The Vegetarian Study Guide

The Vegetarian by Han Kang

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used for the creation of this study guide: Kang, Han. The Vegetarian. Portobello Books, 2015. Paperback edition. English translation by Deborah Smith, 2015.

This book was originally published in Korean. The novel is divided into three parts, each narrated from the point of view of a different character, all linked by the actions of a central character. Each part is divided into smaller sub-sections of varying lengths. There are no chapters or chapter headings. The structure of the analysis represents places at which the narrative breaks into the aforementioned sub-sections.

Part One is titled “The Vegetarian,” and is narrated from the first person point of view of Mr. Cheong, the traditionalist husband of Yeong-hye, who one day upsets his quiet, orderly life by becoming vegetarian. Mr. Cheong sees this as personally awkward (in that it disrupts his much-valued daily routine) and professionally inconvenient (as his wife’s choices make for awkward social encounters with his colleagues). He also finds her choices upsetting in terms of their life, as a couple, and with her family. For example, at a family dinner party, Yeong-hye's conservative father strikes her. This confrontation has a similarly upsetting impact on Yeong-hye’s sister, In-hye, and on In-hye’s husband (who is never named).

Meanwhile, there are interjections of italic-highlighted narrative throughout this section, written in the first-person voice of Yeong-hye. These narratives describe the dream that seems to have triggered her becoming a vegetarian; her present day experiences with this and other dreams; and also refers back to a traumatic confrontation with her father in her childhood.

Part Two is titled “Mongolian Mark,” and is narrated from the third person point of view of In-hye’s husband, referred to in this analysis as “the artist.” Narration reveals that Mr. Cheong has started divorce proceedings, and Yeong-hye has moved out on her own. Yeong-hye is still a vegetarian. Meanwhile, the artist becomes increasingly obsessed with Yeong-hye, and specifically with a pale birthmark (a Mongolian Mark) on her buttocks. He channels his obsession into his work, first into a series of sketches that portray Yeong-hye and an unknown man covered with flowers and having sex; and then in a pair of video recordings that he gets Yeong-hye to participate in. In the first, the artist records himself covering Yeong-hye’s naked body with paintings of plants and flowers. In the second video, the artist records a fellow artist also having his body painted. The artist’s attempt to recreate the sketches in his book by having his colleague and Yeong-hye have sex ends in failure. More obsessed than ever, the artist has his body painted by yet another colleague, visits Yeong-hye’s home, and records himself having passionate sex with Yeong-hye. The aftermath of their encounter is interrupted by the arrival of In-hye, and a confrontation that ends with Yeong-hye being taken to a psychiatric hospital.

Part Three is headed “Flaming Trees” and alternates present tense narration (describing In-hye’s visit to her sister in hospital) with past tense narration (describing incidents from both the recent and more distant past). All of that narration reveals that Yeong-hye is in a psychiatric hospital for months; that In-hye has separated from her husband (the artist); and that In-hye has come to realize that Yeong-hye has been fighting to live a life of the kind of independence that she (In-hye) has longed for but never had the courage to live.

Narration also reveals Yeong-hye’s belief that she is becoming increasingly tree like. In spite of her beliefs about what should be happening to her sister and the efforts of physicians to force Yeong-hye to consume nourishment, In-hye comes to a place where she feels it necessary to fight for her sister’s right to live, and die, on her own terms. The narrative ends with In-hye riding in an ambulance with Yeong-hye, looking for signs of support, rightness, and truth from the trees that the ambulance is passing.

Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 1

Summary

Pages 3 – 19. In first person narration, the narrator describes the reasons he had for choosing to marry the woman he did: among them, her general agreeability, her lack of personality, and her physical plainness. These qualities in a wife suited the kind of life that the narrator wanted to live: quiet, un-noteworthy, and stable. He says that there was only one aspect of his wife that he found unusual - her refusal to wear a brassiere. In spite of initially finding her lack of an undergarment arousing, the narrator says her choice made him feel uncomfortable – not that her breasts were all that noticeable, he adds; in fact, he says, “I would have preferred her to go around wearing one that was thickly padded, so that I could save face in front of my acquaintances” (5). He suggests that the main reason for his discomfort was the fact that her choice was so unconventional.

One night, the narrator finds his wife, dressed in her long white nightgown, staring into the open refrigerator. He asks her repeatedly what she is doing, until she finally tells him that she had a dream – but he does not say what it was about. She then goes into the living room. The man finds his wife so remote that he does not feel able to reach out to her either physically or with words.

The next morning, the narrator sleeps past his normal waking time. As he is rushing around to get ready for work, he is shocked that his wife has not prepared things for him the way he expects them to be prepared, and even more shocked to see that she seems to be throwing out all the meat in the house. When he asks what is going on, she again says she had a dream.

A section of italicized text written in first person (initially, the narrative is not entirely clear on whose voice this is) describes running through a forest; stumbling upon what appears to be a slaughterhouse; being traumatized by what’s inside; and then fleeing and continuing to run, her clothes covered with blood.

Regular text resumes with a description of a confrontation between the narrator and his wife over breakfast – a breakfast which, the narrator complains, is nothing like the kind of meat-filled good cooking his wife used to do. The narrator describes his inability to understand why his wife is doing what she is doing: there had been no previous signs of her being a vegetarian at all.

The narrator describes how his wife’s behavior continues into the spring. He narrates that she loses a great deal of weight, does not sleep very much, and has little interest in sex. The narrator also describes how his wife repeatedly says, when he asks what has been going on, that she had a dream. In narration, he describes the dream – “the barn in the dark woods, the face reflected in the pool of blood and all the rest of it” (18),

adding that hearing about it once had been enough. He goes on to comment on how normal her family seems, and how earthy and reliable his wife had always been.

Another section of italicized text (in what is now revealed to be the wife's first person voice) describes an encounter between the wife and her husband the morning before her first dream. She cut herself while preparing food, she says, and the sucking of blood from the wound calmed her. That night, she says, she had the dream, seeing her face reflected in a pool of blood in the barn.

Analysis

The first few pages of this first section of the novel offer some very clear indications of the character of its narrator, in that Mr. Cheong's conservatism and sexism are very vividly portrayed. It also offers some similarly clear indications of the situation in which he finds himself, in that his almost immediate, knee-jerk resentment of his wife's change in character and habit is similarly very well portrayed. These two aspects of this first phase of the story intertwine and effectively contrast the third key aspect of this phase of the story, one which echoes throughout the book and all three of its phases: the essential unknowability of the character who is in many ways its protagonist - Mr. Cheong's wife. Here it is interesting to note that at this point in the book, she is not yet named and is only referred to, in Mr. Cheong's narration as his "wife."

The story does, however, offer some glimpses of who the narrator's wife is and what she is going through. The interjections in her voice describing her dream and her responses to it are powerful indications of the inner life of a character whose outer life shows only the results of her inner turmoil, not the turmoil itself. These interjections only occur in this phase of the story.

This section also includes the introduction of several of the book's key themes. One theme is the influence of dreams. This is manifested in the references of both characters to the dream that seems to have motivated the wife's change in dietary habits. Another theme introduced is the power and experience of transformation. This is demonstrated through the wife's transforming of herself into a vegetarian, and her husband's reaction to that transformation.

A third theme introduced is sexuality and desire. This last theme manifests briefly in the references to the wife's breasts and to her going braless. It also manifests in her husband's reaction to both these elements, a reaction that, once again, reinforces his essential conservatism and selfishness. Finally, there is the the narrator's reference to the change in the wife's sexual appetite which he, unsurprisingly given his character, links to her vegetarianism instead of his own clearly apparent, essential selfishness.

A fourth theme introduced is that of family dynamics. This theme plays out in the passively confrontational aggression between husband and wife. While every family develops its own dynamic, the dynamics observed thus far between the narrator and his wife are those of power struggle (the narrator wanting to be in charge, and his wife

determined to make her own choice about eating meat) and lack of clear communication, as they are not talking openly and honestly about what is bothering either of them.

The book also offers a thematic exploration of breaking convention. This is most clearly demonstrated first in the narrator's wife's decision not to wear a bra. The narrator only had concerns about this regarding what others may think since the action defied the traditional social conventions of their time and place. The second obvious example of breaking conventions in the narrator's wife's sudden decision to become a vegetarian. Due to a disturbing dream she had, she can no longer bring herself to eat - or cook for the narrator - meat. Based o the severity of the narrator's reaction to this, it is strongly suggested just how far out of convention her decision is. This will be further demonstrated later in the book by the narrator's family's reaction to her decision to become a vegetarian.

One last point to note is the introduction of a key symbol - blood - that appears in all three parts of the book. Blood, here and throughout the novel, is evocative of how the life force animates both humans and animals, and also the suffering equated with the release of that force.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel introduce, in this section (Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 1), its thematic interest in the breaking of convention?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the reader not being told the name of Mr. Cheong’s wife? How might this relate to aspects of Mr. Cheong’s identity and personality as outlined in this section (Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 1)?

Discussion Question 3

At this point in the narrative, what does it suggest that the face seen by the wife in the pool of blood is her own? What does this aspect of the dream suggest about her personality and perspectives?

Vocabulary

middling, jaundiced, prominent, sallow, paunch, diligent, allot, frivolous, coincide, unfathomable, disheveled, concoct, methodical, genetic, predisposition, alleviate, obstinacy, competent, glutinous, haggard, ominous, taciturn, emanate, vitality, squeamish

Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 2

Summary

Pages 20 – 33. The narrator and his wife arrive late to a dinner party relating to the narrator's job. As everyone gathers, the narrator is embarrassed to notice that once again, his wife is not wearing a bra. Later, when conversation reveals that she is a vegetarian, several people offer reasons why vegetarianism is a bad thing. The topic is brought to a close when the wife again says she stopped eating meat because she had a dream, and the narrator lies, saying she was diagnosed with a digestive disease. Narration comments that the husband (who still remains unnamed) is starting to see his wife (also unnamed) as "utterly unknowable" (25).

On the way home from the party, the narrator is upset that his wife does not seem to display any remorse for, or awareness of, how badly she behaved. When she goes home, she goes straight to bed – in her own room, not the room that she shares with the narrator. The narrator calls his wife's mother, who is annoyed with her daughter for becoming a vegetarian. it is at this point the narrator finally reveals that his wife's name is Yeong-hye. The narrator then calls his wife's sister, commenting in narration on how talking with her always gets her sexually aroused. He also comments on how he got the same sort of shocked, almost angry reaction from her as he got from his wife's mother, and adds that he thought about calling his wife's brother, but thought that would be too much.

There follows another italicized representation of Yeong-hye's dreams, in which first person narration refers to the moment of an animal's violent death. Her narrator reveals the increasing number of dreams she has been having and how much more vivid they are becoming. She states that everything is starting to feel strange to her.

The narrator describes how, in the aftermath of conversations his sister-in-law and mother-in-law have with his wife, nothing changes in her behavior. The same is true after a similar conversation between his wife and his father-in-law, a former military man. The narrator also refers to a family gathering taking place in a few weeks, a gathering which – the narrator thinks – will focus on his wife's behavior. The narrator reiterates his frustration with the situation. The narrator decides to forcibly have sex with his wife several times, leaving her virtually catatonic. Later, he comes home from work to find her without her top, breasts shrunken because of weight loss, working in the kitchen preparing vegetarian food.

There is then another italicized excerpt from the wife's point of view, now recounting more than just the dream. First person narration refers to her struggle to sleep. She says the only part of her body that she feels safe with is her breasts, although she is perplexed by how small they are getting, and how sharp and edge-like her whole body is getting. "What am I going to gouge?" (33).

Analysis

The first key point to note in this section, following the reiteration of Mr. Cheong's essential, self-centered conservatism and the revelation of his wife's ongoing breaking of convention, is the reference to Mr. Cheong finding his wife unknowable. Her independence and breaking of convention is clearly leading them both into considerations of her identity that are new. Here, it is interesting to note that while the central characters in the two later phases of the story have similar reactions to the changes in Yeong-hye (that is: they also find her unknowable), their reactions are entirely different here. The central character in Part 2 finds that unknowability essentially intriguing, while the central character in Part 3 not only finds it intriguing, but transforming.

The appearance of Yeong-hye's family puts plot-defining pressure on Yeong-hye in a way that foreshadows developments later in the narrative as well as moves the plot forward here. The appearance of her family also foreshadows later revelations, in both this phase and in later phases, of just how tension-filled the relationship between Yeong-hye and her father actually is. Third, her family's introduction to the story adds a layer of meaning to the book's exploration of family dynamics, in that it starts to sketch the relationships between Yeong-hye and her family by blood as opposed to Mr. Cheong, who is her family by marriage. Here, it is worth noting the character of Yeong-hye's brother, who never really comes into the story as an active participant. He does not become involved in the family drama. Perhaps because he is a son in a culture that tends to value sons more than daughters, he is free to live his own life in the way his sisters, particularly Yeong-hye, are not.

The theme of the influence of dreams is further explored in this section. Yeong-hye's dreams are now clearly affecting, and being affected by, her life in reality. The first reference to her dream foreshadows the revelation (in the following section) of the probable identity of the dead animal.

Finally, the theme of sexuality and desire is further explored when the narrator decides to take out his frustrations with his wife by forcibly having sex with her multiple times. It is stated in the narration that the wife becomes nearly catatonic after these interactions with her husband, clearly suggesting that she is not a willing or eager participant in the sexual encounters. This act demonstrates the narrator trying to reestablish his control and power over his wife in one way he is sure he can (via sexual dominance), since her continued decisions to not wear a bra or eat meat are interpreted by the narrator as defiance and denial of his power over her.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative develop the theme of the power of sexual desire in this section (Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 2)? How does it interact with the theme of breaking convention?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the reason behind the wife's name being revealed at this point in the narrative, and in the way that it is? What do you think is the reason that the husband is referred to only as Mr. Cheong, and never by his given name?

Discussion Question 3

Given that the verb "gouge" has a similar meaning to the word "carve," or the concept of cutting out, what are the implications of the last line of this section (Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 2)? What does this reference refer to? How does it relate to Yeong-hye's experience of her body as being sharper?

Vocabulary

alleviate, sickly, pallor, spacious, demure, gawp, ornate, surreptitious, feign, composure, façade, emaciated, mummify, arbitrary, gastroenteritis, repulsive, flamboyant, defiant, palimpsest, perpetrate

Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 3

Summary

Pages 33 – 52. The family gathering begins, centered around a lavish meal prepared by Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye. In-hye's husband, who plays a significant role in this section, is never identified by name. Mr. Cheong describes him as an artist living off his wife's money, and someone whose freedom Mr. Cheong envies. Conversation at the dinner party is at first polite and discreet, with Mr. Cheong surprised – and not surprised – to notice that once again, his wife is not wearing a bra. At the table, the conversation turns aggressive, with almost everyone in the family taking a turn trying to convince Yeong-hye to eat. She continues to refuse. Eventually, her father speaks to her quite angrily, slaps her face, and forces a piece of meat into her mouth. Yeong-hye spits the food out, grabs a knife, and cuts into her wrists. Her brother-in-law, who has military training, stops the bleeding, and tells Mr. Cheong to start the car. Mr. Cheong makes sure his shoes match before he goes out.

In another section from Yeong-hye's point of view, present tense narration describes how a dog that had bitten Yeong-hye as a girl is tied to her father's motorcycle and run in circles until it drops dead – but not before Yeong-hye makes eye contact with it and feels its suffering. That night, the dog is eaten: according to tradition, "for a wound caused by a dog-bite to heal you have to eat that same dog" (42). Yeong-hye's narration describes imagining seeing the dog's eyes appearing in the surface of the soup.

Yeong-hye is taken to a hospital and bandaged up. Mr. Cheong(now referred to, by the family, as Mr. Cheong) sits with her, but looks forward to going back to work. The next day, a visit from his wife's mother upsets everyone; she manipulates her daughter into trying some meat broth by saying it is a herbal remedy. The mother is out of the room when her daughter goes into the bathroom and vomits everything up. As his wife returns to her bed, Mr. Cheong notices that a bit of her blood is slipping up the tube in her arm and into the intravenous bag of fluid she is receiving. When his wife goes out into the hallway, Mr. Cheong does not stop her. When his wife and mother-in-law return (the former quiet, the latter angry), Mr. Cheong watches and listens as his mother-in-law berates his wife yet again. He describes how his wife looks at her mother "as though she were a complete stranger" (48). In the aftermath of all this, his wife's IV bag is half full of blood.

Another section from Yeong-hye's point of view comments on how constantly painful her stomach is as a result of all the meat she has eaten. She describes wanting to throw herself out the window as a last-ditch effort to help herself.

The next morning, Mr. Cheong – who has slept by his wife's bedside – wakes up to find out that she has disappeared. He tracks her through the hospital to an outside courtyard, where he discovers her in the middle of a crowd of people, sitting topless on the edge of a water fountain. As a security guard and a nurse hurry over, Mr. Cheong

joins her and asks what she is doing. She quietly and calmly tells him it was hot, so she came to sit outside and took off her top. Mr. Cheong then opens her clenched hand, and discovers the body of a dead bird, which has been bitten by a predator and which is bleeding.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section relates to the intense, complicated, painful family dynamics on display. First, at the dinner table, Yeong-hye's family essentially gangs up on her, taking turns telling her why she "needs" to start eating meat again. They clearly share the same sentiments and compliance to conventions as Yeong-hye's husband. Yeong-hye's father's actions of physically attacking his daughter and force-feeding her meat is dramatic and likely appalling to reading. Yeong-hye's father is further revealed as an antagonist with the story of a dog that bit Yeong-hye in her youth. While her father was understandably angry with the dog, his decision to run the dog to death behind a motorcycle before Yeong-hye's eyes is severe and telling of his cruel nature. The revelation that this sort of family dynamic is present and, apparently, accepted by the other members of the family shows readers Yeong-hye's dire situation and foreshadows how difficult and unlikely it is that she will ultimately win the battle and ever be allowed to continue life as a vegetarian in peace.

A related point is the reference to Yeong-hye’s mother finding her a complete stranger. This not only functions on the thematic level of exploring family dynamics, but is also a clear echo of the earlier reference to Mr. Cheong finding Yeong-hye unknowable.

Mr. Cheong's decisions to slow down and assure his shoes match before rushing his wife - who has just slashed her wrists with a knife - to the hospital is extremely telling of his true character. He is clearly far more concerned with following conventions and how he is viewed by others than he is driven by his love or loyalty to his wife.

An important image from this section is of Yeong-hye’s blood flowing up the intravenous tube that is feeding her and into the bag of nutrients. It is a very unusual image that, on one hand, is somewhat complicated to unpack, but on the other hand is quite potent. Given that blood is representative throughout the novel of the essential life force, the image suggests that Yeong-hye’s life force, now defined by a desire for independence and freedom (as represented by her going both braless and vegetarian) is being sucked out of her by convention (i.e. traditional medical treatment).

There is also a clear echo in this section between the dog's eyes she describes seeing in the soup when she was young and the face she saw in the blood in her dream as an adult.

Finally, this section also ends with a powerful image - a topless Yeong-hye grasping a dead bird that has been bitten by something. Given that both her vegetarianism and her determination to going braless suggests, in this phase of the story and throughout the narrative, an attempt by her to claim individuality and independence from convention,

Yeong-hye's decision to go braless in public suggests a flagrancy, or a fearlessness, that has not been displayed to this point. Additionally, the image, which removes the sexuality from Yeong-hye's toplessness, has two meanings: the first meaning relates directly to Yeong-hye as a vibrantly portrayed, and very important, step on her personal journey of transformation, another of the novel's key themes; the second meaning to her toplessness relates more directly to the story, and to Yeong-hye more indirectly, in that it foreshadows revelations in the following phase (Part 2) of what happens to Yeong-hye in the aftermath of this particular event. These happenings shape the actions of the characters whose narratives are at the centerpiece of both the following section and the phase that follows that.

Discussion Question 1

What are the implications of this section's (Part 1, The Vegetarian – Section 3) exploration of the theme of family dynamics?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the connection between the story of Yeong-hye's encounter with the dog and her becoming a vegetarian: is there a genuine connection, or are the two events just coincidence?

Discussion Question 3

How do you think the image of the bleeding white bird (including the fact of its being clenched in the wife's hand) relates to the story and situation so far?

Vocabulary

impotent, patriarchal, empathy, perturbed, negligible, inebriated, ominous, premonition, outlandish, abhorrence, decorative, protrude, amiable, intermittent, austerity, celibate, enunciate, preposterous, dissuade, brandish, adamant, philtrum

Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 1

Summary

Pages 55 – 68. Third person narration describes a man leaving the performance of a sexually charged dance and catches a train for home, reflecting on how he had been disappointed, as he had been on the occasions of several other, different performances. “The thing he’d been searching for was something quieter, deeper, more private” (56). The man rides the train past the home he shares with his wife and son, with no intention of getting off the train.

The man arrives at the art studio he shares with other artists like himself, narration describing his long period of being unproductive; how he keeps his completed work on a reel of videotape; and how some of his sketches resemble the poster for the dance project he just saw. Narration also reveals that his most recent inspiration came as the result of seeing a “Mongolian mark” (59) on the buttocks of his young son, and his subsequent conversation about such marks with his wife. Here, narration reveals that his wife is In-hye, which in turn means that the artist here is the brother-in-law referred to as having saved Yeong-hye’s life in Part 1.

This conversation also reveals that Yeong-hye also has a Mongolian mark, and that his attraction to her has combined with his imagining of her mark to sexualize both her and it for him. Narration then describes how the sketches that have emerged from the mark-triggered inspiration inspire powerful sexual arousal in the artist. He realizes that the sketches that he has repeatedly drawn as a result of that inspiration include the imagined figure of Yeong-hye. He also realizes that the faceless male figure, looking as though he is simultaneously having sex with her and trying to kill her, is himself.

The artist’s contemplations are interrupted by the arrival of J, another artist, who quickly excuses himself to get some coffee. The first artist quickly hurries out, covering his bald spot (about which he is very self-conscious) with his baseball cap, and catching sight of himself in a mirror, noting the sadness in his watery red eyes.

When the artist gets home, his wife (In-hye) berates him tiredly for being late and for his poor eating habits. She also reveals that Yeong-hye has been served divorce papers by her husband. The artist volunteers to go see her, and see how she is. His wife agrees, and the artist hurries into the bathroom, narration revealing he has become suddenly very sexually excited at the thought of seeing his sister-in-law. He masturbates to the thought.

Narration then reveals that the incident at the family gathering at which Yeong-hye had cut herself (an act that is now interpreted as an attempted suicide) had happened two years previously, and that the artist remembers the incident for Yeong-hye’s thinness, the violent actions of her parents, and the cry of rage that she made just before she cut herself. It is also described that in the aftermath of taking Yeong-hye to the hospital, the

artist took off his blood-soaked shirt and went home with it, thoughts of his most recent video work (which had focused on experiences of suffering) suddenly becoming unbearable and making him imagine that it would be a long time before he worked again. “The past ten or so years of work was quietly turning its back on him. It wasn’t his any more. It belonged to a person he used to know, or thought he’d known – once upon a time" (68).

Analysis

Part 2 of the novel shifts focus onto a new central perspective of the artist (whose name is never given), while still retaining the book’s overall focus on the central character of Yeong-hye. She becomes a more significant character later in Part 2, but her presence is felt even in the beginning moments, as the narrative lays the groundwork for Part 2's attention to the artist.

Once the narrative reveals the nature of the artist’s deepening obsession with Yeong-hye, the opening lines of this section can be seen as suggesting that he is looking to channel his sexual energies in a way that is, perhaps, more appropriate than anything directly involving his sister-in-law. With this in mind, it is possible to see this section of Part 2 as initiating another variation on the book’s central theme relating to breaking convention: in his actions, the artist can be seen here as being tempted to break convention (i.e. have a sexual encounter with his sister-in-law) but tries to resist doing so. Later in Part 2, his attitude changes.

The artist is introduced here as a complicated character. While his past actions in saving Yeong-hye's life when she slit her wrists suggest the artist is a kind, caring individual, his action of attending sexually charged dances and having frequent sexual thoughts about his sister-in-law while choosing to return to his own family late paint a less admirable picture of the artist's character.

This section offers an intriguing variation on the book’s theme related to the power and experience of transformation. The experience in question is the artist’s contemplation of how his artistic drive seems to have left him; this is an exploration of what might be called a shadow side of transformation - that is, transformation into a worse state, as opposed to transformation to a more positive state, which is arguably more common throughout the book. In any case, the author’s apparent unhappiness with his career and simmering desire to create can be seen as another factor in the changes of attitude and situation he makes later in Part 2 of the story.

Meanwhile, new piece of information, such as the reference to the divorce proceedings between Yeong-hye and Mr. Cheong, can be seen as another way in which family dynamics are explored (given that divorce can be both a cause and a result of significant changes in family dynamics). The divorce can perhaps be seen as an opening of the door to sexual intimacy with Yeong-hye through which the artist eventually passes. In any case, the revelation of the divorce is not likely to come as

much of a surprise to the reader, given how thoroughly the conservative Mr. Cheong has resented the changes in his wife's attitudes and actions.

Finally, there is the reference to Mongolian marks and the influence of Yeong-hye's particular Mongolian mark, which plays a significant role in later events in the narrative. A Mongolian mark is a type of birthmark with an wavy, uneven shape. This can be seem as a symbol of many things in the book. First, it may symbolize Yeong-hye's character - as she defies convention and refuses to appear as others think she should, just as the birthmark is uneven and not the smooth, clear skin that convention often desires. The Mongolian mark, with it's wavy boarders may also symbolize the shaky, or weakened, reality of the artist's marraige, as the artist's increasing sexual desire for his sister-in-law suggests his own marriage is not as strong as it could be.

The brief introduction of the character J is also noteworthy, as he will play an important part of the story later.

Discussion Question 1

How is the action of this section (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 1) motivated and defined by thematically-significant sexual desire?

Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that the artist's name is never given? What do you think is the author's intent, or purpose, in keeping his name a secret?

Discussion Question 3

How is the artist represented in this section (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 1)? Does he appear to be either a protagonist or antagonist?

Vocabulary

ovation, promiscuous, daub, psychedelic, paunch, fallow, coalesce, preposterous, vicissitude, carnality, titillation, pummel, diligent, uncouth, androgynous, denuded, ambiguous

Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 2

Summary

Pages 68 – 85. The artist's conversation with Yeong-hye is unsatisfactory, because she is mostly silent. Narration reveals that Yeong-hye spent several months in a psychiatric hospital, then afterwards she came to live with the artist and In-hye. At that point, Yeong-hye had seemed perfectly fine, if a bit quiet. The conversation ends with Yeong-hye finally speaking, in "the quiet tone of a person who … had passed into a border area between states of being (71).

Narration then describes how the artist's contemplations of Yeong-hye have all blended with images of the Mongolian Mark, and refers to the artist's sense that the blood that soaked his shirt in the aftermath of her suicide attempt was some kind of premonition of his fate. Meanwhile, he goes to Yeong-hye's apartment, taking a bag of fruit. He rings the doorbell, and when there is no answer, he tries the handle. He is surprised when he finds it unlocked. He goes in, sweating and nervous.

The artist looks through the apartment, which seems empty and which has some of his wife's clothes on the floor; she had given them to Yeong-hye. He is surprised when she comes out of the bathroom completely naked. She calmly and without embarrassment gets dressed. The artist is still more surprised when he realizes how sexually aroused he is becoming. Meanwhile, as Yeong-hye prepares some of the fruit, he reflects on how her body has filled out and softened since her time in the hospital. As they eat, the artist struggles to fight down his urge to have sex with her.

The artist convinces Yeong-hye to go for a walk with him. They go into a coffee shop, where the artist finds himself more deeply seduced by her. He works up the courage to ask her to model for him, believing that perhaps the only way to release his nervous energy is to have sex with her. He also asks whether she would allow her naked body to be painted by him, and whether she will keep the plan a secret from In-hye, adding that they will be working in an studio loaned by a friend. He waits anxiously for her answer.

At his friend's studio, the artist prepares the space for his time with Yeong-hye. His wife calls to make arrangements for childcare, narration describing first how distant and formal their conversations are, and then an incident when they had sex with such intensity that the artist's wife said afterwards that he had scared her. The artist then goes to meet Yeong-hye at the train station.

At the studio, the artist tells Yeong-hye to take off her clothes (she is again not wearing a bra) and to lie face down on a sheet in the middle of the floor. She does, and he sets up his camera, having decided that he is going to record himself painting her. Narration then describes the colorful painting of plants and flowers that he makes from her neck down to her ankle, leaving only the space of the Mongolian Mark clear, but framed with a pale green that highlights it more vividly. Afterwards, he films his work closely, and

when he is done, he asks whether Yeong-hye found what happened difficult. She laughs, “her laughter … faint but lively, seeming to reject nothing and be surprised by nothing” (85). He realizes in the aftermath of her laughter that his perceptions of her and of himself in response to her have changed.

Analysis

This section of Part 2 is primarily notable for its portrayal of intensifying sexual tension. The artist's thoughts about Yeong-hye have moved beyond a crush and seem to be nearing the level of obsession. He is getting bolder in his attempts to get closer to her sexually, as he asked her to model nude for him. She does not seem to be protesting any of his attention, so readers may wonder why the artist has waited again to have sex with her. He seems to enjoy, to some degree, the agony of wanting what he has never had with Yeong-hye, although it seems inevitable that the sexual tension will reach a climax and the characters will end up sleeping together.

The reference later in this section to the qualities of the sexual activity between the artist and In-hye echoes sexual relations with similar qualities between Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye in Part One. In both cases, there is an element of genderized power (i.e. of the man “taking” or “having” the woman) and of relationship dynamic (i.e. the concurrent sense that the man has the right to do so). Here it is interesting to note that both the women in these parallel sexual situations (Yeong-hye in Part 1, In-hye in Part 2) make efforts to break free of both sorts of dynamics, doing so in different ways and with different results, but for the same thematically central reason: they have been pushed into at least trying to break convention.

A similarly important element is its revelation that Yeong-hye had spent time in a psychiatric hospital, which suggests that the events of the family dinner party in Part 1 had a more significant impact on everyone involved than the narration there suggested. The reference also foreshadows events in Part 3, which takes place in a psychiatric hospital. Meanwhile, the references to the blood-soaked shirt and the artist’s premonition of his fate are also elements of foreshadowing – specifically, of events that take place at the end of this phase of the narrative.

Meanwhile, the structural leaps in time in this section are worth noting. There is something almost film-like in the way in which the narrative jumps, or “cuts”, from one significant scene or image to another. Examples include the transition between the artist waiting for his answer and preparing the studio; the narration of the latter provides, by implication, the answer to the former – he would not be preparing the studio if she had said no. Likewise, there is the jump in time between the artist meeting Yeong-hye and their arrival at the studio. It is almost as though the author (and the translator?) have decided to skip straight to the key points of confrontation and relationship while, at the same time, increasing narrative momentum as Part 2 builds to its climax.

The most significant element in this section, however, is the description of the images that the artist paints onto Yeong-hye’s body. The artist covers Yeong-hye's body with

plants, which could be seen as symbolic or ironic of her choice to live as a vegetarian. One could argue that the artist's act of applying - or even imposing - beauty on her in the form of plants and flowers as opposed to letting her own beauty come through may reflect the male attitudes outlined above.

Most significantly, the painting of plants onto Yeong-hye foreshadows events in Part 3 of the story, in which the nature relationship between Yeong-hye and plants becomes clearer and, at the same time, takes a metaphorically and thematically significant turn along the fine line between dark-edged psychological realism and a more brightly shaded connection with magic realism that much of the novel skillfully walks.

Discussion Question 1

As this section (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 2) develops the book's thematic interest in sexual desire, how does the narrative entwine that theme with its exploration of the power of transformation?

Discussion Question 2

In what way does the narrative's reference to In-hye's clothing being on Yeong-hye's floor metaphorically, or literally, relate to the experiences of the characters – specifically, to the author's experience of being involved in relationships with both women?

Discussion Question 3

Aside from it being the first time in the narrative that Yeong-hye is shown laughing, what do you think is the significance of her laughter? What does this moment in the narrative reveal about who she is becoming?

Vocabulary

hypocrisy, inscrutable, dementia, culminate, ulterior, nonchalant, indecipherable, superfluity, voluptuous, compulsion, impassive, signify, sufficient, endow, superfluity, contour, desolate, vegetal, composure, quiver, continuous

Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 3

Summary

Pages 85 – 96. Yeong-hye dresses herself and has a cup of something hot and steaming. Watching her, the artist contemplates how controlled and self-contained she seems; how repulsed he is by the thought of her and her ex-husband together; and how powerful her body seems to be (“a body which said so much and yet was no more than itself” (87). When she is ready, he paints her again, this time the front of her body in colors and shapes that evoke the flowers of daytime (her back being covered with the flowers of night). He again films her, shooting both front and back from a different angle and ending with a close-up of her face.

As she and the artist are leaving, Yeong-hye asks how difficult it will be to get the paint off, saying she does not want it to come off. The artist is surprised, the darkness obscuring anything more her face and eyes might have to tell him.

The artist and Yeong-hye go out for dinner at a Buddhist, vegetarian restaurant. At first the artist believes that the afternoon has released his desire for her – but then he has the image of having sex with her in the restaurant, and his feelings return. He takes the opportunity of asking her why she quit eating meat. After saying he would not understand, she tells him that it was because she had a dream of a face. When he asks for more information, she laughs and says she knew he would not understand. His next question he keeps to himself: why did she bare her breasts to the sun “like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize? Was that because of a dream too?” (91). The narrative offers no answer to these questions.

The artist drops Yeong-hye back at her apartment building. As he watches and waits for her light to go on, he imagines sliding into bed with her, marveling at how he managed to only touch her with his brush.

The artist goes home, learns that his son is sleeping soundly, and calls his wife to tell her he is going back to his studio. When his wife responds, he hears complex emotions in her voice that he had not heard before (the narrative does not suggest what those emotions are (“If you want to go, then go,” she says. “I’m going to close up the shop and head home now” (93)). After she says she will be home soon and hangs up first (which she has never done before), the artist considers staying, but then realizes he cannot face being in the apartment waiting for her. He goes to the studio, where he finds J, who agrees to give him space. As he goes, J says he wouldd love to see what the artist has been working on.

The artist spends all night editing the film he shot of Yeong-hye, and calls the finished product “Mongolian Mark 1 – Flowers of Night and Flowers of Day” (95). As he contemplates what he has done, he realizes what the sequel video, “Mongolian Mark 2,” needs to be – images of a man and a woman having sex. As he leaves his office, he

realizes that the man cannot be him: he is too out of shape. He goes to a sauna, where he undresses and looks at himself unhappily in a mirror, realizing that he has gone too far with this project to stop. He tries to sleep.

Narration comments that “the first thing he saw when he woke from his brief sleep was her” (96), a statement that is, in fact, a representative of a dream state. Her body is green, and the Mongolian Mark is gone. He has sex with her, and when he is done, he realizes that his penis is stained green.

Analysis

As this section of Part 2 once again escalates the sexual tension between Yeong-hye and the artist, there are several important points to note. The first is the deep irony in the comment that to the artist, Yeong-hye seems to be no more than herself, as the story is, to this point and beyond, all about Yeong-hye becoming something more, or something other, than herself. This idea is developed further in Yeong-hye’s comment that she wants to keep the paint on her skin and, indirectly, in the artist’s question about photosynthesis: all these comments combine to suggest, at this point in the narrative, that on some level Yeong-hye is imagining that she is transforming herself into a plant. This idea, in turn, develops further in Part 3, as Yeong-hye’s thematically-significant imaginings about her transformation drive her, and the characters around her, into increasingly extreme choices.

Another important element of this section is the conversation in the restaurant, in which Yeong-hye drops hints, familiar-sounding to the reader, about why she made the choice to become a vegetarian. The sense here is that at the same time she is opening herself up to new experiences that continue to help her define her break from convention, she is keeping parts of herself private and secret. It is a strange mix of open experimentation and vulnerability with privacy and restraint, making her complex and intriguing for both the reader and the man (i.e. the artist) with whom she is becoming increasingly involved.

Other important elements include the return of J (the second of three appearances of the character, the third and most significant being in the following section), and the simultaneous intensifying and clarification of what the artist wants to do (which now is starting to include J). The point to note here is that while the artist’s conscious mind seems to be talking himself into getting someone else to do the second video, his sub-conscious mind (as manifest in his dream) seems to be suggesting the opposite, and what is arguably the truth: that he really wants to be the one to make the film, and to have sex with Yeong-hye. The action of the following section bears this out, as the artist makes a series of choices that on the one hand comes close to getting him what he thinks he wants, but at the same time draws him closer to the two things he truly wants: to create powerful art, and to be with Yeong-hye.

Discussion Question 1

How does this section (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 3) explore a different facet of the book's thematic interest in the power of dreams?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of the artist's first-time experiences with his wife, In-hye (i.e. her expressions of feeling, her hanging up first)? What do her experiences suggest about the state of their relationship?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think might be the complicated feelings that the artist hears in his wife's voice during their conversation?

Vocabulary

minutiae, passivity, renunciation, incongruous, concave, tungsten, tremulous, feral, dissimilar

Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 4

Summary

Pages 96 – 109. The next day, the artist calls Yeong-hye, conversation revealing that she has not washed off the paint and that when it fades, she wants him to paint her again. She tells the artist that the paint keeps the dreams away. Without entirely understanding what she means, he asks her if she is free the following afternoon, and whether it is all right that a man is there as well, a man that he plans to paint in the same way. She agrees to it all. He then calls his wife, who seems more resigned than angry when he says he is going to be working for at least another day. Finally, he calls J, and asks him to meet him at the studio the next day, adding that if J wants to see his work, they can meet at their shared studio.

The narrative jumps ahead to the next afternoon, with J waiting impatiently. Narration reveals that he had been both impressed and shocked at seeing the artist's video of Yeong-hye, and reacted with nervous doubt when the artist proposed painting him and filming the two of them together. Eventually, Yeong-hye arrives, saying that she had not washed the paint off. J then gets undressed, somewhat nervously, and the artist paints both his front and his back, narration commenting in particular on how the area around J's penis is painted with "a single huge flower, the crimson of blood" (102). He notices that J is becoming aroused, and then asks Yeong-hye to take off her clothes and join him. After some initial awkwardness, and with Yeong-hye taking the lead, the two painted people begin to entwine, "almost like two huge, abstracted plants" (104). Eventually, the sexual energy becomes so intense that the artist carefully suggests that they actually engage in intercourse. J reacts badly, but the artist convinces him to just engage in some more poses, without having sex. J leaves apologetically, saying he just does not have it in him to be that free.

As the artist apologizes, Yeong-hye giggles, saying she has become aroused. Suddenly and impulsively, he locks the door and goes to her, attempting to have sex. She pushes him away, saying that it was the flowers on J's body that got her so excited. He asks whether she would do it with him, and let themselves be recorded, if he painted himself. She laughs, "as if limits and boundaries no longer held any meaning for her. Or else in quiet mockery" (107).

The artist leaves his studio, racing home, weeping, the phrase "I wish I was dead" repeating in his brain, followed by the answer "So die."

A female artist named P notices a car coming towards her. When it stops, she gets in, conversation revealing that the male driver (the artist) had called to meet her for the first time in ages. He says he has a favor to ask, narration describing his admiration of her energy and intensity, and how he lets it go as an old memory.

At P's studio, P comments critically on the artist's sketches. As the artist takes off his clothes, P tells him that she will do her painting more in his style than her own. Several hours later, she is finished, and shows him her work. He speaks admiringly of it, but she confesses that in spite of being turned on at first, she now finds him standing there painted somewhat "pitiful" (111). They kiss briefly, the artist overwhelmed with the desire to cry, uncertain of whether it is because of memories of their past relationship or "fear of the boundary he was intending soon to cross" (111).

Analysis

Part 2's overall thematic focus on sexuality and desire develops intensely, and in a variety of ways, in this section. There is the sexual interplay, or almost interplay, between J and Yeong-hye; there is the sublimated sexual desire of the artist, and his history of sexual relations with P; and the note upon which this section ends (the suggestion that at long last, the artist is going to release his barely suppressed sexual desire for Yeong-hye).

The interplay between J and Yeong-hye in this section also touched on the theme of defying traditional conventions. J's inability to go against conventions and follow through with sleeping with Yeong-hye, whom he just met, only serves to contrast Yeong-hye's willingness to ignore all social conventions, as she was more than willing to go through with sexual intercourse with J.

Also in this section, there is another example of the author's frequently used technique of cutting from important moment to important moment: specifically, the reference to J looking forward to seeing the artist's work and then cutting to the aftermath of that "seeing" having taken place. Here again, the writing style moves from key point of action to key point of action, filling in the blanks of what happened between these points with flashbacks.

Another repeated element, but one that is more content-defined than structural, is the reference to the artist noticing that the painted bodies of J and Yeong-hye look like a pair of entwined plants. Here again there is an echo of the sense that on some level, Yeong-hye's journey of transformation is that of human being to plant. Right now, that sense seems to be primarily in the author's intention: it's only later, in Part 3, that it becomes a more overt part of Yeong-hye's own apparent intention.

The artist's contemplations of death is a new element in this section, and seems to evoke a powerful ambivalence, or uncertainty, about how fulfilling the path he is on actually is, or can be. This internal discussion of death adds an interesting layer to the artist's drives and perspectives.

A similarly interesting layer appears in relation to the character of P. The way in which she's introduced is interesting, in that the narrative first presents her without making it clear what her connection to the story actually is. Then there is P's reaction to seeing

her work on the artist's body, which once again reinforces his unhappy self-image and, perhaps, metaphorically echoes the previously referenced comments about death.

Finally, as this section draws to a close, there is yet another reference to the artist weeping, another reference to the ambivalence of his feelings. There is the sense here that he is helpless in the grip of some compulsion: to create art, to have sex with Yeong-hye, or some combination of the two.

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in breaking convention interact with the action of this section (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 4)?

Discussion Question 2

Given that up to this point in the narrative, blood has represented the presence and power of the life force, what would you say is the significance of the flower around J's penis being painted bright red?

Discussion Question 3

Once again in this section (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 4), the narration makes a particular point of referring to Yeong-hye's laughter. What are the similarities and differences between the laughter here and her earlier laughter? What has changed? What has not? What aspect of her transformation does the laughter here represent or evoke?

Vocabulary

ambivalent, hyperbole, monochrome, translucent, sepal, pistil, stilted, cursory, complicity

Part 2, The Mongolian Mark – Section 5

Summary

Pages 111 – 119. The artist arrives at Yeong-hye's apartment, carrying his video equipment which is soon forgotten as his desire takes over. He pulls off his clothes, gets into bed with the woman there, and has fast, intense sex with her, narration describing his awareness of strange sounds that he realizes are coming from him.

In the aftermath of this first quick round of sex, the artist sets up his camcorder and prepares the space for filming, wondering whether he will get the images he wants. "Would their bodies look like overlapping petals, as they had with her and J? Would they seem like one body, a hybrid of plant, animal, and human?" (113). As filming continues and as passion takes over, the artist manages to stop recording just before his climax: "the image he'd wanted to capture on film had to be one that could be repeated over and over, forbidden either to end or to come to a climax" (114). Once he stops recording, though, he and Yeong-hye both climax, her weeping and screaming.

Some time later, the artist licks the spot of the Mongolian Mark, saying that he wished he could transfer it onto his tongue. Meanwhile, Yeong-hye wonders if, in the aftermath of what has just happened, her dreams will stop. Further conversation, which takes place as the artist is falling asleep, reveals that the face in Yeong-hye's dream changes constantly; that Yeong-hye hoped that no longer eating meat would make the dreams go away, but that that had not happened; and that she believes the face is inside her stomach.

When the artist wakes up in the morning, Yeong-hye is still asleep. He realizes that he needs to get home and starts gathering his equipment. When he cannot find his camcorder, he looks in the kitchen, and discovers that his wife (In-hye) is there. She gets her intense feelings under control and confronts him with her story: she brought some vegetables over to her sister and saw the painted bodies when she came in, but did not realize the male body was his until she looked at the video recording. After seeing the video, she called the medical authorities in the belief that both he and Yeong-hye are mentally ill.

At that moment Yeong-hye stands up, apparently having heard the conversation. She goes to her balcony, and stands with her legs wide "as though she wanted to make love to the sunlight, to the wind" (118). As he registers both the sirens of approaching ambulances and Yeong-hye's Mongolian Mark, the artist feels inclined to throw himself off the balcony. Instead, he keeps standing there, staring at the painting on Yeong-hye which now seems more beautiful and intense than any he had filmed.

Analysis

This section contains the climax of Part 2, the point of most significant emotional, narrative, and thematic intensity in the artist's story. The artist finally abandons his pretense of being motivated primarily by artistry and gives in to his physical desire for Yeong-hye. There is the clear sense, in this moment, that while his initial desire to be a productive artist may have been at least a partial motivator of his actions, it has become overwhelmed to express his sexual desire for Yeong-hye.

It is arguable that Yeong-hye finally expresses his sexual desire for Yeong-hye in a controlling, dominant, almost violent way. First, consider the way in which the opening moments of this section are phrased; Yeong-hye is referred to only as “the woman.” Second, Yeong-hye’s screaming and weeping when she's having an orgasm seems to be almost forced out of her. Third, the use of language like “forbidden,” suggests that for the artist, the experience is all about control. In other words, the artist is only interested in what Yeong-hye’s body can do, and be, for him, not in who she is within that body or why she might want to be with him. This, in turn, might be part of the reason why Yeong-hye behaves in the way she does at the conclusion of this section, which is also the conclusion of this phase of the novel. While the narrative offers no clear indications of why she behaves in the way she does, there is the clear sense that she is reaching out for ways in which her body can, or could, be treated that are very different from the ways in which it HAS been treated. It certainly seems to be at least part of the trigger for the situation in which Yeong-hye finds herself in Part 3 of the novel.

Another key point in this section is the reference to the artist wondering whether he and Yeong-hye, on the video he just shot, will resemble entwined plants. This, like other references to the human-plant hybrids suggested by the artist’s body painting, foreshadows events in Part 3, in which Yeong-hye’s experience of transformation takes a turn towards her becoming even more plant-like.

The appearance of In-hye in this section is something of an anti-climax, a moment of undeniable importance that has the feeling of ultimately being less important than what has gone before. This is for two reasons: the encounter between Yeong-hye and the artist is more significant to the story and thematic development of Part 2 than In-hye’s appearance; and In-hye's arrival on the scene is, in fact, more important to Part 3 than Part 2. Her appearance here lays the groundwork for the events and circumstances that form the narrative and thematic foundations for Part 3, which are primarily defined by the relationship between Yeong-hye and her sister.

Discussion Question 1

How do the references to dreams in this section (Part 2, The Mongolian Mark – Section 5) develop the book’s interest in this particular theme?

Discussion Question 2

What kind of physical, emotional, and other transformations (i.e. of situation, of knowledge) take place in this section (Part 2, The Mongolian Mark – Section 5)?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the metaphoric meaning of the artist's reference to the licking off of the Mongolian mark? He knows it cannot possibly happen: what, then, is he talking about when he describes his idea of doing so?

Vocabulary

strident, vitality, atone, ascetic, flirtatious, satiation, partition, tremulous

Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 1

Summary

Pages. 123 – 144. Present tense narration describes the trip of Yeong-hye's sister In-hye as she travels, on a rainy day, to visit the psychiatric hospital where Yeong-hye has been a patient for several months. Narration shifts into past tense as it describes how, some time in the past, Yeong-hye had gone missing; how In-hye had imagined her out in the forest near the facility, "as if she herself were one of the glistening trees" (125); and how she realized that she and her sister might have been out in the rain at the same time, "an indiscriminate connection, their existences briefly aligned" (127). Past tense narration also describes how In-hye, after learning that Yeong-hye had been found, dreamed that her sister describes being not only in the forest, but part of it.

Narration briefly returns to present tense as In-hye arrives at the hospital, but then shifts into past tense as it describes how In-hye, the older of the two sisters, had always felt a degree of protectiveness towards her strange younger sister (including trying to protect her from their violent father); and how, over the last several years, Yeong-hye has become increasingly, and unsettlingly, silent. This, narration goes on to suggest, is similar to In-hye's experience with her similarly silent husband.

After present tense narration describes In-hye's journey through a security tunnel to get to the hospital, her encounter with a moth leads her to contemplations, narrated in past tense, about her husband, who had always been fascinated with flying things. She recalls how she has always been bewildered by the art he makes; how many of his excited ideas never came to fruition; and how, in the aftermath of his leaving the marriage, Ji-woo asks, more than he ever did before (i.e. in the days when the artist was still married but never home) whether there was a father in the family. She also recalls how she assured her son that it was only the two of them, and that that would have to be enough.

In present tense narration, In-hye arrives at the hospital and prepares to meet her sister's doctor, Dr. Park In-ho. As she waits, past tense narration describes her difficulty sleeping, her bad dreams, and her anger of her and Yeong-hye's parents about Yeong-hye's choice to become vegetarian. She also recalls her discovery of her husband with Yeong-hye: how the latter struggled as she was wrapped in straight-jackets and taken away, and how the artist disappeared in the aftermath of court proceedings. In-hye recalls how distant she now is from her parents because of their behavior towards her sister, and how her own capacity for strength and endurance have kept her going.

Present tense narration describes In-hye's meeting with Yeong-hye's doctor. He tells her that Yeong-hye is getting worse. She is no longer eating, so she will have to be fed intravenously. He agrees to let In-hye try to talk to her, but warns her that because of Yeong-hye's illness (anorexia compounded by schizophrenia) he does not hold out a lot of hope. After a noisy encounter with a difficult patient, In-hye realizes how she has

become immune to the behavior she sees in the hospital. Narration then shifts to past tense as In-hye recalls how she had Yeong-hye transferred to this new hospital partly because In-hye could no longer handle being around the desire for independence that Yeong-hye represented to her. Narration also describes how Yeong-hye paid close attention to the trees she saw as she was being checked in, and how Yeong-hye told her, while they were looking out a window at the forest, that “all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters” (144).

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how it establishes and maintains the pattern of shifting verb tense from present into past, present defining the primary narrative (In-hye’s experience in the hospital visiting her sister) while past explores the events and circumstances that brought her there.

The second key point to note is the introduction of two new central motifs, or images. The first is that of rain, which on one level suggests a kind of oppression or gray colorlessness that evokes a lack of pleasure or peace in the experiences of both In-hye and Yeong-hye. Here it is important to note that late in the narrative, as In-hye becomes clearer about, and more connected to, her motives and perspectives, the rain clears. On another level, though, rain becomes an image of nourishment and connection to identity and truth. That aspect of the image deepens and develops as Part 3 of the book continues.

Meanwhile, the second new motif, introduced here, is that of trees, which throughout this section of the book seems to represent some kind of affirming possibility, strength, independence, and transformation. In the early stages of this section, this is primarily true of Yeong-hye; later in the narrative, however, another character develops a similar relationship, one foreshadowed by the references at the end of this section to sibling relationships.

Another, similarly oriented piece of foreshadowing occurs in the reference to Ji-woo, whose interactions with his mother prove significant for the latter at a key point later in this phase of the book. One final piece of foreshadowing: the reference, in the later paragraphs of this section, to In-hye’s resentment of Yeong-hye’s independence, a foreshadowing of In-hye’s change in attitude towards her sister later in the narrative. This change becomes entwined with this section’s developments in the family dynamics theme, and also the book’s overall theme related to the process of transformation.

A key point to note is the reference to Dr. Park’s diagnosis of Yeong-hye’s situation: specifically, his contention that she is suffering from some kind of mental illness. Up to this point in the book, her choices have perhaps seemed somewhat extreme, but have arguably fallen within the boundaries of what might be described as “normal.” As the narrative in this section reveals more and more about where Yeong-hye’s choices have taken her, it begins to become possible to see that Dr. Park’s diagnosis might be correct.

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in family dynamics play out in this section (Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 1)?

Discussion Question 2

What does the shifting back and forth between tenses in this phase of the book (Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 1) do for the story? How does it enhance the sense of event, character, and / or theme?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the reference to In-hye's suspicion that she has been, or is, becoming numb to what she sees in the hospital? How does this relate to her situation, and interactions, with Yeong-hye?

Vocabulary

avert, repugnance, undulate, inchoate, cacophony, fleabane, repulse, taciturn, impenetrable, sorghum, perpetual, tenacious, connote, forlorn, annex, scintillate, stupefy, reticent, potsherds, ponderous, tawdry, precarious, tedious, incessant, despicable, inertia

Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 2

Summary

Pages 145 – 158. As In-hye goes to the ward to find her sister (present tense), she remembers (past tense) an earlier visit. On that occasion, she was warned, as she was being taken to see Yeong-hye, that her sister was constantly doing handstands, and had stopped eating. When In-hye found her, she was doing a handstand and had to essentially be pushed out of it. As they talked, In-hye was struck by how happy her sister seemed to be, but was taken aback when Yeong-hye talked about realizing that trees were, in effect, upside down: that they were reaching into the soil with their arms (i.e. their roots). She then went on to say that she no longer needed food: all she needed was water.

As In-hye goes into the ward in the present tense, she meets Hee-joo, a relatively high functioning patient who has been voluntarily helping to care for Yeong-hye. Meanwhile, In-hye feels concern about how concerned she seems to others ("If only one's eyes weren't visible to others … if only one could hide one's eyes from the world" (150)). In-hye then checks her sister's body for signs of discomfort after her long stay in bed, narration describing (in past tense) another portion of her most recent visit: specifically, how she was struck by changes in Yeong-hye's physical appearance (including the fact that her breasts no longer were noticeable but that the Mongolian Mark was still visible). Meanwhile, In–hye recalls a conversation in which the watchful, but still happy, Yeong-hye told her sister that she was no longer a human being, but was becoming a plant. When In-hye questions whether that is even possible, Yeong-hye happily comments that soon, "words and thoughts will all disappear" (154).

Present-tense narration describes how "time passes" (154); how In-hye tries to tempt her sister with the fruit she has brought; and how Yeong-hye refuses to eat. In-hye fights down the anger that she is starting to feel.

Again, and in present tense narration (which suggests that the rain has finally stopped), "time passes" (155). In-hye tries to give Yeong-Hye some tea, and starts to wonder whether her sister is, in fact, trying to die. As the book shifts into past-tense narration, In-hye recalls a conversation with her sister in which Yeong-hye asked to be taken to another hospital: in this one, she said, they kept trying to get her to eat, and inject her with things. When In-hye asked her whether she wanted to die, Yeong-hye said "Why is it such a bad thing to die?" (157).

Past tense narration then describes a time when Yeong-hye and In-hye, as young girls, were lost on a mountain, and how Yeong-hye had suggested that they not go back. This triggers further recollection of how Yeong-hye was the only child in the family who had been on the receiving end of the father's beatings, narration now revealing that they were fueled by alcohol. In-hye, as the eldest daughter, had tried to take care of her and their mother, but as an adult, In-hye wonders whether doing so had been "a sign not of

maturity but of cowardice" (158). Narration also describes how she has wondered for some time whether Yeong-hye had internalized, or absorbed, all the negative energy from their father into her view of herself. Narration then returns to the incident on the mountain: how the two managed to find their way home. In-hye had been relieved, but Yeong-hye had said nothing, "only stood and watched the flaming poplars kindled by the evening light" (158).

Analysis

This section is among the most psychologically and metaphorically complex in the book. As the exploration of the ideas and meanings associated with plants continues, and as the focus on trees deepens and becomes even more entwined with Yeong-hye's experiences and story, the references to death and to family history also become more thoroughly entwined. There is the increasingly clear sense, as all this entwining continues, that Yeong-hye's experiences in the past have propelled her not only into her experience of transformation, but into what is starting to look as the fulfillment of a death wish: a kind of suicide. This, in turn and once again, raises the question of Yeong-hye's psycho-emotional stability: does she truly believe she is transforming, or does she simply want to die?

In contrast to all these images of darkness and suffering, there is the image that concludes this section and gives the third part of the novel its title. This is the image of the flaming trees, which on one level can be seen as representing at least the illusion of destruction (i.e. the trees being burned), which in turn has echoes of the experiences of both daughters at the hands of their father. On another, and more contrasting, level, the image can be seen as a kind of burning (i.e. with reflected light and no heat) that is actually causing no damage but is actually creating an experience of beauty. Here again, the referent is to Yeong-hye and In-hye: two sisters, two trees, all undergoing an experience of some kind of transformation (i.e. trees transformed by light, two women transformed by clarity of thought and powerful desires for identity). Meanwhile, the image of the young women coming down the mountain and finding a way home also foreshadows a key image in the following section, in which In-hye also comes down a mountain and also returns home, and perhaps for similar reasons: climbing to get away from a troubled and painful family situation, coming back down because the societal pressure to stay connected with family is too strong.

The character of Hee-joo is an intriguing and quite potently developed one: there is a clear sense that even though she is a patient in the hospital, and by definition troubled with some kind of mental illness, she is nevertheless the most unconditionally compassionate person encountered by Yeong-hye in the entire novel. She has no agenda for her, no conceptions, and the only aspect of convention that Hee-joo tries to enact is that of simply caring for another human being. The irony, of course, is that Yeong-hye is so far gone into her transformation that it is doubtful that she realizes what Hee-joo is doing for her.

Discussion Question 1

How does the theme of breaking convention play out in this section (Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 2)?

Discussion Question 2

Which of the book's main themes seems connected to the quote from p. 150 relating to the experience of being watched, or seen, by too many eyes?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Yeong-hye is glad that "words and thoughts" will be "disappear[ing]"?

Vocabulary

robust, gruel, intravenous, anorexia, invective, emigrate, blasé, tranquil, ostensible, discomfited, claustrophobic, scrutinize, incessant, catatonic, adjoin, persecution, mania, hypomania, coccyx, bedsore, vigilant, imperceptible, atrophy, emaciated, spume, quince

Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 3

Summary

Pages 158 – 170. Past tense narration describes In-hye's reflections on how things might have been different for Yeong-hye, for her marriage, and for her own marriage if she had had more courage and spoke up for herself. She recalls her final conversation with her husband (the artist from Part 2), who had called to see if she would let him spend some time with Ji-woo. She realized that he is so sensitive that if she said no, he would never call her again. She ended the conversation without giving him an answer, feeling like she does not owe him one because she does not know him. He did not call again.

Present tense narration says "time passes" (160). Yeong-hye's eyes remain closed. In-hye looks out a window at the forest and recalls Yeong-hye's description of her experience in the forest after running away: she had been just about to melt into the earth. At that moment in the present tense In-hye is jolted back to reality by an excited interruption by Hee-joo, again worried about Yeong-hye.

Past tense narration then describes a memory that "In-hye has never been able to tell anyone else about, and probably never will" (161). Shortly after the encounter with Yeong-hye and the artist, In-hye started bleeding from her vagina, and continued doing so for some time, an experience with corresponded with a period of considering just how much of her life had been takin up with supporting, and not knowing, her husband. Finally, a visit to the doctor revealed that the trouble was being caused by a small polyp, which was quickly and easily removed. As she went home, In-hye felt weak and troubled, the placement of the train station in some woods triggering painful thoughts. Narration then describes how she began to feel like the healing of the physical wound left behind an open emotional wound that was sucking her in, a wound that never went away or felt any better no matter how busy she kept herself, and how well she did her job.

Past tense narration continues as it describes an incident in which the artist came to their home one summer day and forced himself onto her sexually, without any resistance from her. Later, she wandered through her home and then out in the city, narration shifting into present tense: "the pain feels like a hole swallowing her up, a source of intense fear and yet, at the same time, a strange, quiet peace" (166).

Present tense narration states that "time passes" (166). In-hye tries to feed Yeong-hye a plum, her favorite fruit. Yeong-hye has no response. In-hye reflects in past tense on the possibility that she and Yeong-hye had come to a similar place and perspective in their lives, but that only Yeong-hye had acted on it, In-hye having been prevented from doing so by her sense of responsibility towards Ji-woo who, narration reveals, relieves her deep pain sometimes by making her laugh. At times, in the aftermath of laughter or at night, In-hye reflected on her pain, and how she tried to imagine what Yeong-hye felt

when she went into the forest, imagining herself trying to find a similar kind of comfort in trees, to figure out what "… those trees she'd seen at the end of the narrow mountain path, clustered together like green flames in the early morning half-light, had been saying" (169). She imagines the possibility that they could mean, for her, what they have come to mean for Yeong-hye, but ultimately feels like they are deliberately excluding her.

Analysis

Two of the book's key symbols are developed in parallel in this section: blood (which here, as throughout the narrative, represents the life force); and trees (which here, as throughout this section of the narrative, represent transformation and transcendence. The reference to In-hye's experience with blood can be seen as echoing several earlier references, but the most intriguing connection between variations on this theme could be the relationship between the image here and that of Yeong-hye's blood climbing up into her IV bag (Part 1, Section 3). In the latter case, blood (life-force) is being pulled out of Yeong-hye by scientific practice (i.e. something imposed on her by human experience); in the former, blood (life force) has been drained out of In-hye by a small but reparable flaw, or injury. In both cases, the two sisters find themselves weakened, and to a degree emptied, by their experiences: they also, intriguingly, both experience that emptiness being filled by something new, different, and arguably more humane: a desire compassion, for the self and for others, fueled by (and connected to) a desire for independence from convention. Meanwhile, the reference to trees increases and deepens the sense of connection between the two sisters: although In-hye is not quite yet ready to accept her drive to break free of convention in the same way as her sister is (said drive being represented by connection with trees), she is moving in that direction. That movement intensifies in the following section, as the novel builds to its climax.

Meanwhile, the references to two secondary characters both evoke the value of human connection and human relationship. The references to Ji-woo in particular function on a couple of levels: to trigger and enable further exploration of connections between In-hye and her sister; and to foreshadow events in the following section, in which the recollection of interactions with Ji-woo trigger, for In-hye, increased insight into herself and her reaction to Yeong-hye's transformation. Finally, there is the reference to Hi-joo, whose somewhat frantic attentions to Yeong-hye once again offer a welcome glimpse of compassion, joy, and celebration of both simple existence and transformation.

Discussion Question 1

What variations on the theme of family dynamics play out in this section (Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 3)?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of the repetition of “time passes” – that is, aside from the literal suggestion that time is moving forward. Why, for example, is there no reference to specific periods of time – it is not days pass, weeks pass, or hours pass, it’s “time passes.”

Discussion Question 3

Several times throughout the narrative, Yeong-hye is portrayed as experiencing some kind of significant emotional shift as a result of laughter. What do you think are the metaphorical and symbolic values of In-hye having a similar experience?

Vocabulary

docile, spontaneity, perseverance, obstetrics, gynecology, maw, diligent

Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 4

Summary

Pages 170 – 183. Again, narration sates that “time passes” (170). In-hye becomes increasingly angry as she imagines what Yeong-hye experienced as she was in the forest, or practicing her handstands. In-hye imagined, at one point, what it might be like to try to physically shake some sense into Yeong-hye, and tell her that all she is doing is dying. In the present tense, In-hye packs up and leaves, Yeong-hye’s body remaining still.

Present tense continues. Back in the hospital’s lobby, In-hye watches as Yeong-hye’s doctor arrives. He is barraged with questions, which he handles politely then makes his way over to her, followed by an internist. The doctor explains that when they try to move Yeong-hye to a new ward for her new treatment, she will probably try to fight. In-hye starts to speak, but the doctor interrupts her with an assurance that everything will be all right.

An assistant carries “Yeong-hye’s twisting struggling body” (173) into a private room where an attempt is made to feed her forcibly. The medical team struggles to restrain her, and urges In-hye to leave because she is making the situation more difficult. In-hye manages to stay, watching as the attempt to force a feeding tube into Yeong-hye succeeds on the second try. Almost immediately afterwards, however, Yeong-hye manages to attack one of the doctors. In-hye intervenes as the other doctors try to regain control over her sister, crying out with wordless power and forcibly pushing them away and gathering Yeong-hye into her.

In-hye leaves the room, noticing that the doctor’s white coat is spattered with blood and managing to get to a bathroom before vomiting. As she cleans up, she considers the violation that had been perpetrated on her sister. She comes out of the bathroom into a light brighter than she had experienced for some time, and sees Yeong-hye being taken out on a stretcher, her face calm and her hand held by Hee-jin. In-hye looks away.

In-hye sits by her sister’s side in the ambulance, reflecting on how her sister’s vulnerability now reminds her of Ji-woo’s, and how she worries about making sure that Ji-woo will stay happy. She also reflects on how her feelings about what she saw when she caught her husband and Yeong-hye together has changed, and become less of a reaction to the sexual side of what they were doing and more a reaction to how they were doing it. She asks herself whether her husband had “staked everything of himself on those strange, desolate images – staked everything, and lost everything?” (179).

In-hye recalls comforting Ji-woo in the aftermath of a disturbing dream, in which he imagined a white bird with two hands, saying it was his mother. She reassured him that she was still there as she has always been, and that it was just a dream. But then, riding in the ambulance, she wonders whether that was true, “because that had been the

morning when she had turned her back on the sun as it rose over the silent trees and retraced her steps back down the mountain (180)," the whole while wearing a shirt that she had nursed Ji-woo in.

Still in the ambulance in present tense In-hye reflects on how easy – and how selfish, and cruel – it had been to make the decision to abandon her child that day, and on how things might have been different if she had not found Yeong-hye and her husband together. She wonders, if she had lost “the thread” (181) (i.e. Ji-woo), whether it might have been her in Yeong-hye’s situation. Yeong-hye, meanwhile, struggles to speak. In-hye suddenly remembers the walk down the mountain after her attempt to leave Ji-woo, moisture from the dew soaking into “her battered body and spread[ing] through her dried up veins. It had simply leached through into her flesh, down to her very bones” (182). She then whispers to Yeong-hye that everything they are going through might be kind of a dream, confessing that she has dreams too but that “surely we have to wake up at some point, don’t we? Because – because then - ” but she doesn’t finish the sentence. With that, the ambulance leaves the area of the hospital, turning a corner and entering a bright light and passing a stand of “trees by the side of the road … blazing, green fire undulating like the rippling flanks of a massive animal” (183). In-hye stares into the trees “as if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent.” And there the novel ends.

Analysis

The first point to note about this final section is that almost all of it is written in present tense, the most notable exception is the narration of Ji-woo’s dream and In-hye’s reactions to it. Virtually everything else is present tense, bringing the reader fully and immediately into In-hye’s experiences. Those experiences, throughout the forced treatment of Yeong-hye all the way through the book’s final moments, can essentially be distilled down into one key event: In-hye’s realization that she has been, and perhaps is now, on the same path towards living a life free from convention as her sister.

There are both literal and metaphorical references to this: the key literal reference is in In-hye’s memory of her attempt to leave her husband and family, a physical attempt to escape convention that has clear similarities to Yeong-hye’s more symbolic attempt, manifested in her becoming vegetarian. Here, it is essential to note how Yeong-hye’s attempt succeeded where In-hye’s failed, at least in part because she lacked her sister’s courage to take firm, confident, fearless steps in the direction of independence. There is the sense, however, that as Part 3 and the novel both conclude, In-hye has found her way closer to the goal of freedom from convention, and may in fact be close to realizing it.

This is the meaning of the final image of the trees which, throughout this section, had been symbolic of Yeong-hye’s drawing further away from conventional life. In-hye is staring at the trees in search of the same sort of courage that her sister found, the sort of thing that she (In-hye) recognized in her memory of being wet with dew during her walk down the mountain. This image is, in turn, the key metaphoric reference in this

section to In-hye's realization of having been, and moving onto, the same path towards freedom as her sister.

A second recurring image reinforces this idea: that of the flaming trees, or rather, of the trees that look as though they are flaming. A third symbolic reference: to the nourishing power of rain and water, experiences of which unite the sisters in yet another way. There is even a fourth symbolic reinforcement of the idea of connection between the two women: that of the white bird, which appears in Ji-woo's dream and which clearly represents his mother in the same way as the white bird that appeared at the end of Part 1 (Section 3) represents Yeong-hye.

All these elements combine in this section to bring the book to its narrative and thematic climax. Almost all of the book's key themes reach their point of peak intensity here: the breaking of convention (as discussed above); the power of dreams; the power of sexuality and desire (evident in In-hye's realization of the true causes of her reaction to finding her husband with Yeong-hye); and family dynamics (evident in the shifts in relationship between the two sisters). All these ultimately serve the most significant thematic climax here: the experience and power of transformation, evident in Yeong-hye drawing closer to what is arguably the ultimate transformation (death) and In-hye drawing closer to the psycho-spiritual transformation she seems to have been reaching for much of her life.

Throughout all of this, several key images are developed. Aside from the trees and the white bird (both referenced above), there are potent references to blood, which here as always in the novel represents the life force – in this case, the life force being forced out of Yeong-hye in the same way as it was taken out of her in Part 1, Section 3. Meanwhile, there is a powerful new symbol: that of the light into which In-hye emerges after her trip into the bathroom. The image here represents new ideas, new possibility, and new insight, all of which In-hye is experiencing at this stage in the novel and, at long last, in her life.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the developments, in this section (Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 4), in the novel's theme about the power of dreams?

Discussion Question 2

What similarities are there between In-hye's actions towards her sister in this section (Part 3, Flaming Trees – Section 4) and what the narrative has revealed about her actions towards Yeong-hye in their shared childhoods?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the rest of the sentence that In-hye doesn't say: "because then …" what?

Vocabulary

gaunt, relinquish, metamorphose, saturate, contort, inclination, appease, continuous, carotid, cubicle, gabble, placate, vehement

Characters

Yeong-hye

Yeong-hye is an intriguing character, in that the entire novel is about her (she is the vegetarian of the title), but her story is told largely through the eyes and experiences of three other character. Subsequently, the reader learns about the book's central character almost entirely as a result of how other people describe her, other people react to her, and other people relate to her. This, in turn, raises the question of whether, or how, it is possible to truly know Yeong-hye at all, given that almost everything that is revealed about her is filtered through someone else's perception and opinions.

There are certain facts about Yeong-hye that are consistent throughout the narrations of the other three main characters. Before the story begins, Yeong-hye was quiet, slender, neither intellectually exceptional nor intellectually slow, and in many ways perceived as normal – traditional, conservative, in many ways the kind of woman that society, according to those around her, prefers. With her decision to become a vegetarian (which, she states consistently, was the result of having some very painful dreams) she seems to become increasingly withdrawn, increasingly thin, and most importantly, increasingly determined to live her life on her own terms. This blossoming independence is perhaps the aspect of her life and choices that is the most defining when it comes to how the other three central characters see her: as worthy only of exasperation and resentment (Mr. Cheong); as worthy of being worshiped and ennobled (The Artist); and as worthy of being admired (In-hye), albeit grudgingly and resentfully.

Exceptions to this outsider-defined means of understanding the book's central character occur in its first part which is, interestingly, called "The Vegetarian" and is, also interestingly, the section in which its narrator (Mr. Cheong) has the most negative view of Yeong-hye and her choices. In this section, brief, first person interjections written in the voice of Yeong-hye reveal dreams and memories that seem to define her present-day choices, as well as suggest that a significant trauma in her childhood played at least a partial role in her state of mind. These interjections also suggest that that state of mind is so troubled and so confused that Yeong-hye becomes desperate enough, and frightened enough, to make the choice to become vegetarian despite knowing it will isolate her from those around her, but which she believes is the only way she will be free of her pain. Is it an act of taking refuge, or of finding safety, in ensuring outsider-ness and difference? Quite possibly.

Yeong-hye's determination to escape her past, and arguably her self, reaches a climax with an act of defiance (i.e. going out in public with no top) that entwines with an image of vulnerability (i.e. a wounded and bloody small bird) to suggest that she has gone further than simply deciding to be a vegetarian, or go braless (as she has done throughout the first part of the story). She seems to have decided to live ALL of her life on her terms. As such, she is the primary embodiment of the book's central thematic interest in breaking convention.

Mr. Cheong

Mr. Cheong is the first of the three characters whose storylines center around, and reveal truths about, Yeong-hye. He is the narrator of the book's first section, the part of the narrative in which Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and other transformations begin. Mr. Cheong is quite conservative (with very traditional ideas of what a wife should be, and how she should behave); he is cold, sexist, and un-compassionate; selfish, judgmental, and controlling. He makes only the most superficial, limited effort to understand his wife's situation, considering her more as property than a human being and being more concerned with how her choices reflect on him than with her own well-being. Later in the narrative (in sections focusing on the experiences of other characters), it is revealed that Mr. Cheong has legally divorced Yeong-hye, abandoning her because of her choices and decisions to lead a different kind of life from what he, and arguably the culture, believed she should live.

In-hye

In-hye is Yeong-hye's older sister, protective and motherly even though the mother of both women is still alive. In-hye is referred to, and plays a small role, in the book's first two parts, while she is the central character in the third. As a character in a book, In-hye is in a similar situation to Yeong-hye; for the first two parts of the book, In-hye is known only through how others refer to her. To her brother-in-law (Mr. Cheong) she is an unavailable object of inappropriate physical desire. To her husband (the artist), In-hye is a source of aggravating frustration, resigned ambivalence, and unwanted vulnerability. Mr. Cheong compares her favorably to Yeong-hye, while her husband compares her unfavorably.

Part 3, in which In-hye is the central character, takes a different perspective (perhaps not surprisingly), suggesting that In-hye is, in her heart of hearts, more like her sister than In-hye is prepared to admit. Eventually, she and the reader both come to realize and understand that she wants to be as free from conventional attitude and behaviors as her sister, but sees herself as lacking the courage and commitment to take the steps to do so.

The Artist

The artist, who is never identified by name, is In-hye's middle-aged husband. A visual artist, he works in film and video – or would, narration suggests, if he could just find consistent inspiration. Narration describes his struggles to create and connect with his own art, a struggle that ends once he finds his artistic imagination kindled by awareness of a particular birthmark on Yeong-hye's buttock. From that moment on, sexual loneliness fuels the artist's creative longings and drives, leading him to action that is part adultery, part act of artistic creation, and part act of breaking convention by both him and Yeong-hye.

In the aftermath of their choice to simultaneously create art and have sex, the artist attempts to kill himself, but is unsuccessful. Later, he ends his marriage, and is prevented by In-hye from seeing his son. Interestingly, the narrative never reveals what happens to the artist's work in general, or to the films that he made of himself and Yeong-hye in the aftermath of the events of Part 2. All that is revealed of his subsequent life is that he is removed from the lives of his wife and son, and while he makes at least one effort to reconcile with them, or at least with his son, the effort seems half-hearted at best. After he is rejected by In-hye, the artist is not heard from in the narrative again.

Yeong-hye's Mother

This character's most significant appearance is in Part 1, where she becomes part of the unified family front trying to convince Yeong-hye to give up her choice of becoming vegetarian. Her argument is that Yeong-hye is going against tradition, and that Yeong-hye is also cutting herself off of good nutrition. Yeong-hye's mother goes to the unusual step of lying to Yeong-hye about the contents of a broth she brings to the hospital after Yeong-hye's suicide attempt. The mother tells Yeong-hye that it is vegetarian, when it is in fact a stock made from meat. Yeong-hye's mother is well-intentioned, but unable to break out of what she believes should be to pay full, and accepting, attention to what is.

Yeong-hye's Father

Yeong-hye's father's most significant active appearance is in Part 1, in which his attempts to get Yeong-hye to give up her vegetarianism become verbally and physically violent. The sense of him as an essentially violent and domineering man with a cruel streak is enhanced by other narration in this section, in which he is described as punishing a dog for biting Yeong-hye by essentially running it to death. In Part 3, this image of Yeong-hye's father is enhanced even further when In-hye, recalling the family life she shared with her sister, recalls other incidents of violence enacted by her father against her sister - acts that she guiltily feels she did nothing to prevent.

Ji-Woo

Ji-woo is the son of In-hye and the artist. He is glimpsed at occasionally, and usually briefly, throughout the narrative. When he appears, he seems somewhat sickly and vulnerable, perhaps even demanding. This aspect of his personality, and his relationship with his parents, is perhaps part of the reason why, in Part 3, In-hye is described as attempting to leave her family, specifically her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Ji-woo's significant, and most narratively relevant, appearance is also in Part 3, in which a nightmare that he confides to his mother triggers thoughts, in her, that lead to her re-consideration of her relationship with Yeong-hye.

J

J is an artist, referred to only by his initial, with whom the artist (the central character in Part 2) shares studio work-space. Initially portrayed as open and friendly, his fundamentally conservative nature is revealed later in Part 2, when he finds himself unable to engage in the kind of sexual activity with Yeong-hye that both the artist and Yeong-hye seem interested in. This aspect of the character places him closer to Mr. Cheong than Yeong-hye on the continuum of those who resist changes in convention (Mr. Cheong) and those who attempt to transcend it (Yeong-hye).

P

P is another artist, also referred to only by her initial, with whom the artist once had an affair, and whom he calls upon to help him realize his goal of creating art after being body-painted and while having sex with Yeong-hye. P is outspoken, direct, and volatile, a clear and vivid contrast to most of the other women in the novel. Where Yeong-hye breaks convention with quiet determination, and where In-hye realizes her need to break convention with similar quietness, P gives the impression that she does what she wants when she wants, with whoever she wants, and does not care who knows it or how anyone reacts.

Dr. Park In-ho

In Part 3, Dr. Park is the physician assigned to the care of the steadily deteriorating Yeong-hye. He is compassionate but matter-of-fact, seeing his priority as ensuring that she lives, not that she lives the life she wants. He is portrayed as going through somewhat extreme lengths to ensure that his priority is met, appearing somewhat insensitive to how the things he is doing affect not only his patient, but also his patient's family and other caregivers.

Hee-joo

In Part 3, Hee-joo is a fellow patient at the psychiatric hospital in which Yeong-hye is being treated. Her primary function seems to be to represent a kind of unconditional compassion towards Yeong-hye that no-one else in the novel seems to offer her. She cares about Yeong-hye, fusses over her and takes care of her, simply because, it seems, Yeong-hye is vulnerable and has no one on her side. She is sensitive and just simply caring, in ways that the members of Yeong-hye's family are not able to be.

Symbols and Symbolism

Blood

Throughout the narrative, blood shows up as a key symbol that has several variations - in the dream that triggers Yeong-hye's choice to become vegetarian; in the aftermath of her suicide attempt when it moves up into her IV bag; on the artist's shirt; and on the jacket of the doctor attempting to treat her in the psychiatric hospital. In all these variations, blood evokes the same element: the essential life force. In the dream, blood represents the life force of animals that have been killed for food. The blood in the IV bag and on the doctor's jacket metaphorically suggests that her life force is being sucked out of her by medical treatment. The blood on the shirt suggests both that Yeong-hye's suicide attempt cost her some life force, and that the artist is moved and inspired by his connection with that force.

Meat

Like blood, meat is a symbol of life force - specifically, the life force of animals. Perhaps more so than blood, the thought of consuming the meat of animals whose lives have been sacrificed for human consumption is the trigger for Yeong-hye's transformation into vegetarianism. The fact that other characters have no problem at all consuming meat, and in some cases either force her or manipulate her into consuming meat or its by-products suggests a casualness towards meat and its origins that might itself be similarly triggering.

Dreams

Throughout the narrative, the actions of characters and the interactions in their relationships are affected by their dreams, which at times also reveal motivations for those actions. The most vivid example of this is in the character of Yeong-hye, whose dreams become increasingly - and perhaps horrifyingly - vivid as they continue to suggest that for her, things in her life must change. The dreams of other characters are similarly powerful; specifically, for the artist in Part 2 and, indirectly, for In-hye in Part 3, whose choices are defined and triggered by her reactions to the frightening dreams of her son, Ji-woo.

The Two White Birds

The first time a white bird appears in the book it represents Yeong-hye herself, and that she is holding on to her sense of individuality and identity as much as she can.

White birds appear twice in the narrative, both at particularly significant points. The first is at the climax of Part 1, when Mr. Cheong encounters Yeong-hye outside, with her top off, and a seemingly wounded white bird clutched in her hand.

The second white bird appears in Part 3, in Ji-woo's dream. In that situation, the bird represents Ji-woo's mother, and Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye. The fact that the two sisters are metaphorically represented by roughly the same image reinforces the idea, developed throughout Part 3, that In-hye comes to experience the same desire for independence from convention as her sister.

The Mongolian Mark

For the artist in Part 2, the Mongolian mark is representative of the sexual appeal of his sister-in-law, Yeong-hye, and a trigger for his increasingly intense desire for her. The Mongolian mark refers to a particular type of birth mark that is generally small, irregularly shaped, and somewhat bluish in color. The mark figures prominently in the body painting the artist does on Yeong-hye, and in the video that he takes of her, the intensity of its effect on him symbolically representing the intensity of his animalistic desire for her.

The Artist's Sketches

The artist's sketches can be seen as symbolizing the artist's sexual obsession with Yeong-hye, his sister-in-law. In the first sections of Part 2, narration refers to a series of sketches made by the artist that he becomes obsessed with turning into a video. Eventually, narration reveals that these sketches (and therefore the idea for the video) were inspired by fantasies and images of the Mongolian mark (i.e. birthmark) on Yeong-hye's buttock. Further on, narration also reveals that as he obsessively contemplates the sketches, he comes to realize that the people he has drawn are based on his ideas of himself and Yeong-hye together.

The Artist's Videos

The artist's videos can be seen as representing the power of truth - the truth of the artist's desire, and the truth of the consequences of his actions. Eventually, the artist manages to manipulate Yeong-hye into participating in the video shoot about which he has long fantasized. His first plan to find a man to "perform" with her falls short, so he chooses to do what he has perhaps always intended to do: shoot the video with himself as the male performer. The shooting of the videos results in a passionate, animalistic sexual encounter between the artist and Yeong-hye. But then In-hye (the artist's wife) sees the videos, which results in the artist's suicide attempt and what appears to be a psychological breakdown in Yeong-hye.

The Artist's Shirt

For the artist, his bloodied shirt can both be seen as triggering his deepening desire for Yeong-hye, and his desperation to connect with that life force. When Yeong-hye attempts to kill herself at the family gathering in Part 1, the artist (who is instrumental in helping to save her life) gets some of her blood on his shirt. He takes the shirt home, his thoughts frequently referring to the significance he feels at having her blood on something he owns. As noted above, blood represents the life force, with the blood on the shirt representing Yeong-hye's life force.

Plants

Interestingly, while plants play an important symbolic role in the action, particularly in terms of Yeong-hye's struggles and transformations, there are few (if any) references to actual living plants before Part 3. To that point, the plants referred to had been mostly artificial - specifically, the plants and flowers painted on the bodies of Yeong-hye, J, and the artist in Part 2. These plants, as beautiful as they are, remain essentially unreal, and as such, can be seen as representing the unreal, fantasy-defined aspects of the artist's desire. At the same time, though, the references in Part 2's narration to how the painted men, and the painted Yeong-hye, seem to resemble entwining plants seem to suggest something more - something transformative that foreshadows both the appearance of real plants in the book's final part and the depth and thoroughness of Yeong-hye's transformation.

Trees

Trees represent the end goal of Yeong-hye's transformation. In Part 3, as Yeong-hye's transformation deepens and takes strong hold of her psyche, the narrative increases its attention to live plants - specifically to trees, which appear first in reference to Yeong-hye's attempt to escape from the psychiatric hospital where she is staying and into a nearby forest. These trees, in turn, play a role in defining aspects of Yeong-hye's experience, as she starts to imagine herself as a tree, standing upside down so that her arms resemble the roots of a tree, its "arms" reaching into the ground for nourishment. There is the sense here that in trying to make herself more tree-like (even to the point of saying that the only nourishment she needs is water), Yeong-hye is trying to transform herself, or at least see herself, as being like one of the strongest and most enduring of all plants.

Rain

At the beginning of Part 3, and throughout the narrative of that phase of the story, rain and poor weather provide a key component of the setting - specifically, providing a sense of oppression and unease for In-hye while, at the same time, providing sustenance for the deteriorating Yeong-hye (she runs into the forest in the rain so that

she, as noted above, can absorb the rain in the way the trees do). That said, the former aspect of rain's symbolic meaning is more significant: this is because late in the narrative, In-hye's realization of how similar her desire for independence is to that of her sister coincides with a clearing away of the rain and the emergence of the sun. This means that during the early stages of the Part 3 narrative, rain and cloud are symbolic of In-hye's lack of clarity around her own identity.

The Flaming Trees

The image of "the flaming trees" is shaped to suggest that these trees are intended to represent both Yeong-hye and In-hye as they each, in very different ways, realize their own desires for, and inclinations towards, independence. This image, which gives Part 3 its title, does not refer to trees that are literally on fire: instead, it refers to a pair of points in the Part 3 narrative in which trees look, as the result of particular types and castings of light, as though they are on fire.

Settings

South Korea

The southern half of the so-called Korean Peninsula, despite its society that is somewhat more liberal than the dictatorship in the north, is the broad strokes setting for the novel. The country's traditions relating to public behavior, the roles and functions of spouses, and values related to food and eating play significant roles in shaping the events of the narrative.

Seoul

The capital city of South Korea is the community in which most of the narrative unfolds - specifically, Parts 1 and 2. While the character and environment of the city do not play an overtly significant role in defining the story's events and characters, there is a sense of the city's size and that the city's large size shapes the characters' experiences of feeling lost or of lacking individuality. There is also a sense an essential traditionalism that does not change in spite of the presence of a certain cosmopolitan, or worldly, sensibility often found in large cities.

Homes

The homes of Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye, of In-hye and the artist, and of Yeong-hye when she moves out on her own, are the settings for several key scenes. These settings are important because the homes where the characters dwell are evocative of the conservative family values that so many of them struggle to hold onto as they confront the transformations around them - particularly Yeong-hye's. In other words, the physical settings / homes in which the novel's key confrontations take place evoke the aspects of Korean - and family - society that Yeong-hye, and eventually In-hye, try to achieve independence from.

The Second Studio

In Part 2, the artist's painting and filming of Yeong-hye takes place in a studio that is not the one he usually uses: the second studio is one that he borrows from a friend. It is the setting for key moments in the narrative at which both Yeong-hye and the artist, in different ways and for different reasons, draw closer to the independence from convention, and closer to their own desires.

The Psychiatric Hospital

The primary narrative line of Part 3 is set in the psychiatric hospital to which Yeong-hye has been committed by her family (there are several flashbacks from that narrative line to past events that take place in a variety of locations). The most important point about this setting is, ironically, that although she is confined, Yeong-hye is further along in her transformation than she was when she was free - that is, living her own life in her own homes. The psychiatric hospital allows her to complete her transformation in an environment where she is exposed to medical treatment, yes, but in which her determination to claim independence from convention becomes strongest.

The Forest

A few sections in Part 3 - specifically, those describing Yeong-hye's escape attempt - take place in the forest surrounding the psychiatric hospital. The forest is the setting for Yeong-hye's encounters with trees and rain, both of which trigger the realization in her that the transformation she is heading for, and has perhaps been unconsciously desiring all along, is a transformation into a tree. For her, therefore, the forest is the setting for self-revelation and truth, a metaphoric sensibility that has its echo in the book's final moments, in which In-hye, riding in an ambulance with her sister, insistently looks into the trees that flash by the vehicle for answers to her questions about identity and independence.

Themes and Motifs

Breaking Convention

The actions of three of the four principal characters in the novel are defined by a desire for breaking convention. Yeong-hye does it most thoroughly, initially attempting to limit her unconventional behavior to being vegetarian, but then releasing that attempt as she becomes increasingly determined to not only live on her own terms, but to die that way as well. The central character of the second section tries to break convention, but does so secretly (where Yeong-hye does it quite openly). When his attempts and intentions do become more widely known, the artist is unable to follow through; he seems to lack his sister-in-law's depth of commitment. The central character of the third section, Yeong-hye's sister In-hye, eventually realizes that what her sister has done / is doing is something that she is both jealous of and longs for. Her actions (she also appears in the book's first two sections) are initially resentful and angry, but eventually, as the conventions with which she lives her life become more and more distasteful to her, she becomes not only understanding of her sister's choices, but admiring. In all three cases, the drive to break convention seems to spring from an unhappiness, an experience of feeling unfulfilled, or some kind of entwined combination of the two.

The thematically central core of the actions of these characters becomes even more vividly apparent when those actions are contrasted with those of Mr. Cheong. Throughout the narrative, but particularly in the section in which he is the narrator, he is defined by his determination to live and act within convention – in other words, he is thinking and acting from exactly the opposite place of those whose actions embody this theme. His negative and inhibiting perceptions and attitudes are reinforced directly by the actions and attitudes of the parents of Yeong-hye and In-hye, and more indirectly by the actions and attitudes of characters like J (who is unconventional, but only up to a point) and Dr. Park In-ho. The doctor's attitude is particularly significant, in that he sees Yeong-hye in terms of illness, and not in terms of what the novel thematically suggests is at the heart of her action – a courageous determination towards independence.

While Yeong-hye's desire to break convention initially manifests with her decision to become a vegetarian, she expresses that desire in other ways as well. Those ways are echoed in the actions of other characters, with one means of breaking convention manifesting in the lives of several characters. This is the book's second central theme: an exploration of sexuality and desire.

Sexuality and Desire

Yeong-hye is only one of a number of characters in the narrative who express the desire to break convention by becoming more open with and about their sexuality. In Yeong-hye's case, that openness begins with a refusal to wear a bra – at least, that is how her conservative husband sees her choice, and there is a sense that for the reader, the

choice is at the very least related to an expression of gender (sexual) identity. Eventually, Yeong-hye's letting go of convention manifests in her willingness to participate in the sexualized creation of art in Part 2, an aspect of this particular theme that is primarily played out in the attitudes and actions of the central character in that section, the unnamed artist husband of Yeong-hye's sister. His actions are the primary manifestation of this theme in the book, with both his art and his personal desires revealing both an inclination and a determination to release his own identity by openly, if somewhat desperately, releasing his sexuality.

Once again, though, the narrative offers an example of heightening a particular thematic statement by also expressing its opposite. This is first notable in the character of Mr. Cheong who, in Part 1, repeatedly refers to his physical attraction to In-hye, an attraction echoed in Part 2 by that felt by the artist for Yeong-hye. But where the latter attraction becomes mutual and is eventually consummated, the former is never acted upon because of Mr. Cheong's essential conservatism and determination to live a conventional life. His values, in turn, are echoed by those of In-hye, whose reaction to sexuality in general seems to be reluctant and lacking in a sense of either pleasure or responsibility – that is, responsibility to initiate, engage, or respond.

Eventually, Yeong-hye's expression of sexuality as a means of expressing individuality becomes less important to her than her emerging desire to become less human. Whereas the artist sees his sexuality and desires as making him more human, and the other characters seeing sexuality as a function of being human, Yeong-hye's release of sexuality and other human characteristics (such as eating) lead her to an even fuller, deeper experience – leading to consideration of the book's third major theme, the power and experience of transformation.

The Power and Experience of Transformation

The central narrative arc of the book is directly connected to, and defined by events in, Yeong-hye's journey of transformation – although the narrative is not entirely clear as to what that overall transformation actually is. It takes place in stages, or a more appropriate word might be components: from meat-eater to vegetarian; from dominated wife to independent woman; from sexual reticence to sexual freedom; from food consumption to starvation; and perhaps even from sanity to insanity. At the core of each of these components, there seems to be a desire or an intention to live a truer life, not just a freer one: one in which Yeong-hye is more herself, even though the ideas of what that self actually is seem to continually evolve. For the reader, this sense of transformation-by-component can seem frustrating, in that it is never securely or definitively clear what, exactly, the path is that Yeong-hye is on, but perhaps that is part of the book's thematic point, the idea that the journey of a life has no objective or definitive destination, but instead is defined by the process, not the end.

Meanwhile, Yeong-hye's experience of inner transformation is reflected in her physical transformation – ironically, or in reverse. Yeong-hye's inner life seems to take her in a direction of a fuller, more expansive sense of who she is and what she can be - at least

that is what she thinks is happening, and what the reader is led to believe is happening (until it starts to seem as though the transformation is a movement from seeking a new life into a possibly insane seeking of death). At the same time, the transformation of her physical existence takes her life in the opposite direction: her body deteriorates and dies away even as her inner life, at least for a while, begins to blossom and green, a term that suggests a link between her spiritual growth and two things: what the artist paints onto her body and her eventual belief that she is becoming a plant, at least in intention.

Meanwhile, for the characters living outside of Yeong-hye's experience of transformation, that experience causes a variety of reactions – from the clearly negative and resentful (Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's parents), through the ambivalent and needy (the artist), and into the initially resentful but eventually also transformed (In-hye). In other words: contrast (i.e. no transformation), limited parallel (i.e. limited transformation that stops before completion), and qualified parallel (i.e. the beginnings of parallel transformation that shows no signs of stopping).

The Influence of Dreams

Dreams, both sleeping and waking, are portrayed throughout the novel as powerful triggers of transformation. Perhaps the most apparent example of this is, again, the transformation of Yeong-hye, whose dreams of blood, of faces in blood, and of the violence associated with both are the initial causes of her choice to become vegetarian. Her dreams continue to fuel her transformation, both dreams while sleeping and eventually dreams while waking, such as her experiences in the forest. Both are acts of, or experiences of, imagination that continually fuel and further her movement from one state of being to another.

Other characters also experience waking dreams, or acts of imagination, that transform, as dreams do, real life into meaning-rich imagery. A primary example of this is the artist, whose imaginings of a new and different way of approaching his art, and indirectly his own sense of identity, are fueled by imaginative (day)dreams associated with the Mongolian Mark, with his desire to use Yeong-hye's transforming body as both a canvas and a sexual outlet, and a desire for personal rebirth (i.e. as an artist). This experience, in turn, parallels a pair of other rebirths: Yeong-hye's (which threads through the entire narrative), and In-hye's, which emerges into the narrative in Part 3. All three experiences of transformation and change are fueled and defined by experiences of dreams, either waking or sleeping.

Meanwhile, there is an example in Part 3 of another, night-time dream affecting the action (i.e. Jin-woo's dream about his mother, the trauma of which results in In-hye both comforting him and realizing some challenging truths about herself). But the more telling third example of the effect of dreams relates to In-hye, whose day-dreams are as deeply infused with memory as Yeong-hye's night dreams in Part 1. In-hye's dreaming, or imagining, of the causes of Yeong-hye's actions; of her own roles and responsibilities in relation to those actions; and of her own possible routes to transformation are all, in their own way, as triggered by dream-like emergings of the past as are Yeong-hye's.

This parallel experience of the two very different, but ultimately very similar, sisters, is one example of how the book explores its fifth major theme, relating to the nature and function of family dynamics.

Family Dynamics

There are clear indications throughout the narrative that a substantial component of what triggers Yeong-hye's transformations connects directly to her experiences with her father, and more indirectly to her experiences with other family members. Her dream-memories in Part 1 refer specifically to an incident in which she was traumatized by her father's actions: similar experiences of both physical and emotional assault are referred to in Part 3, as In-hye contemplates the family dynamics that shaped both her and her sister's adulthood. This, in turn, is another way in which the narrative explores and develops this theme, not only in terms of exploring how In-hye was affected by the family dynamics between her father and sister, but how she actually played a role in defining those dynamics. She asks herself how much her choices, or lack of choices, in response to how her father treated her sister shaped the family situation in general, and her sister's values and choices in particular. She does not necessarily come up with any answers, but her contemplation of the family situation seems to fuel, or trigger, the change in attitude towards her sister, and towards herself.

This sense of interaction between members of what might be described as a core family (i.e. parents and children) echoes in the relationships between In-hye and her husband (the artist) and their son, Jin-woo. The relationships in this triangle of characters are less narratively significant than those of the main family (i.e. Yeong-hye, In-hye, their parents) but are nonetheless important in developments of the story of the artist in Part 2 (whose glimpsed desire to be a good parent is overwhelmed by his dominant desire to be a self-realized artist) and in the story of In-hye in Part 3. Her movement towards her own independence is checked, at least somewhat, by her sense of guilt and responsibility, while her dream-memory of an attempted departure from her roles as wife and mother is a key revelatory moment that illustrates that she might, if things have been slightly different, been as much of a self-transforming rebel in her family as Yeong-hye was in hers.

The final way in which family dynamics play out in relationship to the narrative has to do with husband/wife relationships. The dominant husband – submissive wife relationship of Mr. Cheong and Yeung-hye (echoed in the relationship between Yeong-hye's parents) is portrayed as being a repressive set of chains that Cheong is desperate to retain even while his wife acts, with similar desperation, to break them. Then there is the husband-wife relationship between In-hye and the artist, in which the two seem to be headed in very different directions from one another, the latter desperately moving towards a type of self-realization that takes him even further from a wife who already feels deeply distant from him. This sense of spousal isolation is an important part of what makes In-hye start to wonder whether Yeong-hye, in her determination to establish and live her own transformed identity, might have been on the right track after all.

Styles

Point of View

Each of the novel's three parts is written from a different point of view. Part 1, "The Vegetarian," is written from the first person point of view of Mr. Cheong. He is a traditional and conservative husband of Yeong-hye, while she is a young woman who rejects certain types of conventional behavior and becomes, among other things, a vegetarian. The narrative point of view here is revealing of Mr. Cheong's fundamental limitations on perspective. He wants things to be a certain way, and he thinks he has things the way he wants. However, when it turns out that things are changing, he fights to keep that change from happening. This first section also contains interjections of another point of view: that of Yeong-hye, whose short first-person narrations reveal the reasons and depths of her decisions and choices. Here it's important to note that these shifts in point of view are highlighted and emphasized by changes in how the text appears on the page: Yeong-hye's interjections are printed in italicized font, in contrast to Mr. Cheong's, which are printed in regular font.

The novel's second part, "Mongolian Mark," is written in third person narration that focuses on the point of view of the artist, the husband of Yeong-hye's sister and a character who is never given a name, but is identified solely by what he does. The point of view here is of the limited style; this part of the novel is focusing entirely on the experiences of the artist, the attitudes and actions of the other characters being presented solely as interpreted by the main character.

The novel's third part, "Flaming Trees," is narrated from the third-person point of view of In-hye, Yeong-hye's older sister and the wife of the artist. The point of view is mostly consistent throughout this part – that is, focusing on the experiences and thoughts of In-hye, although there are sections in which narration becomes more objective, referring to and considering past incidents without commentary or interpretation defined by In-hye's perspective. What's notable about Part 3 is that there are shifts in narrative tense; portions of each division of Part 3 (those focusing on In-hye's present-time encounter with Yeong-hye) are narrated in present tense, while recollections and narratives of what happened to get the characters to this point in the story are written in past tense. This shift in tense draws the reader more immediately into In-hye's experience of her own transformation.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the work, and more specifically about the edition under consideration, is that it is a translation from the original language of Korean. This translation also has a definite British flavor to it – for example, running shoes are referred to as "trainers." A question then arises: how much of the original's language

and imagery has similarly been shaped through the cultural and linguistic lens of the translator? How true to the narrative and thematic intentions of the original is it?

The second point to note about the book's use of language, and the relationship between language and meaning, is that the book is very dense. The edition under consideration is only 186 pages long, yet there is a great deal of story packed into those pages – that is, story and imagery and meaning. There are very few spare words, ideas, or narrative passages: there is not a great deal that feels as though it does not need to be there, or fulfill the author's purposes.

The third point to note about the language – meaning relationship in this book is that the narrative, like its central character (Yeong-hye) is quite enigmatic. There are places and passages in which it becomes a challenge to figure out what is going on, and what exactly an event or narrative moment means in terms of the book's larger picture. There is a sense that meaning is being hinted at, rather than overtly expressed: that both the meaning and the intention of a character's actions – that is, the intentions of both character and author – are meant to be investigated and considered by the reader, as opposed to explained by the author. Thus, the reader is left to decide whether, for example, if Yeong-hye is insane, if she is driven by a pure spiritual calling, or by some combination of the two.

Structure

The novel is divided into three parts, each focusing on the experience of a different character, but the action of all three primarily defined by the actions of the same character (yeong-hye), different from the other three. In other words, the book might be described as having four protagonists: one whose story is the foundation narrative, with the stories of the other three emerging in response to various elements in that foundation.

Each part has its own structure, each with its own climax; each with its own narrative build towards that climax; and each with a starting point that makes a clear and vivid statement about the circumstances in which the protagonist of each section starts his or her own journey. In Part 1, Mr. Cheong begins with an immediate statement of how much he resents his wife's decision to break convention and become a vegetarian. In Part 2, third person narration describes a situation that evokes the artist's frustration as he seeks an outlet for his creative and sexual desires that is less dangerous than potential intimate involvement with his sister-in-law. Part 3's beginning evokes the weather-based discomfort that metaphorically echoes the emotional discomfort within which In-hye visits her sister in the psychiatric hospital.

Finally, each part moves from its individual beginning to its individual ending, all three beginnings and all three endings existing in relationship to the big picture, foundational beginning-middle-end structure of Yeong-hye's journey. Mr. Cheong's part is her beginning; the artist's part is her middle; and In-hye's part is her end, an intriguing

structure that keeps Yeong-hye front and center in the reader’s mind even while keeping her actual experiences and transformations in the background.

Quotes

The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground. There was no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn't get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings.
-- Narrator (Mr. Cheong) (Part 1 – Section 1)

Importance: This quote represents the confining, sexist attitudes of the narrator, and also represents the controlling, conventional way of thinking against which the narrator's wife / the novel's protagonist so significantly rebels.

A long bamboo stick strung with great blood-red cashes of meat, blood still dripping down. Try to push past but the meat, there's no end to the meat, and no exit. Blood in my mouth, blood soaked clothes sucked onto my skin … in that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, feel it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood … the look in my eyes – my face, undoubtedly, but never seen before."
-- The Wife (Yeong-hye) (Part 1 – Section 1)

Importance: The source of this quote is eventually revealed to be protagonist Yeong-hye. It evokes the images and experiences that triggered her fear and self revulsion about consuming meat, both of which in turn triggered her decision to become a vegetarian. This quote also contains one of the book's earliest references to blood as symbolically representative of the life force, generally viewed by the narrative as being eaten away, perhaps even destroyed, by convention.

Everything starts to feel unfamiliar. Like I've come up to the back of something. Shut up behind a door without a handle. Perhaps I'm only now coming face-to-face with the thing that has always been here. It's dark. Everything is being snuffed out in the pitch-black darkness.
-- Yeong-hye (Part 1 – Section 2)

Importance: Another excerpt from Yeong-hye's dreams, this one suggesting that she is beginning to experience an increasingly powerful disconnection from the conventional life that she is beginning to leave behind.

I thought I could get by perfectly well just thinking of her as a stranger, or no, as a sister, or even a maid, someone who puts food on the table and keeps the house in good order. But it was no easy thing for a man in the prime of his life, for whom married life had always gone entirely without a hitch, to have his physical needs go unsatisfied for such a long period of time.
-- Mr. Cheong (Part 1, Section 3)

Importance: Here again, Mr. Cheong's narration reveals his sexist, convention-defined

attitudes. The significance of this quote lies in how he expresses his dissatisfaction and resentment in sexual terms, an ironic foreshadowing of how Yeong-hye eventually begins to experience the kind of freedom from convention she is seeking through expressions of her sexuality.

Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides."
-- Yeong-hye (Part 1, Section 3)

Importance: With this quote, the reader gets a clear sense of the visceral intensity with which Yeong-hye is responding not only to the literal consumption of animal flesh and destruction of the (blood-defined) life force that goes into eating meat; she is also responding, with a visceral sense of guilt and helplessness, to what she sees as her role in what she remembers of the torturous death of the dog that bit her.

He'd pictured to himself … how it had felt to carry her on his back, her body pressed up against his and staining his clothes with her blood, the feel of her chest and buttocks, imagined pulling down her trousers just enough to reveal the blue brand of the Mongolian mark."
-- Narration (Part 2, Section 1)

Importance: In this quote, narration offers an example of the way in which the artist's thoughts about Yeong-hye and her Mongolian mark start to become more deeply sexual, and also more obsessive.

That was the kind of relationship they had these days – that of business partners, who were careful to excise any superfluity from their dealings, and whose only shared business was their child … that night a few days ago after he'd gone to see his sister-in-law, he'd reached out in the darkness and pulled his wife to him, without giving himself time to think about what he was doing. Surprised and confused by this apparent show of desire … if she'd looked [his wife] would have seen something closer to fear in her husband's eyes. But it was dark."
-- Narration (Part 2, Section 2)

Importance: As part of its study of sexual obsession in Part 2, the novel includes this description of how the existence of a relatively functional couple / sexual relationship is challenged, and ultimately damaged, by the intrusion of other sexualized desires.

This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated … what she had renounced was the very life that her body represented … the overwhelming inexpressibility of the scene beat against him like a wave breaking on the rocks, alleviating even those terrifyingly unknowable compulsions that had caused him such pain over the past year.
-- Narration (Part 2, Section 3)

Importance: This quote highlights the irony associated with the artist's obsession with Yeong-hye. Even as his desire for her deepens and intensifies, her desire for simply being a human being is shrinking and almost disappearing.

The image of a man and woman, their bodies made brilliant with painted flowers, having sex against a background of unutterable silence. Their shifting limbs matter-of-fact in that vacuum. A progression of scenes lurching from violence to tenderness, with no extreme left unexplored. One stripped-down, drawn-out moment of quiet purification, extremity sublimated into some kind of peace."
-- Narration (Part 2, Mongolian Mark – Section 4)

Importance: At first, this quote seems to suggest that the artist's desire for Yeong-hye, who is the woman referred to in this quote, is more artistic in origin. Up to this point, however, and past this point, the narrative makes clear that his core desire is to possess her sexually, which makes the sentiments of the above quote at best a rationalization, at worst a lying and willful self-delusion.

His red flower closed and opened repeatedly above her Mongolian Mark, his penis slipping in and out of her like a huge pistil. He shuddered at the appalling nature of their union, a union of images that were somehow repellent and yet compellingly beautiful. Every time he closed his eyes he could see the lower half of his body dyed green, soaked from the stomach to the thighs with a sticky, grassy sap."
-- Narration (Part 2, Section 5)

Importance: As the artist finally engages in his long-delayed, long-longed-for sexual encounter with Yeong-hye, he finds himself simultaneously attracted to, and repulsed by, the images that their physical union seems to be creating.

Look, sister, I'm doing a handstand; leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands – they delve down into the earth. Endlessly, endlessly – yes, I spread my legs because I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch; I spread them wide …
-- Yeong-hye (Part 3, Section 1)

Importance: This quote contains one of the first direct references in a conversation between characters (as opposed to a reference in narration) to the idea that Yeong-hye is experiencing, or choosing, a transition into a way of thinking, feeling, and living that takes her away from her humanity (convention) and in another direction - specifically, towards being more of a plant.

Even as a child, In-hye had possessed the innate strength of character necessary to make one's own way in life. As a daughter, as an older sister, as a wife and as a mother, as the owner of a shop, even as an underground passenger on the briefest of journeys, she had always done her best. Through the sheer inertia of a life lived in this way, she would have been able to conquer everything, even time.
-- Narration (Part 3, Section 1)

Importance: In this quote, which refers to In-hye's essential courage and personal power, the irony is significant: she had used her strength and self-well to endure convention, rather than challenge it as her sister had done.

[In-hye had] never been able to forgive [Yeong-hye] for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there."
-- Narration (Part 3, Section 2)

Importance: This quote sums up a key component of the complicated, often challenging relationship between In-hye and Yeong-hye, for In-hye a mix of admiration and resentment, of being inspired by her sister at the same time as being angered by her.

Even as a child, as far back as she could remember, she had done nothing but endure. She had believed in her own inherent goodness, her humanity, and lived accordingly, never causing anyone harm. Her devotion to doing things the right way had been unflagging, all her success had depended on it, and she would have gone on like that indefinitely. She didn't understand why, but faced with those decaying buildings and straggling grasses, she was nothing but a child who had never lived.
-- Narration (Part 3, Section 2)

Importance: As part of her growing self-awareness, a component of her journey towards realizing her dream of at least beginning to step away from convention, In-hye realizes even more deeply how much she has failed herself.

… summer trees in broad daylight flicker in front of her eyes like huge green fireworks. Is this because of the hallucination Yeong-hye told her about? The innumerable trees she's seen over the course of all her life, the undulating forests which blanket the continents like a heartless sea, envelop her exhausted body and lift her up."
-- Narration (Part 3, Section 3)

Importance: This quote essentially encapsulates the metaphorical implications of the trees that appear throughout Part 3 of the book. The trees are symbols of possibility and of freedom from convention. Throughout this section, trees have represented (as they do here) Yeong-hye's independence and freedom. As the narrative draws towards its conclusion, trees start to represent the same thing for Yeong-hye's more inhibited sister, In-hye.

Covered with flowers and leaves and twisting green stems, those bodies were so altered it was as though they no longer belonged to human beings. The writing movements of those bodies made it seem as though they were trying to shuck off the human.
-- Narration (Part 3, Section 4)

Importance: As In-hye recalls the impressions and experiences she had in the aftermath of catching Yeong-hye and the artist in the act of making painted love, this late-in-the-book narration reinforces what the narrative and its themes seem to have been heading towards all along: the chosen de-humanization, and de-convention-ing, of Yeong-hye. This quote, referring to an incident in Part 2, and to all its repercussions in Part 3, evokes what Yeong-hye has been experiencing from the beginning of Part 1: a self-separation from the world and ways of eating animals, of sexual restraint, and of conventions of human behavior in general.