

HL Essay

How does Han Kang use shifting narration to expose the universality of suffering in *The Vegetarian*?

Word Count: 1482

Han Kang's novel *The Vegetarian* tells the story of Yeong-hye, a housewife and parttime manga artist, who suddenly decides to become vegetarian. The novel explores her family's reaction to this decision. Because her husband and father value obedience above all, they treat her dietary choice as an act of rebellion, forcing her to conform to their notion of what she should eat: traditional, meat-heavy Korean food. Their conflict spirals out of control, causing Yeong-hye immense suffering. However, Kang's novel is not narrated by its main character. Instead, she employs shifting perspective to tell each part of the story from different characters' point of view: husband, brother-in-law, sister. Through these shifts in perspective, the reader sees how they treat Yeong-hye, but also the suffering caused when people cannot express their 'true' selves. Ultimately, shifting perspective reveals the universality of suffering in a culture where all are expected to conform.

Kang uses Mr Cheong's perspective to reveal the suffering caused by the pressure of conforming to rigid work expectations. This is shown through Mr Cheong's narration of the restaurant scene. On arrival he takes his seat "*careful not to be seen to gawp.*" His action of sitting 'carefully' betrays his self-consciousness. He's aware of his every move and doesn't want to be seen making a mistake. The word 'gawp' suggests his natural reaction is to express surprise and amazement at the luxury restaurant. But he suppresses this natural reaction in favour of neutral, unobtrusive behaviour. He previously stated to Yeong-hye that "*I need this evening to go well. It's the first time my boss has invited me to one of these dinners.*" The modal verb 'need' reveals his feeling that this isn't something he 'wants' to get right; that he 'must' meet his boss' approval. Mr Cheong's perspective reveals the presence of his boss and coworkers is constraining. His desire to prove himself is not related to personal merit or competence, but to his ability to blend in and not make mistakes. His perspective allows readers to see that, despite the awful way he treats Yeong-hye

throughout part one, he's not a monster but a man who suffers from feelings of inadequacy. At the end of part one, Kang reveals Mr Cheong also suffers from bad dreams. Like Yeong-hye's nightmares, his dreams are disturbing, suggesting an internalised trauma that he cannot fully repress. Therefore, Mr Cheong's perspective does not excuse his behaviour, but reveals the universality of suffering under such rigid social and work cultures.

While Mr Cheong's perspective exposes the pressures of work culture, Kang uses the perspective of Yeong-hye's brother-in-law as an example of the suffering of artistic and creative people in a society that prioritises conformity over individuality. This is exemplified through the doubts he experiences over his artistic vision in part two. He thinks about being "*divided against himself*" and asks, "*Was he a normal human being?*" The metaphor of 'divided' suggests a person experiencing an internal conflict. The artist is split between his private self, who has extreme artistic ambitions, and a more restrained and acceptable self that he projects to the outside. His roles are divided between pursuit of art and family responsibilities that he often neglects (in one scene he drives past his house and returns to his studio, leaving his put-upon wife to look after their son alone). The question he asks himself betrays his self-doubt and anxiety, calling into doubt his very humanity. Noticeably, he is unable to answer this question, implying how his artistic obsession is driving him to the edge of normality and acceptability. Instead, he acknowledges how his work "*Might put him in the firing line,*" a metaphor that means to be the target of other's disapproval. 'Firing line' points to the severity of this criticism, as if the words of others are weapons that can harm the artist. Only through access to his perspective can the reader understand the artist is a divided character, a far cry from the quick and competent man who jumped to the rescue in part one. His artistic desires seem strange and overly erotic, and he's very conscious that they would not be accepted by wider society. His internal conflict lets readers feel his suffering, and they can see how a conformist society makes artistic or creative people doubt themselves. In Kang's Korea, there's no room for uniqueness or freedom of expression. Kang's presentation of the brother-in-law's boundary-breaking art poses the same challenge to wider society as Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, and as a result

both characters suffer crises of identity and social ostracism, establishing suffering as universal in the novel.

Unlike the suffering of the book's two male narrators, Kang switches to the perspective of Yeong-hye's sister, In-Hye, to show the universal suffering of daughters, wives, and women in an extremely patriarchal society. This can be seen through In-hye's deteriorating physical and emotional condition. She describes her sleeplessness: "*She closes her bloodshot eyes... still she cannot sleep*" and the feeling of damage somewhere inside: "*She could feel that gaping black wound still sucking at her.*" Both 'bloodshot eyes' and 'gaping black wound' are visceral, graphic images of pain and suffering. Phrases like 'she could feel' and 'still sucking' suggest a remorseless, life-draining force draining her energy and motivation. In many ways, her experiences mirror Yeong-hye's (an image of Yeong-hye's blood leaking backwards into an IV tube implies the same life-draining forces operate on both sisters). Just like Yeong-hye when she was first married, In-hye always describes herself as a conformist, dedicated to doing the right thing by her family, her son, and her work. Yet she's experiencing comparable suffering to her sister, such as sleeplessness, and suicidal ideation when she admits to being "*afraid that something inside her would make her throw herself in front of a passing train.*" Through such parallels, readers can see how suffering extends beyond inadequate or strange people to impact even those who have committed themselves to living in a conformist way. While In-hye was not directly beaten, she's internalised the guilt of being protected from her father's abuse by Yeong-hye. Now married to an emotionally distant man, through In-hye's character, Kang reveals the universal suffering of daughters, wives, and mothers who are forced to bear the brunt of patriarchal failings.

Finally, while the majority of the novel is narrated through shifting outside perspectives, Kang occasionally gives the reader Yeong-hye's own perspective. This can be seen in the part one short dream sequences presented in italic font. These dreams are full of horrific imagery, such as when Yeong-hye sees herself after devouring raw meat: "*My bloody face. My bloody mouth.*" Here Kang uses anaphora of as a method suggesting Yeong-hye's powerful awakening to the idea that eating meat is a gruesome and visceral act, involving

the killing of other living creatures in order to sustain oneself. She describes her dreams of gorging on raw meat as “*dreams overlaid with dreams. A palimpsest of horror.*” Repetition conveys the remorselessness of her suffering, she cannot escape her own guilt, even when she sleeps. The old-fashioned metaphor of ‘palimpsest’ refers to a pad that was placed under writing paper. When the paper is lifted, the pen nib has inscribed impressions on this pad. Yeong-hye’s dream-images are, in the same way, inscribed onto her mind, ensuring that they are unforgettable and cannot be easily dismissed. Han Kang’s style changes during these sequences, she uses a short, fragmented style of writing that reflects Yeong-hye’s traumatised psyche. However, while Yeong-hye’s dreams are intensely personal images of blood and dead animals are universal images of death and guilt that equate eating meat with murder. She even uses the words “*murderer or murdered*” interchangeably to suggest how the act of taking another life ‘kills’ the innocence of the perpetrator. Reading such disturbing and graphic scenes may even prompt readers to confront their own role in the industrial production and consumption of meat, an issue that crosses countries and cultures. In this way, while Yeong-hye’s dream perspective is so narrow and restricted it feels unique to her, the symbolism of her dreams activates universal ideas and suggests her suffering may be more universal than the perspective implies.

In conclusion, Han Kang uses the shifting perspective of *The Vegetarian* to argue that Yeong-hye’s experiences of suffering are not unique to her. She’s not just ‘crazy’, as Mr Cheong might say. Readers see how characters who are complicit in her degradation are themselves impacted by issues of culture and society, especially the conformist work and patriarchal family cultures depicted in the novel. While suffering may manifest in different ways – nightmares, twisted desires, suicidal ideation – nevertheless Kang argues that nobody is immune to the universal suffering of living under the expectation of conformity.

Works Cited

Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Hogarth London/New York, 2015.