

The Bath



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JANET FRAME

Janet Frame grew up as one of five children in a working-class family in New Zealand. Her father was on a railway crew and her mother was a maid in the writer Katherine Mansfield's house. Frame's upbringing was marked by the tragic deaths of two sisters in separate drowning incidents and her brother's struggle with epilepsy. To escape these hardships, Frame went to school to become a teacher in 1943, but this career ended after she attempted suicide. For the next eight years, she received various diagnoses, and was in and out of mental institutions. Her first collection of short stories won a national literary prize days before she was to have a lobotomy; this was a surprising honor that fortunately cancelled the procedure. Many psychologists encouraged Frame to pursue writing instead of psychological treatment, which she did. Frame's literary success is particularly remarkable today for its having arisen out of the oppression she faced during a time when the mentally ill were treated as if they weren't human beings. Her experience inspired the themes of death, madness, isolation, and inequality that distinguish her writings. Her work is internationally renowned and spans the genres of fiction, autobiography, poetry, and young-adult fiction, and she received many awards, including the Order of New Zealand.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Depression, World War I, and the Industrial Revolution were highly influential to Janet Frame and her contemporaries. It was a time of upheaval that disrupted society's norms and catalyzed Modernism, an artistic movement characterized by stylistic experimentation and subjects of isolation, alienation, and disorder. As a result, Modernist literature often probes the inner psyches of characters in an attempt to illustrate the trauma of the changing modern world. Janet Frame's work combines stream-of-consciousness (a Modernist style) and realism, the strict and unsentimental account of reality and hardship.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Janet Frame's work is influenced in part by stream-of-consciousness writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce who explored the inner thoughts of their characters. Much of Frame's prose is reminiscent of Woolf's lyrical style and use of imagery, and the first line of "The Bath" pays homage to the first line of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*. Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" is also a tragic story about how trapped some women are in their everyday lives. Perhaps most clearly,

Frame's legacy resembles that of her contemporary, Sylvia Plath, whose struggle with mental illness also deeply affected her work, leading her into themes of madness, darkness, and alienation.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Bath
- **When Written:** 1965
- **Where Written:** New Zealand
- **When Published:** 1965 individually, and later in 1983 as part of the collection *You Are Now Entering the Human Heart*
- **Literary Period:** Modern Period
- **Genre:** Realism, Frame Story, Horror Story
- **Setting:** The woman's house and the cemetery by the sea (in Dunedin, New Zealand)
- **Climax:** The woman cannot get out of the bathtub and realizes she's not self-sufficient anymore
- **Antagonist:** The bathtub/the struggles of old age
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Based on real life. "The Bath" is based on a real occurrence. The widow of Frame's uncle was once unable to get herself out of her bathtub and would have died from exposure had her neighbor not found her.

Fatal mistreatment. Janet Frame spent time in the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum, an institution in New Zealand that is infamous for its cruel conditions. Around the time of Frame's seclusion there, a fatal fire killed 37 patients who had been locked inside an outbuilding.



PLOT SUMMARY

An elderly woman is preparing to visit her late husband's grave, as tomorrow is the 17th anniversary of his death. She sets out the flowers she will bring and prepares her daily meal, which she eats in silence in her kitchen. Then, she heats the water so she can take a **bath**. She struggles to turn the taps to run the bathwater because her hands are old and stiff, and she feels full of dread. Lately, it has become difficult for her to take a bath, since she cannot move her body very well. Before she gets into the bath, she places a chair beside the tub in case she needs to reach for it when the time comes to get out.

In the bath, the woman can hardly enjoy herself because she's so afraid of how she will get herself out. She plans to be so

quick in getting out of the tub that she will take her body by surprise. But as she prepares to get out, she's overcome with helplessness and a sense of being trapped underground. Her hands continuously slip from the sides of the tub, and even the chair proves no aid to her. She starts to cry and scream for help, thrashing in the tub, but no one around can hear her. Becoming extremely lonely, she thinks of her dead husband John, and how he would save her if he were still alive.

Finally, the woman succeeds in getting out of the tub. She gets into bed and lies awake, wanting to die and thinking miserably about her body, which has become "an inner menace." There was so much she used to be able to do, and so little she is capable of doing now, as she can no longer perform simple tasks without experiencing pain. Horrified and humiliated, she realizes that she'll need to accept help soon for the care of her body. Eventually, the widow falls asleep, thinking of the cold white frost outside and of the cemetery.

The next morning at the cemetery, the weather is surprisingly warm. The sun shines on the grass and the sea is calm, hardly breaking into waves. The woman sets to work tending her husband's grave. She weeds it, cleans out the jars, and arranges the flowers in them. Then she stands back to admire her work, pleased with herself for always caring so well for her husband's grave.

As she turns reluctantly to go, she stops before her parents' grave. In comparison to her husband's rather small grave, theirs is large and covered with an elaborate tombstone. They were wealthier than her husband during their life, which allowed them extra space in the cemetery. The woman is grateful for the luxury her parents could afford for themselves in death. She rests against their grave and feels a sense of peace come over her, although she is nagged slightly by a feeling that the world is becoming smaller.

The woman wants to stay in the cemetery indefinitely where she won't have to take any buses, carry any heavy coal buckets, and struggle the way she does at home. Soon, however, she finds herself at the bus stop. She is overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle around her and tries desperately to recall the peace and satisfaction she felt while in the cemetery, looking at her husband's grave bright with flowers and her parents' spacious grave. But she can't recreate the feeling. The image of her husband's grave is shrinking and shrinking, until it disappears altogether and is replaced by the image of the terrifying bathtub waiting to trap her in a moment of vulnerability.

so she runs herself a bath. In her struggle to get out of the bath, readers learn how desperate her situation is: her aging body will no longer cooperate, so she's trapped in the tub. She's completely alone, and nobody hears her when she calls for help, which causes her to panic, lament her loneliness, and even wish she were dead. Every day is a struggle for her, since once simple tasks (such as carrying coal buckets, hanging the laundry, and taking public transportation) now cause her a great deal of physical and psychological pain. In addition, she seems to have nobody to comfort her, as accepting help from the people in her life—especially her cruel niece—seems to humiliate her. In the second half of the story, though, the widow goes to the cemetery, where she finds peace for the only time in the story. She tends her late husband's grave and visits the graves of her parents, who are buried nearby. At home, the woman feels inept and afraid, but in the cemetery—where she finds herself capable of physical labor, like weeding her husband's plot—she finds purpose, contentment, and companionship with the dead. She longs to remain in the cemetery and seems to find death less frightening than returning home to all the tasks that torment her, particularly bathing in the tub.

John (Husband) – The woman's late husband appears in the story only as a memory; he died 17 years before the start of the story, leaving the woman to take care of herself in her old age. He is buried in the cemetery across town, where she frequently visits him, bringing flowers with which to decorate his grave. Near the end of the story, it is revealed that he was poor compared to the woman's parents, who are buried in the same cemetery. Their spacious grave and elaborate tombstone make his seem small and simple by comparison. The widow decorates his grave with flowers but does not decorate theirs, implying that she feels the need to compensate for the simplicity of her husband's grave.

The Parents – The woman's parents are buried in the same cemetery as her husband. They have a large grave because they were buried back when the cemetery had more space, and their tombstone is elaborate, indicating their wealth. They are not mentioned in the story until the woman stops by their grave on her way home, but the widow feels fondly towards them and is grateful for their comfortable grave. Standing by their grave gives the woman a sensation of peace that she does not feel at any other point in the story.

The Niece – The woman's niece appears to be one of her only living relatives, and she visits once in a while to help the woman with her daily tasks. But the woman does not seem to find any pleasure or comfort in this. In fact, the only time the woman reflects on her niece at length, it's quite negative—she remembers feeling loathed and judged by her niece because she was not physically able to look at the beautiful clouds while they were doing laundry. This shows how being around people who don't understand her can actually make the woman feel lonelier than she was before.



CHARACTERS

The Woman – The protagonist of "The Bath" is an elderly widow who lives alone. Each year on the anniversary of his death, she visits the grave of her late husband, John. At the story's opening, she is preparing to visit his grave the next day,



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



LONELINESS AND DEATH

In "The Bath," an elderly woman struggles to get herself out of **the bathtub**. As she fails to pull herself out and then panics that she'll remain

trapped there, she reflects on how alone she is: her husband is dead, and when she screams for help, nobody can hear her. She can only rely on herself, even though her body is failing. The woman does have some people in her life, but they seem not to bring comfort. Her niece, for example, comes to help sometimes, but she makes insensitive comments and seems not to understand the woman's struggles. And while the woman knows that she'll soon have to hire someone to help her bathe, this thought brings no relief, only "humiliation." By contrast, after the woman finally clammers out of the bath, she travels to the cemetery to place flowers on her husband's grave and longs to stay there with him and with her parents who are buried nearby. Her only comfort seems to be sitting among the dead. In this way, the story gives the impression that life can be lonelier than death, especially at the stage of life when one's loved ones are gone.

Early on, the story establishes that the woman is completely alone, a condition that pains her. As she struggles to get out of the bath, she calls for help, but there's nobody to hear her: her husband is dead, and the street outside her window is completely silent. "Where were the people, the traffic?" she wonders, despairing that "No one in the world will hear me. No one will know I'm in the bath and can't get out." Importantly, the woman's loneliest moments occur when she's most vulnerable—in times when she's unable to take care of herself. This is most significant when she's trying to get out of the bath and fears that she's trapped there. Several times during the tub scene, the story calls attention to her loneliness: "Loneliness well[s] in her" as she struggles, and even once she's gotten herself out, she is "exhausted and lonely thinking that perhaps it might be better for her to die at once." This loneliness is specifically associated with her age. After all, when she was younger, her husband was alive and could help her if she was in trouble, and when she was younger, she could also help herself, because her body was more agile. So it seems that, as the woman has gotten older and less capable of caring for herself, she has felt herself to be more and more alone.

Despite the woman's loneliness, she does not seem to find solace in the company of others. This is clearest when she

recalls her niece coming to help her with the laundry. It's an unpleasant memory: when the woman wasn't able to look at the beautiful clouds in the sky (because looking up would make her dizzy), her niece responded with an "incredulous almost despising look." The niece's inability to understand the woman's limitations perhaps made her feel even lonelier than she was before, and it causes the woman to remember this day "with a sense of the world narrowing and growing darker, like a tunnel." The woman also seems to feel embarrassed by the notion of asking others for help, which limits the pleasure she can find in their company. For instance, when she realizes that she will now have to hire a nurse to help her bathe, it brings her no comfort—instead, she feels that it's a "humiliation." Likewise, she seems humiliated by having to ask a neighbor to fetch items from the top shelf. And when she calls for help getting out of the bath, she does it only in desperation, once the humiliation of asking someone for help becomes preferable to the misery and terror of being trapped in the tub. In this way, the story suggests that the company of others is humiliating, not enjoyable, when it comes from necessity.

By contrast, the woman feels peace and contentment towards the end of the story—but only when sitting among the dead in the cemetery. Throughout the story, the woman's prevailing emotions have been loneliness, fear, dread, and humiliation, but her trip to the cemetery finally makes her happy. After visiting the graves of her husband and her parents, she sits in the grass and feels a "peace inside her; the nightmare of the evening before seemed far away." She doesn't say so directly, but she seems to take comfort in the presence of the dead, reminding her of a happier and less lonely period of her life. In fact, the woman seems to feel at home in the cemetery in a way she does not in her actual house. Sitting in the grass, she thinks that she doesn't want to return home—she wants to stay at the cemetery forever. Part of this is her desire to stop struggling with the obstacles and humiliations of her daily life, but part of it seems to be her desire to remain with those she loves. It seems that the woman has reached an age where her loved ones are dead, the people in her life humiliate and misunderstand her, and she's lonely when she's alone *and* when she's with others. Because of this consuming loneliness, it makes sense that she might prefer death.



STRUGGLE AND OLD AGE

The woman in "The Bath" has gotten to an age where even simple things are a struggle: she has trouble reaching items on a high shelf, filling the coal bucket, looking at the sky, hanging laundry on the line, changing buses, stoking the fire, and of course, getting in and out of **the bath**. While her body would once obey her easily, now it's an "inner menace"; her back, shoulder, and wrists are bad, and she can no longer control them well. She thinks that it might be better to die, since the "slow progression of

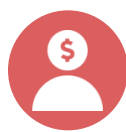
difficulties [is] a kind of torture” that she no longer wants to endure. While the struggle of daily life tortures the woman, she’s able to briefly find some pleasure in the cemetery, where she is suddenly able to make her body work: she’s able to care for her husband’s grave without trouble, raking it, cleaning the jam jars, and placing beautiful flowers in them. In this context, she can finally enjoy a moment of pleasure and peace, soaking in the warm breeze and the view of the sea. This contrast between the woman’s mood at the cemetery (where she feels capable) and her mood at home (where she feels vulnerable and inept) shows how the physical struggles of aging can be so difficult as to rob life of its most basic pleasures.

The woman’s aging, uncooperative body is both humiliating to her and dangerous, as it limits her ability to care for herself. The woman’s back and shoulder are in so much pain that she has difficulty with daily tasks like keeping the fire going, showing what a struggle it is to care for herself in basic ways. With the fundamental tasks of staying alive becoming a desperate struggle, the woman’s life has become overwhelming and scary. Even basic pleasures have become not only difficult but downright frightening, which is clear when she takes a bath. The woman loves the feeling of a warm bath, but she can’t take them very often because it’s such a struggle for her to get out. Furthermore, once she *does* get into the bath, she can hardly enjoy herself because she’s so consumed by anxiety about what will happen when she needs to get out. Because her body is so unreliable, the woman doesn’t seem to have very many pleasures left. Finally, the woman’s physical pain disrupts her most important rituals. For instance, the woman visits her late husband’s grave each year on the anniversary of his death, but she has come to dread this task simply because it’s so physically hard for her to make the journey out to the cemetery. Visiting her husband’s grave seems central to the woman’s life and identity, so the notion that she might become physically unable to do it shows how her aging body threatens the loss of self.

Watching her body decline is so awful that the widow thinks it would be best for her to die. She first fantasizes about death after her harrowing struggle to get out of the bathtub. It was so frightening and exhausting for her to be trapped in the tub that, afterwards, she lays in bed feeling lonely and thinking that it “might be better for her to die at once.” In other words, fighting with her aging body has become so horrific—she describes it as a “kind of torture”—that she would prefer the nothingness of death. On top of this, her declining body humiliates her. Her shoes have to be specially sized for her disfigured feet, she has to ask a neighbor to fetch items from the highest shelves of her cupboards, and she knows she’ll soon have to hire a nurse to help her bathe. She frames aging as a progression of humiliations, thinking with dread that “there will be others, and others.” It is only when the woman lets her mind stray from thoughts of her failing body and her arduous tasks that she becomes peaceful enough to sleep. Lying in bed after the

incident with the bath, she thinks of the frost-white snow outside and her long-dead husband, which lulls her to sleep. This shows that sleep—and death by analogy—is her only escape from suffering.

In contrast to her misery at home, the woman finds peace at the cemetery where she is suddenly able to perform physical tasks. At home, the woman struggles with tasks as basic as raking coals, so it’s striking that, at the cemetery, she suddenly seems more capable. For instance, she uses a pitchfork to rake the garden at her husband’s grave, seemingly without incident or exhaustion. Furthermore, after she cleans the jars that hold the flowers, she carries them back to the gravesite full of water, “balancing them carefully one in each hand” as she walks. This feat of balance is shocking for a woman who, at home, feels so at risk of tripping that she must constantly stare at the ground. And after placing the flowers on her husband’s grave, she feels not exhausted or humiliated—as she does after doing any kind of chore at home—but satisfied and at peace. She is proud and purposeful, having done her duty in tending her husband’s grave. This shows just how much the woman’s despair has to do with her declining body; when she feels capable, she is happy, and when she feels incapable, she is miserable and longs for death. Significantly, the woman’s capability at the cemetery leads her to her only moment of real pleasure in the whole story. After tending her husband’s grave, she sits down in the grass and enjoys the sun and the warm breeze, seemingly at home in her body for the first time. Unfortunately, this doesn’t last long, as she soon has to make the arduous trek home where she feels incapable once again.



LIFE, DEATH, AND SOCIAL CLASS

At the end of “The Bath,” while the woman is at the cemetery tending her husband’s grave, the story introduces a twist: the woman’s parents are also buried in this cemetery, but their grave is much grander than his. Their enormous grave reveals the “elaborate station of their life”—essentially, that they were rich—while the husband’s small grave reflects his humble social position. This revelation casts the woman’s actions in a new light. While her yearly ritual of cleaning her husband’s grave and adorning it with flowers initially seemed like a straightforward act of love, it’s noteworthy that she does *not* similarly place flowers on her parents’ grave, even though she thinks fondly of them and feels gratitude that they are so comfortably at rest. It seems, then, that cleaning and decorating her husband’s grave is, at least in part, a way to compensate for his cramped quarters, an apology that he’s been laid to rest without the luxury he deserves. In this way, the story bitterly suggests that human beings are not equal, even in death, and that this class inequality is an injustice that plagues the living.

When the story reveals the parents’ grand grave, it’s a shock, since the woman herself seems not to have very much money.

The difficulty of the woman's life reflects her humble status. She does not have any hired help around her house, which means that she has to do chores that are arduous for her, and she has to take the bus, since she presumably has no car. From these details, the reader can assume that she's not wealthy. Furthermore, the woman's husband was cremated and laid to rest in a tiny, unadorned plot with a simple gravestone. This suggests that he, too, was of a lower class, since all of these factors suggest that he needed to be buried without spending much money. Since the woman and her husband appear lower class, it's surprising to learn that her parents were wealthy. Their grave is spacious, elaborate, and grander than those around it, which reflects their higher social status. The woman specifically reflects that they came by these luxuries because they had "money, time, and forethought"—all markers of an upper-class life.

The parents' wealth casts the woman's actions in a new light: suddenly, caring for her husband's grave is not just about love, but about class. This becomes especially clear when the woman does not tend her parents' grave like she does her husband's; she seems to believe it's sufficiently grand already and requires no extra labor to give her parents dignity. Importantly, her choice not to rake or put flowers on their grave is not neglectful or resentful; the woman makes it clear that she misses her parents and is grateful that they've been laid to rest so comfortably. It seems that she simply finds these gestures unnecessary, since they already have what they need. By contrast, the woman has made the effort to go to the cemetery every year for 17 years to rake, weed, clean, and put flowers on her husband's humble grave. Certainly, this reflects her enduring love for her husband, but it also suggests that she feels she must compensate for his humble gravesite, giving it the extra beauty of fresh flowers and a tidy plot.

After the woman has tended her husband's gravesite, she feels satisfaction in a job well done. She's proud that she has put in the effort to give her husband the dignity he deserves. But significantly, when she sits by her parents' gravesite, she has a different feeling: peace and contentment. Reflecting that her parents have "extra space should they need it" allows her to relax and enjoy the warm breeze and the feeling of the grass. This subtly shows how money brings comfort to people, while poverty is inherently more anxious. The woman's proximity to her parents' luxurious grave brings her the only happiness she experiences in the whole story, while her husband's grave clearly troubles her, as she makes the effort to fix it up each year. In this way, the story bleakly shows how class inequality defines people's lives, even in death.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BATHTUB

The bathtub symbolizes the way in which elderly people become imprisoned in their own bodies. The first half of the story involves the elderly woman struggling to get out of the bathtub after her bath, as her body is no longer agile and cooperative enough for even minor physical feats. Trapped in the bathtub with nobody to help her, she is essentially alone with her aging body, finding her body not simply unreliable, but also her "enemy" and a "menace." As she lays in the tub, unable to get out, the bathtub becomes akin to a grave; she has the sensation of being sucked into the earth when she drains the water, and afterwards she feels as though she is "under the earth" with wheels moving above her. It's as though she's been buried alive by her own body.

Importantly, though, the bathtub is *not* directly associated with death. The next day, when the woman visits the cemetery, she finds tremendous peace among the graves, showing that it wasn't the tub's association with graves that frightened her—instead, it was her helplessness. The woman associates peace and comfort with actual graves, whereas her life has a grave-like oppressiveness that she associates with the bathtub. Therefore, the bathtub represents the cruel prison that life becomes in one's old age, particularly when one's body won't cooperate.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Stories of Ourselves, Volume 1* published in 2018.

The Bath Quotes

☞ She had bought the flowers to force herself to make the journey that each year became more hazardous, from the walk to the bus stop, the change of buses at the Octagon, to the bitterness of the winds blowing from the open sea across almost unsheltered rows of tombstones; and the tiredness that overcame her when it was time to return home when she longed to find a place beside the graves, in the soft grass, and fall asleep.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis


This passage appears in the beginning of the story when the


woman is making preparations for her trip to the cemetery. It shows that, from the outset, the woman's mental determination is stronger than her physical capability: she "forces" herself to make the journey to the cemetery by buying flowers. The use of the word "force" sets up the battle against her own aging body that she undergoes throughout the story. With her body becoming more and more resistant to her activities, the woman determinedly sets her mind against her body, employing strategies to make it obey her wishes.

The list of the many legs of her journey to the cemetery and of the hazards that await her there helps the reader to sense the weariness that overcomes the woman at the end of her long journey, making her want to fall asleep right there in the grass. Despite her dread of the cemetery (implied in the first part of the quote), the soft grass compels her to rest there. This hints that the woman only dreads the cemetery because the weather is often bad, and because she has to move so much to get there. This quote illustrates the woman's longing for rest, no matter the place. And, of course, the notion that she wants to sleep in the cemetery is a hint that she longs for death.

☛ [...] she tried to think of it calmly, without dread, telling herself that when the time came she would be very careful, taking the process step by step, surprising her bad back and shoulder and powerless wrists into performing feats they might usually rebel against [...]

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis


As the woman is sitting in the bathtub, she looks ahead apprehensively to the moment when she'll have to get out. Here again, she tries to command her body with her mind. Her habits and daily regimen seem central to her character—she likes to feel in control of housekeeping, and she has routines like visiting her husband's grave each year—but one aspect of her life that is out of control and irregular is her body. This seems to make her profoundly uncomfortable and scared, and she hopes that if she comes up with a plan for moving her body—and follows it perfectly—she will be successful in getting out of the tub. In


the same way that she worked through her nightly tasks (stoking the fire, cooking her dinner, washing her dishes), she hopes to carry out her exit from bath carefully, step-by-step. She thinks that she can methodically maintain a state of normalcy, even though she is terrified of her unreliable body.

She also thinks that the element of surprise will make her body work. Her body has become so faulty and unpredictable that she her only hope is to trick it into performing normally. This indicates that the woman thinks she can still outsmart her body and thus keep to her routines.

☛ Again she leaned forward; again her grip loosened as if iron hands had deliberately uncurled her stiffened blue fingers from their trembling hold. Her heart began to beat faster, her breath came more quickly, her mouth was dry.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the woman is trying to get out of the bathtub and continuously failing. Up until this point, she has been remarkably calm despite her pain and difficulty. This quote shows her beginning to panic. The moment she has been dreading—her exit from the bathtub—is actually before her, and it is not going to plan. Even her mental determination is proving insufficient to carry her through this task.


Furthermore, this passage presents the bathtub as an antagonist. The woman hasn't yet come to the realization that her body is no longer capable of bathing. Therefore, she blames the bathtub for preventing her escape, and she likens it to a menacing force—the "iron hand"—that is deliberately thwarting her. She attributes this force to the slipperiness of the bathtub and the cold of the bathroom. The "iron hand" here seems to actually be what the woman later calls "the inner menace" of her own body. But before she has accepted that the iron hand is actually her own weakness, she struggles against it as if it is not herself.


The image of the iron hand also makes this a moment of horror in the story. Janet Frame's stories have been called horror stories because their protagonists often realize

something that horrifies them. The woman's realization of her frailty, which is the climax of "The Bath," is horrifying because it means she must accept her body as a menace, the iron hand as her own old age.

Where were the people, the traffic? Then she had a strange feeling of being under the earth, of a throbbing in her head like wheels going over the earth above her.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis



After a while of being trapped in the bathtub, the woman begins to panic. Here, she realizes just how alone she is; even if she screamed (which she eventually does), nobody is there to hear her, so she can only rely on herself. Of course, this is terrifying to her, because she's not physically capable of getting herself out of the tub, and with nobody to help her, she worries that she might be trapped there forever.


This quote conveys a sense of oppressive isolation—she's so alone that she feels she is under the earth where no one can see her plight or hear her calls for help. Up to this point, the woman has not sought human company, instead remaining determined to do everything herself, and she calls for help in the bathtub only when she's tried repeatedly to get out by herself. So it seems that it's only out of desperation that she's longing for the help of others, but nonetheless her sense of isolation makes the situation more dire and horrifying.

Furthermore, this quote likens the bathtub to a grave. Being trapped in the bathtub makes the woman feel "under the earth," which makes it seem as though she feels buried alive. This could be a nod to her (quite reasonable) fear that she might die of exposure in the cold bathroom if she can't manage to get herself out of the tub, and it might also have to do with her thoughts of the cemetery that she plans to visit tomorrow. The visit to the cemetery will reveal that everyone she loves in life is already dead—her husband and parents—and she longs to be among them, so maybe she feels buried alive in the sense that she's trapped in a suffocating life while those she loves are dead.

Loneliness welled in her. If John were here, she thought, if we were sharing our old age, helping each other, this would never have happened.

Related Characters: The Woman, John (Husband)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis

When the woman is sitting powerless and vulnerable in the bathtub, she starts to realize her helplessness and reflect on her solitude. This quote makes the woman's loneliness explicit and suggests that old age is meant to be shared. The main action of the story—her trip to the cemetery—implies that she's been a widow for seventeen years, but she doesn't mention her loneliness before this moment. Stuck in the bathtub, she suddenly feels her husband's absence and longs for him to be with her. When she realizes that two people are required to do what she used to be able to do alone, her loneliness flares up.

Loneliness is made worse by one's old age, this passage implies, because having someone to help her is now not simply a luxury, but a necessity, as she cannot do the basic tasks of her life by herself. When one is young, they may feel the emotional sadness of being separated from someone, but they are nonetheless usually physically capable of being alone. The woman may feel that after seventeen years, she's gotten used to living without her husband, but now, she physically cannot do without him. In this way, her grief catches up with her, and actually increases as she ages because she needs her husband more.

She remembered with a sense of the world narrowing and growing darker, like a tunnel, the incredulous almost despising look on the face of her niece when in answer to the comment 'How beautiful the clouds are in Dunedin! These big billowing white and grey clouds - don't you think, Auntie?'

She had said, her disappointment at the misery of things putting a sharpness in her voice, 'I never look at the clouds!'

Related Characters: The Woman, The Niece

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 320


Explanation and Analysis

This memory comes to the woman when she is lying exhausted in bed after managing to escape the bathtub. She is reflecting on her torturous decline into old age and recalls a humiliating moment when her niece came to help around the house, asked her to look at the beautiful clouds, and then gave her a cruel look when the woman said she never looked at clouds. It seems that the niece either didn't understand that the woman was physically incapable of looking at clouds (since raising her eyes to the sky makes her dizzy) and was judging her for not appreciating their beauty, or it's possible that the niece *did* realize that this was the result of a physical impairment and simply despised the signs of aging in her aunt, leaning into the arrogance of youth.

The woman uses the word “narrow” to describe the feeling she had in this moment of receiving the niece’s cruel look. The word “narrow” evokes the trapped and panicked feeling that the woman had when she was stuck in the bathtub, likening the humiliations of aging to the physical danger of being trapped in the tub. In this passage, the woman already feels a sense of physical confinement: her back is so stiff and sore that she cannot look up at the sky, and therefore the space around her has literally narrowed. This narrowness worsens when her niece is rude and unsympathetic to the suffering that is behind the woman’s response.

●● Now she did not dare look up. There was enough to attend to down and around - the cracks and hollows in the footpath, the patches of frost and ice and the potholes in the roads; the approaching cars and motorcycles; and now, after all the outside menaces, the inner menace of her own body.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 320

Explanation and Analysis



This passage occurs when the woman is lying in bed after the incident with the bath, thinking of how she has slowly become less able to do everyday things. Here, she describes how she must focus her eyes intently on the ground when she is walking, because anything could trip her up—even ordinary things that aren't usually dangerous. In this way, her world has become physically more narrow, as she cannot look at or appreciate the broad world around her,

since she has to be focused so intently on the specific things—like walking—that allow her to survive. It's also noteworthy that her aging body is forcing her to stare at the earth while she walks, which subtly evokes how being trapped in the bathtub made her feel like she was “under the earth.”

Notably, the bathtub did not put her in the grave, but rather put her at the mercy of her own body, which is why she feared it so much. Here, the woman has realized that her own body is “the inner menace.” It's clear that “all the outside menaces” like the bathtub and the cracks in the road frighten her, but it's her body that frightens her most of all, which makes it the antagonist of the story.

●● In all her years of visiting the cemetery she had never known the wind so mild. On an arm of the peninsula exposed to the winds from two stretches of sea, the cemetery had always been a place to crouch shivering in overcoat and scarf while the flowers were set on the grave and the narrow garden cleared of weeds. Today, everything was different.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis


“The Bath” is broken into two distinct halves, the first about the harrowing incident with the bathtub and the second about the woman’s day at the cemetery tending her husband’s grave. These two halves have remarkably distinct moods: the bathtub scene is terrifying, whereas the cemetery scene is pleasant. The weather is a huge signifier of this shift, too, as the freezing cold house was part of what put the woman in danger when she was trapped in the tub (she could have died of exposure), whereas the weather warms significantly in the second half of the story and makes her day at the cemetery pleasurable.

Another notable difference between the two halves of the story is that there is no description of the woman’s journey to the cemetery. While the first half focused extensively on her dread of bathing and then the terror of struggling to get out of the tub, the second half glosses over another one of her fears almost entirely: the journey to the cemetery, which she has been finding more and more arduous as she ages. It's hard for her to change busses, fight the cold winds, and even walk without tripping, which all makes traveling to

the cemetery perilous. But the story doesn't even mention her journey there, which gives readers the impression it was somehow effortless, foreshadowing the transformation the woman seems to undergo when she's there where she is suddenly capable of complicated physical labor like carrying jars full of water and weeding her husband's grave. It's not clear why there's this huge shift in the story between the harrowing bathtub scene and the peaceful and pleasant second half, but this opening passage to the second half sets up just how different the mood will be.

Then she ran the sparkling ice-cold water into the jars and balancing them carefully one in each hand she walked back to the grave where she shook the daffodils, anemones, red leaves from their waxed paper and dividing them put half in one jar, half in the other.

Related Characters: The Woman, John (Husband)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 321


Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the things the woman does at the cemetery to clean and decorate her husband's grave. Up until this passage, the woman has struggled to do any kind of physical labor—even straightforward things like turning the taps on the bathtub. Whenever she tries to do everyday tasks, she experiences stiffness, weakness, pain, trembling and dizziness. All these words are strikingly absent from this passage, which instead highlights the woman's capability, attention to detail, and precision. It's a shocking transformation; she has gone from not being able to walk without looking carefully at the ground so she doesn't trip to balancing jars full of water while she navigates the uneven terrain of the cemetery. The story never explains this miraculous transformation, but it seems plausible that tending her husband's grave has given her purpose, making her suddenly feel capable and energetic.

The woman's tasks at home are all directed towards caring for herself, whereas at the cemetery, she cares for others. When she is trying to bathe herself, she feels old and weak, but when she is cleaning up her husband's grave, it is as if she is young again. This suggests that tasks of self-care only make the woman feel older, but that when she can be useful to another cause, she forgets her old age altogether.

There were no flowers on the grave, only the feathery sea-grass soft to the touch, lit with gold in the sun. There was no sound but the sound of the sea and the one row of fir trees on the brow of the hill. She felt the peace inside her; the nightmare of the evening before seemed far away, seemed not to have happened; the senseless terrifying struggle to get out of a bath!

Related Characters: The Woman, The Parents

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 321

Explanation and Analysis


When the woman is leaving the cemetery, she stops beside her parents' grave. This is a surprise, because her parents have not been mentioned until this moment in the story—and it's also surprising because the woman seems working-class, whereas the parents' elaborate grave reveals them to have been wealthy. Here, the woman describes the feeling of peace she has watching the natural world at her parents' grave. She had to tend her husband's grave to make it seem dignified and beautiful, but apparently her parents' grave requires no additional labor to make it nice. Nature gives their grave its beauty: the grave ripples with sea grass and is lit by the sunlight. Because their grave is so spacious and elaborate, it requires nothing from her: the woman doesn't bring flowers to their grave not because she doesn't care for her parents' memory but because their grave could not be made more perfect than it already is. Because of their means, her parents were able to completely separate from the human world and be at peace in an elegant grave decorated by nature.

The dead are very alive to the woman: she imagines them turning over in real beds. Looking at her parents' grave makes the woman feel peaceful because of how very separated it is from human life: it reminds her not at all of the bathtub and her struggles at home with old age. Although she is devoted to her husband's grave as well, it still requires her energy and the addition of flowers to make it satisfy her. Her husband, because he was not able to afford a luxurious grave, is less comfortable and so she goes to great lengths to make his grave beautiful as though he has not fully passed on from the realm of human discomfort.

●● She waited, trying to capture the image of peace. She saw only her husband's grave, made narrower, the spring garden whittled to a thin strip; then it vanished and she was left with the image of the bathroom, of the narrow confining bath grass-yellow as old baths are, not frost-white, waiting, waiting, for one moment of inattention, weakness, pain, to claim her for ever.

Related Characters: The Woman, John (Husband)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 322

Explanation and Analysis

This is the final passage of the story. The woman is on her way home and tries not to lose the peaceful feeling she had while at the cemetery, but she can't help but think about the horrors that await her at home. In this passage, the "grass-yellow" color of the old bathtub is contrasted with the "frost-white" color of its original condition, showing that the bathtub—like her—has aged. Everything in this passage seems to relate to her aging, as her sense of her husband's grave growing narrower evokes how she has felt for some time like her own world is getting narrower and narrower the older she gets.

The final line is terrifying, as it is like the foreshadowing of a murder—it seems as though the woman feels that the bathtub will inevitably kill her. In this way, the woman fears her life instead of death itself, since death seemed peaceful at the cemetery, while life is full of peril.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE BATH

A woman brings home cut flowers, since tomorrow is the seventeenth anniversary of her husband's death. She visits his grave on that day each year to weed it and decorate it with flowers. This year, she's worrying about the journey, because it's becoming more hazardous as she ages. Walking, changing buses, and enduring the cold winds in the cemetery are so grueling that it makes her want to lie down among the tombstones and sleep.

That evening, as the woman cooks her dinner, stokes the fire, and heats water for **her bath**, she moves slowly; her back and shoulder hurt. Her hands are so weak that she can barely turn the taps on the bathtub. It's a shame that she hasn't been taking more baths lately, but it has become so hard on her body that it's impossible to bathe more than once every couple of weeks. She places a chair near the tub that she can grab if she has trouble getting out, as she did the last time she bathed.

The woman cautiously lowers herself into **the bath**, already dreading when she'll have to get out. She plans how she will surprise her body into movements she usually can't do. To put off getting out, she washes herself a twice and fantasizes about closing her eyes and waking up already in bed. But as she realizes she can no longer put it off, she feels weak and alone.

The first lines of the story speak to the ritual of the woman's trip to the cemetery: she has done it for seventeen years, and she knows exactly how to prepare. The tone changes ominously when it says that the journey has been occupying her thoughts more than usual, showing just how treacherous ordinary, habitual things have become in the woman's old age. While the woman's loneliness is a condition of her life—after all, her husband has been dead for a long time—her old age is presented as a new enemy that is beginning to disrupt her life.



Taking a bath was something the woman enjoyed when it was easy for her to do, but now, she feels a lot of dread and anxiety about having to bathe, since her body has not been cooperating lately. Baths can be quite dangerous for older people, especially if they slip and break something or hit their heads, and especially if they have nobody to help them if they struggle, which the story implies the woman does not. Despite her apprehension, the woman is very determined to bathe. She resolutely carries out the actions required to prepare her bath, keeping up her ritual despite the pain and anxiety that underlie everything she does.



The woman sets her mind against her body. Mentally, she is able to transport herself safely out of the bathtub. She imagines her body functioning perfectly, and dreams of waking up having glided through the transition out of the bath altogether. But, as the moment of getting out of the bath gets closer and closer, the woman's fear, helplessness, and loneliness overcome her. The action of getting out of the bath is so physically demanding that even the woman's mental determination becomes futile against it.



After draining the bathwater, the woman sits naked and shivering in **the tub**. She notices how slippery its surface has become and feels pain in her shoulders. When she grabs the rim, her hands slip. She begins to panic and then realizes that if she were to call for help, nobody would hear her. Outside, the world is completely silent, and she feels that she's "under the earth."

The woman makes another serious effort to grab the chair and hoist herself out, but it fails. Out of breath, she shouts for help, but of course, nobody hears. She's desperately lonely—if her husband were still alive, he would have helped her. After trying and failing again to get out, she starts beating the sides of the **tub**. Then she spends a half hour alternating between struggling to get out and resting her tired body.

Finally, the woman "escape[s]" **the bathtub**. But she knows that she'll never take another bath alone; this is "the end or the beginning of it," since she will have to hire a nurse to help her bathe now. Having the nurse will be the "first humiliation," and many others will follow.

Exhausted and lonely, the woman lies in bed wishing she would die. The "slow progression of difficulties" is a "kind of torture"; she can no longer reach items at the top of her cupboard, hang laundry on the line, or mow the lawn.

At this point, the bathtub starts to take on attributes of an antagonistic character. It is so slippery and cold that it makes the woman feel powerless and vulnerable. What is more, it actively seems to be trying to trap her, making her feel under the earth, as though she were buried alive. The bathtub is strikingly similar to a grave at this point, and one cannot help but have the impression that the woman fears the bathtub because it seems to be forcing her towards death.



The woman is no longer able to maintain the fantasy that she is self-sufficient. She accepts some of the facts of her situation: she has no one to take care of her and she cannot take care of herself. Her physical ability has hit a wall, and her mental determination has petered out as well. Physically and mentally helpless, she begins to panic, expending her energy on wild and hopeless behavior. She has lost control of her sense of normalcy. It seems possible that if she does not escape the bathtub, she might die of exposure, as she is wet and naked in a very cold bathroom.



The woman's struggle in the bathtub causes her to realize something she refused to accept before: she can no longer do some basic everyday things by herself. Her self-esteem takes a huge fall in this moment, which is evident from the despairing and confessional tone of her thoughts, contrasting with her determined and regimented thoughts before. While the woman seems quite alone in her life, she doesn't seem to take any comfort in the idea of having a nurse help her bathe—in fact, she sees it as a "humiliation." In this way, it's clear that being alone is not what the woman despairs—it's being helpless to prevent her body from reaching a point where she is no longer self-sufficient.



The terrifying ordeal with the bathtub releases a stream of reflections and sorrows. Even though the woman didn't die in the bathtub as she seemed to fear, getting out doesn't end her terrible feelings, since the situation has just proved to her that she's no longer self-sufficient, which is also something she's been dreading. Comparing aging to torture further positions her body as an antagonist who is ruining her life, and given that feeling, it makes some sense that she would long for death—at least death will release her from the torture of aging, both the pain in her body and the humiliation of not being able to do even basic tasks for herself.



Once, when her niece came to help her and remarked on the beauty of the clouds, the woman replied that she never looks at clouds and the niece acted “incredulous” and “despising.” But the truth is that she can no longer look at the sky without feeling dizzy. Besides, she has to look at the ground to protect herself from tripping. She must always guard her body from its own “treachery,” as if it were an enemy. Soon, she will need someone else to “help her to guard and control her own body,” which scares her.

The next day, the weather is surprisingly warm. Normally, when the woman visits the cemetery, the wind whips across the ocean, making her shiver through her coat. But today it’s peaceful and nice. The woman weeds the garden at her husband’s grave then cleans out the jars for holding the cut flowers she brought. Standing back, she looks with satisfaction at her work, noting proudly that she has always cared for her husband’s grave.

As she leaves the cemetery, the woman walks by her parents’ grave. It’s a roomier grave than her husband’s, as they had money for extra space and an elaborate tombstone. Their grave has no flowers, only soft grass glowing in the sun. The woman feels peaceful; she’s so far from the terror she felt last night getting out of **the bath**. Sitting at her parents’ grave, she doesn’t want to go home, as she’s enjoying the wind and the sea.

The woman has the sense that the world is narrowing. She is so mentally and physically limited by her aging body that she cannot enjoy the beauty of the world; instead, she has to pay very narrow attention to her own body and safety at all times. The unpleasant interaction with the niece perhaps gives a hint as to why the woman doesn’t seem to want anyone else’s company. After all, it doesn’t seem like other people understand what she’s going through, since the niece seems not to realize that the woman isn’t choosing not to look at the clouds—she physically can’t. Because of these cruelties, perhaps the woman simply prefers to be alone with her own thoughts, which explains why the notion of aging so much that she has to hire a nurse troubles her so much.



This passage begins the story’s second half, which is remarkably different from the first. The first half detailed the harrowing ordeal with the bathtub and the woman’s despair at not being able to do ordinary tasks anymore, but now the weather has warmed and the woman is suddenly able to do what she couldn’t do at home: she can do the labor of maintaining a grave, seemingly without pain or difficulty. Since the weather is comfortable and she’s able to do the work of tending the grave, the woman’s mood is also transformed: she seems pleased and happy, rather than anxious and despairing.



The woman has not mentioned her parents before this moment, so the fact that they’re buried right near her husband comes as a shock. Another surprising thing is that apparently they were wealthy, which stands in contrast to the woman herself, who seems working class (she has no help at home, she takes the bus instead of driving, etc.). It’s also notable that, while the woman makes the effort to come each year to beautify her husband’s grave, she does not do the same for her parents—but this does not appear to be out of resentment or neglect, as she feels so happy and peaceful visiting her parents’ grave. Perhaps she finds it so beautiful already—likely because they were wealthy enough to have a large, elaborate grave—that she doesn’t think it’s necessary to fix it up. The fact that the woman, while sitting in a graveyard, does not think of the bathtub that she felt was entombing her (putting her “under the earth”) is also important; she doesn’t associate the bathtub with the graveyard, but rather with the grave-like confinement of her life at home. This implies that she perhaps finds the idea of death preferable to the threat of continuing to age and becoming less capable.



The woman is thankful that her parents were able to have such a comfortable grave, unlike her husband, who was cremated. His grave has only room for a tombstone. The woman's parents' grave is like having a lot of land, back before there were too many people in the world. It confuses her that the world has gotten "wider and wider" and yet there's "no space left"—although it might have gotten narrower.

The woman doesn't want to undertake her arduous journey home, returning to the struggles of her daily life. She'd rather stay in one place. Nonetheless, she returns to the bus stop, and she thinks of making her dinner and the upcoming weeks when family plans to visit. The noise around her seems to get louder, and she closes her eyes to remember the peace of the cemetery: the bright flowers on her husband's grave, and her parents' grave with so much room they could roll over if they wanted. But all she can see is her husband's grave getting narrower and narrower until it vanishes entirely and then becomes the "narrow confining" **bathtub**, waiting for a moment of vulnerability to trap her forever.

Her parents' wealth adds a troubling element to the story; it suggests that the dead are only truly at peace if they can afford to be. The woman likely visits her husband's grave because she is anxious about making sure his remains are comfortable and dignified, just as she is anxious about her own discomfort and dignity in life. It seems that when the woman contemplates the difference in wealth between her parents and her husband, she is led back to thoughts of narrowness. The world is narrower not only because the woman is getting weaker but also because there are more people and less wealth. This subtly opens the possibility that the woman may not even get the relief she seeks in death.



The woman's loneliness and helplessness are absent while she's in the cemetery. At the beginning of the story, the cemetery seemed like a sad, harsh place that the woman must go to great lengths to get to. By the end, however, the cemetery has the warmth of a home to the widow. She feels capable, content, and able to experience pleasure there. Her peace and pleasure in the cemetery show, by contrast, the misery of the woman's life at home. As she travels back, the pleasant image of the grave is replaced by the terrifying image of the bathtub. In this way, it seems that the woman doesn't dread death itself, which may bring her peace. What she actually dreads is not being able to live her life self-sufficiently, and she dreads a potentially harrowing process of dying while trying to do a daily task like bathing.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Clark, Cora. "The Bath." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 26 Sep 2021. Web. 14 Oct 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Clark, Cora. "The Bath." LitCharts LLC, September 26, 2021. Retrieved October 14, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-bath>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Bath* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Frame, Janet. *The Bath*. Cambridge University Press. 2018.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Frame, Janet. *The Bath*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2018.