

## 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.

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### 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

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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. How would you describe the character of the narrator, as he is presented throughout 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? How might the descriptions of the passage be understood as descriptions of the wider world beyond the boundaries of this story?
4. Throughout the story, the narrator and his wife argue about the cat. Is the cat really the crux of their arguments? Do you think their differing perspectives are really about something else? What clues are there to deeper accusations?
5. At the end of the story, the narrator returns to his house and settles back into his comfortable 'zone' – the kitchen. Does this mean that nothing has changed? Has he learnt anything or grown over the course of his strange day? Has there been any character development?

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## Important Characters: *Tuesday's Women*

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

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. Although the action of *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women* centres on this male narrator, it is the women of the story who drive the action. Along the course of a single unsettling day, the narrator encounters three female characters who act as catalysts for the action, guiding him away from the safety of his routines and into a world of uncertainty. In the manner of literary foils (side characters who are purposely juxtaposed with the main character in order to bring out an opposite or contrasting quality) through these women Murakami shows aspects of life that the narrator seems to have lost touch with, while also hinting at deeper symbolic or mythological meanings.

The narrator's wife seems to be the most ordinary of the three women. It is her request that sends the narrator searching for the missing cat and begins his journey out of the domestic world he finds so comforting. Being the narrator's foil, she highlights his aimlessness and passivity. While she remains in the world of work, and is occupied by her professional purpose and responsibilities, he spends much of the story drifting aimlessly through routines of cooking, ironing, smoking, and waiting. She therefore represents a kind of purpose that the narrator appears unable to find within himself, or that he has somehow lost over the course of his life.

The mysterious woman on the telephone introduces a different kind of disturbance. Her strangely intimate requests unsettle the narrator and exposes a kind of sexuality and desire that makes him uncomfortable. By contrast to the stability represented by his wife, the phone woman is associated with mystery, the irrational, and the explicitly sexual. As another foil, she reveals the narrator's emotional uncertainty. Where she is confident and sensual, he seems unable to access deeper feelings and emotions. The girl in the garden plays yet another role. Curious, imaginative, and perceptive, she accepts the strange aspects of the world without needing logical explanations. Her seemingly childlike conversations encourage the narrator to look beyond his everyday routines and limits. Again, she highlights his emotional detachment and lack of imagination; the sense of wonder and curiosity that defines her character appears to be something that the narrator has lost as an adult.

Tuesday's Women can be read as more than simple side characters. Their shared role in guiding the narrator invites comparison to the Three Fates of Greek mythology, figures who guide and influence the course of human lives. Although Murakami never makes this connection explicit, each woman directs the narrator towards new ideas and experiences he neither expects nor understands. Like the Fates, they stand at a crossroad in his life, leading him towards a confrontation with himself and giving him a glimpse of things hidden or mysterious. Each possesses a quality that he has lost: purpose, sexuality, imagination. Together they guide him beyond the boundaries of his self-imposed routines and encourage him to unlock the secrets of the world, and to confront the secrets of his own self as well.

### Activity

Create a character profile of the three women of the story. Using details of the story you could sketch out their appearances, find key lines of dialogue, present important character qualities, and suggest the particular challenges they pose to the narrator. Show how each woman functions as a literary foil, revealing aspects of the narrator's character that might otherwise remain hidden.

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## Literary Study: Symbolism

*"The wind-up bird used to come to our yard and wind the spring of our quiet little world."*

All the stories in *The Elephant Vanishes* collection are incredibly symbolic. Throughout *The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women*, Murakami uses symbols to suggest meanings that lie above and beyond ordinary objects and events. Everyday items seem simple on the surface, yet reward exploration by revealing deeper significances. For example, an important symbol in the story is the wind-up bird itself. Heard but never seen, the narrator perceives its strange mechanical cry from somewhere in his immediate surroundings. He believes the bird "*winds the spring*" of the world, suggesting unseen or hidden forces operating 'behind the scenes' of reality. The bird is one of these unseen forces. Like a clockwork toy, without winding there would be no movement or activity. The bird comes to represent the narrator's belief that his life is controlled and influenced by forces he cannot see or understand.

Another important symbol is the missing cat, Noboru Watanabe. On a literal level, the narrator's wife asks him to search for the lost pet. But the importance attached to this task suggests the cat's disappearance represents something larger and more significant. As the narrator searches, he is forced out of his comfortable routine and into situations that challenge his understanding of himself and his world. The cat symbolises the disruptive force that acts as the catalyst for the strange experiences that follow.

Symbols are not limited to objects or animals. Activities such as cooking spaghetti, ironing clothes, and climbing the wall at the back of the narrator's yard can also be considered symbolically. The telephone calls that interrupt his routine and the women who challenge him to do things that make him uncomfortable can all be interpreted symbolically. As his sense of normality breaks down, the narrator becomes increasingly aware of his own fractured self. His recognition of "*some long lost subterranean element*" that has been pushing his life off course is yet another symbol. The metaphor of a mysterious, underground force may symbolise his unconscious anxieties and uncertainties or is even the symbolic site of his past self that he feels he's been separated from. One of the joys of considering symbolism is uncovering how a single symbol can contain layers of meaning that begin to unfold after due consideration.

By filling his story of an ordinary day with symbolic objects, animals, actions, characters, and events, Murakami suggests a mystery underlying our everyday reality. The symbols in the story all point towards knowledge that cannot be easily seen or explained. Nevertheless, the reader feels how beneath the seen surface of reality lies a certain strangeness that can only be explained in symbolic or metaphorical ways.

### Activity

Think about all the items, animals, people, and events in *The Wind-Up Bird and Tuesday's Women* and collect any that you think are symbolic or can be understood metaphorically. Create a collage, mind-map or visual explainer of the story's most important symbols. Annotate them with quotations from the story and your ideas and explanations:

