narrated from the third-person perspective of Hyong-chol himself who wonders what he was doing at the moment Mom disappeared, worries about how to find her, and begins to feel guilty about not being a better son. As Hyong-chol and Chi-hon follow every possible lead as they try to track Mom down, they discover that she is following something of a pattern, visiting every place where Hyong-chol lived, or worked, or both. Over the course of the searches, Hyong-chol remembers how Mom pushed him to do well on his exams, how disappointed she was when he failed the entrance exam to university, how she continued to make sacrifices for him, and ultimately, how badly he treated her.

The third section of the novel, "I'm Home" is narrated from a similar perspective to that of the first section - that is, of a first person narrator speaking of himself in the third person (i.e. referring to himself as "you"). In this case the narrator is Father, struggling to come to grips with the disappearance of his wife, with his memories of her life, with his self-recrimination for not being a better husband, and with the surprising discovery of her relationship with a local orphanage. Meanwhile, the mystery of what happened to Mom is deepening, although both Hyong-chol and Chi-hon are beginning to wonder whether they're ever going to find her.

In the fourth section of the novel, "Another Woman", the narrator is Mom herself. In language and phrasing that suggests she has died, or at least that she is existing on a different spiritual plane, Mom describes visiting her favored younger daughter (and worrying that she, the daughter, is losing her sense of self) and a male friend (who was a confidante and perhaps more). She also visits her and Father's home and, when she discovers that Father isn't there, explores the house room by room, reliving important times in her life. At the close of this section, narration describes Mom's encounter with her own Mom, and the comfort she finds in her arms.



The narrative closes with an epilogue, written in the same narrative style as the first and third sections and again focusing on Chi-hon, who has impulsively joined her boyfriend on a trip to Rome. Leaving him behind in their hotel room, she walks through the ancient streets, at one point reading a letter sent by her sister in which the sister describes changes in her feelings and perspectives since Mom disappeared. Later, Chi-hon visits the Vatican where she is able to honor one of Mom's fondest wishes and where later she whispers a prayer to the Virgin Mary to "please, look after Mom."



Part 1, Nobody Knows, Section 1, p. 4 - 33

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This novel, translated into English from the original Korean, explores how individual members of a family are traumatized by the sudden and unexplained disappearance of "Mom." As the narrative explores the loss, self-recrimination, and in some cases, self-discovery experienced in the aftermath of Mom's going missing, it also considers themes related to the self-sacrifice of mothers, the relationship between past and present, and the shifting nature of identity.

In the first-person narration in which she refers to herself as "you", the narrator (whose name remains unknown until early in Part 2, Section 1) describes the efforts of her family to find "Mom," who has been missing for several days. The narrator describes how she was designated to create a missing-person poster because she was a writer, how her brothers and sisters (particularly her eldest brother Hyong-chol) each had an opinion as to what should be on the poster, and how their discussions always seemed to turn to something else. She describes how Mom got lost, separated from Father on a crowded day at the Seoul Train Station when, for some reason, Father decided to take the subway instead of a taxi to their son's house. The narrator reveals, in narration, that she was in China promoting a book she had written on the day Mom disappeared, wonders what exactly Mom was doing while she (the narrator) was looking through a copy of her book at a book fair, and asks herself when she realized that Mom couldn't read. She describes how Mom used to ask the narrator to both read his letters home and write letters back. Even then, the narrator comments, she didn't realize that her mother could neither read nor write. At that point, she begins a contemplation of how little she knows her mother.

The narrator describes how intensely devoted Mom was to her sons, particularly Hyong-chol. She describes Mom's desperate sense of grief when he, then her other sons, left home, a grief that, the narrator says, she didn't seem to feel when her daughter (The narrator) left - she (the narrator) got no letters. She describes realizing that she had become a stranger in her own home, and discusses what the word "Mom" means to her. Finally, she describes paying a surprise visit to Mom, discovering her having some kind of seizure in the garden, and hearing her confess that when her (Mom's) sister died of cancer, she (Mom) didn't cry. The narrator describes the suddenness of Mom's sister's death from cancer, and how Mom said she couldn't cry anymore "because then my head hurts so much it feels like it's going to explode." At that point, the narrator says, she saw how much Mom had physically changed, and realized at that moment she no longer knew her.

After a brief description of Mom's relationship with her brother (the narrator's uncle), the narrator comments that seeing the two of them together made her realize, for the first



time, that Mom had a life before she became Mom. She then describes how, after discovering Mom in the yard, she changed her plans and stayed overnight, telling Mom a lengthy story of the experience she (the narrator) speaking to a gathering of blind people who had recently read her book in Braille, copies of which she had recently been given. She describes feeling lost because she usually judged the success of her speaking and storytelling by what was in the eyes of those listening, and couldn't decide what to speak about until prompted to talk about her book by one of the listeners. Eventually, the narrator describes how well her talk actually went, leading Mom to comment how much she enjoyed hearing the story. This leads the narrator to contemplate how her way of talking to her mother had changed - from a curt anger once she left home to a cursory casualness to this more intimate conversation

Part 1, Nobody Knows, Section 1, p. 4 - 33 Analysis

This opening section of the book establishes the book's central situation and lays the foundations of its plot - the family's search for Mom, a situation that can be seen as manifesting on two different levels. The first is the physical search for the missing Mom, an externally directed search for her actual body. There is a narratively engaging element of mystery about this aspect of the work, with the reader being drawn into the story by the deepening questions of how and why did it happen. The point is not made to suggest that the mystery element is the most important in the book, or even among the most important - only that the element of mystery is a key factor in drawing the reader further into the narrative and its characters. In any case, the second level of the family's search for Mom is, by contrast, more inwardly directed, as each of the work's four narrators searches their memories and their feelings for their individual insights and/or beliefs and/or understandings as to who Mom actually was. Here it's important to note that none of the narrators begins either search with much sense of Mom other than what she meant to them individually - they have little or no real idea who Mom was to and/or for herself. This, in turn, relates to perhaps the more important elements of this section, all of which relate to its style of narration.

The first point to note about this section's narrative style is that the narrator never gives her own name, referring to herself in the third person (i.e. as "you"). Her name (Chi-hon) is only revealed in the early stages of Part 2, Section 1, in which it is given by her brother, the Hyong-chol referred to so negatively in this section. The irony of Chi-hon's name being given by someone for whom she has such negative feelings is itself worth noting. The second key point about the work's narrative style in this section is related, in that Chi-hon also never gives her mother's name - the latter is referred to here, and for the most part throughout the book, only as "Mom". This suggests that the character is to be regarded by the reader as more of an archetype or a function than as someone with an actual individual identity - in other words, the same way as her children tend to see her, a discovery that the narrator of this section makes here. Meanwhile, this fact combines with Chi-hon not giving her own name to suggest that she (Chi-hon) has issues with her own sense of identity, referring to herself far more often in terms of her relationship with Mom than as herself. In relation to this point, it's important to note that in the Epilogue, also narrated by Chi-hon, the character has a much stronger sense of



individuality, of self and of identity. Also, it's worth noting that of the four narrating characters in the book, Chi-hon is the only character with two sections. This, in turn, gives rise to the idea/sense that her journey of transformation - from identity defined by relationship with Mom to identity defined more by self - is, on some level, tied to one or more of the novel's central thematic premises.

Then: the narrative contains a couple of key foreshadowings, circumstances that hint at moments later in the narrative when truths about individuals, their relationships, and their actions are revealed. For example, the description of Father leaving Mom behind in the train station foreshadows the revelation in Part 3 Section 2 that Father always walked faster than Mom. The reference to Mom's headaches foreshadows several occasions throughout the narrative in which she again suffers from similarly debilitating headaches.

Finally, there is Chi-hon's story about the reading at the gathering of blind people, which can be seen as functioning on a couple of levels. The first is ironic, in that Chi-hon herself is blind, but not in any physical way. She is not only blind to the potential of this particular audience for understanding her work, and to the potential of her mother for understanding her work. She is, perhaps most importantly, blind to her mother's identity, although as this section of the narrative suggests, she is becoming somewhat more aware that there is such an identity, even if she remains somewhat unaware as to what that identity might be.



Part 1, Nobody Knows, Section 2, p. 33 - 59

Part 1, Nobody Knows, Section 2, p. 33 - 59 Summary

Taking with her the Braille books, the narrator visits first a fish market (where she buys some fresh octopus) and then a beach. There, she recalls being taught to read by her second-eldest brother who, under Mom's orders, also made sure she didn't use her left hand, which she was naturally included to use. This leads her to recalling how Mom and Father fought over sending her to school, how Mom sold her wedding ring and took on extra jobs to pay the fees. Narration then returns to the visit home that began in the previous section, with the narrator describing how she and Mom cooked the octopus for breakfast. Preparing the octopus leads her (the narrator) to recall how some of her mother's cooking habits troubled her sister-in-law, particularly when it came to preparing food for the ancestral rites. After breakfast, Mom and the narrator go for a walk in the hills, describing how Mom asked what the world's smallest country was and made her promise that when she found and visited the country, to bring her back a set of rosewood rosary beads.

The narrator then recalls the many things Mom did to make extra money in the house, including selling a litter of puppies. She also recalls how, when the puppies were all sold, Mom let the narrator choose a book to buy, and she chose "Human, All Too Human," written by an author named Nietzsche. The narrative then moves back to the walk on the mountains, where Mom reveals that she deeply resented her own mother for not enabling her to go to school. The narrator then discusses how Mom agreed to come to Seoul (where the narrator now lives) to see doctors about her headaches only if Hyong-chol wasn't told. She also discusses how the doctors discovered Mom had had a stroke, how the blood pooled in her brain as the result of the stroke was cleared away and how the headaches didn't stop. Later, conversation in which Mom confesses that the happiest times of her life were when she was providing well for her hungry children leads the narrator to comment on how Mom's increasingly painful headaches "slowly ate away" at the smiles on her face.

Part 1 concludes with narration returning to the present day - that is, the aftermath of Mom's disappearance. The narrator visits a print shop where the man helping her print the flyers reveals, as the result of a compliment from the narrator, how close he and his mother were. He describes how, because he had so many allergies to fabric, his mother made all his clothes out of pure cotton, and that after she died, he found "stacks of cotton clothes that would last him for the rest of his life." When the narrator asks whether he thought his mother was happy, he becomes unhappy with her and says his mother wasn't like contemporary women.



Part 1, Nobody Knows, Section 2, p. 33 - 59 Analysis

The narrative's thematic emphasis on the perceived functions of motherhood continues here, with Chi-hon describing, at considerable length, the sacrifices to which Mom went in order to enable her (Chi-hon's) schooling. This foreshadows equally detailed descriptions of the lengths to which Mom went to support Hyong-chol, themselves described in Part 2. Meanwhile, this theme is also explored in the vignette at the print shop, where the devotion of the clerk's mother can be seen as metaphorically representing the eternal devotion of motherhood. Here might be a good time to raise one of the narrative's key concerns. The mothers portrayed in the narrative (including Chi-hon's sister, the narrator of Part 3) seem prepared and/or willing to go to almost any lengths to ensure the well being of their children. The exception is Mom's mom, portrayed here and in other sections of the book as being more interested in ensuring that Mom did what was expected of her, not what was best for her - although it could be argued that from the perspective of Mom's mom, what was expected was the best for her. In any case, by portraying prominent mother figures as profoundly self-sacrificing, the novel seems to be asking the question of whether they're doing so because they were expected to do so, or because they felt driven to do so by maternal feeling. The work's portrayal of these mothers' children as essentially being ungrateful and assuming such sacrifice was their right suggests that they, at least (the children) perceived it as the former. The question of how the mothers themselves view/regard such sacrifice is a murkier one.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Mom's headaches (which, like other references in the narrative, suggest that they were triggered by emotional rather than physiological causes), and the reference to Mom buying Chi-hon a book. There are two points to note about this particular moment. The first is that it shows that Mom had a sensitivity to Chi-hon's nature that Chi-hon, it seems, didn't always believe she had. The second is the author of the book - Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the most famous of the so-called existential philosophers of the early 20th Century. The selection of the book is interesting for a couple of reasons. Its philosophic subject matter was, in all likelihood, far beyond the comprehension of the young Chi-hon, and was, at the same time, evocative of a perspective on life that, in very basic terms, celebrated the strong and devalued the weak ... in other words, that would have celebrated Mom in her strong-willed determination.

Finally, there are the references to the smallest country in the world and to the rosary beads. Both references foreshadow events in the Epilogue, in which Chi-hon visits the smallest country in the world, finds exactly the right kind of rosary beads, and has a spiritual experience that, for her and the reader, brings to a climax both her physical (external) and spiritual (inner) search for Mom.



Part 2, I'm Sorry Hyong-Chol, Section 1, p. 63 - 79

Part 2, I'm Sorry Hyong-Chol, Section 1, p. 63 - 79 Summary

Narration in Part 2 shifts to third person, focused on Hyong-Chol. It begins with a description of his handing out missing person flyers in Seoul Station, and later refers to him watching his sister (the narrator from Part 1, whose name is now revealed to be Chi-hon) and her more aggressive technique. Meanwhile, one of Hyong-chol's flyers leads a passing woman to say that he saw someone who looked like Mom in front of the Yongsan 2-dong office, that the woman and Mom had the same eyes, that the woman was wearing blue plastic sandals and had an injured foot. In spite of knowing that Mom was wearing sandals of a different color when she went missing, Hyong-chol travels to the Yongsan office. On the way, he recalls how Chi-hon angrily told him about Mom's headaches and the mini-stroke, saying that (Mom) didn't tell him because she didn't want him to feel that she was a burden and asking why Mom would feel that way. This leads him to recall Mom's pride at his good grades in high school, her shaping the circumstances of life at home to enable his studies, and her confused disappointment at his not succeeding in his college entrance exams. He also recalls the extraordinary trip she took (taking the train for the first time in her life) to bring him his high school certificate so he could take a civil service entrance exam. In the aftermath of that trip, narration reveals, Hyong-chol promised himself to always take care of her, but outwardly berated her for taking the risks she did, in particular following a stranger who offered to lead her to the Yongsan office. She responds optimistically, saying you have to trust some people sometime.

When he visits the office, Hyong-chol realizes Mom probably wouldn't have come there - if she could figure out how to do so, he reasons, she would have been able to figure out how to get to either his house or that of one of his siblings. Looking at the office leads him to remember more about the time Mom brought him the certificate. They slept in the night duty room (where workers staying at the office all night slept) and, in the middle of the night, Hyong-chol comments about her having taken the train for the first time. Mom confesses how happy and nervous she was when he was young and she was doing everything for the first time, adding that she had high hopes for him and then, later in the night, tearfully apologizing to him. For what, the narrative doesn't say.

Hyong-chol then visits the apartment building where he lived when he first came to Seoul, and learns from a boy who lives there that a woman resembling Mom (and who also had the same kind of eyes as the woman on the flyer) had sat by the gate a couple of days ago. After promising the boy a share of the reward being offered for Mom's return, Hyong-chol leaves, recalling that that night in the duty office, he had promised her a warm room when she next came back to the city. Then, as Chi-hon did earlier, he



contemplates what he was doing at the time Mom disappeared - he was recovering from a night of too much drinking, during which he had celebrated the successful implementation of a marketing plan suggested to him by Chi-hon but mocked, that evening, by a jealous colleague named Kim. "As he sweated in the sauna," narration comments, "which he often visited the day after he drank too much, Father was getting on the train without Mom."

Part 2, I'm Sorry Hyong-Chol, Section 1, p. 63 - 79

Analysis

The mystery element of the narrative (i.e. the question of what exactly happened to Mom, where she went and how she got there) begins to deepen in this section, as Hyong-chol begins to trace what appear to be her steps through Seoul and, on another level, through her past - or rather, her past as defined by his life. This is this section's key element, in that the narrative makes it very clear throughout Part 2 that Mom was devoted to Hyong-chol's well being and success. In other words, her children's present day search for Mom is defined, as her past life had almost entirely been, by her relationship with Hyong-chol. This aspect of her life, like so much of what she did, raises the question of whether she made the choices she made because she was expected to, or because she wanted to. Here it's interesting to note the apparent difference between her perspective on / reactions to Hyong-chol and her attitude towards her youngest daughter, portrayed in Part 3. In the latter, the narration (in the voice of Mom herself) is full of endearment and affection, phrasing and imagery that suggests she did what she did because she loved that daughter so much. In terms of Hyong-chol, the equally clear sense is that she was doing her duty, mother to oldest son. In any case, the novel makes the clear point that all Mom's children took her for granted, apparently assuming that her devotion and support were only to be expected. This didn't stop them from speaking sharply and condescendingly to her, as they all seem to do at one point or another - the children are portrayed as greedy and ungrateful, not appreciating what they've been given and why until it's apparently too late. This appears to be, in essence, one of the book's key messages - appreciate your mothers.

Aside from the question of what exactly happened to Mom, the narrative also raises another key question - what did she think she had to apologize to Hyong-chol for? While the narrative never explicitly answers this question, there are two strong possibilities. The first is indicated by events in the following section, in which she seems to be apologizing for revealing her disappointed anger at Hyong-chol's failure to pass his exams. There is also the sense, however, that on some level, Mom feels she pushed Hyong-chol too far and too hard, that his desperation to be the kind of son she seemed to want him to be actually kept him from realizing his potential rather than helping him. This idea is reinforced by the self-discoveries Hyong-chol makes as the result of events at the end of the following section.



Part 2, I'm Sorry Hyong-Chol, Section 2, p. 79 - 112

Part 2, I'm Sorry Hyong-Chol, Section 2, p. 79 - 112 Summary

Narration describes how, when Hyong-chol was a child, Father brought home an attractive woman much younger than Mom who left shortly afterwards. In spite of the woman's attempts to make friends with him and his siblings, Hyong-chol repeatedly rejected her, eventually tearfully pleading with Mom to come home. She agrees, chasing both Father and the woman out of the house. Later that year, Father returned, and when he does, Mom fed him as usual, "as if Father had left that morning and had come back at night, instead of having left in the summer and returned sheepishly in the bitter cold of winter." In the aftermath of Father's return, Mom makes sure Hyong-chol gets the best and the most food, has all the time he needs to study, and in general ensure that he's treated particularly well. When he fails his college entrance exams, however, she is very angry and disappointed, but shortly afterwards, when she brings Chi-hon to live with him, starts apologizing to him every time she sees him.

Back in the present, a telephone conversation with Chi-hon sends Hyong-chol to the scene of another possible sighting of Mom, this one in front of a market in Yokchondong. As he hurries to check out the sighting, Hyong-chol realizes that all the sightings so far have been in places where he used to live, and wonders how Mom, who was never left on her own whenever she visited Seoul, is making her way through the city now. When he and Chi-hon arrive in Yokchondong, they find the place where Mom was apparently seen - a pharmacy, where the pharmacist reveals the circumstances of his encounter with her, including his treatment of her injured foot. His description of what the woman was wearing matches the description of what Mom was wearing when she disappeared, except for - again - her being described as wearing blue sandals. He also comments on the warmth in the eyes of both the woman on the flyer and the woman he met with, the worn nature of the sandals, and the startling depth of the wound in her foot. Afterwards, Hyong-chol and Chi-hon search separately for a while, reuniting at a playground near the first house Hyong-chol bought.

Hyong-chol recalls Mom's first visit to that house, and her uneasy happiness at having her own room. He also recalls earlier visits when she would come to the city for a family function, bringing huge amounts of food and reminding him that, as the eldest child, he had a responsibility to serve as a role model for his siblings. Always after those visits, Mom would insist on going back on the midnight train, and Hyong-chol would insist on accompanying her to the platform, where he would promise her that he would provide for her. The visits always ended with Mom apologizing to him once again. Later, after having a drink with Chi-hon, Hyong-chol goes drinking on his own, determined to drive the image of the woman in the blue sandals with the wounded foot out of his head.



When he gets home, he drunkenly picks a fight with his wife, accusing her of not being responsible enough to take care of his parents. Their quarrel is interrupted by Father, who has been staying with them while the search continues and who blames himself for Mom's disappearance, adding that he wants to go home. After Father goes to bed, Hyong-chol crumples to the floor in drunken self-loathing, realizing it was he who had disappointed Mom and not the other way around.

Part 2, I'm Sorry Hyong-Chol, Section 2, p. 79 - 112

Analysis

Here again, the externally oriented search for the missing Mom has an internally oriented echo and / or mirror, as Hyong-chol searches his memory and his feelings for insight and/or understanding into the part of Mom that, it seems, has been missing all his life. He and Chi-hon are going through essentially the same experience, searching for Mom's physical presence in the same way as they are searching for signs of her inner life, her reasons for doing what she did in the way she did it.

At this point, it's interesting to note how he and the other individuals who offer clues to Mom's appearance refer to the same things - the eyes, the blue sandals, and the wounded foot. The references here are particularly important, in that the pharmacist is so much more detailed and so specific about these details. At this point in the narrative, when it has been made very clear just how little Mom's children know and/or recognize about her, all three aspects of the lost Mom's appearance can be seen as representing aspects of her personality / inner life that the children have, for the most part, missed seeing all their lives.

Perhaps the most surprising element of this section is the story of Father and the other woman, a character who is referred to only in this section - Father's story, which is the subject of Part 3, never refers to her at all. This is perhaps because Hyong-chol, self-centered as he is, sees the event solely in terms of its effect on him and his relationship with Mom. In any case, the portrayal of Mom in this section is particularly interesting, in that it seems that her tendency towards self-sacrifice is not oriented solely towards Hyong-chol. Again, the question is raised of whether she does what she does because she is expected to, or because she wants to. The other interesting point to note about this story is the language in which the author describes Father's return - specifically, with the summer/winter imagery. This can be seen as metaphorically reflecting Father's emotional state (i.e. having left in the "summer" of new love, returning in the "winter" of that love having worn out its welcome and/or the "winter" of shame). This is one of the very few instances in the narrative in which poetic language/imagery is utilized.



Part 3, I'm Home, Section 1, p. 115 - 133

Part 3, I'm Home, Section 1, p. 115 - 133 Summary

In first person narration in which he refers to himself as "you", Father is shocked when he is visited by a young woman named Hong Tae-hee, who is looking for Mom. Tae-hee reveals that Mom had been a regular visitor to the orphanage she runs (Hope House), that she had been giving large sums of money towards the maintenance of the orphanage, and that she (Tae-hee) had been reading Chi-hon's books to her. Father's considerations of all this surprising news are interrupted by various recollections - of Mom's insistence that she get control of the money being sent to her by Chi-hon and her siblings, and of Mom's arranging for them to commemorate Parents' Day even though none of their children got in touch. Father reflects on how trapped he felt by his house and his home life, how he can now see clearly how much Mom's general condition had deteriorated over the years, and how he had taken no responsibility for caring for her. Narration refers, several times, to Father's habit of shouting "I'm home" into the silence of his house, half-believing, in his loss (see "Quotes", p. 122) that Mom will have come back and was about to respond.

As he settles back in after his trip to Seoul, Father reflects on how he "returned home because of the things your wife grew and raised", both garden and children. He contemplates his habit of leaving whenever he wanted to, recalling one night when he fed his suddenly maturing children ("You grew frightened of your children's appetites. You wondered what to do with all of them") and realized that he could never leave again ("that was when you decided that you needed to forget about the outside world"). Meanwhile, crying out "I'm home", Father searches for Mom, recalling how, when he asked for something, she would drop everything to take care of him. He wonders how he could have possibly been married to her all this time without taking care of her, vowing to himself) that if she came back he'd do better.

Father comments in narration that it wasn't until after she went missing that he recalled the first time they met - during the unsettled period after the Korean War. Theirs was to be an arranged marriage, but Father couldn't conceive of marrying someone he had never seen, so he set off for Mom's village of Chinmoe. He first saw her sitting quietly on her home's front porch, embroidering, but then followed her to the cotton fields, where he watched as she pleaded with her mother to be allowed to remain unmarried. Her mother, whom Mom called "Mom" insisted, saying she could provide no other life, but eventually burst into tears herself. This, Father realizes, was a turning point in his life (see "Quotes", p, 132). Finally, he describes in narration how he was unable to sleep at Hyong-chol's in the city, but when he got back home, he slept for three days straight.



Part 3, I'm Home, Section 1, p. 115 - 133 Analysis

Here the author again returns to the style of narration employed in Part 1, in which Chi-hon referred to herself in the third person. In this case, as was the case in that section, the distancing effect of this stylistic choice suggests that in the same way as the narrator doesn't really know Mom, he doesn't really know himself. In other words, and in the same way as Chi-hon, Father is making discoveries about himself and his feelings about Mom in the same way as he is making discoveries about what he doesn't know about Mom.

Meanwhile, this section is particularly noteworthy for the further glimpses it offers into the home life of the family - Father's frequent absences, Mom's essentially nurturing qualities, Mom's control of the family's finances and, in particular, the story of his illicit visit to meet his yet-unmet bride. Here, the narrative's portrayal of Father is ultimately of less interest, in terms of the book as a whole, than its portrayal of Mom's mother, also called Mom. This portrayal very clearly indicates that this earlier Mom did what she did and made the choices she made in what she believed to be the daughter's best interests, as opposed to what either of them actually wanted. The reader gets this sense from the fact that Mom's mom bursts into tears after insisting on the marriage - she knows that the likelihood of her daughter being happy is not substantial, but has decided that being well taken care of is the greater priority. There is the sense, after learning of this event in Mom's life, that the reader will see her (Mom's) choices and belief systems as echoing / reflecting those of her mom - an echo that resounds in the life and experience of Mom's own daughter, portrayed in Part 3.

Ultimately, though, both this section and the following one, in which Mom's life and experience are explored through Father's perspective, create sympathy and compassion in the reader for both characters, even the apparently very selfish father, whose profound sense of being lost and pathetically futile shouting reveal him to be more vulnerable at heart than previously believed. The lesson for the reader here, as it is throughout this occasionally heavy-handed narrative, is this - you can never really know the truth about your parents and what they've had to live. Therefore, they deserve to be treated with respect and compassion. Otherwise, you will lose them (literally and metaphorically) or they will lose you (i.e. let go of you) as, it seems by the end of the novel, Mom has done.



Part 3, I'm Home, Section 2, p. 133 - 164

Part 3, I'm Home, Section 2, p. 133 - 164 Summary

Father recalls how Mom spent large amounts of money on beautiful burial clothes (the nicest clothes she would ever have, she said), and wanted him to die first. His thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of two little girls who Mom had taken care of and fed when their own mother saw that she (Mom) could be taken advantage of. As he prepares rice using a rice cooker he has no idea how to run, he reflects on what happened the day Mom got lost at Seoul Station, recalling how he always walked faster than her in spite of her begging him not to. After the girls go, he weeps heavily, narration commenting that he had never wept during any of the other traumas he suffered in his life, realizing how badly he had treated Mom, frequently ill with digestive disorders and, at one point, with breast cancer.

Father's recollections are interrupted by the arrival of his sister, portrayed throughout the narrative as being both judgmental and interfering. Father reflects on his chain-smoking sister's unhappiness, reacting with surprise when she confesses that she had hoped to apologize to Mom for some of the things she (the sister) had done and said to her. One of those things was speaking badly of Mom because of Kyun, Father's younger brother.

The mention of Kyun leads Father to an extended recollection of his brother's life. Kyun was very intelligent, but the family couldn't afford to send him to school. As he grew older, Kyun and Mom became closer and closer, with Kyun treating Mom as if she was his own mother and, at times, buying her gifts including a basin made of nickel for use in cooking. Father was jealous, and his sister complained, but nothing they said or did damaged the relationship. At one point, Kyun left for several years, eventually returning physically stronger but somewhat emotionally disturbed. One day, Mom found him having a kind of seizure and ran into the village to get Father, interrupting his gambling. Narration comments that after Kyun died, Mom was suspected of having killed him, to the point of her being arrested. She was never convicted, but Father's sister was convinced that Mom had something to do with Kyun's death. Mom, meanwhile, became quieter and sadder after Kyun died and, as the result of his contemplations Father, who was himself very upset at the death of his brother, realizes he should have paid more attention to her. He wonders, in fact, whether her grief about Kyun contributed to Mom's many illnesses, including her headaches.

Again, Father's recollections are interrupted, this time by a telephone call from Chi-hon, concerned that calls with information about Mom have stopped. Father confesses that the day he and Mom were to go into Seoul, Mom confessed to having a bad headache, but he made her go anyway. This leads the drunken Chi-hon to confess that the reason Mom had a headache was a fight the two of them had had. Father tells her how much Mom valued Chi-hon's writing and success, revealing that Mom had had someone read Chi-hon's writing to her (Hong Tae-hee - see Part 3, Section 1). As Chi-hon cries, Father starts to cry himself, realizing how much Chi-hon cares about Mom.



Part 3, I'm Home, Section 2, p. 133 - 164 Analysis

There are several important elements in this section - the visit of the little girls (yet another surprise for Father about Mom's private life), the visit of his sister (portrayed throughout the narrative as a toxic influence on the entire family) and the revelation that Mom had breast cancer. This last is, on the surface, particularly shocking since neither of the previous narrators, Chi-hon or Hyong-chol, mentioned it - another example, perhaps, of just how little they knew about Mom ... or how little she wanted them to know about her.

Probably the most important element of this section is the story of Kyun. The exact nature of Mom's feelings towards him is never fully revealed. It does seem that she views him more like a younger brother than anything else, but she also advocates for his going to school in the same way as she eventually advocates for Hyong-chol, so there are perhaps her feelings are more maternal. There is even the possibility that her feelings grew into something more, as narration comments on how intensely she grieved after his death. The point must be made, however, that the precise nature of Mom's feelings for Kyun are less important than the facts that she had them and that Father, as he himself comes to recognize, never really paid the attention to them that they deserved.

One last point to note in this section is the reference to the nickel basin and its representation of the emotional bond between Kyun and Mom. The reference here foreshadows events in Part 4, in which the basin plays a catalytic role in events that explore another kind of emotional bond between Mom and someone other than her husband and children or in other words, another secret aspect of Mom's life.



Part 4, Another Woman, Section 1, p. 164 - 186

Part 4, Another Woman, Section 1, p. 164 - 186 Summary

For the first few paragraphs of this section, it's not entirely clear who is narrating. The first person speaker is confused and uncertain, speaking of the living arrangements of a woman and her children, narration eventually revealing that the speaker is Mom, that the object of her attention is her daughter (who has three children), and that Mom is now in the form of a bird, sitting outside the daughter's house and watching events there. Mom describes her daughter's affection for birds, and how she buried a dead bird found by her eldest son (who is good in school and studies a lot). Mom also narrates a fight that takes place over the phone between her daughter and Chi-hon, who is planning to leave on a promotional tour for one of her books. In order to calm the situation down, Chi-hon hurries over, but collapses in fatigue, saying she met her boyfriend's mother the previous day, a woman who is called sister by her own daughter. After she finishes her story, Chi-hon confesses that she doesn't understand what's happened to Mom. Meanwhile, Mom reflects on how upset she was first when her other daughter went to America for three years, and then came back, having been educated, and became devoted to her family.

In narration, Mom apologizes for being so judgmental and negative about her daughter having so many children (three), saying that she (the daughter) was always "a source of happiness" to her, especially since she was born healthy and happy following the stillbirth of another brother. That baby, she adds, was buried not by her (Mom), but by someone Mom identifies as "that man." The loss of that baby, Mom suggests, made her second daughter (Chi-hon is the first and oldest) particularly precious to her, adding that she did all the special things she did (making her daughter a pretty dress for school, buying her nice shoes) because the daughter was so special. She recalls not becoming angry with her daughter for participating in protest marches because she loved her so much, also recalls how nicely her daughter treated her on her visits to Seoul, and apologizes for having put her daughter in a situation in which she (the daughter) can't worry as much or search as much as she would like. Mom then says she feels unwell and is going to leave, but wants to hold her daughter for a little while first. "Don't be sad," she says. "I was happy so many days of my life because I had you."

Part 4, Another Woman, Section 1, p. 164 - 186 Analysis

The opening paragraphs of Part 4 are written in such a way as to be quite mysterious, particularly since Parts 1 and 3 are first person narrations in which the narrator refers to



him/herself as "you," a term the narrator of this section uses as well. In other words, it's difficult to know in what way "you" is actually being used. It eventually becomes clear, however, that the narrator is Mom and the "you" is her unnamed youngest daughter to whom, it must be noted, Mom refers with affectionate terms and endearments that none of the other three narrators portrays her as using. Here again there is another secret about Mom (that her younger daughter was her favorite) and an apparent implication - that her heightened attention towards Hyong-chol was, and is, more the result of duty than of genuine affection, so clearly at work in her relationship with her youngest daughter.

Other interesting elements in this section include the almost-in-passing reference to Mom being in the form of a bird (a situation which is never really referred to and/or discussed again) and the reference to a still-born child. Again, this is a family circumstance, like Kyun, that is never referred to by any of the other narrators and is, as such, yet another indication of how little they knew, or wanted to know, or perhaps even cared, about Mom.

The final important element in this section is the reference to "that man", a reference that intrigues the reader (who wants to know who he is and what he meant to Mom) and draws him/her further into the narrative which, in the following section, explains who "that man" was and what he meant to Mom.



Part 4, Another Woman, Section 2, p. 187 - 212

Part 4, Another Woman, Section 2, p. 187 - 212 Summary

Mom visits an elderly man entering a hospital who angrily resists every time a doctor asks for his name and, at one point, gives Mom's name. This leads Mom to recollect how she met the man - as he was passing on his bicycle, he offered to help her carry a heavy load of flour and leave it for her up ahead, but took to his own house instead. When the frantic Mom found both the bowl and the man, she discovered the man's wife was having a baby and helped her give birth, afterwards making food for the starving family. Mom describes how she later returned and discovered that the wife had died, how Mom breastfeed the baby, and how afterwards, she and the man became good friends. She describes how he helped her through difficult times how she tracked him down and visited him after he moved, and how she abused his generosity. She apologizes for making things so difficult for him and thanks him for everything he gave her - "I was able," she comments in narration, "to travel through my life because I could come to you when I was anxious, not when I was happy." His name, she reveals, is Eun-gyu.

Mom then visits the house at Chongup, which is closed up and cold, covered in snow and ice. It's now winter and Father has left. As Mom wonders whether he has gone back to Seoul to look for her, she remembers the house before it was renovated and travels through it, each room triggering memories. As she describes those memories, narration reveals that she didn't want Father's attention when she was ill, not wanting to be a burden. She also reveals how careful she was to listen for her children at the house's gate, how when she got her headaches she burned gifts from her earlier life, and how the only gift she retained was a mink coat, bought for her by her youngest daughter. She describes the frustration and loneliness that led her to church, where, in the churchyard, she prayed at a statue of the Holy Mother. Inside the church, she became fascinated by the mink coat of one of the other churchgoers, buried her face in it, and wept, releasing long-pent up feelings. Her thoughts returning to her own mink coat, she describes her discovery of how much it cost, and reveals her determination that her youngest daughter should have it after she died. Her reflections are interrupted by the arrival of Father's sister, who sits on the porch and weeps, mourning Mom's disappearance while, at the same time, calling her heartless for leaving. This, in turn, leads Mom to confess that she doesn't want to be buried in the family site set aside for her, adding that she wants to be buried at home - here, at Chongup.

The section concludes with Mom's narrative of how, when she was "left behind at Seoul Station", she lost all her memories except for those of when she was three years old - her long walks, her father's sudden accidental death, her playing and laughing because



she hadn't yet heard, and the punishment she faced as a result. That was the memory she walked through Seoul with. She then sees her own Mom, who sees the wound in her foot and holds open her arms.

Part 4, Another Woman, Section 2, p. 187 - 212

Analysis

There are several important elements in this section. The first is the story of Eun-gyu, the "that man" of the previous section. The point must be made that the narrative makes no indication whatsoever that Mom's relationship with him had anything sexual about it at all. Theirs, it seems, was entirely a platonic relationship, one that seemed to fulfill Mom's needs more than those of "that man", at least in the relationship's later stages. One does have to wonder, though, given Mom's apparent tendency for self blame where it might not have been appropriate whether her need for Eun-gyu, and her acting on that need, was as oppressive as she believes it to have been. In any case, he was an escape for her, a way to take refuge, at least for a while, from the difficulties and challenges of her home life.

Other important points to note include Mom's comment that she didn't want Father to look after her when she got ill. This is, on the one hand, very ironic, given that in Part 3 Father realized that he could/should have taken better care of her. On the other hand, the comment is possibly another example of how Mom indulges in apparently unnecessary self-sacrifice. Then there is the story of the mink coat, a possession that seems remarkably incongruous, given how Mom is portrayed, throughout the narrative, as having nothing to do with luxuries, and wanting nothing to do with them. It is, however, for her a source of comfort and one of her few pleasures, meaning that the fact of its existence adds yet another layer of meaning to the life that Mom's husband and children really knew nothing of. Yes, they probably know about the coat - what they don't know, in all likelihood, is what it represents.

Perhaps the most important element of this section is the brief reference to Mom's having seen, in the churchyard, some kind of portrayal, probably a devotional statue, of the Holy Mother. The term "Holy Mother" is used, mostly by Roman Catholics, to identify the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. She is venerated as a saintly ideal of sacrifice and faith throughout Christianity, but is held in highest spiritual esteem by the Roman Catholic Church. That faith practice sees/portrays her as what amounts to the most powerful archetype of idealized motherhood, simultaneously wounded by the death of her son and blessed by giving birth to him, in contemporary Western culture and society. She is also an intercessor between humanity and God, invoked by those who wish her to bring their suffering to God's attention and to plead, on their behalf, for healing. The connection made by the narrative between the sacrifices of Mom and the sacrifices of the Holy Mother is quite clear. The implication, here and in the Epilogue, where the Holy Mother makes another, even more metaphorically and thematically significant appearance which the appearance here foreshadows, is that in her own way, Mom is intended to be viewed as a similar archetype of suffering and sacrifice.



Epilogue, Rosewood Rosary, p. 214 - 237

Epilogue, Rosewood Rosary, p. 214 - 237 Summary

In narration in which she refers to herself as "you," Chi-hon describes her visit to Italy in the company of her boyfriend, Yu-bin. Spontaneous and secretive, Chi-hon has traveled without telling any of her family that she is gone, afraid of being accused that she has forgotten Mom. As she slips away from Yu-bin for a day by herself, Chi-hon visits the Vatican, at first following in the path of a tour guide (whose words she doesn't really listen to) but later separating herself from her tour group and reading a letter from her sister, stuffed unread into her purse. In the letter, the sister describes how, when she returned from America, Mom gave her a small persimmon tree, saying if she took care of it, it would bear fruit when she (the sister) was old. The letter also refers to the sister's discoveries about the persimmon tree and her contemplations of its future. These, in turn, lead the sister to consider how badly she and the rest of the family treated Mom and to ask Chi-hon to not give up on her (Mom). After reading the letter, Chi-hon imagines how challenging it must have been for her sister, with her three children, to actually sit down and write the letter.

Chi-hon then recalls the telephone conversation she had with Father just before he left, a conversation in which he blamed himself for Mom's disappearance and Chi-hon agreed - that yes, it was his fault. She then recalls how selfless Mom had been when Father went through a series of medical procedures, and how Father had, on rare occasions, also taken care of Mom. Chi-hon also describes her occasional meetings with Hyong-chol since Mom's disappearance, commenting that he has become short tempered and angry, responding to her outbursts about his not finding Mom with tears and, eventually, silence.

Chi-hon's attention returns to the tour guide who at one point describes the Vatican as the smallest country in the world. This leads Chi-hon to remember the conversation with Mom in which she asked Chi-hon to bring her, if she ever visited the smallest country in the world, a rosary made of rosewood. Chi-hon goes off in search of just such a rosary and finds one, but doesn't quite know what to do with it. Later, however, as she's visiting St. Peter's Basilica, she finds herself drawn to the statue of The Pieta. Feeling powerful emotions of grief evoked by the statue, Chi-hon kneels before it and places the rosary on the floor, imagining both the statue coming to life and Mom being near her. She wonders whether an unconscious desire to see The Pieta was the reason she spontaneously decided to travel to Rome. After a while, Chi-hon gets up and leaves, exiting the Basilica into sunshine. "And only then" does she say what she couldn't say when she was kneeling in front of the statue, "Please, please look after Mom."



Epilogue, Rosewood Rosary, p. 214 - 237 Analysis

As previously discussed, Chi-hon completes something of a journey of transformation in this section, having come to both realize and accept just how much about Mom she never knew, and now never can know. Her act of prayer and sacrifice in this section clearly suggests that part of what she doesn't know is what has actually happened to Mom, but that she does know that she (Mom) has passed into some kind of existence, whether still physically on the planet or not, in which she (Chi-hon) can no longer participate. In other words, Chi-hon participates in an act of faith of a sort that, because of her earlier fear, she was previously unable to enact.

It's interesting to note that this discovery is tied in with Chi-hon's experience of independence, having left Korea without depending on her family for support or for permission, embarking on an experience of life defined more by her relationship with her partner. It's also interesting that, in entrusting Mom to the care of the Holy Mother, she (Chi-hon) is proclaiming her independence, her own identity, in yet another way - Mom had her life and, perhaps, her own death. It's now time, it seems, for Chi-hon to get on with hers.

Finally, the presence/image of the Pieta is, as previously discussed, clearly an implication that Mom's sacrifice, her devotion to the well being of her children, are simultaneously archetypal and spiritual - that her love and loyalty, not to mention her suffering, were and are manifestations of a fundamental way of relating to life. There is the sense, in fact, that Mom knew this about herself and her experience, a sense arising from the initial references to the smallest country in the world and to the rosewood rosary. Yes, it could be argued that Mom (portrayed throughout the narrative as not having these sorts of imaginative thoughts or making such poetically evocative requests) says what she says earlier point because the author wants to offer some (slightly heavy-handed) foreshadowing of her novel's climax (i.e. a spiritually fulfilling end to Chi-hon's simultaneous physical and emotional search). It could also be argued that the curiosity about the smallest country in the world and the longing for a rosewood rosary are both examples of how Mom's inner life is so thoroughly unknown to her children. In any case, the authorial implication of this final image seems clear. This is the idea that motherhood is sacrifice, that those who have been sacrificed FOR will never know what that sacrifice costs, and that with those two circumstances in mind, the well being of ALL moms, whether they're outwardly gone (dead or missing) or inwardly unknown, should be entrusted to the care of God.



Characters

Mom

"Mom" (who is, for the most part, rarely referred to by her own name, Park So-nyo) is the novel's central character, even though she is spoken about far more often than she actually appears. Her disappearance is the novel's central issue, the immediate after-effects of that disappearance on her family are the focus of much of the narration, and the contemplations that her family engages in as a result of those after-effects are the means through which the narrative explores its central themes. In other words, those contemplations trigger separate realizations in the novel's other characters of just how their perspectives on Mom and their respective relationships with her have been, essentially, empty.

In terms of Mom herself, it's important to note that for the most part, the reader's impression of her is gleaned from what the other characters say about her (the fact that she is almost exclusively referred to as "Mom" also says a great deal). All three of the other narrators (Chi-hon, Hyong-chol, Father), along with the other members of the family spoken of by ALL the narrators (including Mom), describe her as self-sacrificing to an extreme, hard-working and responsible, demanding and not overtly affectionate, but ultimately completely loving. There are also glimpses of a more romantic side, a lonely side, a needy side of her, but even in the section of the book in which she is the narrator (Part 3), she comes across as putting herself and her needs far below those of the other people in her life. She finds fulfillment in helping others find fulfillment, a situation which, the narrative seems to contend, is both archetypal and somehow fundamentally unhealthy.

Chi-hon

Chi-hon is the first of the book's four narrators, Mom's eldest daughter and the child, it seems, with whom Mom has the most difficult relationship. Chi-hon is an internationally successful author, temperamental and emotionally volatile, particularly where her family is concerned. As she portrays herself, at times inadvertently, she comes across as somewhat self-absorbed, an archetypal (i.e. universally familiar) and thematically central portrait of a child with a lack of knowledge of and/or interest in her mother. Over the course of the narrative Chi-hon, more so than any of the other members of Mom's family portrayed in the novel, comes to the realization that there was more to Mom than any of her family realized, believed, or imagined. It's important to note that as the novel concludes, Chi-hon is not necessarily more aware of what her Mom's past and inner life actually are, but the fact remains that she has become aware that both a past and an inner life did in fact exist. In other words, Hyong-chol, Sister, and Father all come to regret, as the result of Mom's disappearance, not knowing more about Mom and treating her better. So does Chi-hon, but what sets her apart from the other characters is that she moves beyond regret and into a spirituality-defined concern for her well being



that none of the other characters manage. They remain self-centered. Chi-hon, perhaps for the first time in her life, is thinking and acting with Mom's best interests in mind ... or at least with what she has come to believe are Mom's best interests.

Hyong-chol

Hyong-chol is the book's second narrator. He is Mom's oldest son, the child in whom she invested more time and energy than any of the others, and is, to his growing shame, the child in whom she became most disappointed (although, as the narrative makes clear, she felt intensely guilty about both feeling that disappointment and letting Hyong-chol become aware of it). Hyong-chol is portrayed as being almost as self-absorbed as Chi-hon, but even more self-righteously so. He views himself as Mom does - as the oldest son whose success must be ensured at any and all costs. When he fails to meet the goals he and Mom shared for that success, both their lives are changed completely. Hyong-chol's disappointment, both in himself and in his letting down of Mom, turns inward and manifests in bitterness, short-temperedness, and heavy drinking. His realization, portrayed in the concluding moments of Part 2, that his failure was his responsibility and not hers, comes too late to salvage both his own and Mom's sense of self-worth. The narrative portrays him as knowing it's too late, with his brief appearances in subsequent sections clearly indicating he his continuing even further down the road of bitterness and self-hatred.

Father

Father is the book's third narrator. He is Mom's husband, portrayed throughout the narrative (even in Part 3, in which his is the primary point of view) as fundamentally irresponsible and self-indulgent. He drinks, works irregularly, has affairs, disappears frequently, and the whole time assumes Mom is both willing and able to compensate for him, to pick up the tattered pieces of the life he seems both unwilling and unable to engage in. He seems to have a sense of how badly he has behaved, but for the most part seems, after Mom's disappearance, more focused on his own grief and sense of loss than on contemplating why she might have left. Yes, he does consider ways in which he might have taken better care of her, but ultimately there is the greater sense that he would have done so only to ensure that she continued to take care of HIM. In short Father, more than any of the other family members affected by Mom's disappearance, experiences reactions defined primarily by self-pity.

Sister

Chi-hon's younger sister, who is unnamed, is the primary focus of the first part of Part 4, the section of the book in which Mom is the narrator. Sister is portrayed as being the most ambitious of Mom's children, having gone to America for several years to continue her studies in her chosen field (pharmacy). She is also, it seems, the child with whom Mom most identifies, urging her throughout the narration of Part 4 to not let herself get



trapped by/absorbed into motherhood in the same way that she (Mom) did. Like the rest of the family when it comes to their relationships with Mom, Sister is essentially self-absorbed, although she is sensitive enough and generous enough to recognize the genuine need beneath Mom's apparently irrational request for a mink coat, even if she (Sister) doesn't really know what that need is). At the narrative's conclusion, however, Sister remains as bewildered, as hurt, and as lost in her life as most of the other characters, although there is the sense, arising from the metaphoric implications of the persimmon tree, that she, like Chi-hon, is at least beginning to see her life, and Mom's disappearance from that life, in somewhat different terms.

Aunt

Aunt is Father's sharp-tongued sister, portrayed throughout the narrative as being opinionated, confrontational, and judgmental, particularly when it comes to Mom - her housekeeping, her child-rearing, her qualities as a wife, all come under Aunt's scrutiny and eventual attack. Late in the narrative, however, when it becomes clear that Mom isn't coming home (Part 4), Aunt's actions reveal that she has at least some degree of remorse for how she treated Mom, and some sense of how Mom's disappearance is affecting the family. There is also the sense, however, that she, like Father, is essentially unaware of her own role in triggering Mom's unhappiness.

Kyun

Kyun is Father's younger brother, an intelligent and ambitious young man who, for several years, behaved as though Mom was his own mother, treating her with respect and consideration that, ironically, her flesh and blood children seemed unable to do. His sudden death traumatizes Mom, but her grief and ongoing remembrance of him go essentially unremarked by the rest of her family. In other words Kyun, when his story is revealed in Part 3, can be seen as one of the fundamental symbolic representations of Mom's life and identity that her family knows nothing about.

Eun-gyu

Eun-gyu, who appears only in the part of the book narrated by Mom (Part 3) is, like Kyun and Hong Tae-hee (discussed below), a manifestation of Mom's inner life and identity that her family knows nothing about. He is her friend and confidante, and perhaps even her extra-marital lover (the narrative never actually suggests that he was, but the implication is there). There is an important irony associated with this character, however. This is the fact that, in describing him and their relationship, Mom doesn't go into a lot of detail about who he was for himself, focusing more on who he was for her. In other words, she views Eun-gyu in the same way as her children seem to view HER - as a source of (comfort? support? endless caring?) without, after their initial meeting, taking a great deal of interest in what HE might need, want, and/or value.



Hong Tae-hee

Hong Tae-hee is the third of the novel's three symbolic representations of Mom's inner life. She runs the orphanage where, it seems, Mom spent a good portion of her time and to which Mom gave substantial portions of money. For her part, Hong Tae-hee was generous to Mom in return, spending time reading to her and, through her reading of Chi-hon's books, helping Mom understand just what her oldest daughter did.

Mom's Mother

Mom's own mother, also referred to as Mom, appears only a couple of times in the narrative. She is portrayed as being forceful and pragmatic, aware of her daughter's feelings but even more aware of the necessity of putting those feelings aside in order to ensure a secure living. She provides the example of self-sacrifice that Mom takes into her own marriage and family life, albeit to an extreme that, it seems, her own mother never quite did.

The Ancestors

Throughout the narrative, characters refer to participating in the "ancestral rites", spiritual practices that are intended to honor the ways and sacrifices of family members who have gone before and who have made present life possible. The presence and influence of the ancestors, and the rites honoring them, are in fact portrayed as fundamental components of daily living, with the focus both receive in the narrative coming across as profoundly ironic. This is because the characters, in many ways and on several occasions, seem more interested in ancestors from the distant past rather than in their primary, most recent ancestor (i.e. Mom).

Yu-bin

The briefly glimpsed Yu-bin is Chi-hon's partner, at times supportive and sensitive and, at other times, somewhat selfish. His agreeing to her impulsive request that she accompany him on a business trip to Rome is an important catalytic element in Chi-hon's realizations about Mom and about herself in her relationship with Mom.



Objects/Places

South Korea

This is the country where the novel is set. There is the sense throughout the narrative that tradition (in the form, for example, the so-called "ancestral rites") plays a fundamentally important role in the everyday lives of the people who live there.

Seoul

This is the capital of South Korea. Much of the narrative is set in this busy and crowded city whose atmosphere and energy provide an effective and albeit rarely glimpsed backdrop against which the inward contemplations of the characters play out.

Chongup

This is the small rural community where Father and Mom make their home, the community that all their children eventually leave in order to make new lives in Seoul.

The House in Chongup

The house where Mom and Father once lived with their children is never described in any great detail, but is nevertheless an important presence in the lives of all the characters. It, like Mom herself, seems to be taken for granted as always being there to return to even though, as Chi-hon discovers on one visit, it doesn't feel as secure and safe as an adult as it did when she was younger. Here again, there is the sense that her experience of the house is similar to that of the woman, Mom, who ensured that the lives lived there were as fulfilled, as complete, and as nurturing as possible.

The

Several times throughout the novel, narration refers to regular, annual rituals (similar to, for example, Thanksgiving or Christmas in western culture) in which families gather for large meals and to recall past events / circumstances. In the case of the "ancestral rites", those events are primarily the lives of family members who lived in the past and made life in the present possible.



Hope House

This is the orphanage run by Hong Tae-hee visited and financially supported by Mom. It represents and/or manifests the secret aspects of her life that her family knows little, if nothing, about.

The Nickel Basin

The basin is important for two reasons. First, is a gift from Mom's beloved Kyun and as such is a representation of the kind of devoted love that he, as a surrogate son, gave to her in ways that her biological children did not display. Second, the basin is the catalyst for Mom's meeting with Eun-gyu, the "other man" who comes to play such an important role in her secret life.

Mom's Mink Coat

This expensive article of clothing is purchased for Mom by her youngest daughter who, on some level, recognizes the comfort the coat offers and the urgency with which Mom seeks that comfort. Ironically, Mom is inspired to want the coat after seeing a similar coat while attending church, the rituals there not offering nearly as much comfort as the material goods (i.e. the coat) that faith and/or practices in the church are supposed to eschew, resist, or deny.

The Vatican

The Vatican in Rome is the seat of the worldwide Roman Catholic Church (i.e. the place where its power and administration are centered). It is regarded by the world as a country in and of itself, separate from Italy but contained entirely within its boundaries. This makes it, as the narrative points out, the world's smallest country, the place from which Mom asks Chi-hon to bring a rosewood rosary.

The Rosewood Rosary

A rosary is a string of beads, specially shaped and blessed, used by Roman Catholics as an aid to, and/or focus of, prayer. Owning a rosary made of rosewood (which smells of roses) is a particular dream of Mom's. Given that rosaries in general are representative of a connection to God, both sought and achieved, Mom's desire for a rosary can be seen as symbolic of her desire for connection with a life, or with meaning, beyond her earthly experience. Roses, meanwhile, and their scent, are traditionally viewed as evoking and/or representing the spirit of God, and in particular the presence of the Holy Mother.

The Pieta

The Pieta is the term used for both a particular artistic subject (i.e. the Virgin Mary holding the crucified Christ in her arms) and one of the most famous representations of that subject in the world, if not the most famous (i.e. a marble sculpture of the Pieta, carved by Michelangelo, in the Vatican). The thematic focus and/or archetypal meaning of both subject and statue is a mother's grief over the death of her child. When Chi-hon visits the Pieta in the Epilogue, she has a profound emotional and spiritual experience which, it seems, is defined by the sudden awareness, triggered by the statue, that Mom was, in all likelihood, profoundly affected (i.e. grieved) by the "death" of her relationships with her children. Those relationships the narrative suggests, were defined by their need for her which, in turn, defined her living her life for them.

The Persimmon Tree

Also in the Epilogue, Chi-hon's sister refers to a seedling persimmon tree given to her by Mom in the hopes that it would eventually bear fruit. The tree, according to Sister, managed to survive in spite of being seriously neglected. It's now, she adds, being moved to a more advantaged location where, she hopes, it will finally yield a harvest.

Themes

Motherhood and Self-Sacrifice

On a fundamental level, the novel's primary thematic focus is on the question of what it means to be a mother. Even though most of the central characters (and three of the narrators) are not themselves mothers, their experiences, and their reflections on those experiences, are for the most part defined by what they believe a mother's responsibility is. Those beliefs are, in turn, defined by the attitudes and beliefs of the mother figure in their lives, HER beliefs in turn defined by the beliefs of her mother.

In any case, the perspectives of Mom's family on who she is and what her function in the family is are defined primarily by the concept of self-sacrifice - specifically, the idea that a mother's duty is to put the lives and well being of her children (and, almost incidentally, her husband) before her own. No matter what the personal cost, mothers are expected to ensure the well-being of their children, particularly the eldest male. It's important to note that the narrative doesn't offer any particular perspective on whether this is a phenomenon unique to the Korean culture. It does, however, quite clearly suggest that it is a phenomenon of archetypal scope, present, at least to some degree, in the lives and experiences of motherhood in general.

The novel also clearly suggests that on some level, the expectation of self-sacrifice on the part of the mother, BY mother, child and husband, is ultimately unhealthy. This idea is developed through the motif of Mom's constant illness, which seems (according to the narrative) to get progressively worse the deeper her family sinks into assumption and presumption of her sacrifice. An important question, however, is this - whether the self-sacrifice itself is unhealthy, or whether the lack of gratitude and respect shown for such sacrifice is unhealthy.

The Relationship between Past and Present

Throughout the narrative, there are a number of contemplations on how the past influences the present. There is the sense that the present day attitudes towards self-sacrifice that are at work throughout Mom's family are grounded in attitudes of the past. Also, it's interesting to note how the novel's seemingly passing interest in ancestor worship in the Korean culture (i.e. on honoring, through ritual, the contribution distant ancestors make to present life) has a present-day echo in its more pressing interest in how the experience this particular family is defined by the influence of more recent ancestors (i.e. Mom's mom).

The influence of the past on the present is explored in another way by Chi-hon, Hyongchol and Father in each of their narrations. All three characters see their pasts (i.e. their relationships with Mom) in the harsh new light cast by their present trauma (i.e. Mom's disappearance). In other words, events and relationships of the past now have different



meaning and implications given what has happened in the present. The characters are forced to look at what they did, how they did it, and why they did it in the hopes of possibly finding an explanation for what happened, comfort in their loss, and some kind of justification and/or explanation that will ease their stabbing, surging guilt.

Perhaps the most significant explorations of the relationship between past and present occur in Part 3 (the section of the novel narrated by Father which contains the story of Kyun) and Part 4 (the section of the novel narrated by Mom which contains the story of Eun-gyu). Both stories, and the relationships and situations they portray, reveal aspects of Mom's past that have haunted her every present day since. The emotional fulfillment offered by each of these relationships, as fleeting as it was, was a measuring stick of memory against which the lack of fulfillment in her relationships with her husband and children were measured, and almost always found lacking. It could be argued, in fact, that Mom's present experience (i.e. physical disappearance from her life) can be seen as an echo of her past experience (i.e. emotional disappearance from her life).

The Shifting Nature of Identity

The experiences, and resultant transformational journeys, of two of the central characters can be seen as evoking the book's third thematic focus, the shifting nature of identity, with the two characters in question, Mom and Chi-hon, going on opposite journeys that offer its mirror images. On the one hand, the narrative portrays Mom as experiencing an increasing and deepening loss of identity, a loss of self, an eating away of individuality by the greedy, essentially ungrateful demands of her children and husband. This loss of identity manifests, ultimately and entirely, in her disappearance. Once her children and husband are done with her, there is literally nothing left except memories, glimpses, and empty hopes. On the other hand, the narrative portrays Chi-hon as experiencing an expanding sense of identity, a growth into freedom and independence from what she has believed about defining herself in terms of her family to a newly discovered sense of independence (i.e. taking a trip without her family's knowledge or permission). She also moves from being a bad daughter (or at least believing that she is a bad daughter) to acting like, and believing she is, if not a good daughter at least a better one. The transformations of these two characters become even more noteworthy when they are juxtaposed with the lack of transformation in other characters. Hyong-chol gives lip service to the idea of being a better son, but at the end of his section is still as self-absorbed and as self-important as ever. Father, by the end of his section, doesn't even get to lip service - he remains locked in the self-serving, self-dramatizing, self-pitying posture that he seems to have held throughout his entire marriage.



Style

Point of View

The work's shifting points of view are among its most noteworthy characteristics, with each of its major sections being narrated by a different character - Chi-hon (daughter of the missing woman), Hyong-chol (son of the missing woman), Father (husband of the missing woman), and Mom (the missing woman herself). In the Epilogue, the narrator is once again Chi-hon, a fact that, when combined with the subject matter of the Epilogue, suggests thematic resonances related to the book's contemplation of the nature of identity (see "Themes"). A particularly interesting aspect of these shifts in narrative is that both Chi-hon and Father write in the first person, but refer to themselves in the third person - "I did this" or "I said that" becomes "You did this" or "You said that", "you" in this case referring to the speaker. The sense here is almost of accusation, of blame - that Chi-hon and Father blame themselves for Mom's disappearance in ways that the more self-dramatizing Hyong-chol does not. Other values of this stylistic choice are explored in "Language and Meaning" below. In any case, while this stylistic choice does take some getting used to, it develops and sustains the idea that for at least some of the members of the family Mom left behind, her disappearance has shocked them, at least to some degree, out of their self-absorption and into an experience of looking more closely at themselves. What they discover as the result of that self-examination (i.e. about their attitudes towards Mom and their relationship with her) is tied closely to the work's various themes.

Setting

The novel is set in contemporary Korea with the action moving from the rural community of Chongup (where Mom and Father raised their children) to the bustling, crowded urban community of Seoul (to which those children have moved, and which is the narrative's primary setting). There are powerfully drawn contrasts between the two. Chongup is portrayed as more rural, less populated, less sophisticated, and more comfortable, while Seoul as portrayed as extremely urban, almost over-populated, very sophisticated, and quite uncomfortable - again crowded, but also noisy, busy, and most importantly impersonal. This aspect of setting also has resonances with character, story and theme. To be specific, there is the sense that when she was at home, when she was at Chongup, Mom had at least SOME identity - she had a purpose, she had a function, she was known. In Seoul, on the other hand, her anonymous interactions with the city (i.e. where she's just another person in the streets, where she has no identity) are paralleled by her interactions with her children in which she is another kind of anonymous (i.e. having no identity OTHER THAN what she is expected to have).

It's also important to note the novel's setting in time, its placement in a contemporary society complete with cell phones and high speed internet in which traditional views of relationships (husband/wife, parent/child, and particularly mother/child) come across as



almost anachronistic, out of step with contemporary views. This aspect of setting can be seen as interacting with the character of Chi-hon to reinforce the previously discussed idea that on some level, she is evolving into what might be described as a more modern perspective on both her mother and herself.

Language and Meaning

As discussed in "Point of View" above, one of the more interesting and engaging aspects of the narrative is its shifting point of view, and in particular its use of third person pronouns to refer to a first person narrator. Aside from the apparent self-recrimination that echoes through each of the sections in which the technique is employed (Part 1, narrated by Chi-hon and Part 2, narrated by Father). There is also a sense that this technique, as discussed elsewhere in this analysis, lessens the sense of identity associated with these characters, their sense of self. They are not "I," they are not "me," and "they" are someone other or someone detached from the immediate experience. The section focused on Hyong-chol, on the other hand is narrated in the third person, which allows the reader a relatively objective portrait of the character that a first person narrative would not. Finally, there is the narration of Part 4, in which the narrator is Mom and in which she speaks of herself as "I". There is the clear sense here of a sense of self and of identity that none of the other characters seem to have in their sections - Chi-hon and Father view themselves and analyze themselves, but they do not necessarily CONNECT with themselves, in the way Mom's first-person "I" narration suggest she does. In short, the language used throughout the narrative can be seen as reflective of its exploration of issues related to the shifting nature of identity.

Structure

The narrative is broken down into four sections, which are followed by an epilogue. Each section is narrated by a different character - in order, these are Chi-hon, Hyong-chol, Father and Mother. The Epilogue is also narrated by Chi-hon. While there is a sense of cause-and-effect, of action-reaction in the plot (i.e. event leading to reaction/consequence leading to another event and so on), there is the sense about the piece that rather than plot, the more important consideration, for the author, has more to do with explorations of feeling, emergences of memory, and/or the entwining of both. In other words, where many novels are structured according to the forward / horizontal movement of plot along a line or continuum from beginning to end, "Please Look After Mom" is, in many ways, more defined by its vertical movements - into memory, introspection, feeling, and the hearts of the characters rather than into their actions. Yes actions play a part - there is an engaging sense of traditional mystery embedded into the novel, the narrative of the search for a missing person (i.e. Mom) serving, on an important level, to draw the increasingly curious reader further and further into the story. However, there is the overall sense that that sense of mystery is intended by the author to be little more than a sort of string upon which to hang the work's thematic and character-defined contemplations. These are defined as exploring the nature of motherhood, the relationship of past and present, and the shifting nature of identity.



Quotes

"You'd meet to discuss how to find Mom, and one of you would unexpectedly dig up the different ways someone else had wronged her in the past. The things that had been suppressed, that had been carefully avoided moment by moment, became bloated, and finally you all yelled and smoked and banged out the door in a rage." (Part 1, Section 1, p. 8).

"Either a mother and daughter know each other very well, or they are strangers." (Ibid, p. 17).

"If you are with family, you needn't feel embarrassed about leaving the table uncleared after a meal and going to do something else. You realized you'd become a stranger as you wanted Mom try to conceal her messy everyday life." (Ibid, p. 17 (2)).

"The word 'Mom' is familiar and it hides a plea: please look after me. Please stop yelling at me and stroke my head; please be on my side, whether I'm right or wrong." (Ibid, p. 18).

"You never stopped calling her Mom. Even now, when Mom's missing. When you call out 'Mom', you want to believe that she's healthy. That Mom is strong. That Mom isn't faced by anything. That Mom is the person you want to call whenever you despair about something in this city." (Ibid, p. 18 (2)).

"It never occurred to you that she had once taken her first step, or had once been three or twelve or twenty years old ... it hadn't dawned on you that she was a human being who harbored the exact same feeling you had for your own brothers, and this realization led to the awareness that she, too, had had a childhood. From then on, you sometimes thought of Mom as a child, as a girl, as a young woman, as a newlywed, as a mother who had just given birth to you." (Ibid, p. 25).

"At a certain point, the conversations between you and Mom became simplified. Even that was not done face to face, but by telephone. Your words had to do with whether she ate, whether she was healthy, how Father was, that she should be careful not to catch cold, that you were sending money." (Ibid, p. 33).

"Even though it was more natural for you to favor your left hand and foot, Mom told you that there would be many things to cry about in life if you used your left hand." (Part 1, Section 2, p. 35).

"'You're my first child. This isn't the only thing that you got me to do for the first time. Everything you do is a new world for me...'" (Part 2, Section 1, p. 74).

"Mom, who went into the fields after a heavy rain and propped up fallen beanstalks all day, who practically carried Father on her back to bring him home when he was drunk,



who beat the pig's behind with a stick when it escaped from the pen to usher it back inside, couldn't kill a chicken." (Part 2, Section 2, p. 84).

"How hard your wife must have worked to hide from this young woman the fact that she didn't know how to read. Your wife, wanting so badly to read your daughter's novel, couldn't tell this young woman that the author was her daughter...how was your wife able to restrain herself from bragging about her daughter to this young woman?" (Part 3, Section 1, p. 120).

"Habit can be a frightening thing. You spoke politely with others, but your words turned sullen toward your wife. Sometimes you even cursed at her. You acted as if it had been decreed that you couldn't speak politely to your wife. That's what you did." (Ibid, p. 121).

"After your children's mother went missing, you realized that it was your wife who was missing. Your wife, whom you'd forgotten about for fifty years, was present in your heart. Only after she disappeared did she come to you tangibly, as if you could reach out and touch her." (Ibid, p. 122).

"You left this house whenever you wanted to, and came back at your whim, and you never once thought that your wife would be the one to leave." (Ibid, p. 129).

"When you thought of that young woman ... embroidering on the porch of the cottage, calling out 'Mom' at the cotton field, when you thought she might be dragged away by a soldier into the mountains, never to be seen again, you couldn't pick up your feet to go away." (Ibid, p. 132).

"You don't know how to do anything. Someone has waited on you all your life. I can just see it. Nobody likes a smelly, silent old man taking up space. We are now burdens to the children, who have no use for us." (Part 3, Section 2, p. 133).

"How could you have not gone slower, when your wife asked you to slow down your entire lives? You'd stopped and waited for her, but you'd never walked next to her, conversing with her, as she wanted - not even once." (Ibid, p. 139).

"The wound of losing her young husband in a house fire...was rooted deeply in your sister, and had grown into a large tree, one that couldn't be chopped down." (Ibid, p. 147).

"Even if everyone in the world forgets, your daughter will remember. That your wife truly loved the world, and that you loved her." (Ibid, p. 164).

"I didn't want to see you living like that, when you had a good education and talent that others envied...you deal with what comes at you head on, without running away, and go forward with your life, but sometimes I was angry about the choices you made." (Part 4, Section 1, p. 179).

"I thought you would live a life different from the others. Since you were the only child who was free from poverty, all I wanted was for you to be free from everything. And with



that freedom, you often showed me another world, so I wanted you to be even freer. I wanted you to be so free that you would live your life for other people." (Ibid, p. 184).

"You're paved in my heart like an old road. Like the pebbles in a pebble field, dirt in dirt, dust in dust, cobwebs in cobwebs ... if I think about when I first met you, I can see my youthful face." (Part 4, Section 2, p. 188).

"She says that all the things that have happened are actually in the present, that old things are all mixed in with current things, and current things mingle with future things, and future things are combined with old things; it's just that we can't feel it." (Ibid, p. 196).

"I remember everything. All the things that happened in that house. The things that happened in the years when the children were born, the way I waited for you and forgot about you and hated you and waited for you again. Now the house is left behind, by itself. There's nobody here, and only the white snow is guarding the yard." (Ibid, p. 198).

"I bent over the feet of the Holy Mother, who was holding her dead son, to pray for her help to pull me out of this depression...but then I stopped herself, wondering what more I could ask of someone holding her dead son." (Ibid, p. 203).

"She takes the blue plastic sandals off my feet and pulls my feet into her lap. Mom doesn't smile. She doesn't cry. Did Mom know? That I, too, needed her my entire life?" (Ibid, p. 212).

"When I first brought the tree here, the roots were so scrawny that I kept...doubting that it could even grow in the ground, but when I dug it up to move it, its roots had already spread far underground, tangled. I was impressed with its grit for life, its determination to survive somehow in the barren earth...for the first time, I felt attached to that persimmon tree. My doubts that it could ever have fruit disappeared." (Ibid, p. 218).

"...how could we have thought of Mom as Mom her entire life ... she didn't have the opportunity to pursue her dreams and, all by herself, faced everything the era dealt her...and she couldn't do anything about her very bad lot in life other than suffer through it and get beyond it and live her life to the very best of her ability, giving her body and her heart to it completely. Why did I never give a thought to Mom's dreams?" (Epilogue, p. 219).

"He said that maybe it was only her children who thought of Mom's life as being filled with pain and sacrifice, because of our guilt. We might actually be diminishing her life as something useless." (Ibid, p. 228).

"That woman disappeared, bit by bit, having forgotten the joy of being born and her childhood and dreams...the woman who, at least when it came to her children, wasn't surprised or thrown off by anything. The woman whose life was marred with sacrifice until the day she went missing. You compare yourself with Mom, but Mom was an entire world unto herself." (Ibid, p. 231).



Topics for Discussion

Consider the description of Mom given by the pharmacist in Part 2, Section 2. Discuss the metaphoric / symbolic value of the three main points of that description - her eyes (i.e. their warmth), her shoes (i.e. the fact that her children believe them to be a different color than the shoes she was actually wearing), and the wound in her foot (i.e. its depth and seriousness). In what way does each of these characteristics reflect and/or manifest an aspect of her inner life, the life her children have missed and are seeking to understand?

Discuss the symbolic / metaphoric implications of the persimmon tree given to Mom's youngest daughter in the Epilogue (see also "Quotes", p. 218). What is the relationship between the tree and its fate, and the identities/futures of Mom's children? between the tree and Mom herself?

What are your perceptions of your own mother? What do you know about her past? What questions would you ask her if you could? If your mother is alive, set aside some time to ask her some of those questions. If your mother is passed on, ask living relatives about her OR imagine her answers based on what you DO know about her. Write a brief personal biography of her.

In what way is the name of the orphanage visited by Mom as much a symbol and/or manifestation of her inner life as what she does when she's there?

Do you agree or disagree with the novel's apparent thematic contention that self-sacrifice is a primary, defining aspect of motherhood? Why or why not?

Debate the question posed at the end of the entry on "Self-Sacrifice" in "Themes" - specifically, the question of whether self-sacrifice (such as that practiced by Mom) itself is unhealthy, or whether the lack of gratitude and respect SHOWN for such sacrifice (such as that practiced by her children and husband) is what is unhealthy. Use instances and circumstances from the narrative in your debate.

What does the word "mom" mean to you - what characteristics, what attitudes, what actions? Is there such a thing as a typical "mom"? If so, what is that person like? Would you describe your own "mom" as being "typical?" Why or why not?

What do you think the author intended by naming Part 3 (the section of the book narrated by Mom) the title "Another Woman?"