

The Vegetarian



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HAN KANG

Han was born in Gwangju, South Korea, before moving to Suyuri at 10 years old. She studied Korean literature at Yonsei University. Following college, her poetry was featured in the journal *Literature and Society* in 1993. The following year, she won the 1994 Seoul Shimbun Spring Literary Contest with her debut novel *Red Anchor*. Since then, she has published several short story collections and seven novels. She won the Yi Sang Literary Prize in 2005, the 2000 Today's Young Artist Award, and the Korean Literature Novel Award. She wrote *The Vegetarian* in 2007, and following its translation and publication in English by Deborah Smith, Han won the Man Booker Prize. Han currently teaches creative writing at the Seoul Institute of the Arts.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Vegetarian takes place in modern-day Seoul, and its society is rooted in conservative Korean values. Traditionally, Korean family hierarchies emphasize patriarchal authority, wherein a husband or father exhibits dominance and kindness in exchange for obedience and love. Korean families are also seen as a unit, and the impact of an individual can have ramifications on the perception of the family as a whole. The remnants of these dynamics are felt in *The Vegetarian*, wherein Mr. Cheong and the rest of Yeong-hye's family see her choice to be a vegetarian as disobedient and a poor reflection on the entire family. Outside of the pages of the story, vegetarianism in Korea is on the rise, but it is still largely viewed as a niche diet and is difficult to maintain, as most dishes in Korea include some kind of fish or meat and there is some confusion about what vegetarians do or do not eat in Korea. One of the ways in which this makes social life difficult, as is seen in *The Vegetarian*, is the ability to have social meals, as ordering food to be shared among all diners is the norm at restaurants in Korea. This is viewed as a communal bonding opportunity, and is one of the reasons that Yeong-hye's decision not to eat any dish with meat is viewed with such distaste by Mr. Cheong's co-workers when they go out to dinner.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Han wrote a short story called "The Fruit of My Woman" in 1997, which tells the story of a woman who had turned into a plant—an image she then used as an inspiration for *The Vegetarian*. The book bears similarity to some of Franz Kafka's works, namely *The Metamorphosis*, which follows a man who

wakes up one morning to discover he has transformed into a giant insect, and "A Hunger Artist," which tells the tale of a performance artist who is put in a cage and people observe his starvation, and who resents being made to eat at the end of his fasts and feels deeply misunderstood. *The Vegetarian* has also been compared to South African author Ceridwen Dovey's 2007 novella *Blood Kin*, which follows three protagonists, each of whom are obsessed with the consumption (both as food and as sexual objects) of other living beings. There are also connections to Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener," an account of a man who works at a dead-letter office and who gradually performs fewer and fewer tasks at work before stopping eating and dying of starvation. For a contemporary work about a Korean family's attempts to understand each other, see Kyung-sook Shin's *Please Look After Mom*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Vegetarian*
- **When Written:** 2003-2007
- **Where Written:** South Korea
- **When Published:** October 2007 (South Korea); January 2015 (United Kingdom)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary fiction
- **Setting:** Seoul, South Korea
- **Climax:** Yeong-hye refuses to allow the doctors to force-feed her; In-hye witnesses their attempts to insert a tube into her nose and bites the nurse in order to try to get the doctors to stop.
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Cheong
- **Point of View:** The point of view shifts in each of the three parts: the first section is narrated in first person by Mr. Cheong; the second is narrated in third person from the perspective of the brother-in-law; the third section is narrated in third person from the perspective of In-hye.

EXTRA CREDIT

Plant-Based Source. Han has said that she was obsessed in college with a line from Yi Sang, "I believe that humans should be plants"—a clear source of inspiration for much of her work, including *The Vegetarian*.

A Labor of Longhand. Han first wrote the book entirely by hand, which took her a long time due to her joint problems.



PLOT SUMMARY

The first section of *The Vegetarian* is narrated by a man named Mr. Cheong, who lives with his wife, Yeong-hye, in Seoul, South Korea. Their relationship is normal and unremarkable. Yeong-hye is a woman of few words, cooks and keeps the house, and reads as her sole hobby. The only strange thing about her is that she sometimes does not like wearing a **bra**, and despite Mr. Cheong's insistence that she wear one, she tells him that bras make her uncomfortable.

The blandness of their lives changes abruptly when one day, Yeong-hye wakes up in the middle of the night from a graphic dream in which she is violently killing and eating an animal, pushing raw **meat** into her mouth. Haunted by this dream, she throws away all the meat in the house. Mr. Cheong is aggravated by this behavior, and becomes even more frustrated when she refuses to cook meat for him anymore. Mr. Cheong views this as a selfish and disobedient act, and calls her insane. He is particularly confused because she had always been skillful at cooking meat.

Over the next few months, Yeong-hye loses weight and starts refusing to have sex with her husband, explaining that his body "smells of meat." She becomes unable to sleep. One evening, the couple has dinner with several of Mr. Cheong's co-workers, including his boss. Yeong-hye does not wear a bra to the dinner, attracting the notice of his co-workers. She also refuses to eat the meat served at dinner, and thus ends up not being able to enjoy most of the 12 courses served family-style. The others comment critically on her vegetarianism, and gradually stop talking to her at dinner. Mr. Cheong is appalled at his wife's behavior.

Mr. Cheong decides to call Yeong-hye's mother and her sister In-hye in the hopes that they can convince Yeong-hye to give up her vegetarianism. They are equally shocked at Yeong-hye's decision to disobey her husband but are unable to convince her to eat meat again. Mr. Cheong also becomes frustrated with Yeong-hye's abstention from sex, and he pins her down and rapes her on several occasions. Yeong-hye also begins to take her clothes off when she is alone at home, cooking naked. When he asks why she does this, she only tells him that she is hot.

Yeong-hye continues to be haunted by nightmares wherein she is violent and murderous, and continues to lose weight. Her family (including her mother, father, In-hye, In-hye's husband, and her brother Yeong-ho) gather together for a meal at In-hye's apartment. Yeong-hye's mother tries to get Yeong-hye to eat meat, even holding pieces of pork up to her lips. When this fails, her father becomes outraged and tells Mr. Cheong and Yeong-ho to hold Yeong-hye's arms; he then slaps her and jams a piece of pork into her mouth. Yeong-hye immediately spits out the pork and, in desperation, cuts her wrist open with a

knife. Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's brother-in-law immediately take her to the hospital. At the hospital, Yeong-hye's wound is stitched up, but before she is discharged, she disappears from her room. She is found on a bench having removed her hospital gown, with a dead white bird with bloody bite marks on it in her hand.

The second section, "Mongolian Mark," is narrated from the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law (In-hye's husband), two years after the first section. The brother-in-law is a video artist; his wife, the primary breadwinner in their home, is the manager of a cosmetics store. The brother-in-law and In-hye's marriage is strained, and he is more attracted to Yeong-hye. Recently, the brother-in-law has become obsessed with images of men and women covered in painted **flowers** having sex. This obsession began when In-hye (while giving a bath to their toddler Ji-woo) mentioned that Yeong-hye still has a Mongolian mark. The brother-in-law imagines the two of them having sex together and longs to film it.

After being discharged from the hospital, Yeong-hye lived with In-hye and the brother-in-law for a time due to the fact that Mr. Cheong left her, but she now lives alone. The brother-in-law visits Yeong-hye and asks her if she would model for him—he explains he wants to paint her body with flowers and film her naked. She tacitly agrees, and the brother-in-law becomes filled with lust. He is overcome by desire and has sex with In-hye for the first time in months. He puts his hand over her mouth and imagines she is Yeong-hye. When he is finished, she cries, but he falls quickly into sleep and they do not address this incident afterward.

Yeong-hye comes to the brother-in-law's studio, where she calmly undresses. He paints huge flowers on her body and films her in different poses. Afterward, they go out to dinner. He asks her why she doesn't eat meat, but she says that he wouldn't understand. That evening, the brother-in-law returns to his film studio, forcing In-hye to come home early to watch Ji-woo. There, he reviews the tapes and cuts them into a video, but he knows that he wants to film more. He asks a fellow artist friend, J, to model with Yeong-hye. He calls Yeong-hye, who has not washed off the paint, and asks her to come back and model again, this time with another man. She agrees.

The next day, J and Yeong-hye come to the studio. The brother-in-law paints J in flowers, and then he and Yeong-hye start to pose, with Yeong-hye doing things like craning her neck around J's, stroking him, and straddling him without being asked. J becomes aroused, and the brother-in-law asks if they would have sex for real. J immediately refuses, and leaves shortly after. As Yeong-hye dresses, she confesses that she wanted to have sex with J because of the flowers on his body. The brother-in-law then drives away, gets another artist friend to paint flowers on him, and returns to the studio where Yeong-hye is waiting. The brother-in-law immediately lays Yeong-hye down and aggressively has sex with her, forgetting his

camcorder. When they are finished, Yeong-hye strokes the flowers on his chest, and he turns the camera on and films himself having sex with her from behind. Yeong-hye bursts into tears, and he switches off the camera. In their final minutes of sex, she yells at him to stop. Afterward, the two fall asleep in the studio together.

When the brother-in-law wakes up, Yeong-hye is still asleep, but the camera is gone. When he goes to search for it, he finds In-hye at the studio. She tells him that she had come to look for him, had watched the film, and that she called emergency services on him. Just then, Yeong-hye wakes up and goes over to the veranda, showing her naked body to the sun. The brother-in-law thinks about throwing himself over the railing.

The third section, "Flaming Trees," is narrated by In-hye, two years later. Yeong-hye now lives in a psychiatric hospital and is refusing to eat entirely. A doctor tells In-hye that if she cannot get Yeong-hye to eat, they will try a method of getting her to eat that they have tried before: inserting a tube into her nose to feed her gruel. If this does not work, she will have to be transferred to a general hospital for a complicated surgery that will allow them to hook an IV up to her arteries to keep her alive.

In-hye drifts in and out of several memories from the last two years. She describes an incident in which Yeong-hye had run away and had been found in the mountains, acting like a tree. Afterwards, Yeong-hye had told her that all of the trees were like brothers and sisters to her. She tells In-hye that she doesn't need to eat anymore—she only needs sunlight and water. On another visit, In-hye had asked Yeong-hye if she thinks she's become a tree, asking her how a tree could talk. Yeong-hye agrees with this logic, saying soon her thoughts and words would disappear.

In-hye also thinks about her husband: how she had wanted to take care of him, but was never fully sure that she loved him and was never sure that he loved her. She knew, instead, that he was in love with his work. She always thought he was incomprehensible to her. After she called the police on him, he had tried to throw himself over the railing, but was rescued by a paramedic. He then had to prove that he was not mentally ill, and had been held in prison for several months. Afterwards, he went into hiding, and In-hye never saw him again, though he called once to inquire about Ji-woo.

In-hye feels guilty about Yeong-hye's condition and wonders what she could have done to prevent it. But In-hye is also in some ways jealous of Yeong-hye's ability to simply "shuck off social constraints." She thinks that Ji-woo is the only thing that is keeping her tethered to reality. Even when she was still with her husband, she thought often of ways to harm herself or kill herself, and once walked into the mountains, intending to completely abandon her family, but decided to return.

In the present, In-hye is unable to convince Yeong-hye to eat.

Yeong-hye is then taken to another ward and the doctor tries to insert the tube into her nose. Yeong-hye grows upset, saying that she doesn't want to eat, and tries to resist their efforts. In-hye watches as they successfully insert the tube, but when they pull out a tranquilizer so that Yeong-hye can't throw up the food, In-hye runs into the room and bites a caregiver in the ward who tries to hold her back. Yeong-hye struggles, then throws up blood and has to be transferred to a general hospital immediately. Before they leave, In-hye thinks, "it's your body, you can treat it however you please." In the ambulance on the way to the general hospital, In-hye confesses to Yeong-hye that she has dreams, too, but that at some point a person has to wake up. As they drive, In-hye sees a forest of trees glinting in the sunlight. She looks at them "as if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Yeong-hye – The primary protagonist of *The Vegetarian*. Yeong-hye is a young woman living in Seoul, South Korea, with her husband, Mr. Cheong. When Han first introduces Yeong-hye and Mr. Cheong, they have a normal, if boring or unaffectionate, relationship. Yeong-hye cooks and keeps the house for Mr. Cheong; her only odd behavior is that she does not like wearing a **bra**. When she starts to have violent and gory dreams, however, Yeong-hye becomes disgusted by eating **meat** and refuses to make meat dishes in the house. She rapidly loses weight as a result of her new diet, and when her family tries to stage an intervention and her father attempts to force-feed her pork (largely because he sees her vegetarianism as an act of defiance against her husband), she cuts open her own wrist with a knife in response. After her stay in the hospital, Mr. Cheong divorces her and Yeong-hye becomes more passive and lethargic. She tacitly agrees to model for her brother-in-law, attracted to the **flowers** that he paints on her body. Yet the brother-in-law corrupts this relationship when he asks her to have sex with him, and later forces her to do so. After her sister and the brother-in-law's wife, In-hye, discovers them, Yeong-hye is committed to a psychiatric ward and the brother-in-law is sent to jail—showing how people who are isolated and break social convention are both punished by society and unable to escape it, devolving further and further into perceived madness. By the end of the novel Yeong-hye refuses to eat entirely, telling In-hye that she only needs sunlight to survive, and she begins acting like a tree. The doctors continue to force her to eat, however, even resorting to sticking a tube down her nose and then tranquilizing her so that she doesn't throw up the food. Even though Yeong-hye uses her body as a tool for resistance and refuge, she is ultimately unable to attain the life and innocence of a plant, which highlights the inescapable violence inherent in humanity.

In-hye – The brother-in-law's wife and Yeong-hye's older sister, who provides the narrative perspective for the third section of the book. In-hye is four years older than Yeong-hye and is at first described as the saner and more responsible of the two. She is the primary breadwinner for herself and her husband, who is a video artist. She manages a cosmetic store and has a young son, Ji-woo. Of all of the characters, In-hye is the most devoted to her sister as she goes through numerous traumatic experiences, despite the fact that In-hye doesn't fully understand her sister's strange behavior. Han also describes In-hye as not fully understanding her husband's thoughts or motivations: their isolation from each other and the lack of understanding between them is one of the things that prompts her husband to construct fantasy worlds through his art. When she discovers that he has had sex with Yeong-hye on film, she calls emergency services on him and refuses to let him see their son. But even though In-hye is perhaps saner than her sister, she, too, experiences bouts of mental instability. Her isolation from the people around her drives her to think about self-harm, and she even considers abandoning her family and walking into the mountains, never to return. Ultimately, however, In-hye recognizes the deep and dire consequences that face her husband and Yeong-hye for giving up their societal obligations, and she recognizes the importance of remaining tethered to reality.

Mr. Cheong – Yeong-hye's husband, who narrates the first section of the novel. Mr. Cheong is an average businessman who expects Yeong-hye to cook and clean for him. They have a relatively normal, if loveless existence, though he often finds it odd that she refuses to wear **bras**. The real conflict between them begins, however, when she has gory dreams that prompt her to throw away all the **meat** in the house and refuse to cook meat for him. He recognizes that this is an act of resistance against him, and views her as obstinate, disobedient, and insane. The fact that he does not try to understand the dreams that she is having, and is not sensitive to the violence that she is experiencing, only causes her to feel more isolated. He also grows frustrated when she refuses to have sex with him, saying that he "smells of meat"—another way in which she asserts autonomy over her own body. He rapes her on several occasions in response, again demonstrating the violence and consumptive nature of humanity. The conflict between them comes to a head when she attends a dinner for his co-workers, but refuses to eat the meat courses and does not wear a bra, attracting attention and disdain from the others. He calls her family to stage an intervention, but the situation only grows worse when she slits her wrist and lands herself in the hospital. Mr. Cheong then divorces Yeong-hye, emphasizing Han's argument that those who break social conventions are doomed to be punished by society.

The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband – Yeong-hye's unnamed brother-in-law and In-hye's husband, who provides

the narrative perspective in the second section of the book. The brother-in-law is a video artist, while In-hye is both the primary breadwinner and the primary caretaker of their young son, Ji-woo. In-hye and her husband's marriage is largely joyless, as the two are revealed to understand each other very little. When the brother-in-law learns from In-hye that Yeong-hye still has a Mongolian mark, he becomes obsessed with images of naked men and women having sex, their bodies covered in painted **flowers**. He asks Yeong-hye to model for him, then asks her to return to pose with a fellow artist named J. When he asks J and Yeong-hye to have sex for real, J storms out, refusing to do it. The brother-in-law then has flowers painted on himself and films himself and Yeong-hye having sex—even after she revokes her consent to do so. When In-hye finds the tape of the two of them having sex, she calls emergency services on the brother-in-law, assuming that he is not in his right mind. He then tries to throw himself off of a balcony railing, proving how overwhelming isolation and feelings of being misunderstood can often lead to madness. The brother-in-law is then forced to go into hiding and In-hye refuses to allow him to see Ji-woo, proving the harsh consequences that society provides for breaking its conventions.

Yeong-hye's Father – Yeong-hye, In-hye, and Yeong-ho's father. Yeong-hye's father is described as a strict and violent Vietnam War veteran. At the end of the novel, In-hye reflects on the fact that Yeong-hye is the only one that Yeong-hye's father had beaten growing up, and she had internalized this violence. This assertion is given more proof when Yeong-hye remembers an incident in which she had been bitten by a dog, and Yeong-hye's father ran the dog until it died of exhaustion, strangled and bloody. Yeong-hye is haunted by the image of the dog and how she ate its **meat** afterward. This and the other similar dreams are what prompts Yeong-hye to decide to give up eating meat, seeing it as a violent facet of human existence. Yeong-hye's father and mother, however, view this as obstinate disobedience toward her husband and a poor reflection on them as parents, which prompts him to slap Yeong-hye and force her to eat meat. In response, she cuts her own wrist open, again trying to assert autonomy over her body by any means necessary.

Yeong-hye's Mother – Yeong-hye, In-hye, and Yeong-ho's mother. When Mr. Cheong calls and informs Yeong-hye's mother that Yeong-hye is refusing to eat, she grows furious at her daughter's disobedience, thinking it reflects poorly on her as a mother. She and Yeong-hye's father help stage an intervention for Yeong-hye and try to force her to eat **meat**, but this backfires when Yeong-hye slices her wrist open. After Mr. Cheong serves Yeong-hye with divorce papers, Yeong-hye's mother and father completely abandon her, providing one of the main negative consequences for breaking social conventions in this society.

Ji-woo – In-hye and her husband's young son. In the first

section, Ji-woo is three, and by the end of the story he has turned six. In-hye primarily takes care of Ji-woo, while the brother-in-law frequently foregoes any kind of fatherly duties. As the story progresses, In-hye, too, considers abandoning her child and shirking the societal obligations she has, but recognizes that Ji-woo is the only thing tethering her to reality.

J – An artist friend of the brother-in-law's who agrees to be painted and to model with Yeong-hye. Over the course of the film shoot, however, he becomes increasingly aroused by but also increasingly uncomfortable with the poses they take. When the brother-in-law suggests they have sex for real, J storms out of the studio, offended and furious at being asked to do so.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Yeong-ho – Yeong-hye and In-hye's brother. Yeong-ho joins the rest of the family to hold an intervention for Yeong-hye, and helps hold Yeong-hye's arms when his father tries to force-feed her. After this incident, Yeong-ho does not remain involved in Yeong-hye's life.

P – An ex-girlfriend of the brother-in-law's and a fellow artist. He goes to her when he needs his own body painted in **flowers**.

Hee-joo – Another patient at the psychiatric ward where Yeong-hye is staying, who helps to take care of Yeong-hye.

TERMS

Mongolian Mark – A blue birthmark common to people of Asian descent. It often disappears before a person turns five years old and almost always before puberty. In *The Vegetarian*, the **brother-in-law** becomes obsessed with the fact that **Yeong-hye** still has her Mongolian mark as an adult, and it is the image of the mark on her buttocks which inspires the images of naked men and women painted in **flowers**.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE BODY, AGENCY, AND RESISTANCE

The Vegetarian centers on Yeong-hye, a young woman living in modern-day Seoul, South Korea.

The novel begins with her choice to become a vegetarian before tracking the fallout of this decision on Yeong-hye's relationships with her family and husband. However, it is not so much the fact that Yeong-hye no longer wants to eat

meat that troubles her husband, Mr. Cheong, and the rest of her family. Rather, it is the fact that she suddenly wants to have autonomy over her body, particularly when she goes against her family's desires. As Yeong-hye becomes more and more defiant of those around her, Han establishes Yeong-hye's body as a tool for her resistance against others, ultimately suggesting that bodily autonomy is the only way for a person to maintain any agency in his or her life.

Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is the first step to asserting autonomy in her life, which has been very deferential up until this point. This newfound sense of authority over herself disturbs those around her greatly, as they have come to expect obedience from her. The novel begins when Yeong-hye starts to have dreams in which she is devouring bloody meat, torn apart with her own hands and teeth—images which become allegories for Yeong-hye's feelings of being violated and the victim of violence. The graphic images nauseate and horrify her, and so she announces to her husband that she will no longer eat meat and will not allow it in their home. Mr. Cheong refuses to accept this decision, thinking, "it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done." Thus, he sees her decision not as something conscious but as a way for her to assert her agency and resistance against him. When the rest of Yeong-hye's family hears about her decision, they, too, view it as an affront to themselves, believing that her disobedience reflects poorly on how they brought her up. Yeong-hye's mother, father, brother Yeong-ho, sister In-hye, and brother-in-law all visit her in order to try to coax her to eat meat. Yeong-hye's father resorts to attempting to force-feed her the meat; he slaps her and jams a piece of pork into her mouth, but she spits it out. The episode proves how her family feels as though they have the right to decide what Yeong-hye does or does not consume; however, Yeong-hye recognizes that she can use her body as resistance against them. Yeong-hye feels so upset and violated by her father's actions that she slits her own wrist with a knife in front of her family, less as a suicide attempt than a way in which she can make them stop trying to force-feed her. This is yet another way for Yeong-hye to resist: harming herself in order to regain some control over her own body.

Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is not the only way in which she regains some sense of bodily autonomy: she also tries to regain some control over her sexuality. Although the men in her life continue to try to determine what she can and cannot do with her body and her desire, this becomes another arena in which she views her body as a tool of resistance. After Yeong-hye goes vegetarian, she also avoids having sex with Mr. Cheong because she says that his body "smells of meat." This provides a parallel with her vegetarianism, reinforcing the idea that Yeong-hye does not want to consume another person, nor does she want to be consumed herself. Mr. Cheong, however, views this as another absurd and unnecessary form of disobedience,

and so he pins her down and rapes her on several occasions despite her protests. Still, in attempting to stop him and in making it difficult for him to rape her, she is again asserting autonomy over herself and her sex life. Later, after Mr. Cheong has divorced Yeong-hye due to her behavior, she tacitly agrees to be part of her brother-in-law's video art piece. She allows him to paint **flowers** on her naked body and then agrees to be filmed naked posing with another man referred to as J. Despite the fact that the brother-in-law only speaks to J during the filming and does not direct Yeong-hye, she takes initiative to do things like straddle J, crane her neck around his, and place herself in other sexual positions. Thus, the shoot becomes another way for Yeong-hye to control her own body and how it is viewed. Then, when the brother-in-law tries to seduce her after becoming aroused by her actions, she refuses and pushes him away, saying that she only acted in that way because she liked the flowers painted on J's body. This incident becomes yet another means for Yeong-hye to dictate what she chooses to do with her body and what she will allow others to do to it.

In the final section of the book, Yeong-hye tries to assert even more agency over her own life: the ability to stop being human and to stop herself from living. As Yeong-hye continues to be haunted by images of violence, she refuses to eat entirely. When doctors try to insert a tube down her nose, she violently resists, insisting that she doesn't like eating. As In-hye sees this happen, she understands what Yeong-hye is doing. She thinks, "It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like." In-hye's realization sums up Yeong-hye's perspective as well as Han's argument: the body is the last source of refuge and the only means of resistance for this woman who feels as though she has no agency.



HUMANITY AND VIOLENCE VS. VEGETATION AND INNOCENCE

Yeong-hye's abrupt change in character does not only include her choice to become a vegetarian.

Over the course of the novel, the book tracks her journey away from reality as she expresses a desire to both figuratively and literally become a **plant**. This desire is spurred by the terrible and violent nightmares that she has, from which she starts to understand that humans are inherently abusive and she wants to avoid that kind of life. Yeong-hye's self-destructive pursuit of a life as a plant symbolizes the attempt to escape the rage, violence, and harm that comes with being a human—though her attempts at escape ultimately prove to be futile. The novel thus argues that humanity is inherently destructive and that it is impossible to maintain or reclaim one's innocence as part of this species.

Han first establishes the violence against which Yeong-hye is rebelling in the first section of the novel. This is the only time that Han provides the reader with a glimpse into Yeong-hye's

murky thoughts in fragmented sentences and phrases. Han reveals Yeong-hye's fear of violence and her worry that she will harm other living beings in her dreams. The first dream Yeong-hye describes includes images of "long bamboo sticks strung with great blood-red gashes of **meat** [...] Blood in [her] mouth, blood soaked clothes sucked onto [her] skin." She continues, explaining that she had "pushed that red raw mass into [her] mouth, felt it squish against [her] gums, the roof of [her] mouth, slick with crimson blood." This visceral language establishes her horrors at the consumption of meat and her realization of the role of human violence in its production—which is why she is compelled to become a vegetarian. Mr. Cheong critiques the irony of Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian, since she was never a picky eater before, and he had always been impressed by her ability to skillfully slice, marinate, and carve whatever meat she would serve him. But it is precisely these actions that begin to haunt Yeong-hye, as she recalls how the day before she had her first dream, she started to squirm while mincing frozen meat, and sliced her finger open. This moment sparks a kind of recognition in Yeong-hye, that like these animals, she, too, is viewed as a commodity to be consumed by Mr. Cheong.

In the second section of the book, "Mongolian Mark," Yeong-hye takes her decision to become a vegetarian even further as she continues to pull away from the human violence that she is both envisioning and experiencing at the hands of Mr. Cheong and her family members. She begins to act more and more passively and is compared to a flower as Han draws a connection between vegetation and the avoidance of harm. Han first demonstrates Yeong-hye's affinity for flowers in this section, which directly follows the rape that she experienced at the hands of Mr. Cheong and the force-feeding she experienced at the hands of her family. When her brother-in-law asks Yeong-hye to be in an art project in which he plans to paint flowers on her naked body, she neither assents nor refuses. When he paints her, she does exactly as he instructs, taking her clothes off and lying down on her stomach. In doing so, Yeong-hye aligns herself with the passivity of a plant. After Yeong-hye's brother-in-law has painted her, she asks him if water will take the paint off, confessing that she doesn't want it to come off. This demonstrates Yeong-hye's desire to be connected with the flowers and the innocence and gentleness they represent, as well as her submission as a means to achieve that goal. When Yeong-hye starts telling the brother-in-law about her dreams of devouring meat, the brother-in-law wonders if the dreams had prompted her to start taking off her clothes and bare her breasts to the sunlight, "like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize." The word choice, "photosynthesize," highlights Yeong-hye's desire to live and consume without having to kill another thing, much like a plant does.

In the third part of the book, Yeong-hye's desire to live a

passive, harm-free existence only becomes more pronounced and embodied, as she starts literally acting like a plant. Yeong-hye is taken to a mental hospital due to her choice to stop eating altogether, but she runs away into the forest to act like a tree. Back in the hospital, she bares her breasts to the sun, pressing herself up against the window; she tells In-hye that the trees are like “brothers and sisters”; and she insists that all she needs to survive is sunlight and water. Yeong-hye’s wish to actually become a tree is the final step in her desire to renounce human violence. Yeong-hye continues to insist that she doesn’t like eating, but the doctors force feed her and then give her a tranquilizing injection so that she doesn’t throw up her food. Thus, the very violence that Yeong-hye is trying to avoid committing is being inflicted on her, which only spurs her obstinacy further. When In-hye tells Yeong-hye that she is being force-fed because they don’t want her to die, Yeong-hye asks, “Why, is it such a bad thing to die?” Her desire to die, or her lack of incentive to live as a human, stems from this violent life to which she has been subjected—Yeong-hye has, in a sense, been violently devoured by those around her, much like she tore apart the meat in her dream.

It is only at the end of the novel that In-hye has some clarity on Yeong-hye’s motivations: as a child, Yeong-hye was the only victim of their father’s beatings, and In-hye sees that Yeong-hye had “absorbed all her suffering inside her.” Even though Yeong-hye’s decisions throughout the novel are extreme, In-hye understands that her sister’s desire to become a plant represents a means of avoiding the violence that human beings commit and endure.

BREAKING SOCIAL CONVENTIONS

The novel is set in modern-day Seoul, South Korea, a society that is still deeply steeped in its traditions. As such, the book explores the rigidity of the social norms in a conventional, patriarchal society. People are expected to conform to standard obligations, and leaving these duties unfulfilled can have severe ramifications on a person’s life. Through the characters of Yeong-hye and her unnamed brother-in-law, Han shows that when people attempt to break, subvert, or escape the conventions of their society, they are often trapped, ostracized, or sometimes even destroyed by that society.

Yeong-hye’s decision to become a vegetarian and her choice not to wear a **bra** are both seen as an affront to her society. The more she disobeys her husband, Mr. Cheong, and attempts to hold on to these increasingly unconventional choices, the more that society tries to get her to conform to its standards—until she is essentially expelled from it entirely. Early in the story, Mr. Cheong comments on the fact that Yeong-hye doesn’t enjoy wearing a bra. She only becomes more adamant about this odd choice, to the point where she chooses not to wear a bra to an important dinner with Mr. Cheong’s co-workers. This dinner

exposes the rigidity of societal expectations, as they cruelly remark on Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism and also judge her when they see the outline of her breasts. She is then ignored by the other women, and Mr. Cheong subsequently worries that he might be fired for Yeong-hye’s decision to disregard social norms—providing the first example of how breaking those norms is punished by others in society. Yeong-hye then starts to subvert social obligations more fully, choosing to disobey her parents and husband and violently harming herself in an attempt to escape their attempts to make her obey them and eat **meat**. As a result, she is hospitalized, her husband divorces her, and her parents want nothing to do with her. Thus, breaking social contracts begins to isolate her completely from others. In the hospital, when Yeong-hye stops eating, she violently tries to prevent the doctors from force-feeding her. This results in her being moved to a different hospital for surgery to keep her alive. The society refuses to allow her to escape from it entirely, even through death. Han thus exposes how the society is bent on keeping Yeong-hye alive but also ensuring that she can play no part in it, effectively rendering her life meaningless.

Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law similarly yearns to break social conventions and norms, both in his art and in his relationship with Yeong-hye. But like Yeong-hye, the brother-in-law ends up being completely rejected and destroyed by the societal norms he is trying to escape. Even the structure of the brother-in-law’s life before his obsession with Yeong-hye is unconventional. His wife, Yeong-hye’s sister In-hye, is both the primary breadwinner and the primary homemaker, allowing him to pursue his work as a video artist. Other people, including Mr. Cheong, judge the brother-in-law severely for these choices. Thus, it’s clear that exhibiting any unconventional behavior automatically gains a kind of negative connotation in the novel’s society. The brother-in-law’s disregard for convention only becomes more pronounced throughout the novel, as he becomes obsessed with a birthmark that Yeong-hye has and is intent upon filming her naked and painted in **flowers**. As his obsession grows, he chooses to paint himself as well, and record himself and Yeong-hye having sex. But the crossing of this relational boundary is met with both judgment and exclusion. When In-hye finds the video of them having sex, she calls the police on her husband, arguing that her sister is not mentally well and that he took advantage of her. The brother-in-law attempts to jump over the railing of the art studio, but a paramedic saves him. Thus, like Yeong-hye, he is not permitted to escape the society whose boundaries have been so limiting to him. The brother-in-law is then forced to convince a judge that he is not mentally ill, then remain in jail for months. Afterward, he immediately goes into hiding and In-hye refuses to let him have any contact with their son, Ji-woo. Thus, like Yeong-hye, the brother-in-law is not entitled to escape the rigid society, even through death. Instead, he is severely punished for trying to break its social conventions.

At the end of the novel, In-hye continues to try to care for Yeong-hye, even as In-hye's life crumbles around her. She acknowledges what her husband and sister have done: "smashed through all the boundaries," of society. She even recognizes the appeal of doing so; as she accompanies Yeong-hye to yet another hospital at the end of the novel, she wonders if "Perhaps this is all a kind of dream [...] I have dreams too, you know. Dreams...and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over..." In-hye thus finds some peace in the idea that the limitations of reality and society are not real and that they might be escapable at any time. Yet she quickly turns back on this idea, saying, "but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we?" In-hye does not come to an easy answer, but seems to understand that society does not forgive the people who dwell on dreams and allow themselves to slip out of the ideals enforced by society, as Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law tried to do.



MISUNDERSTANDING, ISOLATION, AND MADNESS

Throughout the novel, characters try to grasp each other's drives, particularly Yeong-hye's decisions and the brother-in-law's motives. Characters are constantly attempting to understand what others might be thinking and feeling, but they are often unsuccessful, and as a result feel isolated from one another. Han sketches a complicated relationship among this lack of understanding, isolation, and madness. Both Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law are misunderstood and labeled as crazy by those around them, but it's actually this ostracization that causes them to go mad. The novel thus argues that misunderstanding tends to lead to isolation and, in turn, causes people to construct fantasy worlds and escape reality, spurring them to devolve into the very madness that others suspected was already there.

The idea that lack of understanding can lead to others labeling a person mad is seen most clearly in Yeong-hye, as she makes decisions that are utterly incomprehensible to Mr. Cheong, In-hye, and Yeong-hye's brother-in-law. Each of them comments on the fact that they cannot possibly understand Yeong-hye's decisions, and frequently label her as insane due to this fact. At the beginning of the novel, when Yeong-hye first starts to throw away the **meat** in their home, Mr. Cheong yells at her, "You're insane!" At this juncture, the worst that Yeong-hye has done is simply telling her husband that she doesn't want to cook or eat meat anymore. Yet Mr. Cheong views this only from his own perspective, and seems unable or unwilling to understand what might have caused Yeong-hye to act this way. Thus, he labels her insane due to his own lack of comprehension. Mr. Cheong's declaration enables others to understand Yeong-hye in the same way, as he alerts her family that she is acting strangely. This devolves into a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: the more Yeong-hye's family tries to tell her

that she is acting absurd, the more drastically she acts. When Yeong-hye starts refusing to eat altogether, In-hye starts to view her sister "like a total stranger," and tells her, "You're actually insane." This lack of recognition of her sister's thoughts and actions is what drives her to label her Yeong-hye as mad. Yeong-hye acknowledges the fact that other people don't recognize her thoughts, and this is why people treat her so unkindly. When she tries to explain what's wrong, she tells In-hye that "No one can understand me...the doctors, the nurses, they're all the same...they don't even try to understand...they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles." She sees that the doctors don't understand her, and that's why they are treating her as if she has no agency and is mentally ill. Granted, Yeong-hye's self-harm and refusal to eat are extreme actions, but the fact that she feels like the doctors aren't attempting to understand the root cause of her troubles only makes her feel more isolated and drives her to further radical action.

The relationship between the brother-in-law and In-hye is similarly filled with isolation and lack of understanding, and In-hye's inability to recognize his thoughts and motivations is what ultimately leads her to believe that he is mad as well. Han makes a point of establishing the relationship between In-hye and her husband as an unhappy one. When the brother-in-law arrives home late one night, Han describes how he examines In-hye's face "the way one might look at a complete stranger." This strangeness between them is significant, as it appears that they have no way of understanding each other's thoughts and feelings. In-hye recognizes this as well. She wonders, "had she ever really understood her husband's true nature, bound up as it was with that seemingly impenetrable silence?" This lack of understanding in their relationship is what causes the brother-in-law to seek fulfillment in his fantasies and eventual affair with Yeong-hye, and is ultimately why In-hye labels him mad and calls emergency services on him—even though it is possible that Yeong-hye might be perfectly aware and willing in parts of the affair. As a result, the brother-in-law tries to throw himself off the railing, proving how an assumption of madness can sometimes be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ultimately, In-hye herself has a tenuous relationship with sanity at the end of the book because she, too, feels isolated and as though no one understands her. In-hye relays a story about how her husband had goaded her into sex after coming home very late one evening, and the next morning she wanted to "stab herself in the eyes with her chopsticks, or pour the boiling water from the kettle over her head." The lack of connection she has with her husband only becomes fodder for her own violent and self-destructive impulses. In-hye also describes the "pain and insomnia" she experiences from having to care for Yeong-hye, but which no one else seems to understand. She feels herself pulled in by Yeong-hye's own madness, thinking "If it hadn't been for Ji-woo—if it hadn't been for the sense of

responsibility she felt toward him—perhaps she too might have relinquished her grip on that thread,” meaning the thread of sanity and reality. Thus, In-hye’s desire to connect with her sister and to find comfort, almost drives her to share in her sister’s madness.

The Vegetarian ultimately begs the question of whether it is possible to truly know another person’s feelings. Even among characters who are supposed to know each other very well—namely, spouses and siblings—often fail to conceive of one another’s perspectives. These failings not only lead to them falsely labeling one another as insane, but is ironically what drives one another to insanity. Thus, the book argues that anyone can be steps away from madness when their feelings of being misunderstood become insurmountable.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MEAT

 Meat represents human capacity for violence against which Yeong-hye is rebelling. This is most notably seen in the first section of the book, in which Yeong-hye envisions herself killing some kind of animal and eating its meat raw. These dreams become allegories for the fact that Yeong-hye wants to avoid being abused and sexually consumed by people like her father and her husband Mr. Cheong, but also the fact that she wants to avoid causing this same kind of harm. Subsequently, she decides to throw all of the meat out of the house in an effort to live a less harmful life. There are also several instances in which dead animals (like the dog and the white bird in the first section) become symbolic of Yeong-hye herself as she worries about falling victim to the same fate. Yeong-hye’s desire over the course of the novel to live more like a **plant** than an animal can also be understood as a desire to lead a more innocent life.

PLANTS

 In contrast to **meat**, which represents violence, plants (mostly flowers and trees) come to represent Yeong-hye’s desire to lead an innocent life. After Yeong-hye throws out all of the meat in the house, she tries to live a more passive and gentle life. This is what leads her to want to model for the brother-in-law; the fact that he wants to paint her in flowers attract her, as she feels connected to the gentleness and innocence of that symbol. The irony of the flowers, however, is that the brother-in-law sees them as a symbol of sexuality, and he violates her innocence by having sex with her even when she cries and asks him to stop.

This incident is perhaps what leads Yeong-hye to want to become more like a tree, with its strength and passivity. This desire becomes embodied as she tries to act like a tree, and calls the trees “brothers and sisters.” The fact that Yeong-hye is never fully able to achieve the life of a plant, however, illuminates Han’s argument that human beings can never be truly innocent.



BRAS

Bras represent Yeong-hye’s resistance to societal conventions and boundaries. Even before she becomes a vegetarian, Yeong-hye explains to Mr. Cheong that bras are restrictive and make her uncomfortable, and she often chooses not to wear one, much to his dismay. He views this as the only unconventional thing about her, and it becomes a source of frustration in their marriage. Gradually, however, her choice not to wear a bra goes hand in hand with her vegetarianism, as both become points of contention when she and Mr. Cheong attend a dinner with his co-workers, who are appalled that they can see the outline of her nipples and are taken aback by her unwillingness to share in their meal. The co-workers, who become stand-ins for society at large, do not understand her insistence on maintaining her agency and breaking their conventions, and so they gradually ostracize her.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hogarth edition of *The Vegetarian* published in 2007.

Chapter 1: The Vegetarian Quotes

 Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way.

Related Characters: Mr. Cheong (speaker), In-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye’s Husband, Yeong-hye

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This opening sentence of *The Vegetarian* sets the scene for the upheaval to come. First, it is worth noting the perspective of the passage: despite the fact that Yeong-hye is arguably the main character and the instigator of the action in *The Vegetarian*, Han almost never reveals her thoughts or tells the story from her perspective (the largest exceptions are the snippets of the dreams that Yeong-hye

recounts in this first section). Instead, the first section is narrated by Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong; the second from the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law; and the third from the perspective of Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye. Thus, Han is able to maintain Yeong-hye's inscrutability, which is one of the reasons that people believe she is insane. Without access to her thoughts and motivations, others deeply misunderstand Yeong-hye.

Additionally, Mr. Cheong's statement establishes the conventionality of their lives and the "unremarkable" existence that they lead. This implies the eventual conflict between them following Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian, as she starts to break those conventions. With this first section, Han demonstrates how society (including Mr. Cheong) ostracizes those who break its conventions.

 "Have you lost your mind? Why on earth are you throwing all this stuff out?"

I hurriedly stumbled my way through the plastic bags and grabbed her wrist, trying to pry the bags from her grip. Stunned to find her fiercely tugging back against me, I almost faltered for a moment, but my outrage soon gave me the strength to overpower her.

Related Characters: Mr. Cheong (speaker), Yeong-hye

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Cheong wakes up to find that Yeong-hye is throwing away all of the meat instead of waking him up and helping him get ready for work, he is outraged. This exchange exposes the fragility of their relationship and some of the factors that have prompted Yeong-hye's rebellion. Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian stems from a desire to pursue bodily autonomy and escape the violence of humanity. But Mr. Cheong tramples both of these wishes as he attempts to subvert his wife's agency while also violently wrenching away the meat from her.

Mr. Cheong's questioning of Yeong-hye's sanity also touches on another of Han's primary themes: how, when a person misunderstands another and is unable to access their thoughts and motivations, it is easier to treat the person as insane than it is to dig deeper and figure out why

they are behaving the way that they are. Mr. Cheong does not actually attempt to understand what Yeong-hye is doing or why she is doing it; he simply treats her as though the action of throwing out the meat they have is akin to derangement. Mr. Cheong's unwillingness and inability to understand Yeong-hye only leads her to take more extreme actions when it comes to her body, and she actually devolves into the madness that he assumes in her.

 *In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood.*

Related Characters: Yeong-hye (speaker), Mr. Cheong

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, which takes place in a snippet of the first of Yeong-hye's dreams, is one of the rare times in which Han writes from Yeong-hye's perspective. Han uses fragments and visceral, chaotic phrases to convey the confusion and dream state that Yeong-hye is experiencing. Though Han doesn't reveal the full story, she implies that Yeong-hye has brutally killed an animal and is eating the meat raw. This first dream is the reason that Yeong-hye decides to give up consuming meat, as she grows haunted by the violence and the killing that is inherent in the act of eating meat. Thus, she decides to give up eating meat in the hope of leading a less vicious existence. This is further emphasized when Yeong-hye realizes that eating meat does not stop these dreams entirely, which is why she decides to live as a plant in order to pursue a more gentle, innocent life.

 "I couldn't let those things stay in the fridge. It wouldn't be right."

How on earth could she be so self-centered? I stared at her lowered eyes, her expression of cool self-possession. The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing. Who would have thought she could be so unreasonable?

Related Characters: Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

The night following Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian, Mr. Cheong questions her decision and asks her why she decided to throw all of the meat out of their home. She first tries to describe the violent dream that she had, and then she tries to elaborate that eating meat doesn't feel morally sound to her. Yeong-hye's decision is a way of asserting her own autonomy, and gaining control over her body. Mr. Cheong, on the other hand, views her decision not as a choice for her moral and mental well-being, but instead as a deliberate act of defiance against himself.

Mr. Cheong's reaction is somewhat shocking, given the fact that Yeong-hye's decision is a seemingly unremarkable one: she simply wishes to stop eating meat. Yet to Mr. Cheong, this is an act of rebellion against the conventions that they have established and that exist in society. Mr. Cheong goes so far as to view her as obstinate, selfish, and disobedient, despite the fact that this is the only way in which she has ever asserted agency in their relationship. As a result, Mr. Cheong begins to distance himself from Yeong-hye and ultimately casts her aside, just as the rest of society does.

 "What's the problem, exactly?"

"I'm tired."

"Well then, that means you need to eat some meat. That's why you don't have any energy anymore, right? You didn't used to be like this, after all."

"Actually..."

"What?"

"...it's the smell."

"The smell?"

"The meat smell. Your body smells of meat."

Related Characters: Yeong-hye, Mr. Cheong (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

A few months after Yeong-hye decides to become a vegetarian, Mr. Cheong notices that she is avoiding having sex with him, and she finally admits to being repulsed by the smell of meat coming from his body. This assertion links the two kinds of bodily autonomies for which Yeong-hye yearns: she wants to determine what she does and does not put into her body by refusing to eat meat, and also regains control over her sexuality (or attempts to) by choosing not to have sex with Mr. Cheong.

This statement not only implies what Yeong-hye is rejecting, but also what she is searching for. She no longer wants to be a part of the violent and consumptive aspects of human life, and instead she is searching for the innocence inherent in vegetation and plant life. The connection between Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and her refusal to have sex with her husband only infuriates him further, as he, too, views these actions simply as acts of rebellion against him.

 By the time the twelve magnificent courses were over, my wife had eaten nothing but salad and kimchi, and a little bit of squash porridge. She hadn't even touched the sticky-rice porridge, as they had used a special recipe involving beef stock to give it a rich, luxurious taste. Gradually, the other guests learned to ignore her presence and the conversation started to flow again.

Related Characters: Mr. Cheong (speaker), Yeong-hye

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Some months after Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian, she and Mr. Cheong are invited to a dinner with his boss and co-workers. At the dinner, she announces that she is a vegetarian, and refuses to eat many of the 12 courses, which are served family style. Her unusual diet, in combination with the fact that she does not tactfully engage with the others' questions about her vegetarianism, makes them uncomfortable, and they gradually stop talking to her and even Mr. Cheong. Thus, Han demonstrates how Yeong-hye's choice to break a variety of social conventions eventually leads to her being cast out from it. Not only is she unable to share in the meal, which can often be a means of communal bonding, but the other guests gradually exclude her from the conversation as well.

This episode highlights one of the smaller ways in which Yeong-hye is rejected from society, but it foreshadows how she will ultimately become completely exiled from it when she is forced to remain at the psychiatric hospital in the third section of the book. Just like with the brother-in-law, society punishes those who break its conventions.

“Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. Hand, foot, tongue, gaze, all weapons from which nothing is safe. But not my breasts. With my round breasts, I’m okay. Still okay. So why do they keep on shrinking? Not even round anymore. Why? Why am I changing like this? Why are my edges all sharpening—what I am going to gouge?”

Related Characters: Yeong-hye (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

A few days before Yeong-hye’s family gathers to intervene about her new diet, Yeong-hye continues to have dreams and visions as she slips in and out of consciousness for a few minutes at a time. This is another rare excerpt of Yeong-hye’s thoughts as she recognizes the harsh changes her body is undergoing now that she is not eating meat. Han reveals the concerns that Yeong-hye has about her body are not about her weight loss, but instead about the potential violence that comes from having a human body. As she dreams of herself killing and harming other beings, she values more and more the parts of herself that she knows cannot cause harm.

Thus, Han demonstrates that Yeong-hye’s primary concern in being a vegetarian is in attempting to avoid the harm that humans cause in consuming meat. Yeong-hye’s arc over the course of the three sections illustrates her attempt to become more plantlike, which in turn represents an attempt to escape the destructive nature of humanity.

“Though In-hye sprang at him and held him by the waist, in the instant that the force of the slap had knocked my wife’s mouth open he’d managed to jam the pork in. As soon as the strength in Yeong-ho’s arms was visibly exhausted, my wife growled and spat out the meat. An animal cry of distress burst from her lips.”

Related Characters: Mr. Cheong (speaker), Yeong-ho, In-hye, Yeong-hye’s Father, Yeong-hye

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

When Yeong-hye’s family gathers to stage a kind of intervention for her, they grow more and more frustrated with her obstinacy. Her father eventually takes the extreme action of forcing Mr. Cheong and her brother Yeong-ho to hold her arms as he hits her and jams the piece of pork into her mouth. This shocking action demonstrates how and why Yeong-hye might feel that she has no sense of autonomy and why she might be trying to reclaim it: her family feels that they have a right to decide what she does and does not do with her body, even for something as seemingly small as eating meat. Yeong-hye feels so violated by this act that she ultimately chooses to slit her wrists in front of them in order to get them to stop, in an attempt to regain control over her own body as an act of resistance.

It is also worth noting that this is exactly the kind of violence that Yeong-hye is attempting to avoid or subvert as a result of not eating meat. She is disgusted by human capacity for violence and fears both being consumed and being turned into a violent animal herself, as exhibited by her “animal cry of distress.” This fear is what prompts her to pursue a life that mimics the passivity of plants.

Chapter 2: Mongolian Mark Quotes

“In precisely that moment he was struck by the image of a blue flower on a woman’s buttocks, its petals opening outward. In his mind, the fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex, their naked bodies completely covered with painted flowers. The causality linking these two things was so clear, so obvious, as to be somehow beyond comprehension, and thus it became etched into his mind.”

Related Characters: In-hye, Yeong-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye’s Husband

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: **Page Number:** 65**Explanation and Analysis**

One day, when In-hye is giving Ji-woo a bath, she casually remarks that Yeong-hye still has a Mongolian mark. The brother-in-law becomes obsessed with this image as it becomes tied to sexuality within his artwork and also inspires his attraction to Yeong-hye. The obsession with these images in his artwork is what prompts him to break common social boundaries as he concocts a plan to film Yeong-hye and a man having sex together, and eventually for him to seduce her.

Yeong-hye's Mongolian mark sets up a dichotomy between Yeong-hye's view of herself and the brother-in-law's view of her. While throughout this section she tries to gain the passivity of a plant, he connects the floral mark to sex. This becomes the crux of the conflict between them, as he tries to consume her and take advantage of her sexually. Yeong-hye, on the other hand, is trying to achieve opposite goals: she is trying to regain some control over her body; she wants to avoid the violence of humanity; and she is working to attain innocence and gentleness.

When it was all over, she was crying. He couldn't tell what these tears meant—pain, pleasure, passion, disgust, or some inscrutable loneliness that she would have been no more able to explain than he would have been to understand. He didn't know.

Related Characters: Ji-woo, Yeong-hye, In-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband**Related Themes:** **Page Number:** 87**Explanation and Analysis**

After visiting Yeong-hye, the brother-in-law returns to bed, filled with lust. He has sex with In-hye, imagining that she is her sister and covering her mouth to keep her from speaking. Passages like this, which are littered throughout the second section of the novel, establish the brother-in-law and In-hye's relationship as a cold and distant one. Even in their moments of intimacy, they are unable to connect with and understand one another. This prompts their isolation, and is what drives each of them (particularly the brother-in-

law) to try to create a means of escape for them.

For the brother-in-law, he literally begins to construct fantasies (even as they have sex) in order to feel less isolated. For In-hye, this is presumably the incident (or a similar one) which prompts her trip up to the mountain, which she recounts much later in the section from her perspective. Hearing it from her side, readers recognize that she, too, was close to giving up on reality and leaving her husband and child behind. These two perspectives combined demonstrate how anyone can be pushed to the boundary of reality simply by these feelings of being misunderstood and loneliness.

Seeing how utterly baffled he was, she laughed quietly. A melancholic laugh. "Didn't I say you wouldn't understand?"

He couldn't ask: in that case, why did you use to bare your breasts to the sunlight, like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize? Was that because of a dream too?

Related Characters: Yeong-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband**Related Themes:**  **Related Symbols:** **Page Number:** 96**Explanation and Analysis**

After the brother-in-law paints Yeong-hye for the first time and asks her to model, the two go to a vegetarian restaurant. There, he asks her why she decided to become a vegetarian, and when she responds that her choice was prompted by a dream, she laughs at the fact that he doesn't understand. This is another instance in which two characters try to connect with one another, and yet continue to be met with isolation, feeling that they do not understand each other.

The irony here, however, is that the brother-in-law perhaps understands Yeong-hye better than anyone else does, recognizing that she is intent on becoming a plantlike being and becoming more and more alien to animals. He even recognizes that her wish to take off her clothes is yet another symptom of this desire. Yet the brother-in-law is afraid or unable to express how he thinks of her. This lack of recognition is what causes each of them to escape into a kind of fantasy: for Yeong-hye, the escape into the life of a

plant as she grows more and more attracted to the flowers on her body; for the brother-in-law, the escape into sexual desires and visions.

 She rubbed her neck against J's like they were two birds caressing, almost as if she'd seen his sketches and knew exactly what he wanted her to do.

Related Characters: The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband, J, Yeong-hye

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

When the brother-in-law asks J to film with Yeong-hye, he starts to direct them in poses. Even though he only addresses J and tells him how to touch Yeong-hye, he is surprised to see Yeong-hye take the initiative. This moment is significant for two reasons: it shows Yeong-hye's genuine desire and agency in the situation. Even though most of the time she is passive, she is both in control of her body and in control of how it is being viewed. This is another instance of her attempts to assert agency over herself and her body.

This passage is also significant because of its contrast to the opening of the section. The brother-in-law attends a dance piece after seeing a poster of people covered in flowers, but is frustrated by the fact that it isn't exactly what he had been envisioning in his sketches. Here, his description of the fact that Yeong-hye knows exactly what his sketches look like combat the feelings of isolation. It is this that provides the connection between him and Yeong-hye, as she makes him feel understood and therefore less mad.

 He stood up, stepped close to her and pushed her still-fevered body up against the wall. But when he pressed his lips firmly against hers, probing with his tongue, she shoved him away again.

"Why shouldn't we? Because I'm your brother-in-law?"

"No, it's nothing to do with that."

"Then why not? Come on, you said you were all wet!" She was silent. "Did you fancy that kid?"

"It wasn't him, it was the flowers ..."

Related Characters: Yeong-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband (speaker), In-hye, J

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

After J storms out of the shoot with Yeong-hye, Yeong-hye admits that she is "all wet." Overcome with desire, the brother-in-law starts to pull her pants down but she says no and adamantly shoves him away. This action continues to affirm Yeong-hye's agency in the situation. Even though In-hye later believes that the brother-in-law took advantage of an unwell Yeong-hye, the situation is more complicated than that in reality. Yeong-hye has no problem dictating the terms of her own consent to the brother-in-law, who decides to oblige and seeks out another artist friend named P in order to paint flowers on himself.

The exchange is additionally notable for two other reasons: first, it continues to track Yeong-hye's arc towards wanting to become a plant, providing a midway point between only wanting to eat plants in the first section and wanting to literally become a tree in the third section. Here, her desire is for the beauty of the flowers and the passivity and gentleness that they represent. For both Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law, the exchange also demonstrates the way in which they have shirked off all convention, as they seem not to care that the brother-in-law is married to Yeong-hye's sister, nor does either of them consider the pain that this might cause her.

 He held her at the waist and stroked the mark, wishing that he could share it with her, that it could be seared onto his skin like a brand. *I want to swallow you, have you melt into me and flow through my veins.*

"Will the dreams stop now?" she muttered, her voice barely audible.

"Dreams? Ah, the face...that's right, you said it was a face, no?" he said, feeling drowsiness slowly creep through his body.

"What kind of face? Whose face?"

Related Characters: The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband, Yeong-hye (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: **Page Number:** 119-120**Explanation and Analysis**

After the brother-in-law returns to the art studio covered in painted flowers, he and Yeong-hye have sex several times (during which, at the end, Yeong-hye starts to cry and protest for the brother-in-law to stop). Afterwards, they start to talk, though the difference in what they are thinking about and the way in which they are unable to connect with one another foreshadows their eventual disconnection. The brother-in-law sees Yeong-hye as a sexual object and something that he can literally consume, as he demonstrates here. He is unable to understand the dreams that she has attempted to explain to him.

For Yeong-hye's part, she is not attempting to be sexual whatsoever. Her actions have sprung from a desire to be connected with the flowers, so that her violent dreams might stop. This also includes a desire for the innocent, gentle, and passive life of a flower. The fact that even these two characters cannot fully understand each other, even though of all the characters they understand each other the most, hints at their deep isolation and the near future in which people deem them mad because they are so misunderstood.

 He had to rush out onto the veranda, now, and throw himself over the railing against which she was leaning. He would fall down three floors and smash his head to pieces.

Related Characters: In-hye, Yeong-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband**Related Themes:**  **Page Number:** 119**Explanation and Analysis**

When In-hye discovers the video of her husband and sister having sex, she decides to call the police on him, assuming that he is not in his right mind and that he has taken advantage of Yeong-hye, whom she believes to also be unwell. This demonstrates two key arguments that Han makes within *The Vegetarian*. The first is the complicated relationship between misunderstanding, isolation, and madness: the brother-in-law feels both isolated and misunderstood, as In-hye doesn't comprehend the full situation, nor does she try to listen to the brother-in-law's

thoughts and motivations. Because of this, he attempts to kill himself, proving how an assumption of madness can in fact spur people to mad acts.

Additionally, this passage and the rest of the brother-in-law's arc affirms the harsh punishment that society doles out to those who break its conventions. Neither Yeong-hye nor the brother-in-law are able to abscond society, even through death. Yeong-hye is transferred to a psychiatric ward and kept alive at all costs, and the brother-in-law is prevented from killing himself by a paramedic and is forced to go into hiding, never to see his family again. In each case, they can find neither satisfactory lives within society's boundaries, nor are they able to escape it completely.

Chapter 3: Flaming Trees Quotes

 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...

Related Characters: Yeong-hye (speaker), In-hye**Related Themes:** **Related Symbols:** **Page Number:** 131**Explanation and Analysis**

At the beginning of the third section, In-hye reveals that Yeong-hye had recently escaped the psychiatric hospital in which she had been staying, and was later found in the forest acting like a tree. After being informed that Yeong-hye has been found, In-hye has a vision of Yeong-hye doing handstands and acting like a tree. It is unclear whether this is a memory at the time, or whether this is something that Yeong-hye does and says later on, as she does grow obsessed with doing handstands and speaks about the trees as brothers and sisters.

In this way, Han demonstrates how Yeong-hye's desire to forego the violence, rage, and aggression of human life becomes even more embodied. Her wish for an innocent life has progressed from not eating meat or harming other beings, to becoming passive like a flower, and then to literally acting as though she is transforming into a tree. She does constant handstands, and later, she tells In-hye that she does not need to eat food, that she only needs sunlight

to live. But the fact that her attempts to embody a tree prove futile, furthers Han's argument that humanity is inherently destructive and that it is impossible to maintain one's innocence as a part of the species.

“No one can understand me...the doctors, the nurses, they're all the same...they don't even try to understand...they just force me to take medication, and stab me with needles.”

Related Characters: Yeong-hye (speaker), In-hye

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

As In-hye sits with a sleeping Yeong-hye, she recalls a visit in which Yeong-hye had asked for In-hye's help to get out of the psychiatric ward. In-hye had told her that she could get Yeong-hye released—but only if she promised to eat. Yeong-hye, in response, asserted that In-hye was just like the doctors, and that everyone misunderstands her. Han again reinforces the way in which being misunderstood allows others to label a person as mad, as In-hye and the doctors do with Yeong-hye. Of course, it's possible that if Yeong-hye felt like others understood her better, she might not be forced to take such drastic actions of self-harm.

Additionally, Yeong-hye is simply trying to escape the very violence that the doctors continue to force on her. Being stabbed with needles and forced to take medication (and, at the end of this section, being force-fed food through a tube in her nose) only highlights humanity's violence against even those it claims to want to protect.

“I don't know you,” she muttered, tightening her grip on the receiver, which she'd hung back in the cradle but was still clutching. “So there's no need for us to forgive each other. Because I don't know you.”

Related Characters: In-hye (speaker), Ji-woo, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

As In-hye sits with Yeong-hye, she recalls how her husband had recently called her, asking if he could see Ji-woo. In-hye hung up without speaking to him, but affirmed that her husband was a stranger to her, talking to the already hung up receiver. The end of the brother-in-law's arc here emphasizes two of Han's major themes: first, how those who break society's conventions, as the brother-in-law did in his provocative art and his affair with Yeong-hye, are often outcast from it. The brother-in-law had completely given up his responsibilities as a father, and thus was punished by being prevented from taking on that responsibility when he wanted it.

Additionally, In-hye's statements reinforce the idea that being misunderstood can lead to severe isolation. Her acknowledgement that she doesn't know him—in essence saying that she doesn't understand him or his actions—leads her to separate herself and Ji-woo from him completely.

“It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like. And even that doesn't turn out how you wanted.”

Related Characters: In-hye (speaker), Yeong-hye

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

In the climax of the book, In-hye watches as doctors insert a tube into Yeong-hye's nose in order to force-feed her, then pull out a syringe to try and tranquilize her so that she doesn't throw up the food, which she is prone to doing. In-hye is extremely disturbed watching this, and tries to prevent them from doing so. Yeong-hye becomes violent and blood gushes out of her mouth, forcing her to be transferred to a general hospital. In the bathroom before they leave, In-hye becomes sick and thinks to herself that Yeong-hye deserves to have agency over her body.

In-hye's thoughts here serve as Han's own argument throughout the course of the book. Yeong-hye's body has been a tool for her own agency, resistance, and refuge throughout the book, and particularly in situations in which she feels like she is losing control. Even though Yeong-hye is taking extreme actions and even sometimes trying to harm herself, Han argues that she should be able to maintain agency over her own body, as it is the only area in which she can do so.

If her husband and Yeong-hye hadn't smashed through all the boundaries, if everything hadn't splintered apart, then perhaps she was the one who would have broken down, and if she'd let that happen, if she'd let go of the thread, she might never have found it again.

Related Characters: Ji-woo, Yeong-hye, The Brother-in-Law / In-hye's Husband, In-hye

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

While thinking back on various visits to Yeong-hye and the events in her life that led to this moment, In-hye has a realization about Yeong-hye, her husband, and herself. She sees, first, the way that Yeong-hye and her husband both subverted social expectations during their lives, and perhaps even recognizes the appeal of doing so when she thinks about how easy it had been for her to travel up the mountain and abandon Ji-woo, if only for a short while. As a result of their nonconformity, however, the brother-in-law and Yeong-hye were completely destroyed by society, which is the reason that In-hye had been spurred to return, recognizing the danger in letting the thread go, as she describes here.

Second, In-hye also understands here how close she herself is to going mad, driven by isolation and the feeling of being misunderstood. This is despite the fact that of the characters, In-hye always seemed the sanest and most responsible. By showing that even In-hye can experience these feelings, Han argues that anyone can be steps away from madness when these feelings become overwhelming.

"Perhaps this is all a kind of dream." She bows her head.

But then, as though suddenly struck by something, she brings her mouth right up to Yeong-hye's ear and carries on speaking, forming the words carefully, one by one. "I have dreams too, you know. Dreams...and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over...but surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we?"

Related Characters: In-hye (speaker), Yeong-hye

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of the novel, In-hye rides with Yeong-hye in the ambulance to go to another hospital. In-hye confesses to Yeong-hye that she could also allow herself to get caught up in dreams. In her thoughts, In-hye at first finds some peace in the idea that a person could escape reality and turn their back on societal limitations. Yet she quickly backtracks, ultimately affirming that it is better to live in reality—likely due to seeing the condition that her sister is in. In-hye recognizes the negative and even dire consequences of being completely absorbed by one's dreams.

In-hye doesn't come to an easy answer or resolution, but the book seems to argue that the rigidity of society can be cruel, but often it is inescapable. It is better to try to work within it and find some happiness in life, rather than try to rebel against it and to be continually punished by it as Yeong-hye is.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE VEGETARIAN

The book's first section is narrated by Mr. Cheong, who opens with the statement that before his wife, Yeong-hye, turned vegetarian, she was "completely unremarkable in every way." He goes on to say that there was never any special attraction between them, but nor were there any drawbacks to their relationship, and so they decided to get married. He confesses that he had always been inclined toward "the middle course in life," at school, at work, and in his marriage.

Mr. Cheong continues to describe Yeong-hye's personality: she is a woman of few words, never acts out, diligently cooks for him, and reads for her only hobby. Mr. Cheong does comment on the one odd thing about her: that she doesn't like wearing a bra, because it makes her uncomfortable. He reproaches her for this, noting that people can see she isn't wearing one, but she is adamant that it is constricting and he wouldn't understand what it is like.

In all other aspects, Mr. Cheong explains, their marriage runs smoothly as they are approaching the five-year mark. One day in February, however, he wakes up just before dawn to find Yeong-hye standing in the kitchen in her nightclothes. He asks what's wrong, but she ignores him, staring at the fridge. When he angrily puts a hand on her shoulder, she simply says, "I had a dream." She returns to the bedroom and he follows, lying back in the bed. He is aware that she is awake, but for some reason finds himself unable to touch her or comfort her.

The next day, Mr. Cheong wakes up very late for work, and finds that instead of preparing him breakfast, Yeong-hye is throwing away all the **meat** in the house. He yells at her for not waking him up, and wrenches the trash bags away from her. She again repeats that she had a dream. He asks her if she's "lost [her] mind" and calls her insane, noticing that she hasn't ironed his shirt and that she isn't helping him get ready as he hurries out the door to work.

Mr. Cheong's opening description of what his life was like with Yeong-hye establishes the conventionality of their existence, which sets up the eventual conflict between them when she begins to break those conventions. It is also notable that in a story centering on Yeong-hye, readers see her only through the eyes of other characters, which highlights her lack of agency.



The fact that Yeong-hye doesn't like wearing a bra is an early example of both her desire to break social conventions (which Mr. Cheong is clearly opposed to, as he's concerned with what other people will think) and a way for her to be in control of her body.



Yeong-hye's dreams, about which Han gives more details throughout the chapter, serve as an allegory for her wanting to maintain agency over herself and not be consumed or abused. Her resistance is foreshadowed here in the fact that she does not respond to her husband at first. Additionally, Han begins to introduce the idea of misunderstanding and isolation, as Mr. Cheong's inability to understand Yeong-hye results in his inability to reach out to her or connect with her.



All Yeong-hye has done is decided to throw out the meat in their house, yet Mr. Cheong's inability to understand her motivations or thoughts results in his labeling her insane. His view of her as mad is not only due to the fact that he cannot comprehend her thoughts or feelings, but also because he sees her breaking the social obligations he believes she should be fulfilling.



The perspective shifts to Yeong-hye, inside of her nightmare, which is described in fragmented sentences. She has visions of “long bamboo sticks strung with great-blood-red gashes of meat,” and “blood in [her] mouth, blood soaked clothes sucked onto [her] skin.” She describes pushing “that red raw mass into [her] mouth.” She has a vision of her own face as she chews on the meat, and feels that the face is unfamiliar to her.

That evening, Yeong-hye prepares a meatless meal. Mr. Cheong is furious that she threw out all of the **meat** because of a “ridiculous dream.” He asks her to make fried eggs, but she says that she has thrown out the eggs and milk, saying it “wouldn’t be right” to keep that stuff in the house. Mr. Cheong is aghast at how “selfish” and “unreasonable” she is being, noting that this is a side of her he has never seen.

Mr. Cheong asks Yeong-hye if there will never be **meat** in the house again. Yeong-hye explains that he usually only has breakfast in the house, and he can survive without meat for one meal. Mr. Cheong is astonished, thinking, “it was as if she thought that this ridiculous decision of hers was something completely rational and appropriate.” He recognizes that there are reasons for being vegetarian, like health reasons or for weight loss, but in Yeong-hye he views the decision as “sheer obstinacy” to go against his wishes.

Mr. Cheong also finds Yeong-hye’s decision strange because she’s never been a picky eater and has always been skillful in the kitchen, marinating and snipping **meat** with “deft and practiced” movements. Now, she is presenting him with “a sorry excuse for a meal.” He can’t understand what she is doing, and thinks to himself that he “didn’t have a clue when it came to this woman.”

A few months pass. Yeong-hye sticks to her vegetarianism and loses weight rapidly. She also becomes less attentive toward Mr. Cheong and starts to avoid having sex with him. When he asks her what the problem is, she tells him she’s tired. When he suggests that she eat **meat** to have more energy, she confesses the real reason: she tells him that his body “smells of meat.”

Yeong-hye’s dreams are the only sequences in which readers have first-person accounts from Yeong-hye, though they are fragmented and opaque. The violence and graphic nature of the images clearly serve as her motivation for becoming a vegetarian, and also become an allegory for her desire not to live the violent and consumptive life of a human being.



Again, Mr. Cheong can only view the situation from his perspective, and has little to no desire to explore why Yeong-hye’s dreams prompted her to act in this way. This lack of connection or understanding is what causes Mr. Cheong to believe that Yeong-hye is completely unknowable to him, and completely mad.



Mr. Cheong again refers to Yeong-hye’s decision as “ridiculous” without even fully understanding why she is doing what she is doing. Yet, he does seem to understand a piece of Yeong-hye’s motivation: that she is trying to maintain some agency over herself and her life by choosing what she does and doesn’t consume.



Mr. Cheong views Yeong-hye’s choice as ironic because of her past history with meat. Yet it is precisely because she has been so casual about consuming other living beings in the past that Yeong-hye decides to distance herself from these violent actions and ways of living.



In declaring that Mr. Cheong smells like meat, and that this is the reason that Yeong-hye doesn’t want to have sex with him, Yeong-hye ties her sexual autonomy with her vegetarianism. Both are ways for her to regain bodily autonomy, and both attempt to avoid the consumption of other beings inherent in human life.



Mr. Cheong starts to worry that Yeong-hye “might genuinely be going soft in the head.” She becomes unable to sleep, seemingly haunted by the dreams she is having. He does not ask her about the dreams after hearing about the first one. He tries to reassure himself that she is sane and nothing is wrong because her family does not have a history of mental illness. He refuses to “indulge in introspection” because he believes the situation has nothing to do with him.

Yeong-hye, from her own perspective, recounts the morning before she had the first dream. She had gotten squeamish mincing **meat**, and when Mr. Cheong became angry at her for squirming, she accidentally cut her finger. Later that day, he yelled at her because a chip off the knife had ended up inside one of the dishes she prepared. He scolded her, raging about what could have happened if he’d swallowed the chip.

Soon after, Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye go to a company dinner with Mr. Cheong’s co-workers—the first time his boss has invited them. Mr. Cheong insists that Yeong-hye puts on makeup and impresses upon her that the dinner has to go well. When he arrives, however, he sees she is not wearing a bra, and is extremely embarrassed when he sees his boss’s wife’s “curiosity, astonishment, and contempt” at his wife’s lack of a bra. As the dinner begins, Mr. Cheong also notes that Yeong-hye doesn’t try to engage in the other women’s pleasantries.

When the food is brought out family-style, a waiter tries to serve Yeong-hye soup, but Yeong-hye stops the waiter and tells him that she does not eat **meat**. The others are astonished, and start to discuss vegetarianism—questioning whether it’s possible to live without eating meat, and arguing how vegetarianism goes against human nature.

Mr. Cheong’s boss’s wife asks if Yeong-hye became a vegetarian for a reason like health or religion. Mr. Cheong cuts in, saying that Yeong-hye suffered from gastroenteritis and couldn’t sleep, so a dietitian suggested she become a vegetarian. The others only then understand, and one comments that they’d “hate to share a meal with someone who considers eating **meat** repulsive.” Yeong-hye sits in silence.

Even as Mr. Cheong tries to reassure himself that Yeong-hye is sane, it is clear that he worries otherwise. His belief that she is “soft in the head,” however, is clearly exacerbated by the fact that he makes little to no effort in trying to understand Yeong-hye. He wrongfully assumes that he has nothing to do with her actions, unable to see things from a perspective that is not his own.



This episode provides some background on how Yeong-hye’s dreams arose. In accidentally cutting herself, Yeong-hye recognizes that like these animals, she, too, is made of meat and is often viewed as a commodity for Mr. Cheong to consume and abuse.



The episode of the dinner becomes the first primary example of characters being forced to adhere to social conventions. Han illustrates some of the standards to which Yeong-hye is expected to adhere: putting on makeup, wearing bras, and engaging in lighthearted conversation. Her unwillingness to do these things is another form of resistance, but one for which she is punished by society.



Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism is another means of her breaking social convention, as it means that she is unable to participate in the meal in the same way that the others are able to. For this, she is inherently criticized in their conversation as they provide all the reasons one shouldn’t be a vegetarian.



Although Mr. Cheong tries to make Yeong-hye’s decision more socially acceptable to the inquiring group, the dinner guests’ continued criticism makes it clear that they do not approve of Yeong-hye’s choices.



Twelve courses are served, and Yeong-hye has little to eat, as most of the dishes contain **meat** or fish. The others gradually ignore her. At the end of the dinner, Yeong-hye barely eats dessert, and the boss's wife registers concern that Yeong-hye hasn't eaten anything. Yeong-hye simply stares in response. Mr. Cheong is shocked to see that she doesn't have the grace to look embarrassed or respond, and he thinks that she has become "utterly unknowable."

That evening, after Yeong-hye goes to bed, Mr. Cheong decides to phone Yeong-hye's mother. He tells her that Yeong-hye has become a vegetarian and has imposed the diet on him. Yeong-hye's mother is shocked that she would defy Mr. Cheong and agrees to call her daughter the next morning. Mr. Cheong then calls Yeong-hye's sister In-hye, who is equally astonished, apologizes for her sister's behavior, and resolves to call Yeong-hye as well.

Another of Yeong-hye's dreams follows: "Dreams of murder," she recounts. She dreams of metal striking a victim's head, and "violent acts perpetrated by night." She feels "intolerable loathing, so long suppressed" and a "shuddering, sordid, gruesome, brutal feeling." She worries that everything has started to feel unfamiliar.

Yeong-hye's mother and In-hye's calls have no effect on Yeong-hye. The next weekend, Yeong-hye's father calls, bellowing at her for disobeying Mr. Cheong. Yeong-hye puts down the phone without a word, and Mr. Cheong picks up to apologize. Yeong-hye's father says he is "ashamed" of Yeong-hye's behavior, which is unusual for Yeong-hye's father as he is a strict Vietnam War veteran. According to Yeong-hye, he had whipped her until she was 18.

The family schedules a get-together in June, which Mr. Cheong hopes will set Yeong-hye straight. In the meantime, Mr. Cheong becomes sexually frustrated. On nights when he would come home inebriated, he would pin Yeong-hye to the floor and tear off her clothes as she struggled. Once he entered her, she would simply lay there, face blank, staring at the ceiling. After each sexual encounter, Yeong-hye would act as if nothing had happened, but Mr. Cheong can't help but feel over the breakfast table that she feels bitter.

Han begins to introduce the idea that those who try to break social convention, like Yeong-hye, are soon ostracized from it—as is the case with Yeong-hye and the other dinner guests. Additionally, Mr. Cheong's thoughts continue to emphasize his lack of connection and understanding with his wife, which in turn leads to his belief that she has gone mad.



Yeong-hye's family's reaction demonstrates how they, too, see Yeong-hye's actions as a form of bodily resistance. They also see it as a poor reflection on the upbringing that they gave her as she breaks the conventions of being deferent to her husband.



Yeong-hye's dreams again illuminates some of her own thinking and motivation as she becomes frightened by her own capacity for violence, particularly as the suppressed loathing she describes seems to be directed at Mr. Cheong. The bloodier the dreams, the more she shies away from humanity and its associated violence.



Yeong-hye's father's actions again emphasize the fact that Yeong-hye is breaking social conventions through her actions, not only in her choice of diet but in her disobedience. It is also worth noting the violence that her father enacted on her as a child, which In-hye posits later as one of the roots of her decision to avoid perpetrating violence herself.



In attempting to prevent Mr. Cheong from raping her, Yeong-hye again attempts to assert some bodily autonomy—though this time through sexual autonomy, in addition to retaining her right to choose what she consumes. This only hardens her hatred of this kind of sexual consumption, and she continues to struggle each time he attempts to have sex with her. This is also one of the episodes that prompts Yeong-hye's desire for a more innocent life, which she finds in her connection to flowers and plants in the next section.



Three days before the family gathering, it is incredibly humid in Seoul, and when Mr. Cheong returns home from work, he finds that Yeong-hye is in the kitchen peeling potatoes—completely naked from the waist up. When he asks why she's taken her clothes off, she explains, "because it's hot." He grits his teeth, hoping she is joking, but she is not.

The narrative returns to Yeong-hye's dreams. She pictures throttling someone's throat, or jamming her fingers into someone's eye. She finds herself "flexing to kill." She is frustrated that she can't sleep without having these dreams, and slips in and out of consciousness, sleeping for five minutes at a time.

Yeong-hye thinks that she "can only trust [her] breasts now" because "nothing can be killed by them." She thinks all of her other body parts can cause harm, but her breasts are round and soft. She notices that they are shrinking, however. She wonders why all her edges are sharpening, concluding, "what am I going to gouge?"

At the family gathering at In-hye's apartment, In-hye and Yeong-hye's brother-in-law are introduced. Mr. Cheong describes how In-hye is the primary breadwinner in the family, managing a cosmetic store, and the primary homemaker, taking care of their young son, Ji-woo. Mr. Cheong envies the brother-in-law, who doesn't make any money and can "spend his whole life messing about with 'art.'" Mr. Cheong comments on In-hye's beauty in comparison to his wife's.

Mr. Cheong, In-hye, the brother-in-law, Yeong-hye's father and mother, and Yeong-hye's brother Yeong-ho all make pleasant conversation over lunch, but Yeong-hye doesn't touch her food and doesn't speak. At the end of lunch, Yeong-hye's father yells at her, and others quickly chime in to rebuke her behavior, noting how she is damaging her body from the weight loss.

Yeong-hye's mother brings in an assortment of dishes with **meat** and fish in them, insisting that Yeong-hye eat something and trying to put a piece of pork right in front of her mouth, to no avail. Yeong-hye's father then tries the same tactic, demanding that Yeong-hye obey her father and eat. She responds, "Father, I don't eat meat." He slaps her across the face and tells Mr. Cheong and Yeong-ho to grab Yeong-hye's arms. Yeong-hye's father picks up a piece of pork in his fingers and thrusts it toward her lips. Yeong-hye tightly seals her mouth closed.

This serves as yet another example of Yeong-hye's bodily autonomy, almost taunting Mr. Cheong as she simultaneously bares her breasts (which is both a breaking of social convention and later becomes tied to her life as a plant) but also continues to refuse to have sex with Mr. Cheong, dictating what she will and won't do with her body.



Yeong-hye reaffirms that she wants to avoid being consumed and violated, but she also wants to avoid being a perpetrator of violence, which is what prompts her to follow the more innocent life of a plant.



Yeong-hye's assessment of her breasts as the only part of her body that cannot cause harm reinforces the idea that she is desperate to avoid the violence that is haunting her dreams. The solution she finds is to become more and more passive and plant-like.



Han describes the other marriage in the story that will become central to it: that between In-hye and the brother-in-law. Mr. Cheong immediately establishes how the structure of their marriage, and the brother-in-law's job, breaks social convention.



Although Yeong-hye's family shares legitimate concern over Yeong-hye's weight loss, it is clear that their true issue is with her obstinacy and the means through which she is trying to assert resistance against them and her husband.



This episode—particularly the father's violence towards Yeong-hye—proves how her family feels as though they have the right to decide what Yeong-hye can and cannot do with her body, or what she can and cannot consume.



Yeong-ho and Mr. Cheong are slightly appalled at Yeong-hye's father's behavior, but they do not let go of Yeong-hye. Yeong-hye's father slaps her again, causing her mouth to gape open. He manages to jam the pork into her lips, but she screams and immediately spits out the **meat**, tearing herself away. She then picks up a fruit knife and slices her wrist open, blood spurting out. The brother-in-law grabs the knife and tries to stop the bleeding, picking up Yeong-hye in his arms and heading for the hospital.

Yeong-hye has a memory of herself at nine years old, when she was bitten by a dog. Yeong-hye's father then tied the dog to his motorcycle, and drove in circles with the dog following behind, wearing the dog to exhaustion until it was being dragged by the motorcycle, choking and dripping blood from its open mouth. That evening they had a feast with the **meat** of the dog. As Yeong-hye eats, she remembers the dog's eyes looking at her as she watched it die.

Yeong-hye is asleep in the hospital, now out of critical condition after being brought by Mr. Cheong and the brother-in-law. Yeong-ho, his wife In-hye, and Mr. Cheong are all watching her sleep. Yeong-ho's wife comments that Yeong-hye's father went too far, hitting her and force-feeding her. Mr. Cheong doesn't comment, only feeling intense disgust at his wife.

The next day, Mr. Cheong visits Yeong-hye at the hospital after work. Yeong-hye's mother also visits, and she gives Yeong-hye goat soup (which she tells Yeong-hye is herbal medicine). Yeong-hye is hesitant to drink it, but eventually agrees. She then says that she has to go to the bathroom, and Mr. Cheong can hear her making herself vomit in the bathroom. She then throws away the rest of the soup. Yeong-hye's mother starts to sob, seeing her daughter so emaciated, but Yeong-hye simply stares at her and gets back into bed.

Yeong-hye thinks that she doesn't know why "that woman" (her mother) is crying. She looks at her wrist, which she explains doesn't bother her; instead, she feels as though something is stuck in her solar plexus—there is too much **meat** lodged there. "Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny." Yeong-hye thinks that no one can help her, and that she wants to throw herself through the window.

It is precisely this kind of violence that the father enacts that Yeong-hye is trying to avoid in her vegetarian diet and her ultimate plant-like actions. The self-harm that she enacts here serves as another attempt at autonomy, as she does so not out of a desire to commit suicide but simply as a way to stop them from making her eat meat.



This episode sheds some light onto a potential root of Yeong-hye's newfound disgust with meat, as eating meat inherently represents the violent and unnatural death of another living being. In-hye later comments that Yeong-hye had been the only one subjected to their father's violence when they were growing up, and so she becomes connected to the dog in experiencing that violence.



Mr. Cheong's disgust with Yeong-hye makes it clear how little he understands his wife, and in essence is what dooms her further. The fact that no one understands her, and that her family is trying to force-feed her, is exactly what prompts her to more extreme actions like self-harm.



While Yeong-hye feels completely misunderstood and mislabeled as insane, it is clear that she, too, lacks some perspective on what her family and the others might be thinking or feeling. Rather than try to explain her motivations, she looks at her sobbing mother with a blank stare, completely without empathy, which only makes them less sympathetic towards her in turn.



Yeong-hye directly affirms that she wants a life free from this kind of violent consumption. What her actions have only implied is now made clear in her thoughts: that she is haunted by the meat that she has consumed in the past and the violence that being a human represents. She also directly connects the feeling of being misunderstood with the desire to kill herself. This becomes true of the brother in law as well.



Yeong-hye's mother leaves the ward, and Mr. Cheong lies down on a side bed to sleep next to Yeong-hye. He dreams that he is killing someone, thrusting a knife into their stomach and peeling off the flesh and muscle from their bones. But when he wakes up, he explains, he can't remember who he had killed.

Mr. Cheong's dreams, like Yeong-hye's, demonstrate the human capacity for violence. Although he doesn't remember who his victim is, it is clear that it is related to Yeong-hye. This also justifies Yeong-hye's fears of consumption and abuse at the hands of Mr. Cheong, which is one of the things that sparked Yeong-hye's vegetarianism and desire for autonomy in the first place.



When Mr. Cheong wakes up, Yeong-hye has gone, and has pulled out her IV. He searches through the hospital, and ultimately finds her sitting on a bench by the fountain, her breasts exposed and hospital gown placed on her knees. She is licking at her stitched wrist. Mr. Cheong thinks to himself, "I do not know that woman."

Yeong-hye's choice to expose her breasts to the sun is ultimately described by the brother-in-law as "photosynthesizing," which connects her to the innocence of vegetation. Mr. Cheong only sees the chasm of understanding between them, and this misunderstanding of her behavior is what causes him to label her mad and drives her to that madness.



Mr. Cheong approaches Yeong-hye, and she smiles faintly at him. He asks what she's doing, and covers her body with the gown. She explains that she was hot. Then, Mr. Cheong notices something in her right hand: a small white bird, with tooth marks as though it had been bitten by a predator, streaked with blood.

Like the dog in the memory that Yeong-hye recounts, Han draws a clear connection between Yeong-hye and the bird that she finds. Both are victims of the violence and predation of fellow species, as Yeong-hye is being driven to madness and self-harm by her family and Mr. Cheong.



CHAPTER 2: MONGOLIAN MARK

This section is narrated by the brother-in-law, who is attending a dance piece two years later. He is disappointed by the performance: the poster presented men and women displaying their naked backs, covered in painted **flowers**—an image that he's been obsessed with for over a year. But the performance hadn't been what he was looking for: it had been too overtly sexual. He is looking for something "quieter, deeper, more private."

The brother-in-law knows he should go home to Ji-woo and In-hye, but he instead goes to the studio that he and other video artists use. He sits at the computer and opens his sketchbook, which is filled with images of naked bodies brilliantly decorated with **flowers**, having sex. He notes that the images aren't provocative like pornography; their bodies have "a stillness and solidity that counterbalanced the arousing nature of the situation."

As the perspective shifts to the brother-in-law, Han opens the section focusing on a different theme of her novel: that of breaking convention. As a video artist, the brother-in-law is inherently subverting a conventional life, but his obsession sinks him deeper and deeper into a place in which he will violate convention.



The innocence and gentleness normally associated with flowers is juxtaposed with the sexual content of the sketches that the brother-in-law has made. This will mirror the juxtaposition between himself and Yeong-hye, as he searches for sexual satisfaction and consumption and she longs for innocence.



The images had come to the brother-in-law from a chance conversation: he had noted Ji-woo still had a Mongolian mark while giving him a bath. In-hye had remarked that Yeong-hye still had a Mongolian mark when she was 20, and possibly still has it. In that moment, the brother-in-law was struck by the image of a blue **flower** on a woman's buttocks. He began to draw a man with his arms around a woman's neck as the man thrust himself into her, and became aroused. He knew that the woman was Yeong-hye, and that he was the man in the image.

The brother-in-law had quickly become obsessed with the image, and back in the studio he decides that the only thing he can do is make the image a reality. He resolves to rent a studio from a friend, install lighting, and get body paints. He wonders how he might convince Yeong-hye to participate, and quickly realizes that the video he planned would likely be categorized as pornography. In the studio, another artist, J, comes in, and the brother-in-law leaves. On the way out, he sees his reflection and is struck by an urge to smash in his own face.

When the brother-in-law returns home, he finds In-hye, exhausted. She had gone back to a full-time job at work, and only asks him to keep Sundays free to spend time with her and Ji-woo. The brother-in-law has been avoiding her because he can only see Yeong-hye's face when he looks at her. He prefers Yeong-hye's eyes, her voice, her clothes. He knows that his wife might be called more beautiful, but to the brother-in-law Yeong-hye radiates energy "like a tree that grows in the wilderness."

In-hye tells him how overloaded she's been, as she hadn't heard from the brother-in-law all day, Ji-woo has a cold, and she's worried about Yeong-hye, who was just served divorce papers. The brother-in-law asks if he should call Yeong-hye, and In-hye is delighted by the prospect. He tells In-hye he will call her sister tomorrow. He then goes to the bathroom, and, having become aroused at the idea of seeing Yeong-hye, masturbates thinking about her.

It had been two years prior that Yeong-hye had cut herself. The brother-in-law is haunted by how she had screamed, and remembers carrying her and watching as she received medical treatment. He recalls wondering in that moment what her survival might mean, as attempting to take her own life had been a turning point. He thinks that all of the people in that room were "distant strangers, if not actual enemies" to her.

The flower-shaped mark is significant: for Yeong-hye, flowers and plants represent passivity, innocence, and a repudiation of human violence and consumption. The brother-in-law experiences the opposite effect, where the image of the flower arouses him and spurs him to action and consumption of her body.



Like Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law's desire for sexual consumption becomes another dimension in Yeong-hye's need for bodily autonomy. As the brother-in-law pursues this illicit relationship with Yeong-hye, she vacillates between assenting to that desire and attempting to maintain boundaries.



The brother-in-law makes an early connection between Yeong-hye and the trees, which becomes significant later when she aims to become a tree. It is also ironic that the brother-in-law considers Yeong-hye more attractive, as Mr. Cheong preferred In-hye. This hints at the emotional distance found within both couples, as they fail to understand each other.



The brother-in-law's sexual attraction to Yeong-hye also serves as another way in which he is eviscerating all social boundaries and limitations. Rather than fulfill his role as a husband or father, he starts to pursue someone completely inappropriate: his sister-in-law.



The brother-in-law recognizes the distance between Yeong-hye in her family and the gap in understanding that exists there. Yet he does not realize that he, too, does not fully understand Yeong-hye's motivations. While he characterizes Yeong-hye's actions as a suicide attempt, Han implies that it is more of an act of desperation and escape on Yeong-hye's part than a desire to kill herself.



When the brother-in-law took a car from the hospital, he had thought about his most recent video work, which was a montage of things he loathed: ads, clips from the news, ruined bridges, vagrants, and the tears of children. The images "had come to feel like a form of violence" as he thought about them and the reality they portrayed. He thought, "life revolted him," and he felt like he didn't know himself.

In the present, the brother-in-law calls Yeong-hye and tells her that In-hye is worried. He recalls how, after she had been hospitalized, Mr. Cheong had commented that she was "always so submissive." The brother-in-law asks if Yeong-hye is still on the line. She simply says that the water is boiling and says she has to go. Before she hangs up, the brother-in-law asks if he can come over. After a brief silence, she hangs up.

The brother-in-law drives to Yeong-hye's apartment, bringing some fruit for her to eat. When he arrives, he climbs to her apartment and realizes the door is unlocked. He walks in and looks around, and finds her coming out of the bathroom naked. She dresses calmly, and he stares at her, unable to look away from her body, which has rounded out now that she is eating more.

The brother-in-law apologizes for staring, but Yeong-hye says it's okay, explaining that she just likes being undressed when she's on her own. The brother-in-law gets an erection thinking about this and tries to conceal it. He suggests they eat the fruit he had brought, and they sit down and begin to talk. As she eats, she tells him that she recently had a job interview at a department store. Inside his mind the brother-in-law battles two desires: he reproaches himself for using her as a kind of "mental pornography," but as they talk he imagines licking her fingers and undressing her.

The brother-in-law invites Yeong-hye for a walk and buys her a shaved ice from a nearby café. He stares at her, filled with lust as she licks the ice. He then says he has a favor to ask of her, and asks if she will model for him. He tells her she'll have to take her clothes off, and he'll paint **flowers** on her body. He watches as her eyes flicker at what he is saying. He also asks her if she'll keep it a secret from In-hye. She gives no sign of assent, but does not refuse.

In this car ride, the brother-in-law also starts to recognize the violence inherent in humanity, and how day-to-day life sometimes feels like an assault in and of itself because of the viciousness, trauma, and consumption that characterizes human society.



The irony of Yeong-hye's submissiveness is that it is actually a part of her agency. She has chosen to be submissive all her life, and in this section continues to choose to be submissive. Yet as Han has shown, when she doesn't want to do something she can ferociously resist these actions.



Yeong-hye extends the agency she had been trying to exert when she still lived with Mr. Cheong, and continues to flout social barriers. She walks around naked not out of desire or for any sexual reason—simply that she is more comfortable that way and doesn't care for the societal limitations imposed upon her.



Han draws a barrier between the brother-in-law and Yeong-hye in this moment. Whereas Yeong-hye chooses to be naked not out of sexual desire but rather out of an innocent wish for bodily autonomy, the brother-in-law cannot help but view her actions through a sexual lens. Additionally, this is the first instance in which he ties sex to consumption (descriptions which will recur throughout this section) by connecting eating to sex.



This is another instance in which the brother-in-law connects consumption with sex and arousal, as he watches Yeong-hye eat the shaved ice. This is also where Yeong-hye's attraction to vegetation and plant life begins to come to the foreground, as she becomes excited at the idea only after he mentions painting flowers on her body.



The brother-in-law sets up his paints, lighting, and camcorder in a friend's studio. Close to 3 p.m., he walks to the train station to meet Yeong-hye there. He receives a call from In-hye telling him that she's running late at the store, and he'll have to pick up Ji-woo at 7 p.m. The brother-in-law tells her that he can only do so at 9 p.m., and she sighs and says she'll ask a neighbor to pick Ji-woo up.

A few nights prior, after going to see Yeong-hye, the brother-in-law had been overcome by desire and pulled In-hye to him in bed. He put her hand over his mouth and imagined that she was Yeong-hye as he pulled off her clothes. When they had finished, she was crying, though he wasn't sure exactly why. "You're scaring me," she had said, though the brother-in-law had already been half asleep when she said so. The next morning, she acted as though nothing had happened.

The brother-in-law brings Yeong-hye back from the station, and he instructs her to take off her clothes and lie on her stomach, which she does. He examines her body, noting that she does in fact still have the Mongolian mark. He thinks with surprise that there isn't anything sexual about it, that its blue-green hue is "more vegetal than sexual." He films as he paints red and orange **flowers** along her body.

When the brother-in-law is done painting Yeong-hye's backside, he realizes something about her body: "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." He thinks that she had "renounced the very life that her body represented."

Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law take a brief break, after which the brother-in-law resumes painting, this time on Yeong-hye's front. He paints huge yellow and white **flowers** on her breasts, orange lilies on her stomach, and golden petals over her thighs. He draws out the painting as long as possible, and she is unperturbed at the painting, lying calmly.

When the brother-in-law is finished, he asks Yeong-hye to lie on her side, and he films her body, panning and zooming the camera over her curves. When they are finished, the brother-in-law suggests that they eat something. Yeong-hye assents, then asks if the paint will come off with water. When the brother-in-law tells her she'll have to wash it a few times, she tells him she doesn't want it to come off.

Over the course of this section, the brother-in-law progressively breaks more and more social convention and shirks his obligations to his family. This is eventually one of the things that leads In-hye to completely give up on him, and to leave him without a family in retribution.



This episode of sexual violence mirrors the one that Mr. Cheong commits against Yeong-hye. In both of the women's cases, they are deeply affected by the nature of the violation that is committed against them, and Han emphasizes how they feel completely misunderstood or unseen by the men who are committing these sexual acts.



Yeong-hye's ties to plant life become more explicit here, as the brother-in-law uses the language of vegetation to describe her Mongolian mark. And even though he thinks of her sexually, he also makes a connection between Yeong-hye's relation to plant life and the fact that that life is an innocent one, not a sexual one.



The brother-in-law's acknowledgment that Yeong-hye is attempting to relinquish the sexuality of human life and gain the gentleness and innocence of a plant is made most explicit here. This may even be the moment in which Yeong-hye is most understood by another character, as the brother-in-law realizes that she is trying to avoid the bodily harm to which she had been subjected.



Yeong-hye's connection to plant life lies not only in the fact that she wants to retain innocence, but the fact that she does not want to cause harm. Throughout this section she assents to all of the brother-in-law's direction, a passivity that aligns herself with the life of an inactive plant.



Han starts to hint here at the idea that Yeong-hye not only wants to live life free from meat and avoid the violence of humanity, but Han also shows in Yeong-hye's arc that she wants to literally become a plant—which is why she does not want the flowers on her body to come off.



Yeong-hye and the brother-in-law find a Buddhist restaurant, which is more likely to have vegetarian food. During the meal, he asks her why she doesn't eat **meat**. She says he wouldn't understand: it's because of a dream she had. When he asks about the dream, she says only that she dreamed of a face, and seeing his bafflement, affirms that he wouldn't understand. The brother-in-law is unable to ask why she bares her breasts to the sun, "like some kind of mutant animal that had evolved to be able to photosynthesize?"

The brother-in-law drops Yeong-hye off at her building and thanks her. She smiles in response, and the brother-in-law thinks that maybe she is ordinary and he is "the crazy one." He aches with desire, realizing that even though he had spent many hours with her naked body, he had only touched her with the tip of his brush.

The brother-in-law picks up the sleeping Ji-woo from his neighbor at 9:20 p.m. and carries him to the apartment, though as soon as he lays him down in the bed he can hear Ji-woo sucking his thumb. In-hye calls, and says she'll be home at 11:00 p.m. The brother-in-law tells her that he needs to pop into the studio to finish something, assuring her that Ji-woo is sound asleep. In-hye starts to cry quietly, then says if he wants to go he should go—she'll close up the shop and head home. The brother-in-law feels a pang of guilt, but heads to the studio anyway.

The brother-in-law works through the next day, cutting the tapes into a five-minute movie that he labels "Mongolian Mark 1." He thinks about the next movie he wants to make, with a painted man and a woman having sex. He thinks that he can't be the man in the film, as he is too insecure about his aging body. He wonders who might agree to do it, and how Yeong-hye would react. He knows that he has reached a point of no return, but can't bring himself to stop.

The brother-in-law has a dream about Yeong-hye, lying in front of him, her whole body covered in green paint. He opens her legs, and when he enters her a green sap starts to flow from her vagina. When he pulls out of her, he sees his penis is stained green and his entire pelvic area is covered in a blackish sap.

In this conversation, Yeong-hye recognizes the fact that she is labeled mad because others do not understand her. She believes that if she were to fully reveal her dreams, she would only continue to be misunderstood—which is exactly what happened with Mr. Cheong. This only drives her to further isolate herself and feel that she is abnormal.



The brother-in-law is perhaps the only one that understands Yeong-hye—that she might not actually be crazy, and is simply misunderstood and trying to live a different kind of life. But the brother-in-law underscores how others can make one feel crazy, as he, too, feels misunderstood and mad as a result.



The brother-in-law continues to forego the social contract he made with his family. Not only does he choose to have dinner with Yeong-hye rather than pick up his son from nursery school, but he then proposes to leave his child home alone, forcing his wife to take on the responsibility.



The brother-in-law also knows he is crossing social boundaries in other ways, in trying to make a sexually explicit video featuring his sister-in-law. It is notable that he doesn't pause at being the man featured in the film because of his relation to her; it is only his insecurity in his body that makes him uneasy, demonstrating his complete disregard for social mores.



The brother-in-law's dreams also tie Yeong-hye to the plant that she is becoming increasingly like. The black and green saps seem to symbolize how he is tainted by his sexual desire and how it will ultimately provide his downfall.



The next day, the brother-in-law calls Yeong-hye again, asking if she's washed the paint off. She says she hasn't, as it's stopping her dreams from coming, and hopes that if it comes off later he'll paint her again. The brother-in-law asks if she would come to the studio again tomorrow, telling her that there would be a man there too who would be painted naked. She agrees.

The brother-in-law calls In-hye, telling her that he'd be busy until the following night. She simply says, "I see. Well... don't work too hard." He wishes that she would scream at him, feeling her resignation suffocating him. But once his guilt passes, he calls J and tells him that he wants to show him what he's been working on.

When the brother-in-law shows J the tapes, J calls it the brother-in-law's best work. The brother-in-law then asks J if he would model for another video the next day. J is hesitant, but the next morning he agrees to be the model. J arrives at the studio, quite nervous, and Yeong-hye returns, still covered in **flowers**. The brother-in-law paints J, first in purple hydrangeas on his back, then on his front, with a large crimson flower surrounding J's penis. Yeong-hye sits and watches as the brother-in-law paints. The brother-in-law notices as he works that J's penis has stiffened.

When the brother-in-law has finished painting, Yeong-hye takes her clothes off once more. She and J kneel together, and she moves close to him without being asked. The brother-in-law turns on his camera, then tells J to sit Yeong-hye on his knees, and to start touching her. But before J can do anything, Yeong-hye starts to straddle him, then strokes him and cranes her neck around his. J's penis stiffens.

The brother-in-law continues to direct J and Yeong-hye, telling them to lie on top of each other. Yeong-hye gently pushes J down and slowly lies down on top of him. The brother-in-law continues filming; an immeasurable amount of time passes. The brother-in-law then asks hesitantly if they might have sex for real. Yeong-hye doesn't react, but J immediately gets up and pushes Yeong-hye away, saying he doesn't want to be a part of a porn film. The brother-in-law apologizes, then tells J simply to continue as he had been doing.

Han here gives some explanation as to why Yeong-hye is so drawn to the flowers painted on her body (and eventually on others). Because they stop her dreams from coming, they pull her away from the violence of humanity and shepherd her to the innocence of vegetation.



The brother-in-law continues to pull away from established social convention, foregoing his obligations as a husband and father in order to pursue this sexually transgressing artwork.



The brother-in-law continues to skirt the boundaries of accepted social convention as he asks for another artist's assistance in this sexually explicit film, particularly because he does not fully reveal to J or to Yeong-hye what his intentions are with the film. This is what ultimately causes J to criticize him and which causes society as a whole to turn on him.



While In-hye ultimately assumes that Yeong-hye had no agency over the process of making these films, Han here implies otherwise. Even though the brother-in-law only directs J, Yeong-hye is clearly very in control of her own bodily autonomy and is the person driving the physicality of the situation.



Yeong-hye continues to assert herself over the course of the film, showing how she is using her sexuality to maintain control of her own body. It is clear that at any point she could simply refuse to do what the brother-in-law wants (as J does here, turned off by the transgressive nature of what he is doing and the fact that society looks down upon these kinds of films).



J continues, but his and Yeong-hye's sexual tension has dissipated, and J's movements are forced. The brother-in-law is frustrated: he can see that Yeong-hye's body is "flushed with desire," and he feels sure that she would have had sex if J had agreed. The brother-in-law gives one last direction, for J to make Yeong-hye lie down on her stomach and for him to pose behind her. J gets up, refusing to do any more. He dresses quickly and leaves.

After J leaves, the brother-in-law apologizes to Yeong-hye. She starts to laugh as she dresses; when he asks why, she replies, "Because I'm all wet." The brother-in-law immediately rushes to her and starts to pull her pants back down. She shoves him away and says no. When he asks why, she says that she only wanted to do it because of the **flowers** on J's body. The brother-in-law asks if she would have sex with him if he painted himself. She laughs, "as if limits and boundaries no longer held any meaning for her."

The brother-in-law quickly drives to a former girlfriend's apartment, a fellow artist he refers to as "P." All the while, he continues to think, "I wish I were dead. So die" to himself as he races along the highway. He meets up with P and explains what he wants, showing her his sketches. P paints **flowers** along his whole body. When she finishes, she gives him a quick kiss goodbye. The brother-in-law feels as though he were about to cry, but he can't tell whether it is because of the relationship they once shared, or "fear of the boundary he [is] soon intending to cross."

The brother-in-law returns to his studio, where Yeong-hye is waiting naked. Forgetting the lighting and the camcorder, he lays her down "with a snarl," stripping off his clothes and immediately pushing her legs open and entering her. He hears a "constant panting sound, as if from a wild animal"—before realizing the sounds are coming from him. He comes immediately.

The brother-in-law apologizes; their sex had been very one-sided and hadn't lasted five minutes. Yeong-hye turns on the light so she can see him, and starts stroking the **flowers** on his chest. The brother-in-law pulls away, then sets up the lighting and the camcorder. He asks her to lie down, and she does so. He lowers himself on top of her, thrusting into her from behind, just as he had imagined in his sketches. As they have sex, Yeong-hye bursts into tears. The brother-in-law gets up and switches off the camcorder. When her tears subside, he lays her back down on the sheet. In their final minutes of sex she gnashes her teeth, screams, and yells "stop." At the end, she cries once more.

The irony of this situation is that Yeong-hye views her connection to the flowers as a very innocent one, yet there is a deep sexual desire born of her connection to those flowers. Additionally, for J, the brother-in-law's desire to flout social norms becomes too much for him, whereas Yeong-hye, like the brother-in-law, takes no issue with crossing these boundaries.



Yeong-hye again affirms her own bodily autonomy in revealing her sexual desire, and in asserting that her desire was borne only from the flowers. The brother-in-law's thoughts concerning Yeong-hye here also demonstrate his recognition that like him, she is not put off by social limits or boundaries. This will ultimately become the downfall of both of these characters.



The brother-in-law's mantra of wishing to die illustrates that even he understands how, like Yeong-hye, he no longer wishes to live within the world's limitations and boundaries. He knows that he is soon to subvert them entirely and cross the boundary of what is considered sane, which is why he is overcome with emotion.



Han contrasts Yeong-hye, who has been described with plant-related phrases, with the brother-in-law, who is described like a wild animal here. Yeong-hye's passivity in this sexual encounter continues to tie her to innocence and vegetation, while the brother-in-law's animalism ties him to violence.



Even though the brother-in-law criticized Mr. Cheong, the brother-in-law is shown to want to consume Yeong-hye and be as sexually violent towards her as Mr. Cheong was. Yeong-hye's desire only stems from her connection to the flowers that the brother-in-law has painted, again showing her connection to vegetation. Additionally, Yeong-hye's tears likely stem from this deprivation of innocence and again, her lack of bodily autonomy in the situation.



As dawn approaches, the brother-in-law licks Yeong-hye's Mongolian mark. He thinks that he wants to swallow Yeong-hye. She asks if her dreams will stop. She explains that she thought the dreams were related to eating **meat**, that becoming a vegetarian would stop the faces from returning. She says now that she knows the face is inside her own stomach. The brother-in-law doesn't understand what Yeong-hye's saying, and he plunges into sleep.

When the brother-in-law wakes up at 1 p.m., Yeong-hye is still asleep. He puts on pants, then realizes that the camcorder is gone. He looks around the studio, and sees In-hye sitting there with the camcorder. She tells him that she hadn't heard from him or Yeong-hye, so she thought to stop by the studio. She fights to conceal her emotion as she explains that she saw them asleep naked in the studio, then took the camcorder and watched the tape.

The brother-in-law puts on a shirt as he tries to explain, but In-hye stops him and tells him that she's called emergency services, as both he and Yeong-hye are clearly in need of medical treatment. She asks how he could do this when Yeong-hye clearly isn't well. Just then, Yeong-hye gets up and walks out onto the veranda, opening her legs and showing her breasts to the sun. The brother-in-law thinks about throwing himself over the railing and falling three floors down, but he is "rooted to the spot," staring only at "the blazing **flower** that was her body."

Even though the brother-in-law tries to understand Yeong-hye's thoughts and motivations, it is clear that he, too, misunderstands her. For the brother-in-law, the images of the flowers are tied to sexual arousal and desire, whereas for Yeong-hye, the flowers represent a desire for gentleness and innocence. This misunderstanding only plunges them into further isolation.



The discovery of the brother-in-law's tape leads to his being completely outcasted from society, as he is forced to deal with the consequences of breaking social conventions and the taboo of having sex with his sister-in-law and making a pornographic art film.



In-hye's lack of understanding of the brother-in-law's thought process and motivation is what prompts her to believe that he is mentally unwell. Even though Yeong-hye was somewhat complicit in the affair (though later wanted to stop), In-hye assumes that she is completely insane and incapable of having bodily autonomy. In-hye's call to emergency services only separates isolates them even further, and prompts the brother-in-law to want to kill himself, demonstrating how an assumption of madness can be a self-fulfilling prophecy.



CHAPTER 3: FLAMING TREES

The final section is narrated by In-hye. Two years later, In-hye is traveling to the psychiatric hospital where Yeong-hye now lives. A few months earlier, Yeong-hye had gone missing during the hour in which patients are allowed to take walks. The staff had scoured the nearby mountains, and one nurse was able to find Yeong-hye in an isolated spot deep in the woods, standing "stock-still and soaked with rain as if she herself were one of the glistening **trees**."

In-hye had been taking care of Ji-woo all day, as he had been running a fever for three days. At night, after receiving the call that Yeong-hye had been found, In-hye continues to care for him, holding a wet cloth to his forehead all night. As she does so, she has a vision of Yeong-hye drenched in rain, standing among the **trees**. When she finally feels Ji-woo's forehead has cooled, she curls up on the couch to sleep. She dreams of Yeong-hye doing a handstand, imagining that leaves are growing out of her body and roots are growing out of her hands.

In the final section of the book, Yeong-hye slips even further from humanity as she rebels against its violence. Her desire for a plant-like life becomes more literal and embodied as she tries to act as though she is a tree. This is also another way in which Yeong-hye asserts her agency; as In-hye acknowledges at the end of the book, it should be a person's decision what to do with their body.



In-hye is contrasted with her sister, and with her husband, in the fact that she continues to adhere to a conventional life and aims to fulfill social obligations like caring for her son and for her sister. Yeong-hye, on the other hand, has broken social conventions, and has been completely removed from and punished by the society that she is trying to escape.



The narrative flashes forward to In-hye walking from the bus stop to the psychiatric hospital. As she walks, In-hye thinks about her sister growing up. Yeong-hye had grown more and more reserved as she grew; In-hye even thinks that “there were times when she seemed like a total stranger.” She thinks, too, that this had been true of her husband: “in certain respects they were both baffling to her in exactly the same way.” She wonders if she had ever truly understood her husband.

In-hye recalls the day she first met her husband. He had come into her shop, completely worn out and looking for shaving lotion. She was drawn to his defenselessness and asked him to lunch. She had wanted to take care of him, but even after they were married she found that he was perpetually worn out. She was never sure of the source of her affection for him, and was never sure of his feelings for her.

In-hye found over their marriage that her husband respected her and was kind, but that his true love was reserved for his artwork. Once, after Ji-woo’s first birthday, he filmed Ji-woo just beginning to walk and had an idea for a film: creating an animation in which butterflies flew from Ji-woo’s every footprint. But the video never became a reality. In-hye’s husband was so dedicated to his own work that Ji-woo rarely saw him, so much so that Ji-woo often asked if there was a dad in the family. After the incident with Yeong-hye, In-hye would tell him there was not.

In-hye arrives at the hospital, noticing an old **tree** in the front garden that glinted on sunny days. She closes her eyes and sees Yeong-hye’s face overlaid on the tree as she waits for the doctor to meet her. She is rarely able to sleep, and sometimes goes into the bathroom and sits in the bathtub with her clothes on, as her husband once had. Feeling the coziness of the tub, she thinks that he might not have been so incomprehensible after all.

In-hye thinks of how everything fell apart after Yeong-hye became a vegetarian, and what she could have done to prevent everything from dissolving: she should have stopped her father from force-feeding Yeong-hye, or picked up the fruit knife, or dissuaded Mr. Cheong from casting Yeong-hye aside, or prevented her husband from taking advantage of her. She thinks that what her husband had done was unforgiveable.

In-hye’s thoughts return to the theme of misunderstanding and madness. She begins to recognize the complicated relationship between these two ideas, wondering if her sister and her husband truly were insane, or whether she just simply never understood them and their intentions.



As In-hye describes her and her husband’s relationship, their misunderstanding becomes clearer. The fact that they were never truly sure of their affection for one another drove their isolation, and only made them more prone to misunderstand each other.



Again, Han emphasizes the difference between In-hye and the other primary characters of the novel. In-hye continues to fulfill her obligations as a mother and wife, whereas her husband’s connection to his family was always fleeting. The brother-in-law’s life as an artist was an unconventional one, and ultimately one that shirked his responsibilities to his family, which is why he is ultimately forced out of his family.



Overlaying Yeong-hye’s face on the tree demonstrates In-hye’s understanding of her sister’s connection to plant life; she, too, starts to envision her sister as an embodiment of a tree. In-hye also starts to tease apart some of her husband’s oddities. In these two realizations, In-hye begins to delve into their thoughts and feelings, which makes Yeong-hye and her husband more comprehensible and less insane.



As In-hye recounts the tragedies that have befallen Yeong-hye, her list illuminates the fact that Yeong-hye simply wanted to escape the violent abuse of her father and husband, and wished to regain some autonomy over her own body—both in what she consumed as a vegetarian, and in her sexuality with the incident with the brother-in-law.



In-hye recalls the day she found her husband and Yeong-hye. Paramedics had gotten Yeong-hye into a straitjacket while she struggled, biting them. Her husband had tried to throw himself over the railing, but a paramedic had gotten hold of him. As he was being dragged away, she saw not lust nor insanity in his eyes, but terror—just as In-hye was feeling.

In-hye's husband had been held in a police cell after the hospital confirmed he wasn't mentally ill. He experienced several months of lawsuits and inquiries, and then went into hiding. In-hye never saw him again. Yeong-hye had been sent back to a mental hospital. She refused to eat **meat**, and often pressed herself up against the window on sunny days to bare her breasts to the sun. None of the other members of her family made any further effort for Yeong-hye and even severed contact with In-hye. But she couldn't abandon Yeong-hye.

A doctor approaches In-hye and brings her to a consulting room. He tells her that Yeong-hye's is still refusing to eat, and explains that they will try to feed her intravenously. If it doesn't work, she will be transferred to a critical ward. In-hye asks to see her sister to try to reason with her. The doctor agrees to give her thirty minutes, but reiterates that 15-20% of anorexic patients starve to death. He tells her they still don't fully understand why she is refusing to eat, and none of the medicines they've given her are having any effect.

In-hye walks to Yeong-hye's room. She remembers the first time she brought Yeong-hye to the ward. Yeong-hye had been moved from another hospital, and In-hye worried that returning to social life would lead to a relapse for Yeong-hye. In-hye had also been upset with Yeong-hye, as she had been able to "shuck off social constraints," while In-hye had to remain responsible.

Yeong-hye had been in favor of coming to the psychiatric ward, and when she visited the ward for the first time, she had been excited by the **trees** all around the ward and remarked to In-hye that "all the trees of the world are like brothers and sisters." Now, as the nurse guides In-hye to Yeong-hye's room, the nurse says that Yeong-hye continues to try to pull out the IV, and so they have to use a tranquilizer on her.

Again, In-hye's misinterpretation of the situation caused her to believe that her husband was insane when she called the paramedics—an action which itself prompted his decision to try to kill himself. But In-hye recognizes ultimately that he is not insane—merely afraid, alone, and misunderstood.



The fates of the brother-in-law and Yeong-hye mirror one another. Both had broken social conventions, and had constructed fantasies in order to try to escape the society that judged them. Yet Han illustrates how society does not let them fully escape, even through death: instead it punishes them, ostracizes them, and even destroys them.



Yeong-hye's decision to stop eating entirely is an extension of her vegetarianism as she tries to forego the violence of humanity and attain life as a plant. It raises complex ethical questions of what constitutes sanity and whether a person deemed insane is still allowed autonomy over their body. The story ultimately asserts that everyone should have autonomy, even if it means wanting to die.



Even though In-hye expresses jealousy over the way that Yeong-hye has been able to break social conventions, ultimately she comes to the realization that it is more important to live in reality, seeing how Yeong-hye's attempts to escape society ultimately prove disastrous for her.



Yeong-hye continues to exhibit her desire to literally live as a plant, treating the trees as her family just as much as the actual sister who is taking care of her. Additionally, Yeong-hye's breaking of social conventions is punished both by being removed from it and by not being allowed to escape it fully through the death she seems to desire.



In-hye remembers another incident when she had visited Yeong-hye, and found her sister doing a handstand. A nurse told her she'd been doing so for 30 minutes already. In-hye had had to push her sister over to get her to talk, and when she showed her the food she'd brought, Yeong-hye had said that she didn't need to eat anymore, she only needs water, not food. She also tells her sister that in a dream, she discovered that **trees** stand upside-down, with their arms in the earth.

In the present, In-hye approaches Yeong-hye's room. She sees another patient, Hee-joo, on the way. Hee-joo is receiving treatment for alcoholism and hypomania, and she had helped take care of Yeong-hye in the hospital. Hee-joo tells In-hye that Yeong-hye has been vomiting blood, and her stomach acid is eating away at her stomach. She worries that Yeong-hye might die.

In-hye approaches Yeong-hye, who is completely emaciated and looks like an "overgrown child," having lost so much weight. In-hye finds burst veins on Yeong-hye everywhere, meaning that they have no place left to put an IV in. The only other option requires a dangerous surgical operation that would connect the IV to her arteries. They've tried to insert a tube into her nose, but Yeong-hye has resisted this method. They will try this one last time today, but if this fails, then Yeong-hye will be transferred to another hospital.

After Yeong-hye had been found in the forest, In-hye met with her doctor, who told her that Yeong-hye had become dehydrated and refused to take medicine. When In-hye asked her sister about this, Yeong-hye tells her that she is "not an animal anymore," and that all she needs is sunlight. In-hye asks Yeong-hye if she really thinks she's become a **tree**, and asks how a tree could talk. Yeong-hye smiles and agrees, saying soon her thoughts and words will disappear.

In-hye brings food to Yeong-hye. She wants to convince her to eat, but Yeong-hye appears to be asleep. In-hye recalls another visit, in which Yeong-hye asks her sister to try to get her out of the hospital, saying that people are always telling her to eat, but she doesn't like eating. She explains that the day before, after she ate, they gave her an injection to put her to sleep. In-hye tells Yeong-hye that she can help her get out if she promises to eat. Yeong-hye says that In-hye is the same as the doctors: they don't try to understand her, they just "force [her] to take medication, and stab [her] with needles." In-hye says that she is only afraid that Yeong-hye is going to die. Yeong-hye asks if it's such a bad thing to die.

As In-hye remembers several visits to the ward and to Yeong-hye, each one is marked by another incident proving Yeong-hye's desire to physically embody the life of a tree. In this case, it is illustrated both through her handstands and her assertion that she only needs sunlight and water to live. The arc from Yeong-hye's introduction implies that these are all extensions of her desire to escape the violence of humanity.



The description that Hee-joo provides of Yeong-hye's condition is again symbolic of Yeong-hye's desire to avert the violence of humanity. Whereas initially she had been haunted by the idea of consuming blood and meat, Yeong-hye is now expelling the blood that makes her human, and which distinguishes her from a plant.



Yeong-hye continues to assert agency over her body, to the point where she wants to stop eating entirely and refuses to continue to live. But the doctors' attempts to ensure that she survives, even against her wishes, illustrates the way in which society refuses to allow Yeong-hye to escape its boundaries entirely.



Yeong-hye again connects humanity to animalism, highlighting her desire to escape the viciousness and violence that comes with being a human. By contrast, becoming a plant or a tree allows Yeong-hye to retain innocence and enables her to transcend the burdens of thoughts, words, and obligations.



Even though Yeong-hye is trying to use her body as a last place of refuge from the society that has so abused her, others continue to refuse to allow her agency over her body. She also explains this as a misunderstanding, believing that the doctors only treat her as mad because they don't understand her desire to live as a plant, or to die. Han raises complicated questions about whether a desire to die in and of itself is a form of madness, or if Yeong-hye is simply made mad because she is treated that way.



In-hye thinks back to when she and Yeong-hye had gotten lost on a mountain as children, and Yeong-hye suggested they not go back to their family. In-hye had been relieved when she navigated them home, but Yeong-hye had not been. In-hye realizes, looking back, that Yeong-hye had been the only victim of their father's beatings, which is why she had been so hesitant to return to their home.

In-hye continues to consider what she could have done to prevent all of this from happening. She wonders again about her ex-husband, who has only called her once (around nine months ago) since they split, asking to see Ji-woo. She hung up on him and then uttered the words "I don't know you." She unplugged the phone, and after that, he never called again.

Back in the present, In-hye watches Yeong-hye sleeping and thinks about how Yeong-hye told her that she went to the forest because she heard someone calling her, and she stood there waiting for them. In-hye is jolted out of her memories by Hee-joo, who tells her that the doctors are saying Yeong-hye might die.

There is one memory In-hye has never told anyone. It had happened two years earlier, in the spring of the year when her husband had made the video of Yeong-hye. In-hye had bled from her vagina for close to a month. She was afraid of going to the hospital, worried that she had a serious disease. She became aware of how much of her life she had spent with her husband, devoid of happiness. She realized that she had never really lived.

When In-hye finally worked up the courage to go to the doctor, he removed a polyp stuck to her vaginal wall—nothing else was wrong with her, and the bleeding would stop in a few days. She was stunned that she had spent so much time worrying over so little. On the train platform heading home, she worried that she might throw herself in front of the train. As the next few months passed, she felt that wound drawing her back to madness.

In-hye's remembrance of this story shows the root of some of Yeong-hye's feelings, and how they had seemingly remained dormant for a long time. She had absorbed the violence of her father (also exhibited in the story of the dog from the first section) and wished to avoid the violence of human society.



The brother-in-law becomes similarly banished from society after trying to push and subvert its boundaries. After not fulfilling his obligations as a husband, In-hye refuses to allow him to remain a father figure to their child.



Yeong-hye's decision to go to the forest and the trees she heard calling her is contrasted with In-hye's own trip into the mountains, when she explains that the trees stood silently and unwelcomingly for her. Thus, while the trees serve as a means of understanding for Yeong-hye, they only make In-hye feel more isolated and repel her from the madness of wanting to join them.



In-hye's incident with her bleeding is another instance of feeling isolated. Having this medical issue puts into stark relief how isolated she has been in her life, not having received happiness from her partner. As she describes the result of this incident, it is clear that this drives her to the edge of sanity.



In-hye realizes that she has felt misunderstood not only by her husband, but also by herself. Realizing that she has been so wrong about her own body in some ways, like Yeong-hye, makes her want to reassert agency over it—even if it means causing herself harm.



After that summer had past, one night In-hye's husband arrived in In-hye's bed in the middle of the night after several days away and drew her close to him, telling her to "put up with" sex for a minute. She managed to put up with it, but felt both pain and shame afterward. As she walked around her apartment after her husband had fallen asleep, she felt that life was meaningless, and that she couldn't go on. She left the apartment and walked toward the dark mountains in the distance.

Back in the present, time passes of In-hye's 30 minutes, but Yeong-hye is still asleep. In-hye finally admits that Yeong-hye is actually insane. She wonders if she herself is on the same path that Yeong-hye took to madness, as she is now in the grip of deep pain and insomnia. She thinks that if it were not for Ji-woo, she might have gone mad as well. He is the only thing that can make her laugh, and when he sees that he makes her happy, he tries even more to please her. But when she is alone, she imagines Yeong-hye, the forest, and the **trees**, wishing that they would call to her and "take her life from her."

In-hye's 30 minutes is up, so she packs up the food that she brought for Yeong-hye. In-hye sees the doctor and tells him that it didn't seem like Yeong-hye was conscious. The doctor assures her that Yeong-hye is conscious, just so concentrated that she isn't aware of her surroundings. The doctor tells In-hye that they are going to try to feed Yeong-hye through her nose, and tells In-hye that if it's too much for her, she should step out of the room.

As Yeong-hye is carried into another ward, she thrashes wildly. In-hye is made to step out of the room, as a nurse tells her that Yeong-hye will be calmer without In-hye in there. In-hye watches from outside as the doctor tries to insert a tube into Yeong-hye's nose as the carers hold her still. Yeong-hye opens her mouth as wide as possible, closing her gullet so that the tube cannot go in. They try a second time, this time successfully. They start to send gruel through the tube, then get out a syringe to tranquilize Yeong-hye.

In-hye shakes off the nurse outside and runs into the room, but a carer grabs her to stop her from acting. Yeong-hye shrieks and shakes her head so violently that blood gushes out of the tube and Yeong-hye's mouth. The head nurse goes to tranquilize Yeong-hye, and In-hye bites the carer and begs them to stop as Yeong-hye vomits blood and convulses.

This incident is, if not the same as, then very similar to the one in which the brother-in-law has sex with In-hye while imagining she is Yeong-hye. Like Yeong-hye, In-hye is disgusted by the feeling of being consumed, by her own lack of agency, and by the isolation of a husband who either does not understand her or deliberately disregards her feelings. This isolation drives her near madness and literally to the boundaries of society.



In-hye recognizes Yeong-hye's madness because she doesn't fully understand her motivations. Yet she acknowledges that she, too, is vulnerable to this madness because of her own isolation. Han demonstrates how having societal obligations prevents In-hye from crossing fully into madness, because she cannot shirk her responsibilities in the way that her sister and husband have.



The fact that the doctors refuse to allow Yeong-hye to stop eating, even to the point where they strip all agency from her, demonstrates the way society cruelly punishes those that try to rebel against its conventions and boundaries. Yeong-hye is unable to escape society, even through death, despite her clear intentions to do so.



In this final act of defiance, Yeong-hye tries to maintain as much agency as she can. She uses her body as a tool of resistance against the doctors. At this point, opening her mouth in order to refuse to eat any food is the only source of refuge for this woman who has lost all other control over her body.



The irony of the incident is that, though Yeong-hye is trying to achieve a passive and innocent life, their actions cause both her and Yeong-hye to react extremely violently. This incident mirrors the force-feeding incident of the first section, in which Yeong-hye felt the only way to control her body was to harm herself.



The doctor tells In-hye that they need to transfer Yeong-hye to the main hospital to keep her alive. In-hye runs to the bathroom and vomits. She washes her face, thinking, "It's your body, you can treat it however you please. The only area where you're free to do just as you like." She looks at her face in the mirror and does not recognize herself. She is steeped in guilt, having admitted Yeong-hye to this ward.

In-hye and Yeong-hye sit in the ambulance. In-hye brushes Yeong-hye's hair with her fingers, which reminds her of Ji-woo. In-hye phones her neighbor and asks if she can watch Ji-woo. In-hye remembers how a long time ago, Ji-woo had told In-hye about a nightmare he'd had in which a white bird had told him that she was his mother as it flew away. He sobbed into her, upset. She tried to placate him, telling him that she was right there with him, and she had not changed into a white bird. But she still worries about his dream, as that had been the morning that she had climbed up the mountain away from him before deciding to retrace her steps and return.

In-hye assures herself, sitting in the ambulance, that it had just been a dream. But she feels guilty that even for a moment, she had thought to abandon Ji-woo. She wonders if her husband and Yeong-hye had not "smashed through all the boundaries," that perhaps she might have been the one to break down.

Yeong-hye opens her eyes, but says nothing. In-hye says to Yeong-hye, "Perhaps this is all a kind of dream." She admits that she has dreams, too, but says, "surely the dream isn't all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don't we?" She looks out the ambulance window, where the **trees** are glinting in the sunlight. She looks at them "As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something."

In-hye's thoughts express Han's argument over the entire course of the book: that the body is a source of control and agency for all people, and for Yeong-hye it has become the only place of refuge from a world that has consumed and abused her.



Han demonstrates how isolation and feeling misunderstood can drive any person to the edge of sanity, just as In-hye had following the incident in which her husband had essentially used her for sex. Additionally, Han ties Yeong-hye and In-hye together through the imaged of the white bird, which also appeared at the end of the first section. In that section, the white bird is an innocent victim that is consumed by a predator, as Yeong-hye had been; here, the white bird is a figure driven away from reality, as In-hye had been.



In-hye ties the brother-in-law and Yeong-hye together in the fact that they had both broken through the boundaries of social convention, but also in the fact that she believed both of them had gone completely mad, not fully recognizing their thoughts and feelings.



Ultimately, In-hye recognizes that even if the limitations of reality are escapable, and that one can slip away into fantasy, one quickly becomes ripped apart by the very reality they are trying to escape, just as Yeong-hye and her husband had. Her final act of protesting against the trees implies that she does not want to devolve into madness or throw off reality, and instead wants to wake up and live within it.





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