

Han Kang: The Vegetarian Part 1 (to ‘...Everything is being snuffed out in pitch darkness.’)

“The course of our married life ran smoothly. We were approaching the five year mark...”

Part one of *The Vegetarian* is narrated from the point of view of Mr. Cheong, a traditional ‘salaryman’, whose life is one day upset by his wife’s unusual and sudden decision to turn vegetarian. Mr. Cheong comes upon her one night, dressed in a white night-gown, emptying the fridge of all meat products. He repeatedly asks her what she is doing, and she replies cryptically, ‘*I had a dream*’.

From this moment onwards, Mr. Cheong’s wife continues to change. She loses weight and interest in sex, and stops preparing meals for Mr. Cheong to take with him to work. His frustration mounts until an excruciating and embarrassing scene in which she refuses to participate in a company dinner and shows him up in front of his boss and co-workers. At the end of his tether, Mr Cheong phones his wife’s family and asks their advice. They apologise for her behaviour.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. What is Mr. Cheong’s wife’s name?

- (a) Yeong-hye
- (b) In-hye
- (c) Jon-Yue
- (d) Yeong-ho

2. How long has Mr. Cheong been married at the start of part one?

- (a) Less than one year
- (b) Over three years
- (c) Almost five years
- (d) Longer than ten years

3. In what month did his wife decide to give up meat?

- (a) February
- (b) April
- (c) June
- (d) August

4. Which of these is NOT something Mr. Cheong yells when his wife is throwing away all the meat?

- (a) Are you crazy?
- (b) Have you lost your mind?
- (c) Don’t throw away my KFC leftovers!
- (d) You’re insane!

5. What else does Mr. Cheong’s wife give up?

- (a) Eggs
- (b) Milk
- (c) Fish
- (d) All of the above

6. What item of clothing does Mr. Cheong’s wife not like to wear?

- (a) Tight shoes
- (b) Glasses
- (c) Bra
- (d) Overcoat

7. What is the name of the alcohol Mr. Cheong likes to drink?

- (a) Baijiu
- (b) Soju
- (c) Sake
- (d) Maotai

8. What symbol, first appearing in a dream, reoccurs in every part of the novel?

- (a) Flowers
- (b) Trees
- (c) Blood
- (d) The moon

9. What reason does Mr. Cheong’s wife give for being vegetarian at the company meal?

- (a) She doesn’t give a reason
- (b) Health
- (c) Religion
- (d) A dream

10. What is the reaction of the others at the company meal?

- (a) They are angry
 - (b) They are fearful
 - (c) They laugh and scoff
 - (d) They politely hide their reaction
-

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Describe Yeong-hye as seen from her husband's point of view. What is his opinion of her? What does he find appealing? How would you describe his tone as he discusses his wife?
2. After making her decision to give up eating meat, how does Yeong-hye begin to change? Are her changes just physical?
3. Apart from the obvious reasons he gives (throwing away all the meat in the house, and not wearing a bra), what do you think lies under the surface of Mr Cheong's complaints about his wife's behaviour?
4. *What are the sections in italic writing?* How do these sections differ from the main body of prose in the story? What insights do they add to the novel?
5. What happens during the company meal? What does this scene reveal about wider attitudes towards vegetarianism or any other aspects of society and culture in the novel?

Literary Study: *Perspective / Point of View*

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

Despite the fact that Yeong-hye is the protagonist and the instigator of the action in *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang almost never reveals her thoughts or tells the story from her perspective. Instead, she employs **first person perspective** throughout, but switches the narrator from section to section. Therefore, part one is narrated by Yeong-hye’s husband, Mr. Cheong; part two from the perspective of Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law; and part three from the perspective of Yeong-hye’s sister, In-hye. On first sitting down to write a novel, one of the most important decisions authors must make is: who will tell the story? Whose **point of view / perspective** will the reader be given? The options are limited to 1. The narrator of the story (*first person*); 2. The reader of the story (*second person*); 3. Someone ‘outside’ the story looking in (*third person*).

The effect of choosing the **first person** perspective of Mr Cheong is the same as if Han Kang chose **third person limited**: this perspective deprives the reader of Yeong-hye’s thoughts and feelings. Like the other characters, we can only judge her from her appearance, speech, actions and her effect on other people. Additionally, lots of Mr Cheong’s comments about Yeong-hye are his own opinions – but he states them as facts. The reader must be alert to Han Kang’s use of perspective and try to keep an open mind about Yeong-hye, lest we fall into the same trap as the other members of her family who misunderstand her and label her ‘insane’.

Throughout part one, Mr Cheong struggles with his wife’s decision to become vegetarian. He relies on his wife to cook, clean, wash his clothes, and prepare his lunch every day. As a man who prefers the ‘*middle course*’ in life, any disruption to his simple routine causes him stress and aggravation. The way others perceive him is most important to Mr Cheong, so he is easily frustrated when her physical appearance and behaviour isn’t what he wants. Even when she sinks deeper into distress, Mr Cheong mostly keeps his distance, treating her more like a stranger in his own home than a loved one who needs help and support.

Literary Context: *Korean Social Convention*

“My word, so you’re one of those “vegetarians”, are you?”

The Vegetarian takes place in modern-day Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, and depicts a society rooted in conservative values. For example, Korean family hierarchies emphasize patriarchal authority, wherein a husband or father perform traditional roles such as leading the family, earning money, and dominating in social settings. Women are provided for and looked after - in return they are expected to demonstrate obedience and love.

From the outside, Korean families are seen as a unit, so the behaviour of one member of the unit impacts on the way the whole family is perceived in society. These dynamics can be strongly felt in part one of *The Vegetarian*, beginning when Mr. Cheong and the rest of Yeong-hye’s family see her choice to be a vegetarian as disobedient. They are worried about the poor reflection of Yeong-hye’s choice on the entire family. In fact, outside the pages of the novel, vegetarianism in Korea is on the rise; but it is nevertheless largely viewed as a niche diet. Most Korean dishes contain pork, beef or seafood and there is some

confusion in Korea as to how to serve vegetarian dishes, which may still contain 'lighter' meats such as chicken or fish or may have been cooked in a way that is non-vegetarian, such as adding beef broth for flavour.

While vegetarianism is a personal decision, the novel shows how this choice can create tension and produce awkward social scenes such as when Mr Cheong takes his wife to a company dinner at a nice restaurant. Unlike in the west, where individual diners order for themselves, in Asian countries like China and Korea it is normal for communal dishes to be shared among members of a family or group. Traditionally, the father – or boss of a company or leader of a group – will order for everybody. This communal bonding opportunity becomes awkward if members of the group cannot participate. Therefore, Yeong-hye's decision not to eat any dish with meat is viewed with distaste by Mr. Cheong's co-workers when they go out to dinner – and her vegetarianism causes him considerable personal embarrassment.

Discussion Point: *Sympathy for Mr. Cheong?*

"I thought to myself: I do not know that woman."

Mr. Cheong is an average Korean salaryman. He and Yeong-hye have a relatively normal, if loveless, marriage. In common with many husbands, he expects Yeong-hye to cook and clean for him. The conflict between them begins, however, when she throws away all the meat in the house and refuses to cook meat for him. He assumes 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. When she refuses to have sex with him, he becomes frustrated and rapes her on several occasions. 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. As part one is narrated almost entirely from Mr Cheong's perspective, one of the most important effects is the sense of a man 'hanging himself with his own rope'. For example, the reader can see that, to a large extent, his inability to understand his wife stems from his unwillingness to reach out to her. It's also a shock that his first reaction to her throwing out meat is to accuse her of 'losing her mind'. The way he calls her dream 'ridiculous' reinforces how he can only view the situation from his own perspective and has no desire to explore why Yeong-hye is acting in this way.

Despite this, is it possible to have any sympathy for Mr Cheong, given the events of the first chapter? Are there any moments where you felt that things are not entirely his fault? Does the novel demonise Mr Cheong completely, or does his humanity show through?

Activity

Teams of three or four should prepare arguments either FOR or AGAINST the following motions (or set your own motions) and hold a class debate. Decide on the timings and format before you start:

- This house believes the reader should have some sympathy for Mr Cheong.
- Yeong-hye's actions are entirely reasonable.