

Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales Study Guide

Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales by Yoko Ogawa

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Plot Summary

“Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” is a collection of eleven dark, short stories by Yoko Ogawa which have common strands of plot between them, but which stand on their own separately. All of the stories deal with death or revenge in some way, shape, or form. In “Afternoon at the Bakery”, a widowed mother heads to a bakery in her new neighborhood to purchase a strawberry shortcake. She does this in honor of her son, who has been dead for twelve years. Nothing in the woman’s life has been right since then, including her own suicide attempt, and her husband leaving her. The woman must impatiently wait on the girl who is running the bakery.

In “Fruit Juice”, the young girl who runs the bakery invites a boy to accompany her to meet her father for the first time since her mother is dying of cancer. On the way home, deeply saddened, the girl breaks into a kiwi storage house to eat through her sadness.

In “Old Mrs. J”, the narrator, a writer and stepmother, moves into a hilltop apartment building surrounded by gardens and orchards, and owned by Mrs. J. The narrator comes to learn that Mrs. J. grows kiwis, and has murdered and buried her husband on the hill. Strangely, the husband’s corpse is found missing its hands, while the carrot crop yields hand-shaped carrots.

In “The Little Dustman”, the young narrator is on the way to his stepmother’s funeral, but the train is delayed by a snowstorm. This allows the young narrator to reflect on his time with his stepmother, including how she wrote a short story based on true experiences about Mrs. J and her hand-shaped carrots.

In “Lab Coats”, a doctor is having an affair with a secretary at the hospital, but does not press his wife for a divorce or come to see the secretary, for he too is stuck on the train bound in by snow. This leads the secretary to become angry, who then murders the doctor.

In “Sewing for the Heart”, a bag maker who has shunned all real human connections in favor of making bags is approached by a woman with an external heart seeking a bag to protect her heart. The bag maker takes on the challenge, developing a closeness with the woman and her heart. When the woman opts for surgery instead of a bag, the bag maker feels betrayed and travels to the hospital to kill the woman before her operation.

In “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”, the neighbor of the secretary from “Lab Coats” is questioned about the murders by the police. The woman, obsessed by death, distances her boyfriend with her interests, causing the woman to go for a walk. She ends up going into the Museum of Torture, where she meets the old caretaker and plots revenge by torture on her boyfriend.

In “The Man Who Sold Braces”, the narrator’s uncle, the caretaker of The Museum of Torture”, has died. The narrator reflects on his uncle’s life, including how in addition to

being a caretaker for the Museum, also took care of a pet Bengal Tiger for the two spinsters who owned the Museum.

In “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”, the wife of the doctor having an affair in “Lab Coats” is on her way to confront the secretary when a tomato truck accident causes her to turn around and get lost. The wife comes to a beautiful house and garden, where she sees the uncle comforting the dying tiger.

In “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” the now-paranoid stepmother of “The Little Dustman” collects some of the tomatoes from the truck accident and gives them to the hotel where the Narrator is staying. The Narrator is the father of the dead boy who factors into “Afternoon in the Bakery.”

In “Poison Plants”, the person who first discovers the dead boy is revealed to be an old, lonely woman.



Afternoon at the Bakery – Old Mrs. J

Summary

"Afternoon at the Bakery" – It is a beautiful Sunday when the narrator goes into a bakery for a birthday cake, but no one is there to serve her. Another woman, a regular customer, comes into the bakery and is surprised to see no one behind the counter and no other customers in the shop. The regular customer explains she sells ingredients to the bakery. The narrator explains she has come in for a strawberry shortcake for her son who died at the age of six, 12 years ago. The narrator reveals her son died from suffocation after being trapped in an old refrigerator in a vacant lot where she and an old woman discovered him. The narrator reveals she tried to kill herself in the same fashion, but her husband saved her life before leaving her. She also recounts a phone call from an old friend of her son's who did not know her son was dead. At the bakery, the other woman leaves. The narrator then notices a young woman crying on a phone in the back room. The narrator does not know why, and does not care why the young woman is crying. She anticipates telling the young woman that she wants two strawberry shortcakes.

"Fruit Juice" – While studying at the library, the narrator is approached by a girl from class that he barely knows. The girl asks him to accompany her to a French restaurant for lunch. The girl explains her mother has liver cancer. Pulling out a politician's business card, she explains her mother told her to contact the man on the card should anything ever happen to her mother. It is this man that the girl and the narrator are to lunch with. The conversation is stiff, so the narrator knows his presence is throwing everything off. It becomes apparent the politician is the girl's father. On the walk home, the narrator and the girl pass an old post office which is now being used to store crates of kiwis. The girl breaks into the building, and begins eating one kiwi after another, eating through her sadness. The girl's mother dies that winter. The politician dies five or six years later. Speaking by phone where she works at a bakery, the girl apologizes in tears for never properly thanking the narrator for lunching with her years before.

"Old Mrs. J." – The narrator, a writer, takes an apartment on a hill planted with grapes, peaches, loquats, and mainly kiwis. Mrs. J., the landlady, has planted and maintains the orchards as well as the building. Mrs. J. is more than 80 years old, kind, lives simply, and lives by a strict routine. One day, Mrs. J. chases a cat out of her garden to stop it from digging up seeds and leaving a mess. The narrator suggests putting down pine needles to keep the cat away. Mrs. J. asks about the narrator's work, then reveals that her husband was a lousy drunk who went missing at the beach. Mrs. J. explains that she has always earned all the money by rent and massages. The narrator notes how Mrs. J. gives a massage to a large, middle-aged man soon after.

The narrator and Mrs. J. begin a friendship over the next few weeks. She gives the narrator one of the first carrots that have come up, which is shaped strangely like a human hand. The narrator notes that Mrs. J. brings harvested kiwis down the hill to an



old post office each night. She also notices that Mrs. J. is harvested more hand-shaped carrots. These get her in the newspaper, for which she and the narrator pose for a picture. Soon after, it is revealed through an investigation that Mrs. J. murdered her husband, that there are no kiwis but only a dead cat in the post office, and that the handless corpse of Mrs. J.'s husband is discovered buried in the orchard. The hands are never found.

Analysis

“Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” is a collection of twelve dark, short stories by Yoko Ogawa which have common strands of plot between them, but which stand on their own separately. Connections between the stories serve as a common motif, and from the first three stories of the collection, these connections are already apparent. In “Afternoon at the Bakery”, the Narrator awaits a young woman crying on the phone to order a birthday cake in honor of her dead son. The crying young woman in turn factors into the story “Fruit Juice”, for the young woman is on the phone with the latter story’s narrator, who accompanied her to meet her father for the first time when her mother was dying. In “Fruit Juice,” the girl eats the kiwis that Mrs. J. of “Old Mrs. J.” grows on her hilltop apartment complex.

Death serves as an important theme for each of these stories as well. In “Afternoon at the Bakery”, the whole reason the narrator is in the bakery at all is to purchase a cake in honor of her dead son. The narrator’s life has come undone as a result of her son’s death, from a suicide attempt to her husband leaving her. In “Fruit Juice”, the girl’s mother dies, whereas later, her father dies, completely devastating her. In “Old Mrs. J.”, the kind of death present is that of murder. Mrs. J. seeking revenge for her husband’s drunken ways (and revenge, too, becomes an important theme among these stories) kills him and buries him in the garden of her apartment grounds. Indeed, the hand-shaped carrots can be seen as the husband’s revenge for the murder, for it gives away his death to the police through the news article.

Family is also an important theme in these first few stories of the novel, not so much by its presence as by its absence. In this respect, the theme of isolation also comes into play. The narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery” has lost all of her family – her son to death and her husband to divorce – and so now lives isolated and lonely. In “Old Mrs. J.”, isolation is sought by the murder of her only family, her husband. In the story “Fruit Juice”, the girl who asks the narrator to accompany her to meet her father does so because her mother is dying, and she needs family to survive in the world. Tragically, the girl’s father dies a few years later, leaving her feeling alone and isolated.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery” purchase cakes for her son if her son is dead? Likewise, why does she feel so cold and indifferent towards the suffering of others?



Discussion Question 2

How does revenge factor into the story “Old Mrs. J.”? How does Mrs. J. see the killing of her husband as revenge? How does the husband garner revenge from beyond the grave?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the girl in “Fruit Juice” bring along the narrator to meet her father? Why does the girl in turn come to gorge herself on kiwis?

Vocabulary

luminescent, entranced, fidgeted, placidly, brusquely, tranquility, discreetly, coaxing, accustomed, inhibiting, condescending, impeccable, monotonous



The Little Dustman – Lab Coats

Summary

"The Little Dustman" – The narrator is stuck on a train, waiting to get to his stepmother's funeral. The woman was only the narrator's stepmother for two years, until his father divorced. The narrator, whose own biological mother died longer before, remembers how he came to look at his stepmother as a real mother. He reflects on how he stayed close with her over the years, even after the divorce. He remembers how his stepmother secretly wrote a novel, believing herself to be inferior to the narrator's father, an artist. The narrator also remembers how his father made her a beautiful cloisonné pendant.

The narrator recalls going places with his stepmother, such as the zoo, hoping that she would find whatever she needed for her novel. The narrator explains his stepmother became an unsuccessful published writer, including a story about an old woman who grows hand-shaped carrots. The narrator also explains he found an old photo of his stepmother and an old woman holding hand-shaped carrots. Still stuck on the train, a student chorus is made to sing "The Little Dustman" by Johannes Brahms to keep everyone entertained while waiting.

"Lab Coats" – The narrator, a secretary at the hospital, hates inventorying the lab coats before and after they come back from the cleaners. The lab coats are taken out by way of the morgue tunnel. The narrator and another beautiful, perfectionist secretary work on inventorying coats. The narrator reflects on how the secretary only ever occasionally messes up, such as instructing her on which color number transparency, number 508, be used on a presentation.

While inventorying coats, the secretary explains her boyfriend did not come over the night before. The nurse and her boyfriend, a married doctor, have been having an affair and the boyfriend was supposed to tell his in-laws there would be a divorce. The secretary reveals her boyfriend claims to have been unable to make it because his train was stuck in a freak snowstorm. The secretary reveals her boyfriend has asked her to wait just a little longer, as always. Finally fed up, she explains, she has killed him. As the narrator shakes out the doctor's lab coat, his tongue falls out.

Analysis

Connections continue to be a strong motif in these two stories. In "The Little Dustman", the narrator is on his way to his stepmother's funeral. His stepmother has written a short story, among other things, based on her real-life experience chronicled in "Old Mrs. J." The narrator's stepmother will also factor into later stories as well. The narrator himself is held up on the way to her funeral by a snowstorm which stops the train on which he travels. This same event stops the doctor from "Lab Coats" from beginning a divorce



with his wife and meeting up with the secretary. This in turn leads the secretary to murder the doctor as a matter of revenge for making her wait even longer to be with him. Here, revenge returns as a powerful theme.

Death also remains prominent in these two stories, as the narrator of “The Little Dustman” is traveling to his stepmother’s funeral, while the secretary of “Lab Coats” murders her lover. While death is the focal point of the story “The Little Dustman”, revenge and death become the focal point of “Lab Coats”. The reader will note that the lab coats inventoried must be taken out and brought in by way of the morgue tunnel, which in and of itself portends the death of the doctor at the hands of the secretary. The jilted mistress feels isolated and is angered as a result of her boyfriend’s delays, while the narrator of “The Little Dustman” feels lonely and isolated now that his stepmother has died. Indeed, that death is especially hard for the narrator because he was had such a close familial relationship with his stepmother. The doctor in “Lab Coats” also feels a sense of family which cause him, in part, to want to delay leaving his wife because it would also mean rupturing his children’s world.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator of “The Little Dustman” take the death of his stepmother so hard? How does he attempt to cope with her death?

Discussion Question 2

What connections exist between the stories “The Little Dustman” and “Lab Coats”? What connections between both of these stories exist in relation to the first three of the collection (“Afternoon at the Bakery”, “Fruit Juice”, and “Old Mrs. J.”)?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the secretary of “Lab Coats” murder her lover? Why does she seem to feel absolutely no remorse about having done so?

Vocabulary

emaciated, trinkets, nephrology, creepily, prematurely



Sewing for the Heart – Welcome to the Museum of Torture

Summary

"Sewing for the Heart" – The narrator, a bag maker, arrives at the hospital and asks for the cardiac ward. The narrator hears Dr. Y. being paged on the loudspeaker, and learns he has not shown up for work that morning. The narrator considers her own life, living alone in a small apartment above her shop, and having only herself to worry about. The narrator explains that she loves bags because all they do is hold and do what is expected of them, and have no intentions or desires of their own. The narrator recounts how a large customer born with a heart outside her chest wanted a beautiful and carefully-constructed bag for her heart. The narrator reveals that the woman is a singer who performs locally.

The narrator also reveals her own pet hamster has died, and that she has disposed of the body in a fastfood restaurant trashcan. The narrator then recalls how the woman found a surgeon who could put her heart in her chest, and that the bag wouldn't be needed anymore even though the narrator would still be paid for it. The narrator recounts being upset by this. In the present, she has come to see the woman before her operation to apologize and request a final fitting for the bag merely as a matter of self-accomplishment, at which time she plans to cut off the woman's heart.

"Welcome to the Museum of Torture" – The narrator explains that lots of people and creatures die every day, including the dead hamster she saw in a fastfood restaurant trashcan. The narrator is interviewed by the police about her upstairs neighbor, a woman suspected of murdering a doctor. The narrator reveals she heard strange noises around eleven in the evening, like something was being dragged across the floor. The police are also pursuing any leads they can about a woman with an external heart murdered in the same hospital, but the narrator explains she knows nothing about this.

The narrator's boyfriend then comes over for dinner and a quiet evening. The narrator reveals everything that happened to her during the day to her boyfriend excitedly. This disturbs the boyfriend, who believes the narrator finds the murders amusing. He then leaves.

The narrator, upset, goes out for a walk the next day and stumbles across the Museum of Torture. She goes in and is greeted by an old man in a bowtie who gives her a tour as she has not come to donate anything. The man explains he is both a caretaker and tour guide, and that the collection was originally begun by two world-traveling spinster sisters, the reason unknown. As the old man guides the narrator through the collection, including a water torture funnel, the narrator begins to imagine how her boyfriend would appear being tortured. The narrator decides she will tie up her boyfriend, and extract the hair on his head one strand at a time, and that the narrator will visit the museum again.



Analysis

Connections continue to be an important motif in these two stories. The narrator of “Sewing for the Heart” comes to visit the hospital at which the secretary and narrator of “Lab Coats” work in order to murder the woman with the external heart. In “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”, the secretary’s neighbor, obsessed with death (note that she discovers the dead hamster from “Sewing for the Heart”), is distanced by her boyfriend for her morbid fascination. Ironically, this leads the woman to plot revenge against her boyfriend in the form of torture that could ultimately kill him. Meanwhile, the police set to investigating the dual killings relating to the hospital. Ironically, the bag maker of “Sewing for the Heart” wanted nothing to do with human relationships, but her friendship with the woman with the external heart, begun over the crafting of a bag to protect that heart which is canceled, leads to the narrator killing the woman by cutting off her heart in revenge.

As the reader will note, it is in part the bag maker’s isolation which leads her to the atrocious act of murder. The bag maker has shut out the world in favor of making bags due to the complex nature of human relationships, and the fact the bags, unlike people, do not have motivations or desires of their own. This forced isolation is why the narrator quickly comes to befriend the woman with the external heart, and because the challenge of creating a heart-shaped bag intrigues her acumen for bag-making. The deadly act of murder is fueled by a desire for revenge for the rejection not merely of the bag, but the friendship the bag means to the bag maker, and how the complexities of human relationships have even managed to find their way into bag-making.

Discussion Question 1

What connections can be found between the stories “Sewing for the Heart” and “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”? What connections do these stories have to the previous five?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator of the short story “Welcome to the Museum of Torture” plot revenge against her boyfriend? Can her boyfriend be held accountable for distancing himself from the narrator? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the narrator of “Sewing for the Heart” unable to accept her client’s decision to forgo a heart-bag in lieu of corrective surgery? What happens as a result?

Vocabulary

jauntily, profound, seductive, mimic, inanimate, timid, lustrous, imperceptibly, indispensable



The Man Who Sold Braces – The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger

Summary

"The Man Who Sold Braces" – The narrator, a student studying French, describes everything that his uncle ever touched as breaking in the end. He explains her uncle was an alcoholic traveling hoarder who jumped around from job to job, doing everything from selling mail-order braces designed to make people taller to being a butler for two spinster sisters. The narrator reveals he was never very close to his uncle, but that he received a call from the police about his uncle's death wherein he was crushed by the garbage accumulated in his apartment. The narrator recounts with horror how his uncle fitted him with very painful growth braces, and how his work as a butler was primarily to care for a Bengal Tiger.

In the present, the narrator attends his uncle's funeral. He was most recently the caretaker to the Museum of Torture, which he used for sexual liaisons with girls, many of them underage, and during which time he was arrested for embezzling money from the spinster sisters. The narrator recalls how he visited his recently-paroled uncle to bring him a box of chocolates shortly before death, and how his uncle nearly cried. The narrator recounts how his uncle then gave him a fur coat made from the Bengal Tiger, which broke apart on the way home.

"The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger" – The narrator drives toward the apartment of the woman whom is having an affair with her husband. Her husband has just left for a conference in the United States, so she is taking the time to confront the woman. On the drive over, traffic is blocked by a deadly tomato truck accident. This gives the narrator time to think about the only time she ever saw her husband's mistress at the hospital, frustratingly sorting through paperwork.

While searching for Apartment 508, the narrator becomes lost. She arrives at a big stone mansion with a beautiful garden, so she gets out to have a look. There, she finds an old man and a dying Bengal Tiger. The old man tells her she is not disturbing them, then holds the Bengal Tiger as the tiger dies. It appears to the narrator as if the two become one. The narrator then returns to her car to head home, noting all the tomatoes have been cleaned up.

Analysis

Connections remain a vital motif between these two stories. In the story "The Man Who Sold Braces", the reader is introduced to the narrator's uncle who has held many jobs through his life. But it is the job he held as the caretaker for the Museum of Torture that is most striking, for it becomes apparent the uncle is the old man from the previous



story, “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”. As caretaker for the museum, the uncle also serves as a butler for two old sisters, which includes the care of their pet Bengal Tiger. The uncle and the tiger are once again encountered in “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”, wherein the narrator is the wife of the doctor having an affair in “Lab Coats” travels to confront the secretary, but upon getting lost, comes upon the uncle and the tiger instead. Death is crucial in both stories, for it is the death of the uncle in “The Man Who Sold Braces” and “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” in the other that matter. As the wife notes, the uncle and the tiger seem to become one –something she does not have any longer with her husband. Likewise, the tiger and the uncle never fit into their surroundings, so in death they are united.

Revenge appears subtly in the story “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”, as the wife travels to the secretary’s house with the goal of confronting her. What this confrontation will consist of is unclear, but it is certain that the wife means business, for she waited for her husband to leave the country before embarking on her quest. This quest for confrontational revenge is fueled by the woman’s absolute defense of her family. Family returns as an important theme in both stories, as family is worth defending at all costs to the wife, while the narrator of “The Man Who Sold Braces” reflects on his familial relationship with his uncle. Both the wife and the narrator of “The Man Who Sold Braces” are themselves also isolated. The wife feels alone and isolated due to her husband’s emotional absence (the affair) and his physical absence (the trip), while the narrator feels isolated and alone following the death of his uncle.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” seek a confrontation with the secretary? What does the narrator hope to do? What does she hope the confrontation will accomplish?

Discussion Question 2

What connections exist between the stories “The Man Who Sold Braces” and “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”? How do these stories connect with the previous seven?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator of “The Man Who Sold Braces” reflect so fondly on his uncle, even though his uncle had many flaws? Likewise, how does the narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” come to have such a good opinion of the uncle in the brief encounter she has with him?

Vocabulary

dispassionately, semiprecious, taciturn, bemused, incomprehensibly, embezzled, accumulation, audible, vividly, meticulously



Tomatoes and the Full Moon – Poison Plants

Summary

"Tomatoes and the Full Moon" – The narrator, a photojournalist, picks up his key at the front desk, and opens his hotel room door to find a woman and a dog. The woman explains she came in through the French doors, must have gotten the wrong room, apologizes, and leaves with a small bundle under her arm. The next morning, the narrator sees the woman and her dog once more at the kitchen entrance, giving away organic tomatoes for breakfast. The woman then explains the tomatoes in the omelet the narrator is eating are her little "contribution", and that they were from a fatal truck accident. The narrator's appetite vanishes.

That night, while outside watching the moon, the narrator is again joined by the woman who explains that the narrator looks like a man who once saved her life. The woman explains that the narrator would be just about the age her stepson would now be, and that her bundle contains a manuscript she carries to prevent theft. She reveals her last novel was stolen by a hunchbacked woman, and that she has published her own novel called "Afternoon at the Bakery". Going to bed that night, the narrator looks at an old picture of his now-dead son eating a cake. The next day, the woman checks out, leaving her bundle behind. It is full of blank papers.

"Poison Plants" – The narrator meets a young man at a charity concert where the children's choir sings "The Little Dustman". Despite his ability to sing well, the young man wishes to study at conservatory and become a composer. The narrator comes to serve as a patron for the young man, allowing him to more thoroughly explore music and hire a tutor to prepare for college in exchange for the narrator being able to hear the young man's voice. The narrator explains she had a daughter who used to play piano, but that she died when she was 19. The narrator herself was once a painter, but is now too old and shaky to properly paint anymore. The only joy in her life now is listening to the young man read. She tells the young man that she married at 19 to a man much older than she was after he hired her to do paintings of his garden. The young man says the narrator was beautiful when he sees a photo of her from 40 years before.

When the young man asks to postpone an afternoon with the narrator in lieu of his girlfriend's birthday, the narrator says no and pretends it is her birthday. The young man than dutifully keeps his date. When the young man is accepted into a music program, the narrator must get along on her own. She goes for a walk one afternoon to discover a young boy dead and suffocated from eating poisoned plants in a refrigerator, and sees herself in the young boy.



Analysis

Connections remain critical in the final two stories of the collection. The tomato truck accident that detours the wife in “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” is happened upon by the now-paranoid stepmother who features into “Old Mrs. J” and “The Little Dustman”. The paranoid stepmother collects tomatoes, which she bizarrely donates to the hotel where the narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” is staying. The narrator is himself the father of the dead boy who features in the story “Afternoon at the Bakery” and “Poison Plants”. Indeed, it is the narrator of “Poison Plants” who first finds the dead boy, and is encountered by the boy’s mother in “Afternoon at the Bakery”. This begins the circle of connections and stories all over again. (The reader should also note that the stepmother’s “contribution” of tomatoes to the hotel is symbolic of her own contribution as a character to the overall connections that exist between the stories.)

Death remains a prominent theme in both of these stories, for it is clear that the paranoid stepmother probably doesn’t have long to live. Her encounter with the father of the dead boy at the hotel is not coincidental, for his devastation at the breakup of his family over the boy’s death has led him to try to find meaning in the different places he travels to. The absence of family has, in effect, driven him to new places in and around the city because he is isolated and feels very much alone. The old, lonely narrator of “Poison Plants” is isolated and lonely enough to arrange the financing of the young man’s studies for conservatory in exchange for his company. She comes to see him both as a family and a lover, though he is neither. When he leaves for college, the old woman goes on a walk which ultimately leads her to the dead boy in the refrigerator.

Discussion Question 1

How are the stories “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” and “Poison Plants” connected? How do these stories connect to the others in the collection, including the very first story, “Afternoon in the Bakery”?

Discussion Question 2

Why does the narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” seem to have such patience with the paranoid stepmother who frequently interrupts his visit to the hotel?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the narrator of “Poison Plants” grow so close to the young man through her arrangement with him? How does she cope with his departure for conservatory?

Vocabulary

unabashed, obscure, botanical, deferential, solicitously



Characters

The Narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery”

The Narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery” is a divorced mother who six years before lost her 12-year-old son to a tragic accident. Devastated by the loss of her son, the narrator goes on to attempt suicide, after which her husband leaves her (the ex-husband is the narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”). Since the death of her son, the Narrator has grown insensitive to the pain of others, and has purchased two strawberry shortcakes each year in honor of her son.

The Narrator of “Fruit Juice”

The Narrator of “Fruit Juice” is a young man who recalls his time as a student where a pretty acquaintance asked him to attend a lunch with her where she met her father for the first time. The narrator had originally hoped the invitation was a date, but was dismayed and felt awkward to learn the truth. She thanks him in tears six years later for accompanying her to the lunch.

The Narrator of “Old Mrs. J.”

The Narrator of “Old Mrs. J.” is a writer and the stepmother of the narrator of “The Little Dustman”. The Narrator comes to take an apartment from Mrs. J., whom she befriends. The Narrator becomes a firsthand witness to the strange, hand-shaped carrots that Mrs. J. grows. The Narrator is questioned during an investigation into Mrs. J.’s murdering of her husband. She later transforms the experience into a story.

The Narrator of “The Little Dustman”

The Narrator of “The Little Dustman” is a young man on the way to his stepmother’s funeral. The Narrator’s stepmother (the Narrator of “Old Mrs. J.”) is a budding writer, but believing her talent to be far inferior to that of her artist husband’s, she does not publish for years. The Narrator and his stepmother have a close relationship, so the Narrator is devastated when she dies. The Narrator longed for his stepmother to be able to be a successful writer, but knows it never came to be so.

The Secretary of “Lab Coats”

The Secretary of “Lab Coats” is having an affair with a doctor in the hospital. She impatiently waits for him to leave his wife and children, and becomes enraged when he delays divorcing his wife once again. Finally having had enough, the Secretary has sex with him, then murders him.



The Narrator of “Sewing for the Heart”

The Narrator of “Sewing for the Heart” is a woman who owns and operates a bag shop, and who has isolated herself rather than deal with the complex emotions of relationships and friendships with other people. The Narrator devotes her life to bag-making, and takes on a woman with an external heart as a customer for a specialized heart-shaped bag. It is the closest thing to a friendship the Narrator has had in years. When the woman elects for surgery instead, the Narrator feels betrayed and murders the woman.

The Narrator of “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”

The Narrator of “Welcome to the Museum of Torture” is a young, perceptive woman who is obsessed with death, seeing it everywhere around her. When she learns her upstairs neighbor has been arrested for murder, the Narrator is stunned and fascinated. This amusement alienates her boyfriend, which angers her. Going for a walk, she comes across the Museum of Torture, where she concocts a plan to torture her boyfriend in revenge.

The Uncle in “The Man Who Sold Braces”

The Uncle in “The Man Who Sold Braces” is a kind but distant, alcoholic, and unusual hoarder who can never hold down a job for long. He does everything from selling height-increasing braces to serving as a butler. The uncle is later crushed to death when a stack of his hoarded trash falls on him.

The Narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”

The Narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” is the wife of the doctor having an affair with the Secretary in the short story “Lab Coats”. The Narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” is headed to confront the Secretary, though she has no idea what she will do or say. All she knows is that she wants to save her family. On the way, a truck accident shuts down the highway, causing the Narrator to turn around and get lost, where she comes across the Uncle of “The Man Who Sold Braces” comforting a dying tiger. The Narrator is moved by the scene, and hopes to remember it forever.

The Narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”

The Narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” is a photojournalist who is writing an informational article on the hotel he is visiting, and doing his best to stay positive in life. He is the ex-husband of the narrator of the story “Afternoon at the Bakery”, and the father of the dead boy that features into that story. The Narrator of “Tomatoes and the



Full Moon” has repeated encounters with the now-paranoid stepmother of the stories “Old Mrs. J.” and “The Little Dustman”.

The Narrator of “Poison Plants”

The Narrator of “Poison Plants” is an old woman who agrees to finance a young man’s studies for conservatory in exchange for his company. The old woman is lonely, and comes to see everything from a friend to a lover to a son in the young man. When the young man finally goes to school, the old woman is saddened, so she goes for a walk. It is during this walk that she finds the dead, young boy from the stories “Afternoon at the Bakery” and “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”.



Symbols and Symbolism

Strawberry shortcakes

Strawberry shortcakes factor into the short story “Afternoon at the Bakery”. Strawberry shortcakes are the favorite kind of birthday cake of the dead son of the Narrator. Each year, she goes to a bakery to purchase two strawberry shortcakes in honor of her son. This brings her into the bakery where the girl from the story “Fruit Juice” has gotten older.

Kiwis

Kiwis factor into the short story “Fruit Juice”. Kiwis are discovered boxed and crated in an old post office, now being used as a storage facility. While reeling from the impending death of her mother and the awkwardness of meeting her father for the first time, the unnamed girl in the story break into the office and begins eating one kiwi after another. The narrator explains she is eating through sadness. The kiwis therein symbolize sweetness, and a bountiful and full life, which the girl does not have. She feels empty, and the kiwis are filling an emotional void physically.

Hand-shaped carrots

Hand-shaped carrots factor into the story “Old Mrs. J”. Old Mrs. J. grows the carrots in her garden outside her apartment complex. Because they are so unusually shaped, she is featured in a newspaper article which later leads to the discovery that she has murdered and buried her husband. When the husband’s corpse is discovered, it is learned that Mrs. J. severed his hands.

A train delayed by a snowstorm

A train delayed by a snowstorm factors into the stories “The Little Dustman” and “Lab Coats”. In “The Little Dustman”, the delayed train holds up the Narrator from getting to his stepmother’s funeral in a timely fashion. In “Lab Coats”, a doctor, stuck on the train, uses it as a reason for not ending his marriage for his mistress, or for visiting his mistress the very same night. The mistress ends up killing the doctor in revenge, believing the train story to be made up.

Medical lab coats

Medical lab coats feature into the story “Lab Coats”. Lab coats are worn by medical professionals in the story, and are sent to laundry after being used. Lab coats are then inventoried, shipped out for cleaning, returned, and inventoried upon their unpacking by



the Narrator and a Secretary. When the Secretary kills her lover over his delay in divorcing his wife, the Narrator discovers his tongue in his lab coat.

A heart-shaped bag

A heart-shaped bag factors into the story “Sewing for the Heart”. The bag is specially designed by the Narrator to protect and hold the external heart of a woman who comes into the shop seeking such a bag. The heart-shaped bag becomes representative of the first real friendship the Narrator has had with anyone in years. Upon the woman’s decision to have surgery instead, the Narrator feels betrayed and murders her.

Torture devices

Torture devices factor into the short story “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”. The torture devices are collected by two spinster sisters who travel the world collecting them, then make a museum from their collection. The torture devices, including a water torture spigot and tweezers for pulling hair, inspire the Narrator to torture her boyfriend by tying him up and pulling out his hair one strand at a time.

Hoarded items

Hoarded items factor into the story “The Man Who Sold Braces”. Hoarded items, which include everything ranging from trash to old products, old clothing to old newspapers, are collected by the uncle. The hoarding gets out of control as the uncle gets older, ultimately leading to him being crushed and suffocated by a collapse of trash.

Bengal Tiger

A Bengal Tiger factors into the story “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”. It is among those things owned by the spinster sisters who brought the Museum of Torture into being. The Bengal Tiger is dying in the short story, and is comforted by the uncle from “The Man Who Sold Braces” in its final moments. This deeply moves the Narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”, for it seems to her as if both man and tiger have become one. This is the opposite of her own marriage, for her husband is having an affair, meaning the one they have become in marriage is now two.

Tomatoes

Tomatoes factor into the stories “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” and “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”. The tomatoes are spilled out onto the highway when the truck carrying them crashes and kills the driver. Some of the tomatoes are collected by the stepmother (of “Old Mrs. J.” and “The Little Dustman”) and donated to the hotel. Upon learning he

has been eating an omelet with tomatoes from a fatal wreck, the narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” stops eating the omelet, sickened.

An arrangement of understanding

An arrangement of understanding is made between the Narrator of “Poison Plants” and a young man with a soothing voice. The arrangement provides financial support for the young man as he prepares for conservatory, while it mandates the young man spend time with the Narrator. The Narrator comes to see the young man as everything from family to a lover, and is heartbroken when the young man goes away to college. With the arrangement over, the old Narrator goes for a walk during which time she discovers the body of the dead son of the Narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery”.



Settings

The city

The city is the main setting for most of the stories in the collection. The city is never named, but is based in Japan. The city has urban, suburban, and rural areas, and is host to the vacant lot, the highway, and the hospital. The city also plays host to the Museum of Torture, as well as the massive stone mansion of its owners. The city's police force is overworked, struggling to keep up with the spate of crimes that have recently popped up, including the murders in "Old Mrs. J.", "Lab Coats", and "Sewing for the Heart". The lives of the residents of the city themselves are all interconnected, with the events of each story ultimately affecting all the other stories in some way, shape, or form.

The vacant lot

The vacant lot is an overgrown, animal-infested plot located in a more industrial and run-down section of the city. It is populated primarily by old appliances, including refrigerators. Following heartache, the Narrator of "Poison Plants" wanders around until she ends up at the lot, where she discovers the body of a dead boy in a refrigerator, presumably dead from eating poison plants, and/or being suffocated in the refrigerator. The boy is the son of the Narrator who factors into the story "Afternoon at the Bakery", and who nearly simultaneously comes upon her son as the old woman in "Poison Plants".

The highway

The highway is a massive means of transportation for motorists in and around the city. It is by the highway that residents gain quick access to other distant parts of the city. In the story "The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger", the Narrator is using the highway to travel to the Secretary's apartment to confront her over the affair she is having with the Narrator's husband. The highway is blocked by an accident where a tomato truck has crashed, spilling its contents. It is from this crash on the highway that the now-paranoid stepmother of the Narrator of "The Little Dustman" collects tomatoes to give to the hotel in "Tomatoes and the Full Moon".

The hotel

The hotel factors prominently in the story "Tomatoes and the Full Moon". The hotel is located somewhere along an unidentified cape, known for its wildlife and landscapes. The Narrator of the story has come to the hotel to write about the hotel and the surrounding area. The nature of the rooms in the hotel includes French doors that open up onto a central patio, allowing the paranoid stepmother and her dog to gain entry to



the Narrator's room. It is at the hotel that the stepmother gives away tomatoes from the fatal truck wreck in "The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger", and it is at the hotel that the stepmother leaves behind her latest novel, a ream of blank paper.

The hospital

The hospital factors into the stories "Lab Coats" and "Sewing for the Heart". In "Lab Coats", the Narrator and Secretary both work at the hospital. The Secretary is having an affair with a doctor in residency at the hospital, and many of their sexual encounters have occurred within the hospital. The Narrator and the Secretary inventory dirty and clean lab coats as they are brought in and out of the building through the hospital morgue. In "Sewing for the Heart", the Narrator, feeling betrayed, goes to the hospital to stab the woman who has elected for surgery instead of her heart-shaped bag. The hospital thus becomes a locus for death rather than life, and murder rather than healing.



Themes and Motifs

Isolation

Isolation is an important theme in the short story collection “Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” by Yoko Ogawa. Isolation, thematically, is both being alone, and/or feeling alone or lonely. Isolation in the novel is sometimes a choice, sometimes imposed, and always influential to the plot of the story.

In “Afternoon at the Bakery”, the narrator seeks a strawberry shortcake to commemorate her son’s tragic death. Heartbroken over the death, and after a suicide attempt, the narrator was divorced and left alone by her husband. She combats loneliness by buying cakes, and has grown insensitive to the pain of others, including the lonely young woman who runs the bakery. In “Fruit Juice”, the narrator reflects on his loneliness as a student who hoped for a date with the girl who brought him to soften the blow of meeting her father for the first time instead. The girl herself was about to be left alone by her mother, dying of cancer. In “Old Mrs. J.”, the lonely Mrs. J. keeps the narrator, also living alone, for company, for Mrs. J. has killed her husband and buried him in the orchard.

In “The Little Dustman”, the narrator travels to his stepmother’s funeral alone, heartbroken at her death and feeling isolated. He spends much of the ride recalling memories of his stepmother to fight his loneliness. In “Lab Coats”, the lonely secretary having an affair with the doctor feels angry at his continuing to extend his promise of leaving his wife to be with her, so she kills him. In “Sewing for the Heart”, the young narrator has intentionally isolated herself, not wanting to have to deal with the complexities and cruelties of human relationships. Her isolation is broken by the heart bag, so when the woman who needs the heart bag cancels the order, the narrator’s own heart breaks, creating a sense of angry loneliness that leads to murder. In “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”, the narrator’s boyfriend worries she is too amused at death, so he leaves her alone and isolated, causing her to plot revenge.

In “The Man Who Sold Braces”, the narrator recalls his lonely, isolated uncle whose bizarre hoarding habits eventually led to his death. In the story “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”, the narrator comes across the uncle of the previous story, hugging a tiger as the tiger dies. The narrator notes that the two seem as one, meaning that they were both lonely and isolated – the uncle without a stable life, the tiger in a strange environment. In “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”, a lonely photojournalist tries to combat his loneliness with his work, while the woman he encounters – the stepmother from “The Little Dustman” – has isolated herself in paranoia, leading her to confuse the narrator for other people. In “Poison Plants”, the widowed narrator’s husband and daughter are both dead, so she is very lonely and isolated. She helps a young man get through college, seeing in him a son, a lover, and a friend in different ways. When he leaves for college, the narrator goes on to discover the body of the son of the narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery”.



Connections

Connections are an important motif in the short story collection “Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” by Yoko Ogawa. Connections are the characters, incidents, events, and traces that are common between each of the stories in the collection. Each story connects like a Mobius strip to another in some way, directly or indirectly, clearly, or obscurely, leading to a never-ending chain of events.

In “Afternoon at the Bakery”, a narrator goes to purchase a cake for her dead son in an abandoned refrigerator. This story at first appears to have no real connection to the other stories, until the last story is arrived at wherein the narrator of “Poison Plants” discovered the body of the dead son in the refrigerator. The young woman crying on the phone at the bakery is the girl from the next story, “Fruit Juice”, who thanks the narrator of “Fruit Juice” for the help he gave her meeting her father for the first time several years before. The kiwis eaten by the girl in “Fruit Juice” were grown by the old Mrs. J. in the short story, “Old Mrs. J.” writes a short story about her experience.

The narrator of “Old Mrs. J.” becomes the stepmother of the narrator of “The Little Dustman”, and it is her funeral to which he now travels to attend. The snowstorm that delays the narrator also delays the doctor with whom the secretary of “Lab Coats” is having an affair, causing him to postpone his divorce and leading to his murder at the hands of the secretary. In “Sewing for the Heart”, the narrator murders the woman for whom she is making a heart-holding bag in the hospital where the secretary and the doctor have had an affair. The narrator of “Welcome to the Museum of Torture” lives in the apartment below the secretary, and presumably hears the body of the doctor hit the floor. Disturbed by her seeming excitement about the murder, the narrator’s boyfriend leaves. This leads the narrator to go for a walk where she ends up at the Museum of Torture.

The Museum of Torture is run by an old man, the uncle of the narrator of “The Man Who Sold Braces”. The uncle of this story is also encountered by the doctor’s wife (from “Lab Coats”) in the story “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”. The wife gets lost and delayed on her way to confront the secretary after a fatal truck crash which spills tomatoes all over the road. Some of the tomatoes are gathered up by the stepmother of the story “The Little Dustman”, now gone crazy, and given to the hotel kitchen chef where the narrator of “Tomatoes and the Full Moon” is staying. The narrator is, himself, the father of the dead boy of the story “Afternoon at the Bakery”; and the dead boy is about to be discovered by the old narrator of “Poison Plants”.

Revenge

Revenge is an important theme in the short story collection “Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” by Yoko Ogawa, and makes up the name of the collection. Revenge is the act of meting out real or imagined justice, deserved or undeserved, to another. In “Revenge”,



revenge is central to many of the stories, and helps to drive the overall connections between all the stories.

The kiwis consumed in “Fruit Juice” are grown by Mrs. J. in the story “Old Mrs. J.” Out of revenge for her husband being a lousy, no-good drunk who never worked, Mrs. J. murdered him and buried him in her orchard and garden for revenge. As a result, hand-shaped carrots turn up from her ground, leading to publicity, an investigation, and the discovery of her dead husband’s corpse. In a way, the hand-shaped carrots can be seen as revenge of the dead husband, for both his hands were chopped off by Mrs. J. This will inspire the story written by the stepmother of “The Little Dustman”.

In “Lab Coats”, the secretary having an affair with a doctor who keeps postponing his divorce from his wife ends up angering her instead. As a perfectionist, she controls much of what goes on in her life, so can’t stand it when the doctor won’t do as she wants him to do. As a result, in revenge, she murders him. In “Sewing for the Heart”, the narrator of this story is isolated and alone, making bags for a living. Her only human contact ends up being with a woman who needs a bag for her heart, resulting in the narrator’s having to literally touch the woman’s heart to prepare measurements. The human contact of the most personal kind deeply moves the bag maker, for the heart and the bag-making are seen as one in the same. When the woman decides to have surgery instead, the bag maker feels betrayed, so in revenge murders the woman.

In the short story “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”, the narrator, who is intrigued by death and murder, plots revenge against her boyfriend for walking out on her due to this morbid fascination. Her revenge consists of tying down her boyfriend and torturing him by ripping out his hair one strand at a time. The narrator’s morbid fascination with death is fueled by the events of the stories “Lab Coats” and “Sewing for the Heart”. In many ways, the narrator’s fascination with death desensitizes her, and even intrigues her to the infliction of pain, especially in revenge.

Death

Death is an important theme in the short story collection “Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” by Yoko Ogawa. Death –essentially the end of life – can occur in many ways, but is almost always a tragedy. Death in the short story collection proves critical to their plots and connections between them.

In the short story “Afternoon at the Bakery”, the narrator is seeking to purchase a strawberry shortcake to commemorate her dead son’s birthday. This leads her to an encounter with a young woman who owns the bakery, who will in turn feature in the story “Fruit Juice” which takes place some years before. There, the girl is tragically about to lose her mother to cancer, while her father will die a few years later, prompting the call between the narrator of “Fruit Juice” and the girl as an older woman at the bakery encountered by the narrator of “Afternoon at the Bakery”. In “Old Mrs. J.”, Mrs. J. has murdered her husband and buried him in the garden, leading to the short novel that the stepmother of the narrator of “The Little Dustman” writes.



In “The Little Dustman”, the narrator is traveling to his stepmother’s funeral. His entire purpose in traveling to the funeral is based on death. In “Lab Coats”, the secretary friend of the narrator has become impatient to the point of anger at waiting for her boyfriend to leave his wife, so she murders him instead of waiting any longer. In “Sewing for the Heart”, the bag maker, feeling betrayed after having so intimately and personally designed a bag for a customer’s external heart and being turned down in favor of surgery, travels to the hospital to murder the woman before the surgery. The deaths of the doctor and the woman are investigated by the police in “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”, where the narrator is questioned by the authorities. The narrator herself is obsessed with death, distancing her boyfriend.

Angered, the narrator goes to the Museum of Torture, where she learns about all the ways to torture, and kill by torture, a person. Here, she becomes inspired to torture her own boyfriend. The tour guide at the museum is the uncle that features into the stories “The Man Who Sold Braces” and “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”. The uncle dies in “The Man Who Sold Braces”, whereas in “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger”, the uncle is present to comfort the Bengal Tiger as it dies. In “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”, the fatal traffic accident of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” leads the paranoid stepmother (from “The Little Dustman”) to collect tomatoes and give them to the hotel kitchen staff. The journalist at the hotel is the father of the little boy who has died in “Afternoon at the Bakery”, while the narrator of the story “Poison Plants” is the person who first discovers the dead boy.

Family

Family is an important theme in the short story collection “Revenge: Eleven Dark Tales” by Yoko Ogawa. Family, thematically, involves the love, compassion, loyalty, encouragement, and support of and between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who act in accord with the traditional family unit. Family proves to be tremendously influential, and invaluable, not in its presence, but in its absence in these stories.

In “Afternoon at the Bakery”, the narrator’s son has died many years before. This has caused her great heartache and a suicide attempt. Her husband saves her life, but is unable to deal with being with her any longer, so he leaves her. This causes her to carry on her cake tradition, while her ex-husband begins to travel around as a photojournalist in “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”. Both have been unable to move on as a family without their son. Meanwhile, in “Fruit Juice”, the girl’s mother is about to die just as she discovers who her real father is. It is clear that she and her father must have become close in some respects, because his death proves upsetting to her years later. In “The Little Dustman”, the narrator is on the way to his stepmother’s funeral. The narrator deeply cared for his stepmother, seeing in her an actual mother, not merely a placeholder for his biological mother. Her loss has greatly shaken him.

In “Lab Coats”, the secretary is angered that her boyfriend won’t leave his family to be with her, so she kills her boyfriend rather than waiting any longer. In “Sewing for the



Heart”, the narrator’s forced isolation ultimately leads to her getting close to someone anyways even through the bags she claims she trusts, only to lead to the woman seeking surgery instead of a bag in the end. This in turn leads to the murder of the woman. In “Welcome to the Museum of Torture”, the isolated narrator lives without family, so her connection to her boyfriend is very important. When he distances himself from her, she feels betrayed and reacts by plotting to torture him.

In “The Man Who Sold Braces”, the narrator reflects sadly on the death of his uncle, who was strange, distant, and a hoarding alcoholic, but still a kind man and therefore a worthy family member. The narrator of “The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger” seeks to confront the secretary (from “Lab Coats”) over the affair she is having with the narrator’s husband, threatening to rip the family apart. The narrator gets lost on her way to challenge the secretary, leading to an encounter where the uncle of “The Man Who Sold Braces” gently soothes a dying tiger, revealing him to be at heart a kind man despite his many other flaws. In “Poison Plants”, the lonely narrator whose family has all died sees the young man as everything in one – a lover, a son, and a friend. She is later hurt when he goes off to musical college, leading her to take a wandering walk that leads to the discovery of the son of the woman in “Afternoon at the Bakery”.

Styles

Point of View

Yoko Ogawa tells her short story collection “Revenge” in the first-person limited-omniscient perspective. Each of the eleven stories is told by a principal narrator for that story, and that story alone, although some of the narrators appear as non-narrating characters in other stories (such as the stepmother who narrates “Old Mrs. J” but then appears in “The Little Dustman” and “Tomatoes and the Full Moon”). The first-person narrative gives the reader a personal, firsthand glimpse into the thoughts, emotions, and lives of the narrator and the events of the story that surround the narrator. The limited-omniscient aspect of this type of narrative allows for a degree of mystery, drama, and suspense, as the reader only ever learns as much as is important to that narrator in that story – but from these bits and pieces of information, connections are formed across all eleven stories though the stories may stand independently of one another.

Language and Meaning

Yoko Ogawa tells her short story collection “Revenge” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done primarily for two reasons. First, the novel is reflective of contemporary Japanese literature, in which simplicity is regarded as beautiful and moving. It is only natural that the Japanese author should write in such a style as is common in Japan. Secondly, the simple and straightforward language also allows Ogawa to tell her stories and make her points in very clear, very pointed ways. For example, the irony of the broken-hearted bag-maker of “Sewing for the Heart” seeking murderous revenge against the woman with the external heart by cutting off her heart after producing something to protect her heart is both terrifying and clearly seen.

Structure

Yoko Ogawa’s book “Revenge” is a collection of eleven short stories which have common strands of plot between them, but which stand on their own separately. The stories themselves not only have common themes such as death and isolation, but characters and traces of plots that appear in other stories. Each story thus connects like a Mobius strip to each other in some way, directly or indirectly, clearly, or obscurely, leading to a never-ending chain of events that begins and ends, and begins and ends with “Afternoon in the Bakery” and “Poison Plants”. This endless cycle of connection is reflective of the ways in which human lives ultimately influence one another, sometimes in unknown ways.



Quotes

Perhaps the fact that they could keep customers waiting like this was a sign of confidence, rather than rudeness.

-- Narrator (Afternoon at the Bakery paragraph 9)

Importance: The narrator heads into the bakery to purchase a cake for her dead son's 18th birthday. At first, no one is there behind the counter. The narrator considers initially that this is a sign of the quality of the baked goods, but later learns that the young woman who runs the bakery is upset about something. What this is, the narrator does not know and does not care.

Six. He'll always be six. He's dead.

-- Narrator (Afternoon at the Bakery paragraph 22)

Importance: The narrator explains to the regular customer why she has come in to the bakery. It is because she is buying a birthday cake for her son, who has been dead for 12 years. The narrator reveals the death of her son led to the unraveling of her life. She attempted suicide by suffocation in the refrigerator, after which time her husband saved her life and then left her. Since then, the narrator has lived her life revolving around her dead son and ensuring he has a birthday cake.

I could only watch and wait until she ate through her sadness.

-- Narrator (Fruit Juice paragraph 90)

Importance: The narrator is asked to the lunch where a girl he barely knows meets her father, a famous politician, for the first time. The girl is saddened since her mother is dying of cancer, and the meeting with her father is more awkward than anticipated. On the way home, the girl breaks into a kiwi storage building, and begins eating one kiwi after another. The narrator explains she is eating through sadness. The kiwis represent sweetness, a bountiful and full life, which the girl does not have.

Many more hand-shaped carrots appeared in the days that followed.

-- Old Mrs. J. (Narrator paragraph 53)

Importance: The narrator moves into a hilltop apartment building owned by Mrs. J. Mrs. J. spends much of her time in her orchards and gardens, where she harvests hand-shaped carrots. As it is revealed, the body of her husband is found buried beneath the orchard without any hands.

My only concern was Mama. Was she seeing enough? Had she found what she needed for her story?

-- Narrator (The Little Dustman paragraph 43)

Importance: The narrator is very sad to learn of his stepmother's death. He was very close with her, and wanted her very much to succeed as a writer. It is why he often



accompanied her to places like the zoo, hoping she would find the inspiration needed for whatever she happened to be writing at the time. This demonstrates not only how close the narrator was to his stepmother, but how important the things she did were to the narrator as well. This underscores the heartache the narrator feels at her death.

She knows exactly how she wants a job to be done.

-- Narrator (Lab Coats paragraph 23)

Importance: The narrator works a secretary at a hospital alongside a woman who is a perfectionist. The narrator explains her secretary friend always wants everything to be just so. The secretary, however, is having an affair with a doctor, and is the one thing she is unable to control or perfect. When the doctor says he must wait longer to end his marriage, the secretary kills him.

A bag has no intentions or desires of its own, it embraces every object that we ask it to hold. You trust the bag, and it, in return, trusts you. To me, a bag is patience; a bag is profound discretion.

-- Narrator (Sewing for the Heart paragraph 11)

Importance: Here, the narrator reveals why she loves making bags for a living. To the narrator, a bag is not like a person. It can be trusted, and it does what is asked of it. This is in contrast to the woman born with an exterior heart for whom the narrator has lovingly crafted a bag designed to protect the heart, who finds a surgeon to put her heart on the inside of her body. The narrator has lovingly crafted the bag, so is angered when the woman no longer wants it, even though the woman still pays her. The woman has betrayed the narrator unlike the bags she makes, figuratively cutting out the narrator's heart – so the narrator decides to cut off the woman's heart.

Do you find it amusing that someone died?

-- Narrator's boyfriend (The Museum of Torture paragraph 50)

Importance: The narrator of "The Museum of Torture" excitedly recounts her day to her boyfriend. Her day consisted of being interviewed by the police regarding two murders relating to the nearby hospital. It disturbs the boyfriend that the narrator is so intrigued by death. The narrator angrily comes to the conclusion that she will torture her boyfriend by tying him to a chair and ripping out his hair one piece at a time.

Everything my uncle touched seemed to fall apart in the end.

-- Narrator (The Man Who Sold Braces paragraph 1)

Importance: The narrator describes his kind but distant relationship with his uncle. The uncle bounced around from job to job and never did anything that ever truly stuck. In the end, this includes his uncle's own life. This includes the lives that the narrator himself touched – including the narrator of the story "The Museum of Torture".

What was I going to do when I saw her? It was a question I had asked myself a thousand times. Slap her? Scream insults? Demand she give my husband back?



-- Narrator (The Last Hour of the Bengal Tiger paragraph 6)

Importance: The narrator heads over to confront her husband's mistress. On the way there, she gets lost, and ends up at a stone mansion with a beautiful garden. In the garden, she discovers an old man hugging a dying Bengal Tiger. The two seem to become one.

I'm sorry, but I wonder if you haven't made a mistake.

-- Narrator (Tomatoes and the Full Moon paragraph 2)

Importance: A paranoid woman comes to inhabit the narrator's hotel room, but the narrator tells her he believes she has made a mistake and that she is in the wrong room. The narrator continues to encounter the woman, who turns out to be the stepmother in "The Little Dustman". The idea that the woman has committed a mistake by being in the wrong room and mistaking the narrator for a man she believes once saved her life is reflective of her paranoia, and the idea that she herself might be something of a mistake in the collection of stories – until who she is is discovered.

I knew there was something arrogant about my little arrangement, but I also knew it wouldn't last for long.

-- Narrator (Poison Plants paragraph 14)

Importance: In the story, the narrator provides money for a young man to prepare for musical college while in exchange, he keeps her company and reads to her because she enjoys his voice. It is an almost-chivalric sort of May-December relationship, one which is kept in check by the young man's girlfriend and his going away to college. Yet it is this closeness, and then this absence, that leads to the narrator taking a walk on which she discovers the dead son of the narrator in the story "Afternoon at the Bakery".