

General Queries, Confusions, and Dead Ends

- Are the couple married? Is the child she imagines killing real (i.e., do the couple have children)?
- Is it helpful to investigate the man’s motives or point of view?
- Is the end of the story reality, dream, or some combination of both? Does the woman die in a fire?
- What is the significance of the title “Bone Meat?”

The Woman’s Character and Motivation

Descriptors from the questions (no value judgment here as to their accuracy):

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| ○ submissive /
lacking
agency | ○ passive-
aggressive
○ crazy/
unstable | ○ obsessive/
paranoid
○ weak |
| ○ controlling/ | | |

- Is the woman supposed to be a sympathetic or unsympathetic protagonist?
- The story is told from the woman’s point of view, yet this view is unreliable (since there is a deterioration in the woman’s mental health). How is the reader supposed to know what is real and what is not by the end? Why tell the story in this way?
- The woman organizes the man’s belongings and attempts to otherwise control her surroundings by taking obsessive measures to mitigate the risk of fire? What does this reveal about her mental state?
- When she ordered one of the old dishes with bones or shells and something else was brought out, she rejected it at once, saying “No, not that!” The woman began to wonder if this weren’t how a mother, abandoned with a young child by her husband, must feel. And like the mother, she now took pity on the young child’s unreasonableness, now scolded it, at times hugged the still uncomprehending child and cried; she even thought of killing the child and then committing suicide (13-14). → What is the reader supposed to make of this image? Is there any connection of this passage to the dream of the children at the end?

The Nature of the Relationship

- Was this a healthy or unhealthy relationship? From whose point of view is the reader meant to judge this: the man, the woman, the author? Is the man abusive in some way, and, if so, why does the woman still long for the relationship to continue? What best describes the distribution of power within the relationship: is the man in control; is the woman in control; or do they share control?
- Does the woman love the man? If not, why does she feel his loss so acutely?
- If the woman is really convinced she would be better off without her partner, why does she feel guilty when this manifests in reality? And why doesn’t she leave him earlier if she had been so dissatisfied? Perhaps she was even trying to provoke the man to leave? Or perhaps it is

evidence that she wasn't truly dissatisfied to begin (and has made a mistake in giving the man the excuse to leave)?

- How many times had she been unable to refrain from saying things like “I'd be better off without you!” and meaning them. And one day when she had again been unable to restrain herself, the man had replied “So it seems, doesn't it?” and left. The remorse she felt afterward had been painful (2).
- It had always been a peculiarity of hers that when she was excited-- pleasantly or unpleasantly-- she would become strangely hungry. She seemed to give way to the excitement and gorge herself whenever she had been aggravated into saying “I'd be better off without you!” and meaning it, and especially during her agitation after the man left her. But she had by now lost the energy and the momentum of the excitement, and her appetite no longer asserted itself even in that form (12).
- The woman is under the impression that the man has risen to a higher position in his career (3), whereas she cannot afford to move and start over (4). Is the story about a class disparity between the two?

The Man's Belongings

- Does she want to dispose of the man's things, or does she not want to dispose of the man's things? What is the point of keeping them, when they increasingly become such a psychological burden-- especially since she frankly acknowledges that what is left is junk that the man would no longer desire (3)? If, for instance, she could afford to abandon the clothes along with the apartment, would she do so? Does this latter “solution” even make sense?
- Why does she describe the clothing receptacles as “semitransparent” (12 and twice on 14)? Are these literal hallucinations?

Food

- Why is the story so focused on food consumption and appetite?
- chickens and female hormones (5-6)
 - The man rejects the choice of chicken because of the female hormones it (supposedly) contains. At the same time, this reasoning is almost certainly flawed (in that it is an American, not a Japanese, problem), and the woman notes that the man is inconsistent in this reasoning (since he often brings home roast chicken himself). What explains this seeming digression?
 - Does the discussion of female hormones suggest something about gender roles?
- oysters (7-11)
 - The episode with shopping and eating the oysters is the only sustained look at the relationship. Why does this function as the representative episode? Is it a good memory or a bad memory?
 - The man uses brute strength to force open the oysters, whereas she uses skill to finesse them open (7). Why is this detail included?
 - Why does the woman derive pleasure from not eating the oysters, even though she clearly loves oysters (“Mm,” she again replied, but took pleasure in not reaching for one” [8])?

- When describing the consumption of oysters, the language is sexualized. Oysters themselves are said to be aphrodisiacs (true in Japan as well). Eating them is described in terms of pleasure. The woman moans and sighs while consuming them and trembles in anticipation of the first bite. Her tongue is “aroused” (8), and she uses her tongue and lips like tools to suck and explore. The taste is almost orgasmic: described in terms of its intensity and ending in a “rush” (9). After the first taste the woman longs for more. What is significant about these details?
- At the same time, the oyster consumption in this episode is unsatisfying. The oysters aren’t as good as they usually are. The woman’s consumption of a whole oyster is disappointing. The scene that usually plays out after eating oysters is not followed (9), and the woman wishes that the man would “feel that on another part of her body” when he examines her hand (11). What is the significance of these details?
- bones and shells (12-13)
 - Is this related to the man’s clothes that are left behind? Why, for instance, do the possessions turn into shells?
 - Rising meat consumption is a marker of middle class prosperity in post-war Japan, yet the woman seems to reject the bounty spread before her. Why?
 - The woman is content with eating scraps, shells, and bones. More than this, she actually prefers them. At the same time, these are the worst parts of the meal-- what most would consider literal garbage. Why is she so drawn to food of this type? If this is illustrative of dependence on the man, why does she seemingly long for it, especially since she also seems to long for independence elsewhere?
 - The woman had never been critical of him when they had dishes with bones or shells, because at those times he never made her anxious or brought her troubles to mind. He coveted meat even more fiercely than before, and she even more wholeheartedly savored the tiny bits of bone meat. They were a single organism, a union of objectively different parts, immersed in a dream. Sometimes both would sigh simultaneously from the excess of flavor, and then laugh so much that they had to put down the food they were holding (13).
 - Once, at her wit’s end with the unreasonableness of her own sense of taste, she raptly imagined the man to be standing just beyond the grillwork partition devouring a chicken thigh, then tearing the stripped bones apart at the joint and throwing the pieces in to her, so that suddenly she felt she heard the sound as it hit the floor (14).
 - “Won’t the people who use it later have a hard time? Leaving a mountain of bones that way. We’re supposed to clear out what’s left unburned. Why, there are oyster shells alone to fill a bucket.”
 - To fill a bucket-- what fraction of the oysters they had eaten together would that be? But there weren’t very many from that last time, so when might these shells be from (15)?
- pleasure from not eating (8) or only eating scraps and left-overs (9-10, 13)
- gaining weight and losing weight (12-13) → How is it possible that she gains weight when eating little and loses weight when eating normally?
- taste (8-9) vs. loss of taste, loss of appetite (12-13)

Fire

- Is she afraid of the possibility of fire, or does she welcome the possibility of fire? What is the significance of this?
- What are the connotations of the fire imagery: death (cremation), purity, passion? Why are these connotations significant?
- Why does the woman insist upon fire as the solution to the problem of the man’s belongings (“I have to burn it” on page 14)?
- Why does she fantasize about suicide by fire (since it would presumably be much more painful than other means of achieving this aim)?

Evidence of Fear

- Strangely, for a woman who wanted even herself to be destroyed in the conflagration, she was inclined to be wary of fire. She always recalled one late winter night in her childhood, when there was a fire close by and she saw an old man from the burning building, with a padded jacket slipped on over his flannel nightshirt, being swept along in the crowd, barefoot on the asphalt where water streamed from the fire hoses (4).
- She was tortured by the fear that if she were to start a fire accidentally it would seem like arson. When she went out, especially, she felt she had to check for fire hazards two or three times, all the more so if she was in a hurry [...] She felt then, suddenly, that when she had first locked the door she had already taken care of all possible fire hazards. Having gone out a second time, she found herself worrying that she might now have unthinkingly contributed to an outbreak of fire. And again she had to use her key (5).

Evidence of no fear

- She felt she would like to burn it all-- the man’s things, and her own, and the place. If she too were to burn up with them, she thought, so much the better. But she merely hoped for it, and made no plans (4).
- A moment before, when she had held the ashtray in her hands, she had the dreamlike feeling that everything would, happily, burn to ashes like the cigarettes (5).
- At this rate, she might very well find herself being swept along barefoot in the night in the crowded street flooded by water from the fire hoses, with only something slipped on over her nightgown (12).
- The bell stopped, and just then the siren arrived blaring under her window. But the woman, her eyes closed, nodding “Is that so? Is that so?” simply snuggled deeper into the quilt as it seemed to begin to smolder (15).

Repetition of the image of being swept away by fire

- She always recalled one late winter night in her childhood, when there was a fire close by and she saw an old man from the burning building, with a padded jacket slipped on over his flannel nightshirt, being swept along in the crowd, barefoot on the asphalt where water streamed from the fire hoses (4).
- The man’s belongings, as always, remained with her. To him they were invisible, but they weighed upon her whenever she was at home. These troublesome belongings of his, and her own which for lack of money she could not abandon, and the place, became all the more unbearable to her, and she frequently saw herself being swept along the crowded late-night street flooded by the fire hoses, barefoot, with something thrown quickly over her nightgown (11).
- She must get stronger. If she didn’t, perhaps the wardrobe drawer, the closet door, and the drawer in the desk would turn to glass. Perhaps too the man’s suitcase and clothing boxes would become glass cases, and his rucksack and canvas shoes would become like the nylon pillow cover, or a cellophane

bag. At this rate, she might very well find herself being swept along barefoot in the night in the crowded street flooded by water from the fire hoses, with only something slipped on over her nightgown. It might happen she thought, if she didn't eat a lot at mealtimes and recover from this weakness (12).

- Once, at her wit's end with the unreasonableness of her own sense of taste, she raptly imagined the man to be standing just beyond the grillwork partition devouring a chicken thigh, then tearing the stripped bones apart at the joint and throwing the pieces in to her, so that suddenly she felt she heard the sound as it hit the floor. If she could be sure that she would be able to share it, she thought, she wouldn't mind being swept along the crowded asphalt street barefoot where water streamed from the fire hoses, with only something slipped over her nightgown. Then, becoming aware of the semitransparent top drawer of the wardrobe, she stared at it, trembling. She lacked the courage to look around at the desk drawer, which of course must have become transparent, or at the little gauze-covered windows that must have appeared here and there in the thick paper doors (14).

Dreams

- The woman recalls an old man she had seen swept away by a crowd after his home burned. She is both frightened by this memory and attracted to it-- in both cases identifying with the old man's plight. What explains this identification, and what explains the ambivalence in assigning this memory meaning?
- Is the end of the story dream some kind of wish fulfillment? An unconscious voice? What does fire represent in this context, and why does she actively try to prolong the dream?
- Throughout the story, the woman struggles to rid herself of her partner's things. This changes in her dream in the end. What makes this change possible? Is this willingness to rid herself of the items a positive development in terms of her mental health?
- In the dream fire in the end, the bones and shells are not consumed. In some way they even replace the belongings that she thought she was burning-- perhaps indicating that (in the dream) she was not freed of them after all. What is the significance of these details?
- Are the remaining shells and bones (especially in context of a incineration/cremation fire) evidence that the woman has murdered her partner?
- Is the fire at the end actually part of the dream? If not, are we supposed to infer the woman has set the fire at the end of the story (see "She felt she would like to burn it all-- the man's things, and her own, and the place. If she too were to burn up with them, she thought, so much the better," on page 4)? Does the woman die in the fire? Is the woman crazy? If the dream is wish fulfillment (she does not want to wake up), why does she not dream a happier scenario (such as a reconciliation)? Why does she not flee the "smoldering bed" (15)?

- The woman realized that she hadn't checked on how the schoolchildren who had helped her had left things, but she knew it was part of the dream, so it was all right. Trying to keep from awakening and interrupting her dream, she kept her eyes shut, the quilt pulled up around her head, as she rose and went to the door [...]

The siren of a fire engine wailed somewhere continuously. But what caused her dream to recede was less the siren than the words she had just heard in her dream. From the ashes of the man's belongings, that there should be so many bones and shells! "Is that so? Is that so?" she said nodding, and the siren, to which was added a furiously ringing bell, filled her ears. Was what she had been told in the dream perhaps prophetic? The bell stopped, and just then the siren arrived blaring under her window. But the woman, her eyes closed, nodding "Is that so? Is that so?" simply snuggled deeper into the quilt as it seemed to begin to smolder (15).