

Can it be concluded that characters are better judged by their actions, not their words?

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* presents a cast of characters whose actions speak louder than their words: the almost-silent-but-determined Yeong-hye; the artist who can't be faithful to his family; Yeong-hye's abusive parents who say they want to help but make their daughter's situation much worse after Yeong-hye's decision to turn vegetarian exposes fault lines between family members. In each case, Han Kang uses the contrast between speech and action to show that it's a person's actions that define them, not the words they say or intentions they profess to have.

Firstly, Han Kang crafts the almost wordless character of Yeong-hye to demonstrate that one's convictions are carried through actions, not words. In this case, Kang's decision to tell the story from the point of view of Yeong-hye's family members is one of the most crucial of the entire novel. Narrated from her husband's point of view, part one paints a picture of a timid, mousy woman who has no wants or desires other than to please her husband. Yeong-hye has almost no words of her own, throughout the whole chapter she exists in isolation, simply ironing her husband's shirts or preparing him lunch before retreating back to her room. In describing her, Mr Cheong uses the lexical field of 'ordinariness', including words like "ordinary", "run-of-the-mill", "unremarkable" and "plain" to suggest she has no vivid inner life. However, this illusion is shattered when she makes the decision to give up eating meat. Her dramatic actions – throwing away bags and bags of meat in one memorable scene – combined with the steadfast way she repeats one of the only lines she ever speaks out loud, "I do not eat meat," delivered in a calm-and-collected tone of voice are much better indicators of her strength of character and deep resolve than her near-silence, or the words her husband uses to describe her. In Yeong-hye's case, her actions speak much louder than her (few) words.

The same division between words and actions can be seen acutely in the character of the artist, who also happens to be Yeong-hye's brother in law. He feels frustrated by the responsibilities of being a husband and father and would rather spend all his time working on his art. However, he initially tries to pretend otherwise when talking to his wife. They discuss family matters such as whether he's eating enough, their son Ji-woo, and Yeong-hye's divorce. But the fact that the conversation is happening

over the phone symbolises the disconnect and distance between husband and wife. He is also quite abrupt, especially when he snaps at In-hye, "I told you, I've eaten already." His impatient tone is a clue as to his true feelings of frustration. However, it's his actions that speak most loudly. Although In-hye is expecting him home, instead he drives right past their house and back into the city, ending up at his artist's studio. The husband's dedication to his art, and the way he obsessively films and edits images of birds and flowers, is more of a clue as to his true feelings. Bird images symbolise his wish to escape the constraints he feels, and flowers symbolise his growing obsession with Yeong-hye, something he keeps carefully hidden from his wife. In the artist's case, then, actions (and tone of voice) are a truer way of understanding his desires and motivations than the words he uses when talking to In-hye.

Arguably the disconnect between words and actions is most pronounced in the case of Yeong-hye's parents. In vivid dream sequence flashbacks, the reader slowly discovers how Yeong-hye's father abused her as a child, hitting her and forcing her to eat the meat of a dead dog. In the present day scenes, he presents the façade of the head of the family, telling Yeong-hye to eat meat because it is good for her. Yet his true character is displayed through the actions of restraining Yeong-hye, forcing meat into her mouth, and finally striking her on the face. Despite his brutish bullying, Yeong-hye's mother is arguably even worse. When Yeong-hye is in hospital, her mother showers her with kind words, and gently encourages her to drink herbal medicine. But secretly she has used goat in the recipe, something she knows Yeong-hye would refuse to drink. In this case, the underhandedness of this action reveals how Yeong-hye's mother is a manipulative person, unwilling to support Yeong-hye in her beliefs and choices even when she is at her lowest moment.

Therefore, throughout *The Vegetarian*, Kang shows how characters should be judged by actions rather than words. While they may profess to want to help Yeong-hye, really all they want is for her to conform to their expectations of her. The fact that her husband, brother-in-law, and parents all abandon her by the end of the story is the action that most clearly represents the truth about their characters: they care much more about themselves than anybody else.