

Story of Your Life Study Guide

Story of Your Life by Ted Chiang

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Chaing, Ted. *The Story of Your Life*, from "Stories of Your Life and Others." Vintage Books Edition, June 2016.

The story is told in first person narrative, and shifts between a pair of perspectives and intentions – a straightforward recounting of past events, and an exploration of events that simultaneously layers past, present, and future. This convention of stylistic framing is referred to throughout this analysis as the "narrative present."

The story begins with the narrator (Dr. Sarah Banks, a linguist) addressing her unnamed daughter as Dr. Banks - from a perspective in the narrative present - describes a key point in her life: the moment of decision that led to her daughter's conception.

The story then shifts into the past, as Dr. Banks narrates the events that mark the beginning of the story's principle plot: her being invited to join a scientific team investigating the arrival of aliens on Earth. The aliens are referred to by the humans as "heptapods," while Dr. Banks is joined, on her team, by physicist Gary Donnelly and military officer Colonel Weber. The team's mission is to establish communication with the aliens through what is referred to as a "looking glass," one of several similar communication devices sent by the heptapods to different locations on Earth. Dr. Banks and her colleagues make up one of several similar teams around the planet, each tasked with the same ultimate goals: to find out why the heptapods came to earth, and to keep them from learning about too much of earth's technology.

Episodic descriptions of the investigations undertaken by Dr. Banks and her team are interspersed with descriptions (written from the perspective of the seemingly time-fluid narrative present) of Dr. Banks' memories of her daughter. These memories include references to her teenage years, her childhood, and her young adulthood, including her death in a mountain climbing accident. These memories are not experienced in chronological order, but the narratives of the experiments in communication with the heptapods are. These experiments involve Dr. Banks and her team (primarily Gary) developing both understanding of, and skills in, the oral and written forms of communication used by the heptapods, referred to respectively as Heptapod A and Heptapod B. Dr. Banks finds herself being increasingly drawn to Heptapod B, which she discovers is a language that considers and refers to past, present, and future simultaneously. Meanwhile, she finds herself both thinking and experiencing memories in the same multi-leveled way. It eventually becomes clear that this unique experience of time is the reason why Dr. Banks' construction of the narrative present is written and textured in the way it is: she is experiencing her past as though it is both her present and her future.

Eventually, as Dr. Banks begins a sexual and emotional affair with Gary Donnelly, there is one last communication with the heptapods, and then they disappear, leaving the looking glasses behind. Dr. Banks' narration then returns to the image of the story's



beginning: the moments before her daughter's conception. Narration now reveals that Gary is the father of her daughter, and that she (Dr. Banks) continues to be able to experience time and memory, past / present / future, all in the same moment, as she learned to do while conversing with the heptapods.

Part 1

Summary

Page 91 – 96. The story begins with the first-person narrator (Dr. Louise Banks) telling her child of the night she was conceived, and of the conversation between Dr. Banks and her daughter's father. "This is the most important moment in our lives, and I want to pay attention, note every detail" (91).

(Here it is essential to note that the use of verb tense in the story (i.e. past / present) is complex, but ultimately gives the impression that Dr. Banks is telling the story, as she remembers it, to the child as she remembers HER but before events actually happen. For example: "I remember the scenario of your origin you'll suggest when you're twelve" (91). The context of this multi-layered use of verb tense is referred to throughout this analysis as the "narrative present," and is reflective of key story points made later in the piece.)

After some musing on how her child might describe the circumstances of her birth, Dr. Banks' narration reveals that as she is telling the story, she and her child's father have been divorced and have both remarried, Dr. Banks to a man named Nelson. Dr. Banks also comments that she knows how her story ends, and that she thinks a lot about both its ending and its beginning, "a few years ago, when ships appeared in orbit and artifacts appeared in meadows ... and then I got a phone call, a request for a meeting" (92).

(Past) That meeting is with Colonel Weber (who refuses to give Dr. Banks much information about the situation she is being asked to become involved with) and physicist Gary Donnelly. Dr. Banks assumes that they are there to talk to her about ways of communicating with the aliens who have arrived on Earth, using the artifacts that the aliens have sent. In spite of Colonel Weber's unhelpful lack of answers to her questions (including a lack of use of the term "aliens"), she gets both Weber and Donnelly to understand that unless she can be face-to-face with the aliens, it will be virtually impossible for her to learn their language. Colonel Weber says he will get back to her.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks then comments in narration that the phone call inviting her to the meeting "was perhaps the second most momentous phone call" in her life (95). The first, she says, was the phone call she received informing her of her daughter's death at age 25 as the result of a rock climbing accident. "Your face will look wrong somehow, but I'll know it's you" (95).

Analysis

In this first section, the story introduces its central character (Dr. Louise Banks) and its two central situations. The first situation has to do with the efforts of Dr. Banks and



others to establish communication with visiting aliens, a narrative line which is also a key manifestation of the story's central theme – its exploration of the power and value of communication. A particular point worth noting here is the emphasis this narrative line, and the story as a whole, places on establishing relationships with the aliens based on something other than force. For the most part, stories of this nature (aliens meet humans, or so-called “first contact” scenarios) tend to represent at least the possibility of such an encounter involving violence, pre-emptive or otherwise, from one side or the other. Here, while there is certainly military presence in the story's narrative context, it is very much in the background, and kept at bay by the determined efforts of Dr. Banks and her colleagues. This is also one of the key ways in which the story develops a more sub-textual, or implied, theme: that which explores interactions with “the other.”

As outlined in “Themes,” the concept of relating to “the other” is one that crosses cultures, countries, or religious practices, among any number of identifiable groups or communities. In fact, almost every experience of being in a group, of one kind or another, simultaneously and perhaps inevitably involves interactions with, and attitudes towards, those who are not in the group ... that is to say, “the other.” Throughout history, experiences of interacting with “the other” have often been defined by fear or lack of understanding which, in turn, leads to experiences of violence, confrontation, or attempts to subjugate, dominate, or control. While it is important to note that the term or concept of “the other” is never explicitly included in this narrative, it is nevertheless clearly present: both the humans and the aliens are dealing with an “other,” which is why the story's emphasis on communication rather than confrontation is so significant. The story clearly goes against what has often been standard operational procedure for humans in such encounters: reaching out with words and ideas instead of weapons.

Ultimately, this sense of an implied level of meaning, of a story seeming to be about one thing when it is, in fact, about something else, defines this particular narrative as an allegory. Very often, allegories are stories of spirituality or religion told in a very earthly way, or given a very earthly context. In this case, though, the allegory is one of exploring non-violent ways to face someone, or something, which instinct, impulse, and / or training of one sort or another might initially suggest should be met with a show of power, rather than a show of openness.

Meanwhile, the early pages of the story also introduce its central structural device. This is the division of the narrative into two separate, yet entwining, threads, both defined by the above referenced pair of narrative lines. The first is defined by events in the aforementioned central situation, while the second is defined by what the narrative ultimately reveals is the way in which the events of that situation have affected Dr. Banks. Without giving away too much of what is to come, the interplay of verb tenses (past, present, future, referred to throughout this analysis as the “narrative present”) appears initially puzzling: why is Dr. Banks referring to events that seem to have happened in a way that suggests they have not happened? Eventually, though, and as the two narrative threads entwine, the explanation for this stylistic choice becomes clear, as does the connection between said choice and the story's other themes.



As the narrative progresses, the development and entwining of these two narrative threads take on different layers of meaning, as events and situations in one thread become clearly intended to have echoes of events and situations in the other. The references at the end of this section to the two different phone calls received by Dr. Banks is the first example of this technique, and foreshadows later, similar interactions between the two narrative lines and the meaning of the story that emerges as a result of those interactions.

Discussion Question 1

How do the writing and story of Part One explore the story's thematic interest in experiences of time?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think a real-world reaction would be to a situation like the one outlined here? What do you think your government, or different governments, would do?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the aliens sent communication devices down to Earth, rather than coming down directly?

Vocabulary

seethe, artifact, assess, critical, corduroy, linguistic, comparison, noncommittal, larynx, civilian, anatomy, distinguish (v.), auditory, acoustic, phoneme, spectrograph, sufficient, interaction, suppress, antiseptic



Part 2

Summary

Pages 96 – 106 (Past) Dr. Banks arrives at a small encampment constructed around one of the aliens' communication devices, a large oval object called a "looking glass" that seems to connect the aliens in their orbiting spacecraft with people on Earth (narration reveals that there are nine such devices in the United States and more than 100 in total around the world). Gary Donnelly shows her into the tent / portable laboratory erected around the device, and the two of them set up their recording equipment and computers. Narration reveals that there are similar linguist / physicist teams set up around the world at each glass. Shortly after a communicative connection is established, a pair of seven-limbed aliens ("heptapods") appears in the glass, and Dr. Banks attempts initial communication, establishing the beginnings of a common verbal vocabulary. When she tries to reproduce the sounds made by the heptapods, they are unable to understand her. Dr. Banks continues working to identify more exactly what the heptapods are saying.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks describes how, in her later teaching career, students signed up for her courses only to learn about her encounters with the aliens. She also describes the sources of her favorite stories about language acquisition: anecdotes about children. She then describes, to her daughter, one that involved her in a play on words that's humorous primarily for visual reasons: a misunderstanding between "maid of honor" and "made of honor."

(Past) Dr. Banks asks Colonel Weber for equipment and permission to experiment with communication through writing. The Colonel has reservations based on military reluctance to show too much human technology to the aliens, but Dr. Banks and Gary Donnelly convince him to give this next phase a try.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks describes getting ready for a date with Nelson, a time when her 16-year-old daughter came up with a code in which she and her friend would be able to offer their opinion about Nelson without him knowing. Dr. Banks forbids them, but when Nelson arrives, they go ahead, couching their response to him in terms of the weather: "I think it's going to be really hot," Dr. Banks' daughter says (102). Later, Dr. Banks tells Nelson (who has sensed something unspoken going on) that he just witnessed "a private joke" (103).

(Past) Dr. Banks manages to establish a form of written communication with the heptapods, but is disappointed to discover that their language is not built around a discernable alphabet. She also tries to get them to indicate their names, but it does not work: she ends up naming them Flapper and Raspberry, hoping to be able to tell them apart. Shortly afterwards, and with Gary's help, Dr. Banks manages to start to identify both verbs and sentence structure in the heptapods' language, eventually discovering that they change the physical positioning and visual union of their words/sounds



depending on the combination of ideas being expressed. Dr. Banks realizes how difficult it is going to be to write sentences so that the heptapods will understand.

Analysis

The action of Part 2 includes several important plot points. These include Dr. Banks' first encounter with the heptapods, her initial successes at communication, and her additional success at getting Colonel Weber to give her the additional equipment she needs. This last is particularly important, in that it continues to highlight the story's thematically central emphasis on the importance of communication, particularly when dealing with an "other" (these two themes entwine in similar ways throughout the story).

Other important elements introduced early in Part 2 include the looking glass (the functioning of which is essential to developments in both narrative lines), the fact that several such devices have been placed around the world (foreshadowing later developments in which Dr. Banks and Gary Donnelly interact with other, similar teams of scientists also investigating the heptapods), and the heptapods themselves. This last is particularly interesting, in that while they have certain human characteristics, or at least characteristics that are human-like, they are clearly alien, in terms of how they are physically constructed, how they function and, most importantly, how they communicate. Eventually, the narrative reveals just how different they are in other, very important, ways: thus, the revelations of how they appear externally can be seen as foreshadowing of later revelations of how they function internally, at least in terms of thought and perception.

Meanwhile, the narrative also continues to explore the parallels between Dr. Banks' unraveling the two languages of the heptapods and her experiences in relationship with her daughter. In Part 2, some of those echoes can be found the parallels between the conversation about Nelson and the beginnings of conversation with the heptapods (both of which can be seen as having the feeling of "first time" about them), while others can be found in the reference to a "private joke." This last is perhaps more ironic than some of the other, similarly structured and evoked parallels in the story, in that it is never entirely clear, to either the reader or the characters, just how seriously the heptapods are taking their conversation with humanity – in other words, just how much of a joke the conversation might, or might not, be to them.

Finally, a word about the names given to the aliens by Dr. Banks. The narrative clearly implies that "Flapper" and "Raspberry" are given the names they are not because of any self-revelation of identity, but because the names represent certain qualities of the sounds they make while communicating. "Flapper," it seems, is perhaps given that name because its characteristic sounds resemble something flapping, while "Raspberry," it likewise seems, is perhaps given that name because its characteristic sounds resemble the sound made when a person "blows a raspberry" – that is, blows through his or her lips with his or her tongue sticking out.



Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Part 2 explore the theme of interaction with “the other”?

Discussion Question 2

Given that “looking glass” is a term often used to refer to a mirror, what do you think is the metaphoric importance of the aliens’ communication device being referred to by that term? What is it that’s mirror-like about the interaction between the humans and the “looking glass”?

Discussion Question 3

What does Dr. Banks’ daughter mean, or think is going to happen, when she talks about the weather being “really hot”?

Vocabulary

encampment, barricade, phonology, inactive, resemble, commingle, diorama, radial, symmetric, disconcerting, bilingual, orifice, utterance, compatibility, discourse, pessimistic, optimistic, aboriginal, anecdote, acquisition, prefab, burly, digital, dubious, intelligible, intermediary, pedestal, cursive, compile, corpora, phonetic, elicit, symmetry



Part 3

Summary

Pages 106 – 114 (Past) Dr. Banks describes how cooperative the heptapods were, teaching humans their language “without requiring us to teach them any more English” (106). She describes how Colonel Weber and his colleagues considered the implications of that situation while she and other linguists, working at other looking glasses around the world, compared notes. She reveals that the heptapods were all using the same language no matter where their looking glasses were; how difficult it was for all the linguists to figure out their sentence structure; and the various possibilities for how their written language was constructed.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks recalls a conversation with her daughter who, at that time, was in her late teens. Her daughter insists that Dr. Banks was exactly the same kind of partier that she (the daughter) is, but Dr. Banks comments in narration that she was not. “What I’ll think,” she comments in narration, “is that you are clearly maddeningly not me ... you won’t be someone I could have created by myself” (108).

(Past) Dr. Banks describes an important discovery to Gary: she has worked out that the written language of the heptapods is based on visual information (i.e. something drawn) rather than verbal (i.e. something spoken), which she proposes to identify with two different terms: Heptapod A for spoken language, and Heptapod B for written. Gary comes to agree with her, and is eager to start working out how to apply both forms of language to understanding the heptapods’ perceptions of mathematics. Dr. Banks tells him to have patience.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks tells her daughter how, when she was six years old, she became incredibly excited about going on a trip to Hawaii, but then got upset when she realized she had to wait to get there.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks recalls her daughter’s graduation from college: how she (Dr. Banks) could not believe that the child she raised was now a young woman, and how she could also not believe how fascinated her daughter became with money, becoming a financial analyst. But, she adds, her daughter was doing what made her happy, and that was all that mattered.

(Past) As efforts to communicate with the heptapods about physics and mathematics stall, communications in general improves rapidly. Dr. Banks’ narration describes in some detail the process by which the two races came to understand each other more completely. She also comments on how the humans frequently asked why the heptapods came, and always received the same answer: “to see’, or ‘to observe” (114). She adds that the heptapods rarely asked questions about humanity, coming across as not terribly curious. This, she suggests, made it easier to obey the orders of the State Department to not reveal too much about humanity.



Analysis

In Part 3, as the story develops its core plot (the development of communication between the humans and the heptapods), it starts to draw clearer connections between events clearly in the past (i.e. the encounter with the heptapods) and events that take place in the “narrative present” – that is, the simultaneously foretold and remembered events in the relationship between Dr. Banks and her daughter. Here more than elsewhere in the story to this point, the emotional qualities of the one narrative line can be seen as echoing, or illuminating, the emotional qualities of the other.

Meanwhile, two of the plot developments in Part 3 are particularly significant. The first has to do with Dr. Banks’ naming of the two different forms of language, an incident that lays the groundwork for both her future analysis and the narrative describing that analysis. The second has to do with Dr. Banks’ comments about why the heptapods are there, the first of several occasions on which the heptapods give the answer they do to this question. As later events in the narrative bear out, there is the clear sense here that the heptapods are just as unprepared, or unwilling, as the humans to give out too much information about themselves – a somewhat ironic parallel between the attitudes of the two sides.

Finally in Part 3, the story introduces a new secondary theme, one that explores issues related to the individualization of identity. This theme manifests in the second narrative line, as Dr. Banks recalls / anticipates conversations and struggles with her daughter as the latter begins to define her personal sense of self. These struggles, in turn, foreshadow other developments in this sub-theme, developments later in the story that see Dr. Banks recalling similar experiences with her own mother.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events in Part 3, in both narrative lines, explore the story’s thematic consideration of interaction with the other?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways do the emotional qualities of the two different narrative lines echo each other? What specific experiences trigger those parallel emotions?

Discussion Question 3

How does the story’s thematic exploration of the process of develop individual identity interact with its other key themes – specifically, the value of communication, and interaction with “the other”?



Vocabulary

cooperative, cohort, primitive, conglomeration, reminiscent, systemic, illiterate, cognitive, misnomer, decipher, psychedelic, hypnotic, incessant, trundle (v.), preeminence, monetary, clarification, periodic, attribute, perceptual, impenetrable, declension, curvature, undulation, calligraphic

Part 4

Summary

Pages 114 – 121 (Narrative present) Dr. Banks describes, to her daughter, a time when her daughter was 13 and tried to keep her distance when they will be going shopping, and how she will become angry when Dr. Banks refuses to walk separately from her. Dr. Banks comments on how suddenly her daughter seemed to become resentful rather than happy being with her mother: “Living with you,” she says, “will be like aiming for a moving target; you’ll always be further along than I expect” (115).

(Past) Dr. Banks’ struggles to write a Heptapod B sentence are interrupted by the excited arrival of Gary, who tells her there has been a breakthrough in communicating with the heptapods about physics and mathematics. He diagrams the scientific formula (Fermat’s Principle, relating to how light travels at a different angle through water than through air) that had been shown to the heptapods through another looking glass and had been repeated back to the humans. The discussion between Dr. Banks and Gary on the implications of this new event (most specifically: the possibilities that the heptapods’ understanding of physics is entirely different from humanity’s, and that this new understanding can open the door to further understandings) takes on an unexpected twist for both of them when Gary asks Dr. Banks (Louise) out for a celebratory dinner, and she accepts.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks describes, to her daughter, a pair of experiences (associated with both pain and laughter) in which her daughter’s experience triggered similar, parallel ones of her own.

(Past) The clarity of communication and understanding between humans and heptapods on subjects related to mathematics and physics increases rapidly, with human scientists (like Gary) discovering that the heptapods’ mathematical understandings were in some ways reversed, and in other ways “highly weird” (120). As Dr. Banks struggles to understand science of which she has no knowledge, she continues to develop the two languages (Heptapod A and Heptapod B), and begins to think about what is happening in a different way: “What kind of world view did the heptapods have?” (121).

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks refers to her daughter’s unusual (and attractive) combination of blue eyes and black hair, and how her daughter became exasperated with her father’s inquisitive, confrontational attitudes towards her boyfriends. Dr. Banks also refers to how her own father has never come to terms with HER attitudes towards boyfriends.



Analysis

In Part 4, as the narrative again suggests parallels between the emotional qualities of Dr. Banks' experience with her daughter and the emotional qualities of Dr. Banks' experiences with the heptapods, the narrative introduces yet another new element. This is the reference to Fermat's Principle, a catalytic component of the story that triggers not only new understanding between the humans and the heptapods, but also new understanding, in Dr. Banks, of herself. Later in the narrative, her understanding of Fermat's Principle helps her understand the changes in perception of time that she is experiencing.

Another new element introduced in Part 4 is the emerging of a personal relationship between Dr. Banks and Gary. The incident here foreshadows later developments in their relationship and, perhaps most significantly, a key revelation about their relationship as the narrative concludes.

Also in Part 4, the narrative once again explores the theme of individualization of identity. This takes place not only in Dr. Banks' reference to her daughter trying to be independent while going shopping with her, but also through the inclusion of a pair of contrasts. The two recalled / anticipated conversations between Dr. Banks and her daughter later in this section illustrate how, in spite of various attempts to develop individuality, there are also similarities between the two women in terms of character and experience.

Discussion Question 1

What events in Part 4 relate to, or explore, the story's thematic interest in unexpected connections?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways can Dr. Banks' reference to her daughter as "a moving target" be seen as paralleling Dr. Banks' experiences with the heptapods?

Discussion Question 3

Given what you know of the heptapods so far, what would be your answer to Dr. Banks' question? What do YOU think is the world view of the heptapods?

Vocabulary

embodiment, incredulous, misshapen, oscillate, jubilant, traverse, refraction, attribute, asymmetry, errant, blithe, sensory, jargon, kinetic, velocity, equivalence



Part 5

Summary

Pages 122 – 129 (Past) Dr. Banks continues her analysis of the heptapods' two different forms of communication, written and spoken, and makes important discoveries about how the two interact. Specifically, she discovers the complexity of the heptapods' written language, commenting that "No one could lay out such an intricate design at the speed needed for holding a conversation. At least, no human could" (123).

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks recounts her favorite joke, without reference to her daughter, which relates children blaming parents for everything wrong with their lives.

(Past) While out for dinner at a South Asian restaurant, Dr. Banks and Gary discuss Gary's inability to learn Heptapod B, and his ability to get by with just a few phrases. They also discuss Dr. Banks' inability to follow the conversations with the heptapods about physics, and how their respective inabilities render them "even" (124). Dr. Banks then reveals her difficulty understanding Fermat's Principle, which Gary says has to do with the principle having variational elements, including what almost seems to be a sense of purpose. They discuss the scientific qualities of the principle, some of which imply that light has a degree of consciousness, or at least the abilities to calculate and make decisions – specifically, the fastest way to get to its destination.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, recalls a tiff that arose between the two of them when her daughter asked for help finding a particular term for a situation in which "both sides can win" (126), and refers to her father having mentioned it at some point. Dr. Banks comments that this conversation took place when her daughter was 14, a few years after her divorce from her daughter's father. The argument ends with Dr. Banks' daughter going to her room, angry.

(Past) Dr. Banks practices Heptapod B (the written language) to a point where she becomes more and more fluent, and where she starts thinking in this new language. She compares the experience to her knowledge of how a deaf friend used to think in sign language (i.e. physical, moving images) instead of in words. She also describes how her awareness of concepts, of the reasoning process, and of thought in general take on a feeling of contemplation as a result of her becoming more consciously fluent in Heptapod B. Dr. Banks then shifts focus: staying in the past, she describes a meeting she and Gary had, along with other scientists, with a diplomat named Hossner, who discusses the various likelihoods for the heptapods' visit, and the hope that if the scientists continue to work in the way they are working, both sides can "come out winners." Gary jokes ironically that the situation might be a "non-zero-sum" game (128) which ...

(Narrative present) ... triggers a memory for Dr. Banks: the moment that she remembers the term for both sides being able to win, a "non-zero-sum game" (128). Her



daughter becomes excited. “You’ll give me a sudden, brief hug, and your hair will smell of apples” (128).

(Past) Hossner asks the scientists to keep working to find out what the heptapods want. He is reminded by one of the other scientists that every time that question has been asked, the heptapods say they are there “to observe, and ... that information is not tradable.” Hossner reminds the scientists that the heptapods’ occasional silences may be “a tactical maneuver” (129). Gary and Dr. Banks joke about waking each other up when Hossner says something worth listening to.

Analysis

The first key point to note about Part 5 of the story is how its events begin to move both Dr. Banks and the reader towards the story’s climax, which takes place in the following section. Without referring to the actual climax itself, that point of initiation is the point at which Dr. Banks realizes she is starting to think in Heptapod B, an experience that takes on additional levels of both theory and practice as the narrative builds to Dr. Banks’ climactic realization of the extent of how she has been changed by her encounter with the heptapods and their language.

Another key point is the way in which the writing entwines the story’s two narrative lines. This time, however, the approach is somewhat different: instead of entwining the emotional echoes of one line to another, events and information cross narrative lines – specifically, the relationship between the past reference to “non-zero-sum” games and the one referred to by Dr. Banks in the time-blended narrative present. A third key point is related to the second. This is the definition of a non-zero sum game, a game-play situation in which the action of Player A does not result in a loss for Player B: in other words, it is a win-win situation. That is the goal of the human side of the heptapod-human relationship, and could possibly be the goal of the diplomatic, notably un-curious heptapod side as well, although it is frankly difficult to see, or understand, how the heptapods are “winning” in this situation – perhaps it is something as simple as investigating a new life form without getting shot at.

Meanwhile, an interesting point to note has to do with the implications of the visit by, and the comments of, the diplomat Hossner. A minor character who appears only in Part 5, Hossner’s presence is nevertheless quite significant, in that it raises the question of whether the humans should trust the heptapods. Hossner himself might argue that it is a diplomat’s job to respectfully and tactfully not trust anyone, but there is ultimately the sense about his presence, his suspicions, and his warning that they are intended to be a contrast, a negative barometer by which the reader can judge the (thematically central) positive values of communication rather than confrontation when dealing with an “other.”



Discussion Question 1

In what new ways does the narrative in Part 5 explore the theme of interacting with “The other”?

Discussion Question 2

How does Dr. Banks’ first set of comments about her daughter, in Part 5, relate to the later ones?

Discussion Question 3

What does Hossner mean when he suggests that the silence of the heptapods might be a tactical maneuver?

Vocabulary

sinuous, traverse, redolent, oblique, refraction, anthropomorphic, cohesive, compatible, rendition, fluent, symmetry, mandala, inherent, precedence, prospector, anthropologist, missionary, adversarial, incredulity



Part 6

Summary

Pages 129 – 134 (Contemplation) In a narrative style that becomes more contemplative than narrative (that is: in a style reflective of her experience in thinking in Heptapod B), Dr. Banks describes coming to understand that while human beings tended to look at experiences sequentially, and as meaning emerging from that chronological sequence, the heptapods looked at experiences almost from outside time, that "... one had to know the initial and final states to meet [a] goal; one needed knowledge of the effects before the causes could be initiated" (130).

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, refers to a conversation when her daughter was three, and she (Dr. Banks) found herself speaking in the same way as her mother, something she had long promised herself she would never do.

(Contemplation) Dr. Banks muses on what it might mean, or involve, to know the future. She imagines a woman looking into a theoretical book called "The Book of Ages," in which the story of her life is recounted, and making choices based on what she finds there. She then theorizes that while it is physically possible for the future and present to exist together, it is actually IM-possible because of free will. She then asks "What if the experience of knowing the future changed a person? What if it evoked a sense of urgency, a sense of obligation to act precisely as she knew she would?" (132).

(Past / Narrative present) At the end of a work day, Gary invites Dr. Banks to his house for dinner. She accepts, and they go shopping for ingredients. At the supermarket, Dr. Banks has a sudden memory (the narrative, without a break, shifts into the style of the narrative present): addressing her daughter, she recalls a kitchen accident involving a falling bowl that resulted in her daughter getting a cut. The narrative, again without a break, shifts into the past, as Dr. Banks and Gary finish their shopping, with Dr. Banks taking a bowl off a shelf. "The motion didn't feel like something I was forced to do," she comments in narration. "Instead it seemed just as urgent as my rushing to catch the bowl when it falls on you: an instinct that I felt right in following" (133).

(Contemplation) Dr. Banks comes to a clear realization about the differences between the experiences and perspectives of humans and heptapods: the former see both as happening sequentially, as "cause and effect," while the latter experiences "all events at once, and perceived a purpose underlying them all" (134).

(Narrative present / past) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, has a dream about her daughter's death: specifically, her helplessness to prevent it. She wakes herself up and, in a seamless shift to the past, is comforted by Gary, with whom she is now sharing a bed.



Analysis

The primary point to note about Part 6 is that it contains what is arguably the story's point of climax, or peak emotional / narrative / thematic intensity. That moment is defined, or marked, by the experience in the grocery store – that is, the moment in which Dr. Banks experiences full awareness of how her experience of time is changing, and the simultaneous moment that she realizes how that change is the perhaps inevitable result of coming to more fully understand, and to think in terms of, Heptapod B. Here, the narrative's thematic explorations of experiencing time and the power, and of value of communication, reach their point of most significant meaning and narrative presence: Dr. Banks experiences a clarity of awareness about her perceptions in the same moment as the narrative clearly implies that effective, respectful communication and inquiry can be positively transformative. In any case, the remainder of the story, or falling action (denouement) is defined by the results of the climactic realization here.

Another important point about Part 6 is the introduction of a somewhat different narrative style. This is the reshaping of narrative language into something more contemplative or reflective. Where the language of the past (i.e. the story of the alien encounter) is straightforward narrative, and where the language of the “narrative present” (i.e. the story of Dr. Banks' relationship with her daughter) is complex and multi-faceted, the language of the contemplative sections that begin here is more inwardly directed, less active, more thoughtful. This style is an engaging, effective counterpoint to the more scientifically oriented language of the first narrative line, and the mysteriously evocative, time-confusing language of the second.

There are three final points to note about Part 6, all having to do with its final moments. First, the narrative never explicitly makes the statement, but the implication of the image's final section is clear: Gary and Dr. Banks have moved their relationship to the next intimate level. Second, there is the similarly clear sense that the sudden evolution in the relationship between Dr. Banks and Gary is another example of the story's thematic interest in unexpected connection. Finally, the reference also foreshadows the revelation, in the story's final moments, of just how far their relationship evolves, a revelation that, in turn, adds hindsight-apparent layers of meaning to references to Dr. Banks' family situation throughout the story.

Discussion Question 1

What events in Part 6 relate to the story's thematic exploration of individualization of identity, and how does that exploration develop?

Discussion Question 2

How do you think knowing your future might affect your choices, actions, or decisions?



Discussion Question 3

Do you experience moving through time as purely an experience of cause and effect, or do you have experiences of time being layered, moments existing in parallel?

Vocabulary

conducive, chronological, diversionary, piteous, prophecy, notorious, contradiction, volition, dubious, ambiguous, parse

Part 7

Summary

Pages 135 - 141 (Narrative present) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, recalls the development of her daughter's love of climbing, including rock climbing.

(Past) While musing on how good she is becoming with Heptapod B, and how appropriate a form of communication it is for the heptapods' way of experiencing the world, Dr. Banks is interrupted by Gary, reminding her that Weber is due for a conversation with the heptapods, for which Dr. Banks is intended to be translator. Before they leave for the meeting, Gary kisses Dr. Banks, both joking about how he did not want to work with the heptapods: he only wanted to have sex with her.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, recalls their experience of nursing when her daughter was an infant, and how for her daughter in the moment of being nursed, there was no past or future: only the needs and pleasures of now.

(Contemplation) Dr. Banks contemplates the relationship between free will and action in relation to knowing the future. She also contemplates how the actions of the heptapods do not just "coincide with history's events; it is also that their motives coincide history's purposes" (137). Finally, she comments on how multi-level consciousness, such as that experienced by the heptapods, has no right or wrong perspective, adding that "what made it possible for me to exercise freedom of choice also made it impossible for [her] to know the future" (137).

(Past) As she contemplates a video recording of the heptapods communicating, Dr. Banks considers how, for them, language constituted action, bringing experiences into reality. "In order for their knowledge to be true," she writes, "the conversation would have to take place" (138).

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, recalls an experience of reading a familiar story yet again, her daughter protesting that even though the story is familiar, she still wants to hear it.

(Past) In conversation with Colonel Weber, Dr. Banks reveals that the heptapods are interested in an exchange – they give the humans something, the humans give them something in return. As she, Weber, and Gary debate the meaning of such an exchange, Dr. Banks comments on how the conversation seems both planned and spontaneous. "He was perfectly oblivious of the script, yet his responses matched his assigned lines exactly" (139). Weber tries to manipulate the possibility of an exchange into an opportunity to get something he wants, or that he thinks the government wants, but Dr. Banks calmly but firmly insists that that is not how the heptapods view the idea. Weber agrees to talk to his superiors. Dr. Banks agrees, in what she describes as a private joke.



(Contemplation) Dr. Banks reveals that since learning Heptapod B (the aliens' written language), her mind and memory sometimes slip into that way of perceiving and living experiences. She describes experiencing "past and future all at once ... a half-century-long ember burning outside time. I perceive – during those glimpses – that entire epoch as a simultaneity. It's a period encompassing the rest of my life, and the entirety of yours" (140 – 141).

Analysis

The concluding moments of Part 7 make explicit what the story has already made clear, and what Dr. Banks has already come to experience and understand: the way in which her perception of time is changing. The primary incident in Part 7 that reinforces this insight, for herself and for the reader, is the narration of the conversation with Colonel Weber, a conversation in which Dr. Banks, because of how she has changed, seems able to perceive what the colonel is going to say before / while he says it.

Meanwhile, Dr. Banks' references to free will, in relationship to her sense of knowing the future, echo comments earlier in the story made in reference to the Book of Ages. Here, Dr. Banks answers the question she posed for herself earlier, realizing that free will and knowing the future are indeed mutually exclusive. One cannot have the one while having an experience of the other.

Finally, the narrative introduces the question of humanity's exchange with the heptapods, an exchange that the latter seems to not want to have perceived as a gift giving at the same time as the humans, led by Colonel Weber, try to manipulate the situation to their advantage. Here again, Dr. Banks reveals her sense of self and her sense of integrity, standing up to the colonel in the same way as she has throughout the story. She is, here and elsewhere, firm and consistent in her determination that the heptapods should be treated with respect and trust. Also in this moment, the reader can again see the story's allegory at work – specifically, its thematic and allegorical contentions that interacting with "the other" is only truly valid if such interactions take place within a context of communication and respect for the nature of individual identity, both of which relate to the story's overall themes.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways do the actions and attitudes of Dr. Banks and Colonel Weber explore different sides of the book's thematic interest in interacting with "The Other"?

Discussion Question 2

Again in Part 7, there are possibilities for seeing emotional or metaphoric parallels between the situations, actions, and experiences of the two narrative lines. What do you think some of those parallels might be?



Discussion Question 3

What do you think Dr. Banks means when she talks about the heptapods' style of communication reflecting history's purposes? What purposes might she be referring to?

Vocabulary

sequential, tranquil, klaxon, coincide, coercion, altruism, oblivious, proficient, immersion, amalgam, infinitesimal, sliver, continuous, epoch



Part 8

Summary

Pages 141 – 145 (Past) Dr. Banks begins a conversation with the heptapods, narration revealing that this is the latest of several “exchanges” of the sort proposed in the previous section. Some of these, narration also reveals, have resulted in the heptapods simply returning information they had received, but others have resulted in receipt of scientific information and, at one point, the revelation that the heptapods had found the humans more like themselves than any other species they had encountered. There has been no potentially military or life-altering scientific revelations, something about which Dr. Banks is glad: she “didn’t want to see what our governments might do with it” (142). Shortly after the exchange begins, the heptapod’s screen goes blank. Weber orders Dr. Banks and a fellow linguist (Burghart who, Banks comments, is as fluent in Heptapod B as she is) to restart the conversation. “Everything we said to each other,” Dr. Banks comments in narration, “felt like the carefully bland exchanges of spies who meet in public, but never break cover” (142) Dr. Banks again tries to re-initiate conversation; there is a response; Dr. Banks’ narration describes how her and Burghart’s responses come right on cue, and then the heptapods leave, saying in fact that all the heptapods around earth are leaving. The looking glass goes blank, and at that moment, a messenger from the military arrives.

(Narrative present) Dr. Banks, addressing her daughter, remembers the immediate aftermath of her daughter’s birth, her fatigue and joy, and the elation of realizing that something her new daughter does with her hands is the same as something she did when she was in her mother’s womb. “I’ll recognize the gesture as one I had felt you do inside me, many times. So THAT’S what it looks like” (144).

(Past / narrative present) Dr. Banks’ narration reveals that that last “exchange” was the last time there was contact with the heptapods, adding that no-one ever knew why they either left, or the full truth about why they came in the first place. Narration also reveals that Dr. Banks continued to practice both heptapod languages, but that neither she nor any of the other linguists got any further in understanding them, or being able to communicate in them. Finally, narration reveals that Gary was her daughter’s father, that narration written from the perspective of Dr. Banks having several experiences at once: being with and without Gary, with and without her daughter, “working toward an extreme of joy, or of pain” (145) as she goes inside “to make love, to make you” (145).

Analysis

On one level, the action of Part 8 feels like something of an anti-climax, given that two sections ago, the story reached its highest peak of emotional, thematic, and narrative intensity. On another level, however, it could be argued that both Sections 7 and 8 are written in a style, and from a perspective, that reinforces and echoes Dr. Banks’



experience. Specifically, her theoretical knowledge of how Heptapod B works, and her experience of its actual effect on the mind and perceptions, can be seen as having rendered her incapable of being surprised. In other words, the way in which the narrative describes the final events that make up this story (i.e. a seemingly anticlimactic series of happenings, the outcome of which Dr. Banks clearly knows before they even begin) is reflective of Dr. Banks' experience of those events, with style emulating and evoking substance, and substance echoed in style.

Meanwhile, Part 8 includes one of its most hauntingly touching images in the story, that of Dr. Banks recognizing, from the outside, something she felt her daughter do when she was inside her mother. Aside from the image's tenderness and beauty, there is a sense here that the narrative is intending to develop just one more echo, or parallel, between Dr. Banks' experiences with her daughter and the experiences with the heptapods, albeit one that manifests in reverse. Specifically, in the same way as Dr. Banks recognizes an outer truth associated with an inner experience (when it comes to her daughter's gesturing), she recognizes an inner truth (the value of communicating and experiencing Heptapod B) associated with an outward experience (the study of Heptapod B). Here, in this moment, the narrative develops several of its themes. Its exploration of the value of communication is the theme most clearly developed here, but there are also echoes of the story's interest in unexpected connection (i.e. between Dr. Banks and the heptapod's language, and with her daughter), and in experiencing time.

Perhaps most tellingly, and in relation to the story's allegorical nature, there is also in this moment an evocation of the story's exploration of interacting with "the other." There is the clear sense that Dr. Banks could not have become the somewhat transcendent human being (transcendent, that is, of normal human understanding of time) that she has become if she had not openly, and respectfully, seen what was different about "the other" and strove to understand it, rather than simply defeat or control it. There is value, this moment says, in letting "the other" be itself, in letting as much understanding as possible emerge from shared communication with "the other," and in acknowledging "the other" as having value essentially leads to peace. Finally, in relation to this point, the reader can see that there are, in fact, two "others" involved in this theme's development – the aliens, and Dr. Banks' daughter.

A final note worth considering: the revelation that Gary Donnelly is the father of Dr. Banks' daughter. It may or may not come as a surprise to an astute, puzzle-solving reader, but whether it came as a surprise or not, it is interesting to consider commentary on earlier events (i.e. the divorce, descriptions of conflict, descriptions of fatherhood) in the light of this revelation.

Discussion Question 1

Given how the narrative has unfolded, what do you think is the story's ultimate thematic contention in relationship to experiences of time?



Discussion Question 2

Given what the reader is told, at the end of the story, about the parentage of Dr. Banks' daughter, discuss the significance of the various references throughout the story to the father in the light of this knowledge – for example, the daughter's reference early in the story to how reliable her dad is when it comes to answering her questions. What does the knowledge that her father was / will be Gary Donnelly add to the meaning and implications of that moment?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think the heptapods left when they did?

Vocabulary

infuriate, anthropologist, non-sequitur, anomalous, proficiency, bassinet, incongruous, abrade, certitude, explicable

Characters

Dr. Louise Banks

Dr. Banks is the story's central character, its narrator and protagonist. She is a linguistic scientist, specializing in the study of languages – how they're formed, how they function as communication, and how they are simultaneously similar and different in terms of both intention and practice. She is intelligent, insightful, generally practical, and on occasion somewhat witty: there are moments of clever banter in the conversations she has with her colleagues on the project to which she is assigned early in the narrative – establishing and maintaining communication with a race of visiting aliens.

Dr. Banks' commitment to, and discoveries within, the alien communication project define and motivate the story's primary narrative line. That line also contains explorations of how Dr. Banks is personally changed by her experiences on that project – specifically, how her understanding of time, and her interaction with it, both become something other than the usual, expected human experience. This aspect of her story plays out within, and throughout, the story's second narrative line as well – Dr. Banks' experiences of her relationship with her daughter, an experience that involves a range of emotions. These include joy and surprise in the moments following her daughter's birth; frustration during her teen years; and numbed grief in the aftermath of her death.

Here it is important to note that as the story begins, these two aspects of Dr. Banks' life and story seem quite separate. As the story builds to its climax, the two narrative lines interact both in terms of event and in terms of how they are written and shaped. To be more specific, in the story's final third, it becomes clear that the way Dr. Banks interacts and communicates with the aliens has been, and is, affecting the way in which she interacts with her daughter, as past, present, and future encounters between the two begin to exist concurrently in Dr. Banks' consciousness. The story as a whole, therefore, can be seen as chronicling Dr. Banks' journey of transformation from someone with a limited understanding of the relationship between individual experience, communication, and time, into someone with a broader, deeper, more complex insight into, and experience of, relationship, one infused with wisdom, vulnerability, and courage.

Dr. Banks' Daughter

The daughter of protagonist, Louise Banks, is never identified by name, and is viewed only through the lens, or filter, of her mother's perceptions. The portrait, or characterization, of the daughter is fragmented, offering glimpses of her cleverness, her capacity for adventure, and her desire for independence: interestingly, there seems to be few, if any, references to the daughter's love for her mother.

These fragments of portrait are presented in a non-linear fashion that evokes how Dr. Banks experiences events in her daughter's life. More specifically, the story portrays Dr.



Banks as encountering events associated with her daughter's teenage years, her childhood, and / or her death before encountering events around her birth. The term "encountering" is chosen deliberately: both the story and the style of its telling suggest that Dr. Banks' experiences of her daughter are simultaneously remembered (as happening in the past), experienced (as happening in the present), and anticipated (as happening in the future).

Perhaps the most important point to note about the character of Dr. Banks' daughter is that the story begins and ends, or is "bookended," with Dr. Banks' narration of her experience of the moments before the act of lovemaking that leads to her daughter's conception. In these moments, Dr. Banks experiences being full of hope, joy, and anticipation, an important component of the book's underlying thematic contention of a future infused with possibility.

Gary Donnelly

Gary Donnelly is the scientist with whom Dr. Banks most closely on the alien communication project. He is a physicist, and is assigned to the project in the hope that once communication with the aliens is established, information about science in general, and physics in particular, can (and will) be shared. Gary is portrayed as being intelligent, open-minded, and respectful: he is also eventually revealed to be interested in Dr. Banks in ways that have less to do with science and more to do with personal connection. Their relationship eventually evolves into a romantic one, with Gary being revealed, in the story's final moments, as the biological father of Dr. Banks' daughter.

Colonel Weber

Colonel Weber is the military officer who supervises Dr. Banks and Gary Donnelly on the aliens' communication project. He is portrayed as being very much by the book, particularly focused on what information is revealed to both the scientists on the project and the aliens. There are hints of a militaristic, confrontational sensibility in the Colonel, a sensibility that seems to be kept in check by, on the one hand, the scientists on the project; and, on the other hand, the leaders of the larger world community.

The Heptapods

The heptapods is the name given to the aliens by those with whom they have come in contact. It is essentially a nickname, given that the aliens do not seem to actually reveal the name of their race. The heptapods are described as being approximately cylindrical in shape, as having seven limbs, as having a circular set of what are described as "eyes" on the top of their bodies, and as being extremely fluid and non-linear in how they move through space. This fluidity is echoed in the language they use to communicate, both verbal and written.



Flapper and Raspberry

Flapper and Raspberry are the nicknames given by Dr. Banks to the two heptapods with which she communicates. There is the sense that they are not individualized by personality so much as by the particular qualities of the sound they make when they communicate. They seem to be consistently open, direct and clear with Dr. Banks as they "speak" with her. At the same time, they and the others of their race also seem guarded, or selective, about how much information they share about themselves. They are not confrontational: just reserved.

Nelson

Early in the narrative, Dr. Banks refers to a man who became her second husband, a man named Nelson. He is glimpsed only rarely, referred to mostly in passing but at one point playing an important role in a vignette about the sometimes-challenging relationship between Dr. Banks and her daughter.

Dr. Banks' Mother

The character of Dr. Banks' mother does not appear in the story as an active character, but is nevertheless significant as an influence on the lives of her daughter and, indirectly, her granddaughter. On a couple of occasions during the narration of her encounters with her daughter, Dr. Banks describes her determination to not parent in the way her mother did, and her chagrin in realizing that she has, in fact, done exactly that.

Hossner

Hossner is a diplomat, one of the individuals assigned to oversee and guide the interactions between the aliens and the human scientists investigating their presence on earth. Hossner is cautious and bureaucratic, primarily concerned with making sure that humans get as much information as possible from and about the aliens without giving much (if any) information away about humanity.

Burghart

Burghart appears as the story draws to its conclusion. He, like Dr. Banks, is a linguist, a specialist in language: also like Dr. Banks, he has come a substantial distance in his understanding of the written and aural languages of the heptapods. While the narrative never makes the point explicitly, there is a clear sense, in the brief glimpse of the interactions between Burghart and Dr. Banks, that the two have come to a similarly evolved, similarly new understanding and experience of time as a result of working with

the aliens. This idea, however, is no more than hinted at: Burghart is, at most and like Hossner, a very minor character.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Aliens

Given that the story is, on some level, an allegory, and given that an allegory is, by definition, an extended metaphor, the aliens can be seen as a metaphor with significant thematic implications. Specifically, they can be seen as representing a universal "other," something that is literally "alien" to accepted, popular, or common understanding and experience. They, their presence, and their efforts at communication are the story's central symbolic references to its thematic emphasis on the value of reaching out to, and not confronting, "the other."

The Looking Glasses

As a symbol, the looking glass in the story (one of several placed by the aliens around the world) can be seen as a thematically-linked representation of the power and value of, and need for, open and transparent communication when encountering "the other." The looking glass, a term usually synonymous with "mirror," is a portal for two-way communication between the humans and the aliens, involving both visuals and sound.

Language

Throughout the narrative, language (both sound-based and image-based) can be seen as representing the power and value of communication, as well as several of the story's other themes. More specifically, the acquisition of a new language (the narratively central experience of protagonist Dr. Louise Banks) is also symbolic of the opportunity to get to know, and make discoveries about, not only the object of communication, but also the self.

Physics

As portrayed in the story, the science of how the physical world functions can be seen as metaphorically representing the idea that understanding is, on some level, ultimately of less importance than the attempt to communicate. This idea arises as a result of the narrative's emphasis on how protagonist Louise Banks is changed as a result of her somewhat successful attempts to communicate with the aliens, in contrast to how relatively little change results in those who are attempting scientific understanding.

Rock Climbing

Because climbing, as an experience, is ultimately about getting higher, going further, and becoming stronger (in short: becoming more), climbing in general and rock climbing



in particular can be seen as metaphors for the experience of becoming more encountered by Dr. Banks, while the death of Dr. Banks' daughter while climbing can be seen as a metaphoric representation of how sometimes, risk can result in danger and failure: there is little actual danger associated with humanity's encounter with the aliens, but as the story concludes, there is indeed failure. On several occasions throughout the narrative, Dr. Banks refers to the death of her daughter as a result of a rock climbing accident. On a couple of different occasions, Dr. Banks also refers to the joy that her daughter found in climbing in general, and rock climbing in particular.

Childhood

Throughout the narrative, childhood is presented as an experience of simultaneous joy and struggle - more specifically, the struggle for independent identity. The metaphor here relates to the joy and struggle encountered by Dr. Banks first as she strives to establish and maintain communication with the aliens, and then as she works to assimilate the new understanding of time that she has acquired as a result of that communication.

Time

The symbolic value of time manifests in two ways that intertwine throughout the story. The first is as a representation of how humanity in general has traditionally, generally experienced time: as something linear and sequential. This value manifests in the main narrative line, set in the past, in which Dr. Banks strives to establish and develop communication with the aliens. The second symbolic value of time relates to how it manifests in the second of the story's two narrative lines - as something that in actual fact exists, on all three "traditional" levels (i.e. past, present, future) in the same moment. The metaphoric suggestion here is that anticipation (future), sensation (present), and memory (past) can, and perhaps do, exist for humans in the same moment whether they / we are aware of it or not.

The Book of Ages

The book, *The Book of Ages*, can be seen as representing, or evoking, what Dr. Banks is coming to discover about herself and the ways she understands/experiences time. At one point in the narrative, and as she is beginning to understand what is happening to her experiences of time as a result of her learning the aliens' language, Dr. Banks imagines a woman (herself?) looking into something she calls *The Book of Ages*. This is, essentially, the story of the woman's entire life, made available to her without consideration of what past, present, and future mean / are.



Fermat's Principle

Fermat's Principle is a metaphoric parallel to Dr. Banks' understanding of the time-transcendent means of communication practiced by the aliens in that the same way as light bends when it passes through water, perceptions of time (for Dr. Banks and the aliens) bend when passed through a particular form of communication. This breakthrough is defined by mutual understanding and exploration, between the humans and the aliens, of the real-life Fermat's Principle, which explores the reasons why, and the ways how, light interacts with water.

The Bowls

At a key point in the narrative, Dr. Banks has an experience involving a bowl in a grocery store (in the past) and a bowl in her home (in what might be described as "other time") that triggers insight, in her, into how her experience of time is changing. The bowls metaphorically represent the initiation of that insight, and on a larger scale, represent the way in which sudden conjunctions of information and experience can lead to transformation.



Settings

The United States

The United States of America is the broad-strokes setting for the story (the specific location within the U.S. where the action takes place is never explicitly defined). The relationship between this broad-strokes setting and one of the story's key themes - specifically, its exploration of interactions with "the other" - is important to note. This is because various aspects of America's history are defined, at least in part, by violent relationships between a community that perceives itself as a core, or dominant, community, and a community perceived by that dominant community as "other" - different, threatening in both violent and non-violent ways, and therefore a danger to be confronted and perhaps ultimately disposed of. This combination of setting and theme is a key component of why this story can be considered an allegory.

The Research Station

Much of the action in the story's main narrative line (the establishment and development of communication between humanity and the visiting aliens) takes place in a research station somewhere in America (the exact location is never identified). The station, which is both scientific and military in orientation, is built around what is referred to as a "looking glass," one of several devices distributed around the world by the aliens in order to enable, and facilitate, communication.

Dr. Banks' Homes

The second of the book's two narrative lines, chronicling various encounters between Dr. Banks and her daughter, takes place primarily in and around Dr. Banks' homes. There is not a great deal of description about either home: both are referred to, in passing, in Dr. Banks' early narration. The main value of these combined settings of domestic life has to do with the sense of contrast they offer to the story's other primary setting (The Research Station): the former is, in general, associated with communication defined by intimacy and emotion; the latter is, also in general, associated with communication defined by science and inquiry.

The Past

Also in terms of the story's primary narrative line, it is important to note its setting in time - clearly and without variation, in a time that Dr. Banks experiences as the past. This consideration of setting is particularly important, given that one of the story's central narrative and thematic conventions relates to the different ways that time is encountered and experienced.

Other Time

The story's second narrative line takes place within a context of what might be described as "other time" - that is, a situation in which past, present, and future all exist, or are all experienced, at the same moment. More specifically, Dr. Banks encounters moments of anticipation, memory, and experience - future, past, and present - within the context of this "other time," a key component of the book's narrative and thematic explorations that comes into play as a result of her encounters with, and growing understanding of, the aliens with whom she is interacting.



Themes and Motifs

The Power and Value of Communication

As the story explores various aspects of the power and value of communication, anchoring both plot and character development in that exploration, it contends that communication has power to transform and enhance the lives of those who engage in the process. This aspect of the story is primarily explored through the experiences of the story's protagonist, Dr. Louise Banks.

The primary point to note about Dr. Banks, and her relationship with this theme, is that she begins the story already manifesting the positive values of communication. In many ways, she is defined by her commitment to the value and importance of language: she is a linguist, someone who has made the study and understanding of language, of communication, her life's work. As such, she is someone who, on a bottom line level, strives to understand and be understood, to ask questions and engage with answers, and to look with respect and genuine interest upon those whom she does not yet understand. Over the course of the story, all these traits come into play, manifesting through her interactions not only with the heptapods, but also through her interactions with other characters, past, present, and future.

Dr. Banks also engages with herself, both communicating with her own experiences and insight and then doing so in different, deepening ways. Both internal communication (i.e. Dr. Banks with herself) and external communication (i.e. Dr. Banks with others, particularly the heptapods) have a profound effect on her identity, emerging from those interactions fundamentally irreversibly changed, and for the better. She thinks more, she feels more, she understands more, all because she has sought and discovered more through engaging in communication. The thematic claim arising from this narrative element can therefore be seen as one that advocates openness rather than confrontation, vulnerability rather than defensiveness, and curiosity rather than narrow-mindedness.

The final point to note about the story's exploration of the power of communication is that it is, in many ways, a parent theme: the story's sub-themes, outlined below, are manifestations and/or aspects of this theme. This is particularly true of what is arguably the most subtly developed theme in the story: its consideration of interaction with "the other."

Interacting with "The Other"

As it explores the positive values associated with exploring, and engaging in, effective communication, the narrative makes the associated thematic claim that engagement with a being, a race, or a community that is unknown and possibly dangerous can become effective, safe, and enlightening if respect, courage, and openness are also



engaged. This is primarily dramatized through the exploration and description of the relationship between humanity and the alien heptapods, in which the former resists the perhaps knee-jerk temptation to react to an unexpected situation with violence, choosing to react instead with inquiry and genuine inclinations to understand. There are simultaneous, and parallel, explorations of this theme in the portrayal of Dr. Banks' relationship with her daughter.

It could very easily be argued that in the development of this theme and the narrative premise arising from it, there are clear references to any number of contemporary socio-cultural-political situations. Polarizations, confrontations, and violence arising from political differences, from racial differences, and from religious differences are all, arguably, grounded in mistrust, fear, or a desire to control, manipulate, or devalue "the other," a term defined as that which is perceived as being not normal, not moral, not right, or not valued. In developing a narrative in which interaction with a very clear "other" is both peaceful and improving, the story gives lie to a great many beliefs about interactions with an "other" that have damaged society almost since human beings began interacting with one another, and with the world.

Here it is important to note that the primary plotline – Dr. Banks' interaction with the heptapods – is only the most apparent narrative manifestation of this theme. Sub-manifestations include the interactions between Dr. Banks and Colonel Weber (who seem to view each other as having perspectives dangerously "alien" to their own) and interactions between Dr. Banks and Gary Donnelly (who interact from positions in "other" types of science). Perhaps most notably, there are the interactions between Dr. Banks and her daughter which, like many parent/child relationships, take on increasing qualities of interactions between strangers the older a child becomes. Consideration of these particular, otherness-defined conflicts in turn leads to consideration of another of the story's sub-themes: the individualization of identity.

Individualization of Identity

The story's primary thematic consideration – its exploration of the power and value of communication – is closely tied to consideration of aspects of individuality, given that one way individuality is defined is by how communication takes place. Individuality of races, individuality of communities, individuality of autonomous beings within either of those broader strokes definitions of identity – all are defined, one way or another, one degree or another, by how communication is established and maintained. There are several examples of this in the story. On a smaller scale, the communities of military and science communicate in individualized ways, as do the communities of physics and linguistics. On a larger scale, the individualization of the heptapods is defined by their language, as is that of humanity. Here it is important to note that while the thematic consideration of the power of communication is tightly connected to how Dr. Banks is changed by her connection with the heptapods' way of communicating, the narrative is also very clear that in spite of adopting a form of communication not her own, she actually becomes MORE herself, more of an individual. Whether the same is true of the



heptapods who communicate with her is not known: the story seems to suggest that it is possible.

This theme also manifests on another level, and in another way. This is the individualization of identity within a parent/child relationship, this aspect of the theme manifesting most apparently in the relationship between Dr. Banks and her daughter (which, like many – most? – parent / child relationships is defined by the push-pull of similarity and difference). This relationship is intriguingly echoed in a glimpse of the relationship between Dr. Banks and her own mother which, like the relationship between Dr. Banks and her daughter, is defined on some level by a daughter determined to not be the person her mother expects her to be, assumes her to be, and wants her to be. Here it is important to note a key parallel between the two main examples of this theme in the story: the actions and attitudes of Dr. Banks' daughter can be seen as both echoing and foreshadowing the experiences of the heptapods, in that a determination to preserve individuality and identity threads through both sets of relationships.

Experiences of Time

The thematic parallels between the experiences of the heptapods and Dr. Banks' daughter are simultaneously evoked by, and connected to, the story's thematic exploration of the fluidity of time. This sub-theme plays out on levels of both substance and style – that is, on the level of the story and its events, and on the level of how the story is told. In terms of the former, the story's incidents and plot build towards a pair of important revelations. The first is Dr. Banks' realization of how the heptapods' ways of thinking, being, and communicating are transcendent of time, and are therefore very different from those of humans. The second is Dr. Banks' more climactic realization that her own experience of time has been changed as a result of her encounters and conversations with the aliens. She first realizes that the heptapods' experience past, present, and future simultaneously; she then realizes that she is beginning to have the same sort of experience. She no longer consistently experiences time in the same linear, chronological, one-event-after-the-other fashion as the rest of humanity: time, for her as for the heptapods, has instead become layered, past being experienced during the present, both being experienced at the same time as the future. The primary way in which this manifests in Dr. Banks' experience is through her interactions with her daughter, which is also the primary way in which the story manifests this theme in terms of style.

As the story begins, its language and style reflect its thematic interest in, and emphasis on, experiences of time. This takes place primarily through the author's deployment of verb tense. The use of verbs in the beginning, and on several other occasions throughout the story, reflects and manifests what the reader eventually comes to understand as Dr. Banks' experience of past, present, and future all in the same moment. This layering and paralleling of experience begins to edge its way into the story's second narrative style (i.e. of straightforward, linear storytelling) as the narrative builds towards, and reaches, its climax. The lines of what had previously been a clear distinction between a story of external events (the encounter with the aliens) and a



narrative of inner life (Dr. Banks' encounters with her daughter) become blurred as linear time blends with layered time, the two different experiences becoming one in the same way as Dr. Banks experiences them.

Unexpected Connection

Unexpected, or unanticipated, encounters and connections are the foundational structural elements for the story's narrative and its exploration of theme. The most significant of these sorts of encounters are those that Dr. Banks experiences in relation to the heptapods, whose unexpected arrival, unexpected openness, and unexpected ways of interacting with time all trigger and define the changes undergone by Dr. Banks (and several other characters) as the story plays out. The take-away from this aspect of the story, emerging from how the narrative portrays Dr. Banks' transformation resulting from these and other such encounters, is that like the thematic elements outlined above (communication, encounters with "the other," and individualizations of identity), encounters with the unexpected can, and almost inevitably do, have positive results.

There are several other unexpected encounters and connections in the story. One of the more notable secondary encounters of this nature is that which occurs between Dr. Banks and Gary Donnelly. At a couple of key points (when Gary asks Dr. Banks out, and when they sleep together for the first time), both the reader and Dr. Banks herself seem somewhat surprised at the unexpected way in which the relationship evolves – the unexpected way in which connection manifests and changes a relationship and the individuals involved. One other example of a transformative, unexpected connection: that which arises between Dr. Banks and her newborn daughter, a connection which Dr. Banks, perhaps like many other new mothers, experiences in a depth and power that had been entirely unanticipated.

In all cases, unexpected connections and encounters in this story are seen as openings, possibilities, and opportunities for growth, new experience, and transformation. Thus with consideration of this theme, consideration of all the book's thematic elements comes full circle, back to its primary theme: unexpected connections and encounters lead to unexpected opportunities to, among other things, listen and speak and communicate in new ways that can, and arguably will, lead to almost inevitable positive transformation.



Styles

Point of View

The first element to note in relation to this story's point of view is that it is consistently told from the first person perspective of its narrator, Dr. Louise Banks. The experiences are hers; the insights, commentary, and analysis are hers; and the overall journey of transformation is hers. It is also important to note that this perspective is limited, in that the narration only lets the reader into the inner life of Dr. Banks herself. Any commentary or perspective on the inner lives of any of the other characters is shaped by how Dr. Banks experiences and reacts to what those other characters say and do. In the case of this story, this specific aspect of point of view is worthy of particular note, in it can be seen as reflective of the book's thematic interest in the principles and practices of interacting with "the other" – or, in the case of Dr. Banks, interacting with "the other" characters in the story.

Arguably, however, the most significant aspect of the book's point of view is how the narrative presents, and explores, Dr. Banks' experience of time. Here again, point of view has thematic implications, in that considerations of the nature of time are one of the story's central thematic interests. On the one hand, the first narrative thread (the story of Dr. Banks' interaction with the aliens), unfolds within a pair of concurrent, time-related parameters: the action takes place in Dr. Banks' past, and is recounted in a linear, or sequential, fashion, with events described in what is essentially chronological order (there are a few minor flashbacks and recollections). The second narrative thread, the evolution of, and change in, Dr. Banks' personal experience of time, follows no set, consistent parameters, flipping back and forth from one stage of life to another – in other words, outside of chronological order. The language used in this thread is shaped in such a way to suggest that past and future are co-existing, and that Dr. Banks is experiencing both at the same time, even while she is experiencing the present. This means that her subjective point of view in these sections has several levels of experience, including memory (past), hope and anticipation (future), and sensation (present).

Language and Meaning

It is important to note that each of the two narrative threads that make up this story is shaped by its own style of language. The first thread, the chronologically told story of Dr. Banks' interaction with the aliens, is fairly straightforward in its narrative style, with events, characters, and situations described in a way that is both matter-of-fact and clear, with occasional interjections of wry humor. The voice is very much that of the story's narrator, to the point that there is a clear and consistent sense of a scientific report, or presentation: the language is frequently technical and threaded with jargon, but not to the point of being overly esoteric, or obscure.



In terms of the second narrative thread, the chronologically fragmented exploration of Dr. Banks' experience with time, the language is much more complex, reflective of the type of experience that Dr. Banks is describing. The most notable manifestation of this complexity is in the shifting of verb tense, a result of the fact that in this narrative thread, and as noted above, Dr. Banks is experiencing past, present, and future all at the same moment. For example, in the opening paragraphs of the story, as she addresses her daughter, Dr. Banks' narration includes this phrase: "I remember the scenario of your origin you'll suggest when you're twelve" (91). The language here contains references to present ("I remember," a present act); past ("remember," an act of memory); and future ("you'll suggest," an act of anticipation). This layering / interaction of time and experience, in the story's early stages, walks a fine line between confusing and intriguing. But as the story progresses, as the two narrative lines entwine, and as the relationship between events and experiences in both threads become clearer, the intention and experience of the language in both threads also becomes clearer, and the reader comes to understand how the language in the second thread is vividly, and cleverly, evocative of what is happening to, and within, Dr. Banks.

There are also points where there is a third style of language, one in which there is more of a sense of contemplation, or consideration. The sections in which this style of language emerges come into the narrative in its latter third, as Dr. Banks realizes what her study of the alien languages is doing to her, and as she considers the implications of the changes she is going through.

Structure

In the same way as point of view and language usage are defined by the story's two different narrative threads, so too is the story's structure, which for the most part alternates sections of one with the other. More specifically, the story begins with a section focusing on experiences and style relating to its more complex narrative thread, in which experiences of time fragment, layer, and interact. It then switches to the more straightforward narrative thread – specifically, the more linear narrative of Dr. Banks' interactions with the visiting aliens. For the rest of the story, focus moves back and forth between the two, but not always in a one-to-one ratio: in a couple of places, there are two or three sections in a row that focus on the aliens' narrative thread, or alternatively, that focus on the "Dr. Banks and time" narrative thread. The point here is that for about three quarters of the story, the attention given to each thread is close to being equal.

In the story's final quarter, however – as it draws closer to its climax – the boundaries between the two narrative threads become blurred. Incident, language, and point of view all intertwine as Dr. Banks begins to both experience and understand what is happening to her, how the absorption of the aliens' techniques of communication is affecting how she thinks, how she feels, and how she experiences time. What had once been autonomous, separate sections of text for each narrative thread begin to blend together, so that experiences of past, present, and future all intertwine for the reader in the same way as they are intertwining for Dr. Banks. In this way, style manifests substance; substance infuses style; and insights into meaning and theme emerge from

both in a way that vividly evokes, for the reader, the experiences and situation of the character whom s/he has been reading ABOUT.



Quotes

'... the only way to learn an unknown language is to interact with a native speaker, and by that I mean asking questions, holding a conversation, that sort of thing. Without that, it's simply not possible, so if you want to learn the aliens' language, someone with training in field linguistics – whether it's me or someone else – will have to talk with an alien. Recordings alone aren't sufficient.

-- Dr. Banks (Part 1)

Importance: With this quote, Dr. Banks firmly lays down the law to the reticent Colonel Weber: the only way she will do what he is asking her to do (establish communication with the visiting aliens) is that if she is allowed to set up a face-to-face relationship with them. This establishes Dr. Banks as a committed, responsible, strong-minded, and science-minded central character.

It looked like a barrel suspended at the intersection of seven limbs ... any of its limbs could serve as an arm or a leg ... its limbs had no distinct joints; anatomists guessed they might be supported by vertebral columns. Whatever their underlying structure, the heptapod's limbs conspired to move it in a disconcertingly fluid manner. Its 'torso' rode atop the rippling limbs as smoothly as a hovercraft. Seven lidless eyes ringed the top of the heptapod's body ... with eyes on all sides, any direction might as well be 'forward.

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 2)

Importance: This quote offers a detailed description of the heptapod's physical appearance.

The familiar was far away, while the bizarre was close at hand."

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 3)

Importance: With this quote, Dr. Banks expresses her somewhat paradoxical experience of communicating with distant colleagues through technology that seemed unreliable and unsophisticated compared to that used by the heptapods.

When a Heptapod B sentence grew fairly sizable, its visual impact was remarkable ... the biggest sentences had an effect similar to that of psychedelic posters: sometimes eye watering, sometimes hypnotic.

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 3)

Importance: Dr. Banks describes the experience of encountering a lengthy, substantial sentence in the written language of the heptapods, Heptapod B. The reference is somewhat ironic, given that the term "psychedelic" is traditionally used to describe something, an image or a substance that alters perception: Heptapod B, as the story demonstrates, is itself significantly mind-altering.

I can't believe that you, a grown woman taller than me and beautiful enough to make my heart ache, will be the same girl I used to lift off the ground so you could reach the



drinking fountain, the same girl who used to trundle out of my bedroom draped in a dress and hat and four scarves from my closet.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 3)

Importance: This quote is taken from one of several points in the test in which Dr. Banks finds herself close to being overwhelmed by memories / experiences of her daughter.

The State Department instructed us to reveal as little as possible about humanity, in case that information could be used as a bargaining chip in subsequent negotiations. We obliged, though it didn't require much effort ... whether scientists or tourists, [the heptapods] were an awfully incurious bunch.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 3)

Importance: This quote offers a vivid example of the differences between the humans and the heptapods in attitude, approach, and practice as they study and try to communicate with each other.

[Seeing you in pain will] be like growing an errant limb, an extension of myself whose sensory nerves report pain just fine, but whose motor nerves don't convey my commands at all ... and then there will be the times when I see you laughing ... it will be the most wonderful sound I could ever imagine, a sound that makes me feel like a fountain, or a wellspring.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 4)

Importance: This quote, couched in the uniquely multi-time phrasing of Dr. Banks' evolved perception of time, considers Dr. Banks' experiences of her daughter's joy and suffering.

‘... the notion of a “fastest path” is meaningless unless there's a destination specified. And computing how long a given path takes also requires information about what lies along that path ...’ [Dr. Banks] thought “the ray of light has to know where it will ultimately end up before it can choose the direction to begin moving in.”

-- Gary / Dr. Banks (Part 5)

Importance: The first part of this quote is dialogue spoken by physicist Gary Donnelly, while the second part is Dr. Banks' responding thought. The dialogue refers to the implications of Fermat's Principle, a principle of mechanical physics on Earth, relating to the way in which light changes direction when it enters water. The Principle is one of the first tools used by both the humans and the heptapods to establish communication on scientific subjects.

All those vows made in childhood that I would give reasonable answers when I became a parent, that I would treat my own child as an intelligent, thinking individual, all for naught: I'm going to turn into my mother. I can fight it as much as I want, but there'll be no stopping my slide down that long, dreadful slope.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 6)



Importance: In what the story reveals to be characteristic wryness and irony, Dr. Banks considers how much, or how badly, she has failed to avoid the trap of becoming like her own mother. This quote is one of the most notable examples in the text of the story's exploration of the theme of individualizing identity.

Consider the phenomenon of light hitting water at one angle, and traveling through it at a different angle. Explain it by saying that a difference in the index of refraction caused the light to change direction, and one saw the world as humans saw it. Explain it by saying that light minimized the time needed to travel to its destination, and one saw the world as the heptapods saw it. Two very different interpretations.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 6`)

Importance: As her narration once again considers Fermat's Principle, Dr. Banks deepens her thinking on the subject, taking it into the realms not just of physics, but of the differences in general perception between humans and heptapods.

At that stage of your life, there'll be no past or future for you; until I give you my breast, you'll have no memory of contentment in the past nor expectation of relief in the future ...NOW is the only moment you'll perceive; you'll live in the present tense. In many ways, it's an enviable state.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 7)

Importance: In the same way as her narrative commentary on Fermat's Principle defines both scientific and personal changes in perspective, Dr. Banks' commentary here on her experiences with her daughter (specifically, of her daughter while nursing) informs the experiences she (Dr. Banks) has while discovering the multi-leveled perceptions of time within which the heptapods function.

I would have liked to experience more of the heptapods' worldview, to feel the way they feel. Then, perhaps, I could immerse myself fully in the necessity of events, as they must, instead of merely wading in its surf for the rest of my life.”

-- Narration (Dr. Banks) (Part 8)

Importance: In this expression of regret at the departure of the heptapods, Dr. Banks gives voice to the somewhat wistful longing that they would have stayed longer if only so that she could come to greater understanding of how their means of communication reflected their means of understanding the world, and vice versa.