

Haruki Murakami: The Little Green Monster

"The beast's eyes were exactly like a human's. The sight of them sent a shiver through me. They showed feelings, just like your eyes or mine."

In the story of *The Little Green Monster*, we meet a woman sitting alone in her house. She watches a grand old tree standing in the garden. It's been in her life since she was a child, and she treats it like an old friend. Suddenly, she hears a scrabbling sound that makes her flesh creep. Before long, a monster appears – he's covered in green scales, with short pink little arms and legs – and a long nose, pointed like a whip. The monster approaches the house, deftly picks the lock and comes inside.

Despite his hideous appearance, the monster turns out to be quite friendly. He has the knack of reading people's thoughts, so he can tell the narrator is afraid of him and tries to reassure her. He isn't there to kill and eat her, he just wants to be friends. But the narrator doesn't trust this strange little creature. Conquering her fear of the monster, she learns how to use his mind-reading powers against him. Despite his protestations of friendship and love, she manages to dispel the little green monster and he vanishes from her life forever.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. What kind of tree grows in the narrator's garden?

- (a) Oak.
- (b) Ash.
- (c) Maple.
- (d) Apple.

2. Where is the narrator's husband?

- (a) In bed.
- (b) At work.
- (c) On holiday.
- (d) Missing.

3. Where does the monster come from?

- (a) Flies down from the sky.
- (b) Appears in a flash of smoke
- (c) Burrows up through the ground.
- (d) Climbs down the chimney.

4. Which part of the monster looks most human?

- (a) Hands.
- (b) Ears.
- (c) Eyes.
- (d) Mouth.

5. What is the narrator's reaction as the monster tries to come into the house?

- (a) She tries to hide.
- (b) She opens the door and lets the monster in.
- (c) She tries to kill the monster.
- (d) She ignores the monster entirely.

6. What is the first part of the monster to enter the house?

- (a) Its belly.
- (b) Its feet.
- (c) Its fingers.
- (d) Its nose.

7. Which of these features does the monster display in its speech?

- (a) Rhyme.
- (b) Alliteration.
- (c) Lisp.
- (d) Repetition.

8. Which of these abilities does the monster NOT display in the story?

- (a) Digging.
- (b) Shape-shifting.
- (c) Lock-picking.
- (d) Mind-reading.

9. What colour do the monster's scales turn when it gets sad?

- (a) Green.
- (b) Red.
- (c) Purple.
- (d) Black.

10. What happens to the monster?

- (a) It goes back into the ground.
- (b) It makes friends with the narrator.
- (c) It slowly fades away.
- (d) It flies away.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Describe the narrator's life and situation at the start of the story. In what ways is she similar or different to other characters/narrators we've encountered in the collection?
2. What effect does the monster's way of appearing and physical appearance have on the protagonist of the story?
3. How does the monster behave? Does its behaviour surprise you in any way? In what ways does action and appearance clash in this story?
4. In such a short story, there may not be much room for character growth or change. Does the narrator's character, or behaviour, shift at all over the course of the story? Are there any turning points or moments of change?
5. How does the story end? What is ambiguous about the ending of the story? What can be effective – or ineffective – about the kinds of ambiguous endings Murakami has given us throughout the collection?

Literary Study: *magical realism*

'The monster tried to move its mouth and speak to me, struggling to open its lips as if it wanted to leave me some final message, to convey some ancient wisdom...'

The character of the Little Green Monster is a quintessential Murakami creation. It appears uninvited out of nowhere; its origins remain unexplained, and it vanishes as mysteriously as it arrived; it seems to have some wisdom to impart but the narrator cannot understand its meaning. Bizarrely, despite its ugly appearance, the monster has human eyes full of feeling. By this point in the anthology, the reader has accepted that characters can communicate and engage in substantive supernatural or paranormal activities, such as communicating in dreams or drawing energy from sleeplessness, or speaking with strange, subterranean monsters! These happenings are sometimes an oddity to the characters – but they also seem to accept strange events as part and parcel of existence. Murakami writes in a particular genre of **magical realism**, where unexplained events, disappearances, dreamers, soothsayers, coincidences, freak weather events and other similar phenomena exist in the world. At times, these elements are stronger; at other times they fade into the background. But they are always hovering at the edges of perception as we read the stories in *The Elephant Vanishes*.

Magical Realism is a literary style that weaves threads of fantasy and magic into a real-world setting. Its heroes are not sorcerers like Harry Potter though. They are ordinary people who encounter extraordinary happenings in everyday life. The formula is simple enough: *real-world settings + unexplained supernatural happenings = magical realism*. It's a particularly popular genre of writing in Latin America (the father of magical realism is Columbian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez) but it's spread all over the world to countries as far apart as England and Japan. Murakami has been called 'the king of Japanese magical realism'. His other novels feature talking cats (*Kafka on the Shore*), dream sequences (*The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*), parallel dimensions (*Sputnik Sweetheart*) and paintings that come to life (*Killing Commendatore*)... to name just a few! Murakami's protagonists might be normal people, but those they encounter are strange, clairvoyant, or have knowledge which is mysterious, unexplained or impossible.

Magical Realism	The Wind-up Bird...	Sleep	The Second Bakery Attack	The Fall of the Roman Empire...	The Little Green Monster	The Elephant Vanishes	Other
Dreams							
Disappearances	✓						
Unexplained events							
Coincidence							
Person with unusual knowledge	✓						

Activity

Create a chart to investigate the features of **magical realism** in Murakami's stories. Record in which stories various 'magical phenomena' appear. For example: significant dreams, disappearances, mysterious person (possibly with unexplained knowledge), extreme weather, and so on, are all features that fit into the genre of 'magical realism.'

Analytical Writing Practice

The monster is a contradiction indeed, and clearly is supposed to represent something – but what? Prejudice? Fear? Love? Loneliness? Something else?

Choose an idea that you think the monster (or another magical realist element from any story you like, such as the vanishing elephant, the man who likes to burn barns, or the kindly baker) represents. Write a mini-essay to both practice your analytical writing and come to a better understanding of Murakami's stylistic choices.