

Haruki Murakami: *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women*

"I'm in the kitchen cooking spaghetti when the woman calls."

In the first story of *The Elephant Vanishes* collection, Murakami establishes the tone and motifs that he will use throughout the collection. As in some of his major works, the narrator of the story rarely ventures out of his house. He prefers the comfort and safety of his home, where he enjoys cooking spaghetti, listening to classical music, and whiling away time doing household chores. Despite his reluctance, he nevertheless encounters new and eccentric people who draw him out of his self-imposed exile and force him to confront new ideas. All the while he's supposed to be finding his lost cat, who's been missing for several days.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Which composer is the narrator whistling along with when the story begins?

- a) Rossini
- b) Rachmaninov
- c) Rimsky-Korsakov
- d) Ronnie Size

2. How old is the narrator?

- a) Twenty-five
- b) Thirty
- c) Thirty-five
- d) Forty

3. What was the narrator's job before he quit?

- a) Newspaper copyboy
- b) Assistant accountant
- c) Lawyer's gopher
- d) Bank teller

4. How long does the woman on the phone require to 'come to an understanding'?

- a) Ten minutes
- b) Twenty minutes
- c) Thirty minutes
- d) She doesn't say

5. How many steps does the narrator take when ironing his clothes?

- a) Two
- b) Five
- c) Ten
- d) Twelve

6. What plant, which the narrator is not terribly crazy about, grows in his tiny yard?

- a) Dandelion
- b) Hydrangea
- c) Hibiscus
- d) Rhododendron

7. Why does the girl in the garden have a limp?

- a) She has a congenital condition
- b) She slipped in her house
- c) She fell off a bike
- d) She had a fight with a school friend

8. What is the name of the disappeared cat?

- a) Toru Okada
- b) May Kasahara
- c) Mackerel
- d) Noburu Watanabe

9. What time does the narrator's wife come home?

- a) 5.30
- b) 6.30
- c) 7.30
- d) 8.30

10. What does the narrator's wife believe has happened to the cat?

- a) He's lost in the garden
- b) He's hiding under the house
- c) He's exploring the neighbourhood
- d) Her husband killed him

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How would you describe the character of the narrator, as he is presented at the start of the story?
2. The beginning of this story juxtaposes two phone calls. In what ways are they similar and different? What links the two calls?
3. Skim and scan the passage when the narrator is travelling through the neighbourhood outside his house. What are the strange or notable features of his surroundings? What effect does this journey have on him – or on you?
4. In Murakami's world, people encounter others in random or bizarre fashion. How does the narrator encounter others in this story? What do you think of the way connections are made?
5. Describe the girl in the garden. How does she interact with the narrator? What does she talk to him about?
6. At the end of the story, the narrator and his wife argue about the cat. Do you think this argument is only about the cat, or is it really about something else? What do they say or do to hint at deeper accusations?

Important Theme: *Unsettling Everyday Moments*

"Is anything wrong?" my wife asks. A slight tension invades her voice. She knows all about my ironing when I'm unsettled."

At the beginning of the story, the narrator of *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women* is in his kitchen cooking spaghetti. When an unwanted phone call draws him out of this space, he is irritated. Later, his wife calls, and prompts him to go to look for the cat. While he agrees to go, he is clearly unwilling to leave his house. Comforted by his life of routine, these disturbances unsettle the narrator and lead him to some quite disturbing thoughts about himself and his life.

Throughout the story of *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women*, ordinary details in the story become sources of unease and ambiguity. The narrator inhabits a world which looks like the real world, but where the boundary between the real and surreal gets more and more blurry as the story continues. The way reality is perceived as unreal is a prevalent theme in the collection, and the story of *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women* is where this theme begins to take root. The narrator feels that: *"Somewhere in my head, in my body, in my very existence, it's as if there were some long lost subterranean element that's been skewing my life ever so slightly off."* The more he moves through his mundane, ordinary day, the more ordinary details begin to take on an unreal, ambiguous aspect. So bizarre does the narrator's day become, that it culminates in a near-death experience as he feels a dark mass like a tumour "swelling inside me." While the narrator's day may have begun in ordinary fashion, the way Murakami unsettles the everyday mundanity of life becomes something profoundly disturbing.

Activity

The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women is full of unsettling moments, disturbing details, and ambiguous descriptions. From a mysterious phone-call that challenges the narrator's sense of adventure, to the painful brightness of the sunlight outside, to his interactions with the strange girl in the garden down the alley, almost every stage of the narrator's journey unsettles him – and us – and forces him to re-evaluate the nature of his reality.

Work together in pairs or threes to mind-map the unsettling moments, strange details, ambiguities, and disturbing descriptions of the story. Find specific moments, images, details, that challenge a conventional depiction of reality. Include images, quotations, and concrete details alongside your own ideas and explanations.

Analytical Writing Practice

Symbols are objects, people, sounds, colours, words, or even ideas that suggest deeper or abstract meanings. What do you think these symbols from *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women* represent? Choose a symbol and write an analytical paragraph or two explaining your ideas in your exercise book. If you'd like an idea of how to write, there's a sample below. You can use any of the ideas that you've discussed in your study of *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women* so far:



Sample Analytical Writing

Read this example of a short analytical piece focused on the symbolism of time. Then, choose a different symbol (such as the disappeared cat, the wind-up bird, the telephone, or another symbol from the story) and write your own analytical piece:



Salvador Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* depicts clock faces that appear to be melting in a mysterious barren landscape. Murakami's short story depicts time in a similarly surreal way, stranding the narrator in a seemingly frozen world from which he struggles to escape.

Murakami's short story *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women* explores the struggles of the protagonist, a middle-aged man who has quit his job and spends all his time at home, to reinvent himself. While the world goes on without him, he seems stuck in place, unwilling and unable to leave his kitchen, growing more distant from his wife who seems able to cope perfectly well without him. Throughout the story, Murakami uses the motif of time to symbolise the disconnect between his own small world and the 'normal' world from which he is detached.

A particular character quirk of the narrator is his obsession with the precise time; he seems hyper-aware of the time of day yet, ironically, he doesn't know what to do with the

time he has. He often remarks upon the precise time, for example he goes shopping at precisely *12.30*, and looks for his lost cat at *"a little before two o'clock."* From these frequent mentions of time, the reader might get the impression that he is a character in control of his life. However, on closer inspection, this is not wholly true. For example, the reader may be struck by his cooking spaghetti at *10.30am* – this is an odd choice of food to cook for breakfast. When challenged on this point, he replies: *"Strange or not, what's it to you? When and what I eat is my own business, is it not?"* His defensive tone and the way he answers questions with questions reveals his stubborn nature when it comes to the time of day and his realisation that his actions are seen as 'strange' by wider society. Therefore, the reader notices how Murakami uses the time of day to highlight the narrator's oddities, and his inability to function in a normal, socially acceptable way.

This impression is heightened when Murakami describes how, from the narrator's perspective, time begins to behave strangely. For example, when he goes outside his house he describes: *"the shadows stayed glued in place like fateful stains."* In this image, the shadows appear motionless as if the sun has stopped moving across the sky. This impression is heightened when the narrator explores his neighbourhood. He describes old-fashioned houses as if they are frozen in time, unlivable for years. For example, a fine set of garden chairs *"by the look of them haven't been sat in for months."* His direct comments that *"it all looks as unreal as a set for a TV sitcom"* and *"all is still"* convey the impression that, from the narrator's point of view, time has stopped. By contrast, houses on the opposite side are modern and developed, crowded with objects like modern TV sets and designer sofas. Through the contrast between a still, frozen world inhabited by the narrator and the suggestion that elsewhere the world is developing normally, the reader receives the impression that the narrator is stuck in his own bubble, unable to move forward in his own life while the world outside experiences the passage of time.

All in all, Murakami uses the motif of time as a way of symbolizing the narrator's struggle to reinvent himself. Years ago, for reasons that he is unable to fully explain, he quit his job as a lawyer's aide and retreated to his home, isolating himself from the world. Ever since, time has moved on for everyone else. But for the narrator, it seems to have stood still. He's stuck in a loop, repeating the same simple, mundane actions today as yesterday, and the days before...