Han Kang: The Vegetarian Part 3 (Flaming Trees)

"All of the trees of the world are like sisters and brothers."

By the time we encounter Yeong-hye again in part three, she has been living in a psychiatric hospital for some time and her transformation has reached its final stage. Through In-hye's visits and memories, we see how the ideas that first emerged in part one have developed to their extreme conclusion. What began as a refusal to eat meat has become a complete rejection of human society. When In-hye finally sees her sister, it is clear how far Yeong-hye has changed. She barely speaks, refuses food, and repeatedly asserts an extreme form of non-harmful living, believing that she can survive like a tree sustained by sunlight alone. But she's becoming dangerously thin and weak so her doctors, supported by an ever-more worried In-hye, prepare to deliver her food intravenously.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. Where is the psychiatric hospital located?
(a) By the sea
(b) In the center of Seoul
(c) In the mountains
(d) On Jeju Island

2. What creature does In-hye encounter in the tunnel to the psychiatric hospital?
(a) Giant spider
(b) Speckled moth
(c) Stray cat
(d) Black bird

3. In-hye increased the frequency of her visits after what incident?
(a) Yeong-hye had attacked another patient.
(b) Yeong-hye was refusing her medication
(c) Yeong-hye had decided to eat again
(d) Yeong-hye had run away

4. What tree grows in the hospital's front garden?
(a) Zelkova
(b) Beech
(c) Oak
(d) Sycamore

5. Who is Hee-joo?
(a) The bus driver
(b) A doctor
(c) Another patient
(d) In-hye's friend

6. When In-hye visited before, what was Yeong-hye doing?
(a) Dancing and singing
(b) Steaming potatoes
(c) Standing on her head
(d) Writing her HL essay

7. Which two-word phrase does Han Kang repeat throughout this chapter?
(a) In-hye waits
(b) Time passes
(c) Dreams dissolve
(d) Night falls

8. What does Yeong-hye say she will eat?
(a) Peaches
(b) Plums
(c) Oysters
(d) Only water

9. What condition have the doctors diagnosed Yeong-hye with?
(a) Anorexia nervosa
(b) Schizophrenia
(c) Neither
(d) Both

10. What does In-hye see from the ambulance as she leaves the mountain?
(a) A black bird flying into the sun
(b) An owl sitting on a branch
(c) A dog howling in the trees
(d) A monkey dropping fruit on the ground

Understanding and Interpretation

1. At the start of this chapter, In-hye describes an incident when Yeong-hye ran away from the hospital. How does Yeong-hye appear in this scene? What makes images of Yeong-hye so striking?

2. How has Yeong-hye's condition changed over the time she has been in the hospital? In what ways is she transforming?

3. What impression do you have of the hospital and staff? How do the doctors interact with the patients? How do they take care of Yeong-hye? Who is Hee-joo and why is she so important in this chapter?

4. How does Han Kang make the force-feeding scene near the end of part three so disturbing for readers?

5. What happens to Yeong-hye at the end of the novel? Han Kang leaves the resolution to Yeong-hye's story tantalisingly ambiguous. What are the possibilities?

Important Setting: *The Psychiatric Hospital*

"The hospital buildings stand dreary and forlorn...The wards on the first and third floors have iron bars over the windows."

Throughout *The Vegetarian*, Han Kang presents hospitals and medical institutions as places that appear professional and efficient but often feel cold, detached, and impersonal. Doctors and nurses behave calmly, are capable, and seem well-intentioned; yet they never engage with Yeong-hye on an emotional level. Instead, they focus on her declining physical condition. This creates a recurring tension throughout the novel. Yeong-hye's transformation begins in the mind, as an emotional or psychological response to disturbing dreams and her desire to escape violence. But the people around her treat her condition purely as a bodily problem. As a result, Kang raises questions about whether Yeong-hye's needs can be met if we only apply a medical lens on her.

This tension is reflected in the novel through imagery of medical treatment. Rather than describing hospitals as places of comfort or healing, Han Kang repeatedly emphasises needles, tubes, restraints, and blood. Medical procedures are presented through the language of pain and violation rather than care. Yeong-hye herself reports: *"they just stab me with needles."* Earlier in part one, the image of Yeong-hye's blood travelling backwards into an IV tube is a symbol of healing turned into a life-draining process by the treatment that's supposed to save her. In the final section, force-feeding leaves Yeong-hye vomiting blood and physically struggling against treatment. Although these interventions are intended to save her life, they often resemble the kinds of coercion and violence that Yeong-hye has spent the whole story trying to escape. In this way, Kang prompts us to wonder about situations when medical care, no matter how well-intentioned, may cause more harm than help.

At the same time, the novel suggests that there is something fundamentally human missing from the psychiatric hospital in part three. In-hye is surprised to find most of the patients there appear surprisingly ordinary, and there is more than one case of mistaken identity between patients and visitors or nurses. The hospital's social spaces, such as the largely deserted playroom, feel strangely empty, while psychological therapy seems to be missing from the schedule. Noticeably, one of the few people who shows sympathy and concern for Yeong-hye is her fellow patient Hee-joo. Unlike the doctors, who focus on diagnosis and treatment, Hee-joo responds to Yeong-hye on an emotional level. Through this contrast, Han Kang suggests that while medicine may treat physical symptoms of Yeong-hye's condition, it struggles to address the deeper emotional, moral, and existential 'problems' that lie at the heart of her transformation.

Analysis Writing Practice

Practice your analysis skills by focusing on the hospital setting from part three. Using details from a hospital scene, write an analytical paragraph exploring how Kang portrays the role of medical institutions in the novel. Ideas you might consider tackling include: hospitals as just another conforming space; the way treatment is presented; the way doctors speak or act towards patients; Yeong-hye's experiences in the hospital. Support your ideas with carefully chosen evidence and close analysis of details from part three.

Important Theme: *The Natural World*

"Look sister… leaves are growing out of my body, roots are sprouting out of my hands."

The natural world becomes increasingly important throughout *The Vegetarian*, reflecting Yeong-hye's changing relationship with humanity. In part one of the novel, nature is frequently associated with death, confinement, and human domination. Yeong-hye's dreams are populated by butchered animals hanging in sheds, while animals repeatedly appear only after they have been chopped up, cooked or otherwise made into food. Even images of plant life are often subdued or controlled. At the restaurant in part one, flowers and plants are displayed behind glass, separated from the outside world and reduced to decorative objects. Similarly, the dead bird in the hospital garden suggests a natural world that has been damaged or made into 'prey' for human nourishment. Throughout these early sections, nature rarely appears free or flourishing. Instead, it exists largely as something that has been captured, killed, or at the very least subdued by human activity.

As the novel progresses, however, nature begins to reassert itself. This change is particularly noticeable in part three, *Flaming Trees*, where the natural world becomes a dominant presence. Set in a remote psychiatric hospital surrounded by woodland, the section is filled with powerful images of trees, rain, plants, and insects. In-hye repeatedly describes the trees around the hospital in almost animal-like terms, emphasising their strength and vitality. The enormous zelkova tree in the hospital grounds seems ancient and enduring, while the relentless rain often overwhelms human voices and activity. Even seemingly small details, such as a giant moth in the tunnel or plants forcing their way through cracks in concrete, contribute to the sense that nature possesses a power that cannot be fully controlled. In contrast to the dead and passive natural imagery of part one, nature in the final section appears alive!

This shift reflects Yeong-hye's desire to move away from human society and towards a more natural form of existence. Throughout the novel she increasingly associates humanity with violence, domination, and suffering, while viewing plants as symbols of innocence and harmlessness. As her transformation progresses, the natural world is seen less in incidental ways in the story and more as an expression of Yeong-hye's alternative way of being. The title *Flaming Trees* expresses this change perfectly, suggesting a landscape bursting with energy and significance. By the end of the novel, nature seems to have reclaimed a position of power, challenging the human-centred world that dominates the earlier sections. Through this contrast, Han Kang uses the natural world as a symbol of Yeong-hye's longing to escape the confines of human existence altogether. Noticeably, at the very end of the story, In-hye seems to have internalised something of Yeong-hye's position, reflected by her alignment with nature in the novel's very last lines.

Activity

Conduct a quotation hunt for the theme of the natural world in *The Vegetarian.* Find quotations that express a contrast in the depiction of nature between part one and part three of the novel. In part three especially, you can look for images that show Yeong-hye drawing increasing strength from a resurgent natural setting. Present your findings in a side-by-side chart, design a poster, or create a visual explainer for that reveals the shifting depiction of nature in the novel.