

Haruki Murakami: Sleep

"Sleep is an act that has been programmed... into the human system, and no-one can diverge from it."

Sleep is one of the most haunting stories in the collection, and one of the most disturbing as well. It tells the story of an unnamed woman who, at different points in her life, experiences prolonged bouts of sleeplessness. She has researched insomnia - but doesn't think the symptoms of her sleeplessness are the same. Her doctor is unable to help, but anyway, contrary to what we might expect, her not sleeping doesn't seem to make her tired. In fact, she seems to have more energy than ever before, coping with her daily activities, such as looking after her family and going shopping and swimming, as well as leaving her free to explore her passion for reading, something she doesn't normally have time to do, by night.

However, as we learn more about the narrator's life, we start to realise that her sleepless behaviour coincides with some pretty unpleasant incidents that happened to her. The first time it seemed to be triggered by an attempted rape. So, by the end of the story, the reader is forced to ask whether the narrator is able to cope with the repressed trauma over these past incidents, or whether she is cracking under the strain of her past – and present – state of unhappiness.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know these chapters?

1. How many days and nights without sleep has the narrator experienced at the start of the story?

- (a) Seven
- (b) Seventeen
- (c) Twenty-seven
- (d) Seventy

2. What is the narrator's husband's career?

- (a) Lawyer
- (b) Electrical appliance salesman
- (c) Dental surgeon
- (d) Racing jockey

3. What does the narrator like about her husband's appearance?

- (a) His eyes
- (b) His hair
- (c) His smile
- (d) His hands

4. What kind of car does the narrator drive?

- (a) Honda Civic
- (b) Toyota Corolla
- (c) Mini Metro
- (d) Citroen

5. What novel does the narrator read during the course of the story?

- (a) Anna Karenina
- (b) War and Peace
- (c) Doctor Zhivago
- (d) The Brothers Karamazov

6. What brandy does the narrator drink as it's the only bottle in the house?

- (a) Courvoisier
- (b) Remy Martin
- (c) Martell
- (d) Maker's Mark

7. What does an odometer measure?

- (a) Speed
- (b) Distance
- (c) Weight
- (d) Light

8. After she starts looking and feeling younger, what feature does the narrator still hate most about herself?

- (a) Pointed nose
- (b) Straight hair
- (c) Protruding cheekbones
- (d) Small feet

9. Which of these famous writers is NOT mentioned in the story?

- (a) Katherine Mansfield
- (b) Leo Tolstoy
- (c) Dostoevsky
- (d) Charles Dickens

10. At the end of the story, who is outside the narrator's car?

- (a) Dark, shadowy figures
- (b) Policemen
- (c) Her family
- (d) Her old schoolfriends

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How did the narrator resolve her previous experience of insomnia? What is the difference between that experience and the sleeplessness she is suffering now?
2. What kind of relationship does the narrator have with her husband and son? How do they interact? Does their relationship change over the course of the story?
3. What vivid dream does the narrator have? What happens in this dream? What are the symbolic elements of this dream and how might you interpret them?
4. The narrator begins to view her sleeplessness as a superpower; she believes NOT sleeping gives her new abilities. She even comes to think of her power as '*an evolutionary leap*'. What do you think the narrator gains from her sleeplessness – and what is it costing her?
5. This story is one of the few in the collection with a female narrator (the *Little Green Monster* is another example). Does it make a difference having the story narrated by a woman? Is she similar or different to the male narrators you've met so far? Are there any ideas or events that can be better appreciated from this point of view?
6. How does the story end? What is your interpretation of the images described at the end of the story?

Literary Context – Japan's Break with the Past

Throughout *The Elephant Vanishes*, Murakami elegantly draws a portrait of the post-imperial country of Japan; in his eyes it is a dull place of electrical appliance stores, fading institutions and rapidly diminishing men. Nowhere is this faded land more evocative than in *Sleep*, one of the stories central to the collection. For example, the narrator's husband enjoys speaking about *'the latest hi-tech stuff'*, but the narrator finds this topic of conversation painfully dull. He also complains about his dental equipment becoming *'obsolete'* in a year or two. Later in the story, the narrator watches her husband sleeping and describes his appearance: *'My husband's mouth hung open, the lower lip drooping... his eyes were closed, the lids slack, covers made of faded human flesh.'* Her descriptions lack any kind of vitality, her husband is worn down and decrepit, almost fading away before her eyes.

What is responsible for the faded and greying land we explore in the stories from *The Elephant Vanishes*? Perhaps you've already touched on the answer to this question when we discussed how Japan has embraced global consumerism and corporate culture at the cost of its own traditions and identity. But there seems to be more to it the deeper into the collection we read. A common thread that runs through many stories is characters who, in some way, experience a **break with the past** – and without a clear understanding of the past, find themselves unable to live in the present. Recurring motifs in the stories include losing items of importance, losing relationships with others, and even losing one's sense of self and purpose.

All of Murakami's writing career spans the era of post-war Japan, and while you don't need to study history to engage with his stories, a little general knowledge will help you appreciate the way his characters interact with – or fail to interact with – the past. The Japanese Meiji period (1868 – 1912) saw a rapid modernisation of Japan, including heavy military expansion. Since the 1800s, Japan has been involved in wars against Russia, China, and America. The culmination of Japan's military ambition was the invasion of mainland China in 1937 and the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941. As a result of these events, the country was devastated by nuclear bombs dropped on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan faced a reckoning for its part in the war, and its war leaders were rounded up, tried, and executed for war crimes. Because these events passed so swiftly, ordinary Japanese people found themselves recast from national heroes to international perpetrators to victims of disaster in the span of a few months. The country was both responsible for and victim of atrocities themselves.

Caught in such a paradox, historians and sociologists observed how Japan as a nation responded with a kind of **collective amnesia**. It was as if history ceased to exist before 1945. Unofficially, the Japanese government began to express this policy, using euphemistic language like 'incident' to talk about events from during the war. Murakami's writing can be seen as representing and responding to this collective amnesia. His characters might have a problematic relationship with history, reading about events from the past but having difficulty processing these events. Characters may not be able to remember past events, or they remember them in vague, surreal or distorted ways. In extreme cases, characters retreat into a version of the past that might not be real: for example, the narrator of *Sleep* reads Anna Kerenina, a fictional story that intertwines with real events. At times, it seems like characters in the present have absorbed past events, taking on invisible burdens for themselves; or conversely, they might simply forget key events, or appear blind to events going on around them.

While not overtly political, Murakami's work can be read as a subtle critique of how people deal with an unpleasant or traumatic past through silence and erasure or denial, resulting in the kind of frozen, paralysed, hollow, and diminished world seen in *The Elephant Vanishes*.

Activity

Part of Murakami's presentation of **Japan's break with the past** and **collective amnesia** involves juxtaposing a banal present with a tumultuous past. Characters busy themselves with everyday activities, but these might seem dull compared to past experiences. They may think about historical events, which might be traumatic, vivid, disturbing, or harrowing; they may experience the present as a fixed and unchanging routine; they might find themselves disconnected from the past – yet adrift in the present. The way these ideas are manifest are vivid and varied.

Create a piece of work that expresses how the present and the past compare in *Sleep*, and in other stories from *The Elephant Vanishes* collection. You might create a mind-map, draw a graphic representation of the past vs the present, collect quotations in a side-by-side chart, or any other presentational idea you think might work. Make sure you include plenty of quotation and explanation as you go.

Important Symbolism: *Artificiality*

'It's just reality. Like running a simple machine. Once you learn it, it's just a matter of repetition. You push this button and pull that lever. You adjust the same gauge... over and over.'

Murakami paints a picture of life in modern day Japan as dull and grey, robbed of some essential vital quality. People are trapped in routines, mindlessly going about their day to day lives like automatons. In almost every story, Murakami employs **figurative language** (such as *metaphors*, *similes* and *idioms*) and **figurative images** (allowing you to mentally perceive a comparison between one thing and another) to imply or develop this theme. An image or symbol that repeats itself over the course of a whole work, be it a poem, novel or collection of stories, becomes an **extended metaphor** or a **motif**.

For example, in *Sleep*, the nagging suspicion that there is something unnatural about the narrator's family starts to grow in the reader's mind. Their family routines are fixed and unchanging, following the same exact patterns from day to day. Her husband is prone to bouts of repetition, especially in the things that he says and does, almost like he's a machine running according to a programme. In one incident, the narrator notes how he arrives in the room at *exactly* the moment the water boils for dinner. In fact, the movements of her husband and son are co-ordinated in a way that seems sinister. She describes how *'their hands move in exactly the same way'* when they wave goodbye, using the word *'uncanny'*. As the story continues her husband and son seem to co-ordinate ever more precisely until she realises: they even look exactly like each other!

This feeling of artificiality is present in the narrator's thoughts and feelings about herself as well. The longer she goes without sleep, the smoother and more efficient her life seems to get. She describes completing her housework chores *'with mechanical efficiency.'* She also develops the metaphor of sleep being a way for the mind to refresh or repair its damaged self. This all comes to a head when she declares that reality itself is like *'running a simple machine'*.

Analytical Writing Practice

Collect quotations from the story *Sleep* (and other stories in the collection if you like) that imply our lives are not entirely natural, or that life is in some way artificial or automated. Then practice a short piece of analytical writing exploring his presentation of one or more of these symbols, and the meaning and effect he's trying to create.
