The Mark on the Wall

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Woolf was born Adeline Virginia Stephen to a wealthy family in South Kensington as the seventh child in a family of eight. Woolf's youth was defined by an expansive but informal literary education directed by her father, Leslie Stephens (Woolf never had the opportunity for formal education), as well as by the premature death of her mother and half-sister. Woolf met her future husband Leonard Woolf as a member of the famous Bloomsbury circle of intellectuals, which she took part in along with her sister Vanessa Bell, and which included figures like E.M. Forster, Maynard Keynes, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry, and Clive Bell. The group was known both for its intellectual force and bohemian tendencies, with sexual fluidity, artistic production, and modern values all marking a dramatic shift from Woolf's Kensington upbringing and influencing her later works. Though Woolf is most famous as a defining voice in modernist literature thanks to her various works of fiction, she was also a prolific essayist and kept diaries that were published posthumously. Woolf suffered from mental illness and alternated between living in London and her country home in Richmond. She took her own life in 1941.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Woolf wrote "The Mark on the Wall" at the height of the first World War. The war touched the lives of English citizens, as Germany began strategically bombing England in 1915, and England began conscripting citizens to be soldiers in January of 1916 with the Military Service Bill. Woolf depicts the influence of the war on private citizens in this story, as her references to the war consistently interrupt her narrator's trains of thought. Additionally, the early 20th century showed drastic changes in social norms, technological development, and the confluence of citizens in urban areas (which had begun with the industrial revolution). Movements for women's rights, which played a central role in Woolf's work, saw great gains at the time, as women's suffrage was introduced in 1918 (just one year after the story's initial publication).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Other modernist works treating the topic of time, loss, and memory include Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and Woolf's later novels, such as *To the Lighthouse*, where she develops these themes more fully. One could turn to "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman for another short story written from the female perspective and exploring restrictive gender roles and the influence of domestic space and objects on the female psyche. Kate Chopin also published several short stories and novels investigating the female experience at the turn of the century, including "The Story of an Hour," whose treatment of time and transportation technology resonates with themes explored in "The Mark on the Wall."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Mark on the Wall
- **When Written:** 1915-1917
- **Where Written:** Richmond, UK
- **When Published:** 1917
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, Modernist Fiction
- **Setting:** A living room
- **Climax:** A voice interrupts the narrator's introspection
- **Antagonist:** Modern society, the fleeting nature of life, war
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Hogarth House. In 1917, Virginia and Leonard Woolf founded a printing press in the dining room of their home in Richmond, known as Hogarth House. Books were printed with a hand-press as a hobby. "The Mark on the Wall" was included in the first book they printed, *Two Stories* by Virginia Woolf. Along with publishing numerous of Woolf's novels, Hogarth Press published T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," as well as essays by both Woolfs and Gertrude Stein.

Homage. Virginia Woolf's novels have frequently provided fodder for the works of contemporary authors, artists, and filmmakers—for example, Michael Cunningham won a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Hours* inspired by *Mrs. Dalloway* and Woolf's own life. "The Mark on the Wall" is not exempt from this treatment—the thirteen-page short story was adapted into an hour and a half long opera which premiered at the Tête à Tête Opera Festival in 2017.

PLOT SUMMARY

A first-person narrator sits in her living room smoking a cigarette on a January day after tea and looks into the fire. The sight of the fire draws her into reflections on the similarity between the coals and a cavalcade of knights. Seeking distraction from these thoughts, she catches sight of a black mark on the wall several inches above the mantelpiece. The narrator cannot immediately identify the mark, which provokes

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a sequence of reflections on its possible identity. She wonders if it might be a nail, a hole, a leaf, or something protruding from the wall. In between her various suspicions about the mark, she follows the flow of her consciousness on the topics of knowledge, the passage of time, subjectivity, and nature. She reflects deeply on the fleeting nature of life in modern civilization, as well as her identity as a woman and the impact of gender roles on contemporary society. Throughout the story, her thoughts circle around the ongoing war. The mark on the wall helps to ground her whenever her thoughts become too unpleasant.

Ultimately, a voice interrupts her reflections, revealing for the first time that she was not alone in the room. The voice states the desire to purchase a newspaper, remarks with distaste towards the ongoing war, and disparages the presence of a **snail** on their wall. The story closes with the narrator repeating to herself the realization that the mark had been a snail all along, disregarding the comments about the war.

CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The only substantial character in this story is the narrator; everything that occurs is filtered heavily through her thoughts and stream of consciousness reflections. Though never named, the story heavily implies that the narrator is a woman sitting in her living room with someone, likely her husband. She is well-educated, thoughtful, and very introspective, although she also self-describes as a neglectful housekeeper. These descriptions of her housekeeping and ambivalent need to take the London metro (the "Tube") suggests that the narrator is someone who comes from an affluent household, but no longer has access to or the desire for such extravagant resources. She may be a writer, and she is critical of religion, masculine authority, warfare, and modern civilization.

Someone – The person who interrupts the narrator is implied to be her husband (though a gender is never noted), given that the two are sitting alone in their living room smoking cigarettes after tea. He announces his intention to purchase a newspaper and complains about the snail on the wall—abruptly interrupting the narrator's introspection and ending her musings on what the mark could be. He receives no other descriptive identification in the story, but the belated acknowledgement of his presence is significant as it marks the vast distances thoughts can travel from the reality one is present in; the narrator seems entirely alone and in her own world until this voice breaks through her reverie, reminding her—and the reader—that she has in fact been sitting next to another person all along.

THEMES

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NATURE AND CIVILIZATION

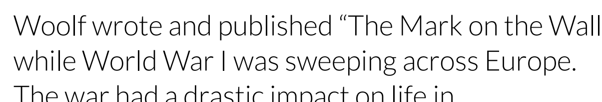
In the final moments of Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall," the unnamed narrator discovers that the black speck on the wall of her home—a mark that has prompted her musings about everything from war to the meaning of life—is just a **snail**. This mundane realization at the end of such deep introspection reflects the tension between nature (represented by the snail) and civilization. Nature, in Woolf's rendering, is indifferent to the whims of humankind—which is why the consideration of the mark on the wall—that is, an intrusion of nature into the home—repeatedly interrupts the narrator's philosophizing, grounding her before she spirals into existential dread about "accidental affair this living is after all our civilization." Writing during the rapidly changing technological and political landscape of the early twentieth century, Woolf ultimately presents the natural world as a potential antidote to the anxiety and ills caused by rapid, impersonal societal development.

Though human beings would like to think of civilization as evidence of their dominion over the world, Woolf instead associates society with anxiety, isolation, and disorientation. Woolf specifically links the modern condition to technology such as the Tube (the London metro) and the post office in order to reflect the "ignorance of humanity": "if one wants to compare life to anything," she notes, "one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! […] Tumbling head over heels […] like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office!"

Woolf clearly feels a disconnect between highly-ordered civilization and the cold randomness of existence, asserting that her technological metaphor "seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard…." Woolf further rejects that material possessions could protect one from this chaotic loss, presenting even civilization's most prized objects as ultimately nothing more that fodder for rats to "nibble": "let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime […] the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates […] all gone, and jewels, too. Opals and emeralds, they lie about the roots of turnips." In aiming to "show how very little control of our possessions we have," Woolf denies humanity's hubristic belief that civilization has achieved mastery over the world.

Natural imagery, however, frequently interrupts these negative reflections on civilization. After being drawn into a spiral of thoughts on the rapidity of life and its "perpetual waste and repair," the narrator moves into thoughts of the "after life" which center on the "slow pulling down" of green stalks of grass and an inevitable return to an indistinct world characterized by "spaces of light and darkness." When a **tree** taps against the window, the narrator thinks about her desire to think "quietly, calmly, spaciously" and never be interrupted; she considers thoughts about society to be interruptions, it seems, while perceptions of the natural world provide welcome relief. As the narrator fixes her gaze on the mark on the wall, she expresses a longing for certainty, solidity, and "proof of some existence other than ours." She then thinks about wood, trees, and all of the flora and fauna that live slow lives around human beings. She repeatedly expresses pleasure and happiness about thinking about the different slow, natural sensations produced by trees, until "something gets in the way" and she is pulled back through a "vast upheaval" into the room—that is, into the domestic human world.

Ultimately, the natural world lends itself to perception and reflection in ways that modern civilization does not. The narrator does not embrace an unambiguous preference for nature over civilization, however—in effect, reflections on the slower-paced and more "certain" realities of natural world can provide mental relief from the ricocheting onslaught of uncertainties in industrialized spaces.



WAR

Woolf wrote and published "The Mark on the Wall" while World War I was sweeping across Europe. The war had a drastic impact on life in London—Germany began strategically bombing the city in 1915, and Woolf writes extensively in her diaries and other stories about the unprecedented architectural and social destruction caused by the fighting. The narrator of this story attempts to have a normal day "smoking a cigarette" after tea, but allusions to the war repeatedly interrupt her thoughts. The persistence of these interruptions on an otherwise peaceful day indicates the difficulties of leading a normal civilian life during wartime. The narrator displays a distinctly negative stance on the war but ultimately cannot escape its effects.

There is a clear dissonance between the domesticity of the narrator's day and the unrest in her thoughts—despite her peaceful activities, she cannot keep her mind off the war. The story starts with the narrator sitting in her living room in winter, for instance; prompted by the sight of burning coals, the narrator jumps to the militaristic image of a "crimson flag" and a "cavalcade of red knights." This fancy is interrupted to her relief by "the sight of the **mark**." These thoughts link clearly to the war, revealing how deeply it has entered even into the homes of London residents. She goes on to think about how future novelists will describe the modern world and accuses herself of making "generalizations" that she calls "very worthless." She dismissively links the word "generalizations" with the military notion of general, noting, "The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers …" In her final mental monologue on the life of a **tree**, the narrator again uses several military metaphors and similes. She thinks about fish in streams "like flags blown out" and considers the tree with "nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon." Even the narrator's "pleasant" thoughts show a preoccupation with the war.

Thinking about the war, in turn, makes the narrator feel out of control—and she deliberately tries to distance herself from such "disagreeable thoughts" by looking at the mark on her wall. She further notes that when she "must shatter this hour of peace" she should "think of the mark on the wall." This links the practice of thinking about the mark directly to distraction from unpleasant thoughts in general, which are militaristically intruding on her "hour of peace." Although she also criticizes this form of distraction, she is forced to play along to find a sense of calm after "waking from a midnight dream of horror." She describes focusing on the mark as taking action to avoid painful or exciting thoughts, even as she expresses contempt for choosing distraction over reflection.

Notably, one of the narrator's primary preoccupations centers on Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which is a list of the hierarchy of officials in England such as the archbishops of Canterbury and York and the Lord High Chancellor. These individuals control large social decisions, including the decision to go to war, which normal civilians take no part in. In theory these facts of hierarchy could "comfort […] instead of enraging" the narrator—in the sense that they assert someone, somewhere is handling things; however, she fixes her eyes on the mark on the wall to dismiss the Archbishops and Lord High Chancellor to "the shadows of shades." It seems she has little faith in those in charge, and this moment drives home her resentment for the war at large.

The final proof that the narrator uses the mark on the wall to distract her from the war occurs at the end of the story. Her partner says, "Curse this war; God damn this war!" and then complains about the snail on the wall, but all the narrator thinks in the final line is "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail." She would still rather think about the mark than the war, because those thoughts are useless and "no good."

In the end, "The Mark on the Wall" portrays some of the civilian costs of war. Rather than focusing on the larger economic and political costs and benefits, however, Woolf examines the impact of wartime on an everyday civilian couple. Because wartime decisions were made by officials higher up on Whitaker's Table of Precedency, there was nothing civilians could do to cope with the war besides try to take their minds off of it. Focusing on the solid natural world worked to a certain

extent, but the story suggests that there was ultimately no way to entirely escape the effects of the war.

GENDER ROLES

The UK saw the birth of social movements around women's rights during the Victorian Period, but many major victories occurred during or after Woolf's lifetime. The first law on women's suffrage, for instance, was passed in the UK in 1918, one year after "The Mark on the Wall" was originally published. Virginia Woolf wrote most of her fictional work about female protagonists and often addressed the inequalities between men and women—for example, UK universities like Oxford and Cambridge only began admitting women later in Woolf's life and she regretted never having access to the formal education her husband and other friends in the Bloomsbury group had. Although the gender of the narrator of this story is never explicitly specified, the text strongly suggests she is a woman sitting in her living room with her partner. She reflects on different social expectations on men and women and addresses the male role particularly critically. However, she blames society rather than individual men and women for the problems with gender roles.

The narrator reflects on developments in human history, discrediting the alleged superiority of masculine authority that has shaped so much of that history. The narrator specifically dismisses "learned men" as "the descendants of witches and hermits who "crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars." By linking such men to a history of superstition, the narrator implicitly devalues the authority of those who control society. The narrator further compares belief in the wisdom of ruling men to a form of superstition itself. Thus, "the less we honour them as our superstitions dwindle"—that is, the less people put unquestioning faith in fallible masculine authority—"one could imagine a very pleasant world [...] without professors or specialists or housekeepers with the profiles of policemen."

Yet even as the narrator devalues male authority, she questions the ability to truly overthrow it: "This train of thought, she perceives, is threatening mere waste of energy [...] for who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker's Table of Precedency?" She further notes that old traditions like "Sunday luncheons" (a reference to Sunday mass and religion) have been displaced without "damnation." In their place stands "the masculine point of view" which governs lives, sets standards, and "establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency." Although she does not regret the loss of old traditions, she also does not celebrate the "masculine" standards that have replaced them. The narrator claims that the war has caused Whitaker's Table of Precedency to become "half a phantom to many men and women" and hopes it "will be laughed into the dustbin where phantoms go." She believes it would leave behind "an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom." The narrator's hopes are clearly linked to the rejection of masculine standards. Because she has seen progress in her own lifetime, she comes to a partially optimistic conclusion about the future that is seemingly at odds with her own assertion that such endeavors toward equality are a "mere waste of energy."

Furthermore, the narrator thinks about the impact of gender roles on her own life and shows the ways that these expectations do not match her reality. She notices the dust left on the mantlepiece by her "not being a very vigilant housekeeper." Given for her desire for a world without housekeepers, this indicates that she does not wish she were a better housekeeper but rather feels trapped by the expectation that she be one in the first place. When she pictures a more beautiful "after life," she claims that "saying which are **trees**, and which are men and women, or whether there are such things" will be impossible. This means that a utopian vision in the mind of the narrator involves the eradication of the differences between the sexes. She also names the image of "men and women [sitting] after tea, smoking cigarettes" as a peaceful and happy one. And as this is what she is currently doing, the more pleasant world she pictures is clearly within reach for individuals. Unequal standards and the tendencies of "men of action" upset the narrator, but she leaves the possibility for pleasant thoughts of men and women living in harmony.

Although the narrator chafes at the gender roles that have been ascribed to her, she does not make sweeping biological generalizations—that is, she does not argue that men and women are inherently different. Rather, she reflects on the way that social expectations influence people of either gender and constrict their lives. Woolf portrays a strongly egalitarian view on the relationship between men and women, indicating that both are capable of reason and goodness. A better world would emerge with the relaxation of these strict social norms—and positive relationships between men and women were already possible between individuals.

SELF AND THE OTHER

Although the story's narrative occurs solely in the mind of its narrator, her thoughts turn consistently towards those of other individuals and the possibility of knowing their minds. She reflects with interest on the impossibility of following another's life, yet her mind circles back to figures as diverse as the former tenants of her house, the people she sees outside a train window, and Shakespeare. These mental forays reveal some hope of encounter between others' minds, or perhaps merely a pleasant fascination with others' internal lives. However, the sudden reveal at the story's close that the narrator has not been alone in the room retrospectively colors these musings. In the end, Woolf leaves it ambiguous as to whether people can truly understand each other at all when the narrator's partner anticlimactically

reveals the identity of the **mark** on which she has spent so long dwelling.

The narrator enjoys considering the lives of others, and also cites distance between people as a source of deep concern and anxiety. In her first guess about the identity of the mark on her wall, she wonders if it belongs to the house's former tenants and says she thinks of them often because "one will never see them again" and "never know what happened." She goes on to consider how others think about her and concludes that humans like to construct romantic images of themselves. The narrator wonders what happens when that romantic image disappears and all that remains is "that shell of a person which is seen by other people." She says this leads to an "airless, shallow" world that is "not to be lived in." This would suggest that people can never truly know each other, leading to a world in which people see only the hollow shells of those around them. Despite her cynicism about the way others see her, the narrator also displays ambivalence about self-image. She talks about "dressing up the figure of herself" in her mind "stealthily." She finds it curious that "one protects the image of oneself from idolatry." This language of "dressing up" and "idolatry" indicates that the process of protecting a positive self-image from the criticisms of others is itself an illusion.

Despite the deeply introspective and solitary reflections of the narrator, at the close of the story it turns out she is not alone—someone, presumably a man, interrupts her reflections. This leads to two possible conclusions. In the first instance, this moment confirms the narrator's worst cynicisms. Attempts at contact between different people's competing mental lives will lead to disappointment as they do in the conclusion of this story. To evidence this, the man's interruption "gets in the way" and causes "a vast upheaval" where "everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing." These emotions are chaotic and a shocking contrast to the calm tone of the narrator's previous reflections, which make them appear all the more unwelcome. He then curses the war and then says, "all the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on the wall." Given that the narrator has spent the entire story guessing the identity of the mark, even saying she might not want to know, this reveal is very anticlimactic and proves that none of her thoughts have been apparent to her companion.

In a second, more positive interpretation, the presence of this other person proves the narrator is not as alone as she thought she was. Furthermore, if the narrator's mind is this vibrant and lively, then perhaps the minds of others are too. Only society leads one to see other people as "shells" with "glassy eyes." And though the man might have a different perspective on the mark on the wall, he and the narrator share a negative view on the war—suggesting a certain meeting of their minds.

What's more, the "pleasant thoughts" that the man interrupts with such upheaval include the image of "rooms where men and women sit after tea, smoking cigarettes." The narrator has already admitted to smoking in the first paragraphs, indicating that this happy image could refer to her and the man in question. Furthermore, when she imagines that she wants a life without interruption, she chooses to picture Shakespeare, "a man who sat himself solidly in an arm-chair, and looked into the fire" much like the narrator herself. However, she soon calls this "dull" and a "historical fiction" which doesn't interest her at all—suggesting an ambivalence towards her stated desire for a solitary, uninterrupted life and perhaps, an appreciation for the intrusions of her companion.

The narrator displays a paradoxical desire for solitude and connection which concludes rather ambiguously. Although she likes to imagine the lives of others and criticizes the elements of society that isolate people, she also has a romantic image of herself that she feels that others cannot see. A cynical worldview might be confirmed when she is flippantly interrupted at the end of the story, but this remains open to interpretation. The narrator indicates that encounters with others lead to a "shallow" world and the shattering of one's self-image, but that self-image is merely "romantic." The very fact of her preoccupation of others proves how necessary they are to her, even if this appears to contradict her desire for solitude, pleasant thoughts, and a life "without interruption."

TIME AND MEMORY

The narrator fixates on the passage of time and discusses the objects and habits that disappear as time passes. Fragments of the past remain both in the form of memories and objects, like shards of pottery, but time still ultimately emerges victorious in its destructive force. Though people try to hold onto the past, the story suggests, life remains a "scraping paring affair" that is indifferent to individual desires. However, some of the changes that come with the passage of time are positive and even exhilarating. People should focus less on controlling and understanding the past, the story suggests, and instead focus on reality and "the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours."

Although the narrator posits that considering concrete possessions allows a return to the past, that return is ultimately limited by the sheer volume of things—physical or otherwise—lost over time. At the start of the story, the narrator claims that to "fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw." She considers "the fire," "the steady film of yellow light on the page of [her] book," and the chrysanthemums "in the round glass bowl on the mantlepiece," grounding her setting in concrete images her of surroundings. This indicates that the story that follows occurred in the past, and that the narrator's stream of consciousness is also a form of memory.

Even though she has grounded her story in the memory of these specific objects, her subsequent memories of objects and possessions leads her to think about their loss and the

"haphazard" nature of life. She names "three blue canisters of book-binding tools" as well as "bird cages, iron hoops, the steel skates" and other items lost over the years. Although one might anchor one's memories in certain objects, then, the objects themselves will inevitably disappear with the passage of time.

Inspired by the dust on her mantlepiece, she considers "the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation." The process of loss that she experienced on a personal level extends to the scale of grand civilizations like Troy; no matter how developed a society, in the end only fragments remain—fragments that only tell part of the story. She later reflects on the antiquaries—individuals who study or collect antiquities. She claims they were often retired Colonels who spent their spare time visiting sites like the "barrows on the South Downs" to try to determine whether they were tombs or camps. They might find evidence like "a handful of Elizabethan nails, a great many Tudor clay pipes, a piece of Roman pottery" to support their conclusions, but the narrator dismisses this as "proving I don't know what." She concludes that "nothing is proved, nothing is known." This supports her belief that fragmentary objects cannot in themselves contain or communicate a full history.

Much as Woolf laments the knowledge that time will inevitably erase her own life, she finds a distinct sense of freedom in the knowledge that everything is fleeting. The trivial, unpleasant parts of life will also disappear. For example, the narrator reflects on the Sundays she used to spend in London, which were full of "afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons" as well as "the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it." There were rules for everything, even tablecloths: "tablecloths of a different kind were not real tablecloths." The narrator's distaste for these past Sunday afternoons provides an example of time passing in a positive way. Those habitual Sundays with her family eventually ceased, and the narrator describes "how shocking, and yet how wonderful it was" that "these real things […] were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms." Reality is not always pleasant, especially when defined by restrictive traditions, yet even the habits that constrict one's life will disappear over time, like "mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth" and leave "a sense of illegitimate freedom" in their stead. While these changes also entail some form of loss, the narrator portrays them as also positive and liberating.

The narrator ultimately takes a cynical view on the prospects of historical reconstruction—that is, trying to determine what happened in the past using the fragments left in the future. However, she does not conclude that change is always bad. Instead, she mourns that all that one acquires and produces in one's life will disappear and be destroyed, while acknowledging that this unceasing march forwards can also be linked to freedom and a sense of progress.

SYMBOLS

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

THE MARK/SNAIL

The mysterious mark on the wall, which turns out to be a snail, shows that familiar spaces can become mysterious again, and symbolizes the uncertainty of rational knowledge. Throughout the story, the mark grounds the narrator by bringing her back from her unpleasant thoughts. The mark thereby stands for a desire to stay anchored in reality and seek protection from the dangers of drifting too far into abstract thoughts—which aligns with the narrator's skepticism about knowledge and "learned men", whom she associates with superstition, and her preference for "the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours." The mark belongs to that impersonal world.

Additionally, the symbolic nature of the snail resonates with the tone of the narrator's reflections. Snails move at a slow pace, counter to the current of modernity—this image stands in stark contrast to the narrator's descriptions of modern civilization, such as being "blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour" and "tumbling head over heels…like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office!" Additionally, the snail symbolizes both the narrator's failures as a housekeeper, which ties into her resentment towards that feminine role. It also demonstrates humanity's inability to completely bar nature from their homes, which suggests that the borders drawn between nature and civilization are less impermeable than one might think. This in turn suggests the hubris of human endeavors to achieve dominion over nature, indicating that the final outcome of the great acts of civilization—city-building, new technologies, and even war—will be the inevitable return to the nature from which humans come.

Furthermore, though the narrator and her husband have vastly different reactions to the intruder, it catches both of their attention. This underlines the paradoxical ways that the objects and spaces can impact people—in essence, it reveals how different people can see the same thing in entirely different ways.

THE TREE

If humanity is associated with a fast-paced lifestyle and destructive materialism, trees symbolize the opposite of that—namely, slowing down, growth, and being present. Their long lives and slow yet constant growth provide an alternative to rapid and ruinous human development. The narrator describes the ways that new technologies impede human connections, as being packed together on the

underground and on omnibuses leads people to look at each other with emptiness and "glassy eyes." Trees, on the other hand, create nurturing communities for other plants and animals, building symbiotic relationships that the narrator contrasts with the isolation of modern humans. She describes the ways that trees grow over the course of years without paying attention to their surroundings, and in doing so provide spaces for cows to swish their tails in the shade on hot afternoons, for birds to sing in June and for insects to sun themselves on the leaves. Even after succumbing to a storm and falling, "there are a million patient, watchful lives still for a tree," as they turn into furniture and housing for human activities. This makes trees inherently social, as well as nurturing and protective, in contrast to the "wasteful" and "haphazard" destructive tendencies of humans. Essentially, the lives of trees progress towards growth and community even in their afterlives, as their only goals are growing slowly and being present. Humanity, on the other hand, rushes to develop new technologies, wage wars, and accumulate heaps of material possessions—none of these things can persist. The hubristic desire for the domination of the world leads to isolation and a shrinking, rather than a growth, of one's knowledge and possessions.

In addition, a tree tapping on the windowpane catches the narrator's attention, interrupting the domestic isolation of her living room. Like the **snail**, the tree also proves that the stark walls humans put up between their lives and the natural world are not impermeable. At times, the narrator appears to identify with the tree, imagining herself leading such a life, as opposed to her civilized life. Because this is a real tree (rather than an imagined one), the tree also represents the importance of paying attention to one's surroundings. By anchoring in solid material objects, one can find a sense of peace outside the various distractions of the fast-paced civilized world.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Monday or Tuesday: Eight Stories* published in 1997.

The Mark on the Wall Quotes

How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw so feverishly, and then leave it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just discovered the mark on her wall, in a moment that interrupts her previous fancy about a cavalcade of knights swarming a hill. The ant metaphor resembles that prior military image in its imagery, but replaces human civilization with a natural image. In this moment, the narrator not only discovers the mark, but also identifies the pattern that her thoughts will take while thinking about it—this quote predicts the frenzy and fever of her reflections, which also stand as a metaphor for the energies of modern society. This moment also sets up the trend of nature replacing and taking over civilization.

"…the mystery of life; The inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilization—let me just count over a few of the things lost in one lifetime, beginning, for that seems always the most mysterious of losses—what cat would gnaw, what rat would nibble—three pale blue canisters of book-binding tools? Then there were the bird cages, the iron hoops, the steel skates, the Queen Anne coalscuttle, the bagatelle board, the hand organ—all gone, and jewels, too. Opals and emeralds, they lie about the roots of turnips. What a scraping paring affair it is to be sure! The wonder is that I've any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment…"

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

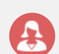
Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just considered and proceeded to reject the possibility that the mark was made by a nail put in the wall by former tenants. She swerves into reflections on the general tendency of objects to disappear and leave only accidental traces behind—either real evidence, like the mark itself, or memories, such as the narrator's reflections on objects lost during her childhood. The objects she lists here are the first real evidence of her gender, as she discusses lost iron hoops and jewels. The objects she lists also indicate a certain level of affluence, at least in childhood. She mourns most keenly the loss of her bookbinding tools, not the most

common hobby for a young woman in this period and an indication of some chafing with the role assigned to her sex. Her conclusion that life is a "scraping paring affair" displays a marked cynicism with the grand promises of civilization—literature, jewels and finery, music, and even symbols of the monarchy (the Queen Anne coalscuttle) serve as no match for the passage of time and the power of nature to reclaim all objects.

> Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race-horse. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard.. . .

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

After considering her losses, the narrator compares modern life more directly to a ride through the Tube. Her vibrant verbal metaphors catalogue rapidity and chaos—blowing, shooting out, and tumbling. The use of the Tube to ground the metaphor expresses an ambivalence with celebrated developments in modern technology, which she believes reduce humans to mere objects or animals—brown paper parcels with hair like the tail of a race-horse. The reference to hairpins further confirms the narrator's gender, although it also indicates the importance of clothing for the female sex at that time. In her concluding words, the effect of time passing is yoked directly to waste and destruction, as well as a sense of randomness that flies in the face of civilization's hubristic promises to master the world.

> The tree outside the window taps very gently on the pane… I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciously, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle; I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

A tree interrupts the narrator's thoughts—this marks the first concrete action in the story. The tree breaking into the narrative in this manner shows the permeability of the domestic space—that is, despite the walls and fire and armchairs, the narrator's living room is still susceptible to natural interruptions. This in turn indicates that nature cannot be completely dominated by mankind.

The narrator's desire for peace and isolation generates an alternative to her reflections on the crowdedness of public spaces. In this instance, she desires a protected space for herself away from others. She seeks ease and the absence of hostility and obstacle, and by associating that ease with privacy and isolation, she links companionship with the negative business she wants to escape.

> All the time I'm dressing up the figure of myself in my own mind, lovingly, stealthily, not openly adoring it, for if I did that, I should catch myself out, and stretch my hand at once for a book in self-protection. Indeed, it is curious how instinctively one protects the image of oneself from idolatry or any other handling that could make it ridiculous…Suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this moment, the narrator expresses a desire for pleasant thoughts, which she defines as thoughts that reflect well upon oneself. These subsequent sentiments

regarding her self-image express some ambivalence, as she chooses words like “dressing up,” “stealthily,” and “idolatry” that implicate this habit with a certain amount of doubt or suspicion. The practice of building and protecting a positive self-image may be natural, but it is also somewhat prone to illusion. However, the narrator fears the self as seen by others—she sees that person as shallow and empty, which appears to leave one with a paradox: one must choose between a beautiful illusion and a painful truth. The references here to the romantic figure in the forest and the empty figure on the omnibus ground this conundrum in her debates on nature and civilization, with the former clearly superior.

…but these generalizations are very worthless. The military sound of the word is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers—a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

By “generalizations,” the narrator refers to her predictions about the subjects future novelists will write about. She rejects that term as too military, which reveals the phantom of the ongoing war tapping at her thoughts (for the link between the military general and the word generalizations is not a common one). The positions she names and rejects are masculine ones, which helps to explain the narrator’s antipathy towards the masculine world: she links it to the war and to the worst elements of civilization. Her reference to childhood and “the thing itself” helps explain the processes through which civilization shapes our minds, as one grows up with fixed expectations of how the world does and ought to work, and only the passage of time reveals those habits as flimsy or transient.

How shocking, and yet how wonderful it was to discover that these real things, Sunday luncheons, Sunday walks, country houses, and tablecloths were not entirely real, were indeed half phantoms, and the damnation which visited the disbeliever in them was only a sense of illegitimate freedom. What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker’s Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom—if freedom exists…

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

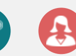
Page Number: 50-51

Explanation and Analysis

Here the narrator considers changes in habits prompted by the passage of time. For the first time, she presents loss and change as potentially positive or even liberatory. Society cannot hold onto its jewels and possessions, but it also cannot hold onto its restrictive traditions—when unpleasant or constricting traditions change, people are left with a general freedom. Even the war plays a potentially positive role here, as the war is the force which so quickly uprooted and disrupted these traditions and habits by conscripting many of Britain’s men to fight. However, the narrator critiques some of the contemporary traditions that have replaced the religious traditions (the Sundays) of her childhood, namely a masculine social and political order represented by Whitaker’s Table of Precedency. Following the narrator’s logic, these similarly constrictive gendered traditions will also end up in the dustbin of history, although the narrator remains ultimately skeptical of whether the final conclusion will be freedom or further constricting habits.

> No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment…what should I gain?—Knowledge? Matter for further speculation?...what is knowledge? What are our learned men save the descendants of witches and hermits who crouched in caves and in woods brewing herbs, interrogating shrew-mice and writing down the language of the stars? And the less we honour them as our superstitions dwindle and our respect for beauty and health of mind increases.. . .

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

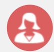
Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In the moments leading up to this, the narrator considers leaping out of her seat and rushing over to determine the identity of the mark. However, she decides this would be worthless and in her explanation she rejects the history of human knowledge as mere superstition—her language here is extreme and quite dismissive. Her disdain for learned men makes more sense when situated in the context of her criticisms of modern society and technology like the underground, since with those criticisms she outlines some of the very clear costs of society and reason. Reason provides no solution to the inevitable end of one's life and the disappearance of all of one's material possessions. The narrator, who has until this point been preoccupied with matters for speculation, has already proved the dangers of too much thought—it can lead to deepening anxiety about worldly problems with no developments regarding their solutions. There is a strongly gendered element to her approach to this question, as the types of knowledge that she rejects belong specifically to learned men.

> Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world. A quiet, spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs…How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections—if it were not for Whitaker's Almanack—if it were not for the Table of Precedency!

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

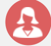
Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

At last the narrator paints an alternative picture to the modern society she has repeatedly critiqued. Her utopian vision centers on a return to nature, and the natural world she describes has particular qualities. These include quiet and space, as well as an expansive sense of time to enjoy the plants and animals in one's surroundings. According to the narrator, the natural world succeeds in exactly the manner that the civilized world fails: it provides time and space for pleasant thoughts and experiences, rather than a sense of rapidity, waste, and distraction. Further characteristics of her ideal world include the eradication of gendered professions, particularly of the professor or housekeeper—as she has already expressed doubts about her own housekeeping, one can see a personal resentment there. The narrator identifies Whitaker's Almanack and the Table of Precedency as the primary barriers to this utopic world, returning once again to these masculine hierarchies in control of governing and waging wars.

> Here is nature once more at her old game of self-preservation. This train of thought, she perceives, is threatening mere waste of energy, even some collision with reality, for who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker's Table of Precedency? The Archbishop of Canterbury is followed by the Lord High Chancellor… Everybody follows somebody, such is the philosophy of Whitaker; and the great thing is to know who follows whom. Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can't be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52/53

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator thinks about self-preservation, she refers to the process of deterring unpleasant thoughts by

distracting herself with the mark on the wall. This at last grants readers a structural explanation for the narrative, as the story thus far has consisted of reflective paragraphs broken off by different guesses as to the identity of the mark. Whitaker's Table of Precedency stands in for the hierarchies of government and religion; the narrator feels disempowered to change those institutions. Both of those branches (the religious and the governmental) consist notably of roles for men—the narrator resents these institutions, as evidenced by her reference to being enraged and shattering her hour of peace.

Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades. Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is a proof of some existence other than ours

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator finally defines the worth of the mark to her. The mark allows her to hold onto something definite, like a plank in the sea, and turn her thoughts about these masculine institutions into mere shadows. It frightens the narrator that these institutions, which hold such violent power and sway, are ultimately very abstract: when one confronts questions such as "why are we at war?" the only obvious answers are these hierarchies of decision-makers, whom the individual citizen cannot influence. The narrator relates her critical obsession with modern civilization (specifically, the war and rapid urban isolation) to a midnight dream of horror, signaling that these great powers do not feel quite real to her. Reality, which she ultimately wishes to worship—to take as the new religion—consists of solid objects, some natural (like the plank of wood) and some manmade (like the chest of drawers, though notably also an object made of wood).

Wood is a pleasant thing to think about. It comes from a tree; and trees grow, and we don't know how they grow. For years and years they grow, without paying any attention to us, in meadows, in forests, and by the side of rivers—all things one likes to think about.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

The transition to thoughts on wood might appear unprompted, but recall the tree outside her window. The narrator's identification with that tree has been the only consistently positive direction in which her imagination has wandered during this story, and in this quote she explains that fascination in more detail. She specifies the growth of trees as their primary symbolic quality, with two particularly unique components: trees grow slowly, and their growth remains a relative mystery to mankind. This slowness provides a rich symbolic alternative to the bustle and chaos of cities—it offers an alternate mode of living, one which integrates with the outside environment instead of trying to shut it out with coal fires and closed windows. The passage of time differs drastically in this model—as trees grow slowly, they gain over time. In contrast, the human rush to accumulate as many possessions as possible and to build vast cities results inevitably in fragments and rubble left behind.

Even so, life isn't done with; there are a million patient, watchful lives still for a tree, all over the world, in bedrooms, in ships, on the pavement, lining rooms, where men and women sit after tea, smoking cigarettes. It is full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree. I should like to take each one separately—but something is getting in the way. . . . Where was I? What has it all been about? A tree? A river? The Downs? Whitaker's Almanack? The fields of asphodel? I can't remember a thing. Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing.. . . There is a vast upheaval of matter.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Someone

Related Themes:

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Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Having considered the role of a tree during its lifetime, the narrator transitions into dwelling on what happens after its death before a voice interrupts her. Trees do not disappear into dust upon death, like Troy or the barrows in the South Downs—they become parts of new useful objects and continue to integrate into new environments. Because of this, nature remains a part of the civilized world, if an almost invisible one. Rather than characterizing the changes caused by the passage of time as loss (as she did with human material possessions), the narrator seems to see new uses of trees as a kind of reincarnation—new lives being led in new places, just as patient and just as positive.

When the narrator is interrupted, she returns to a state of upheaval characterized by these short sentences that all refer back to topics she considered earlier in the story. These short bursts contrast with the syntactical style of the previous paragraph about the tree—reflections on nature warrant longer sentences and a slowing down of the story, whereas the return to civilization comes with snappy sentences and broken transitions. Her inability to remember her train of thought signals the effects of socializing on her memory—just in the moment of being interrupted, she loses the perfect world she was building.

“I'm going out to buy a newspaper.”

“Yes?”

“Though it's no good buying newspapers. . . . Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war! . . . All the same, I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall.”

Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail.

Related Characters: Someone, The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has just been suddenly interrupted by an unknown speaker, even though one might have believed that the narrator had been alone the entire time. This leads to ambiguous conclusions about her sense of isolation from others. The presence of a second party in the room might support a fully cynical view, as his sitting next to her fails to assuage her sense of isolation. Furthermore, the man who interrupts her creates an anticlimactic ending by identifying the mark and effectively ending the story. However, he clearly shares her views on the war, and this belated reveal could support the idea that one is never as alone as one thinks. This interruption also makes one consider the likely gender dynamics, as it is very probable that this man is her husband, given his presence in the living room after tea—the distance in this interaction shows a stiltedness in the interactions between men and women and a dissonance between their priorities.

The realization that the mark is a snail drives home the importance of nature in this story, as well as the significance of slowing down. The snail being in the house shows that one cannot hide from the natural world. It also indicates that the natural world could be an antidote for anxieties about civilization, as the mark has provided the narrator with mental relief from her fears and anger throughout the story. This continues in this moment, as the narrator completely disregards the man's words about the war in favor of the snail; ultimately, thoughts of the war remain so unpleasant that her only relief comes from considering this shelled intruder.

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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 MARK ON THE WALL

On an unknown day in January, the narrator sits in her living room after tea, smoking a cigarette and reading. She reflects that the lit coals of the fire remind her of a cavalcade of knights and distracts herself from these thoughts by catching sight of a black **mark** on the wall above her mantlepiece. She wonders if it was left by a nail used by the house's former tenants to hang a miniature.

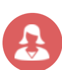
From the outset, this story is grounded in a domestic scene from the narrator's past, which sets an immediate contrast to the direction of her thoughts. Her military associations with the fire reveal her preoccupation with the ongoing war, and this first appearance of the mark demonstrates both her desire for distraction and her attempts to reconstruct the past.

Deciding that the **mark** was too large to have been left by a nail, the narrator ponders the mystery of life and the inaccuracy of thought. She compiles a list of all of the possessions she has lost in her life, including book-binding tools, bird cages, a hand organ, and jewels. She compares life to a hectic and rapid ride on the Tube, mourning its wastefulness, informality, and haphazard nature.

Her reflections on the mark reveal how difficult it is to understand the full history of something just by observing it. However, human lives are defined by loss—even objects as valuable as jewels disappear. Her reference to the Tube displays a particular ambivalence towards technology and contemporary attempts to control nature and construct efficient industrial lives.

The narrator realizes the **mark** isn't a hole and wonders if it is a rose leaf. She compares the dust on the mantlepiece to the dust which buried Troy and considers herself a poor housekeeper. A **tree** taps on the window outside, and the narrator pictures Shakespeare sitting in an arm-chair before a fire like hers, and wishes for a life without interruption. Her historical fiction about Shakespeare bores her, and she yearns to land on a pleasant train of thought that would reflect well upon herself.

If the mark is a rose-leaf, it signals the intrusion of nature into the home. The narrator's considerations of her housekeeping allude to dissatisfaction with gender roles, while also confirming the inevitable return of civilization to nature, a sentiment also confirmed by the tree's interruptions. The narrator tries to anchor herself in Shakespeare, arguably the most potent symbol of the achievements of civilization, but her loss of interest signals the incapacity of even one of the greatest thinkers of mankind to satisfyingly distract one from one's thoughts.



The narrator dwells on the notion of self-image. One constantly "dresses up" the figure of herself in her mind, and the narrator wonders what might happen were this romanticized internal mirror to disappear. The only reflections left would be in the eyes of strangers on the omnibus, which she thinks future novelists will write about. She also thinks about the generalizations and habits that define one's life, but change and disappear across generations, which leads her to consider the "illegitimate freedoms" that can come with the passage of time.

The reference to self-image is ironic, as the narrator gives very little detail about her life in this stream of consciousness—however, if this "romanticized image" refers to her thoughts on learned men and civilization, the subsequent image of strangers on the omnibus confirms the alienation and anonymity actually present in that civilization. Her jump to generalizations re-introduces a fascination with the war, although her cynicisms about civilization result in a faint hope. If current habits are just "dressed-up" versions of reality, the passage of time permits changes in that reality and the potential for liberation.

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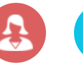
The narrator notices that the **mark** projects from the wall, which leads her to believe it might be a nail painted over by past tenants but revealed with the passage of time. She thinks about other mounds, such as the barrows on the South Downs which retired Colonels explore in the role of antiquaries, seeking evidence of past generations to determine whether they belonged to camps or tombs.

The belated realization that the mark projects from the wall indicates that things which seem superficial at first may contain hidden depths. However, she connects her desire to identify the mark with the futile attempts of antiquaries to determine the nature of the barrows. In the end, it may be impossible to reconstruct the past, and the narrator leaves readers to wonder what is proved by the fragments we are able to identify.

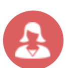


The narrator decides that nothing would change were she to stand up and identify the **mark**, as knowledge itself is the uncertain project of "learned men" following in the footsteps of "witches and hermits." She prefers to picture a world without specialists, where thoughts resemble experience and she could use them to experience the natural world.

The correlations between learned men and witches and hermits cement the narrator's critical opinion of the male sex while also dismissing the history of human reason as mere superstition. As an antidote to the superficial world of specialists, the narrator arrives at the natural world, which appears to be more solid.

The narrator realizes that her preoccupation with the **mark** is an act of self-preservation. She cannot take action against Whitaker's Table of Precedency, but she can put an end to disagreeable thoughts. She wants to find pleasant thoughts and fixates on the solid image of a **tree**, growing outside the bounds of human knowledge and creating an environment for cows, rivers, and water-beetles. She thinks about a tree's lifespan through the seasons and its afterlife in human homes and workplaces.

In this crystallizing moment, the narrator realizes that her entire fixation with the mark has its origins in frustrations with larger social problems and structures that she cannot change: the war, and the masculine social order, represented by Whitaker's Table of Precedency. Instead, she fixates on the symbol of the tree, which stands for the opposite of mankind: a slow pace, growth, and the provision of symbiotic community.



A voice interrupts the narrator's train of thought and drags her back to the living room. Someone stands over her and says that he wants to purchase a newspaper despite the futility of seeking news during the unending war period. He complains about the **snail** on the wall, and the narrator realizes that the mark on the wall had been a snail the whole time.

This interruption marks the story's climax (or anticlimax), simultaneously revealing that the narrator has not been alone and identifying the mark on the wall as a snail. The voice likely belongs to the narrator's husband, and his presence casts a pall on her reflections about the isolation of the modern era. Her final fixation on the snail conveys the mark's ultimate purpose, which was to distract her from her unpleasant thoughts about the war and provide hope for an alternative to a destructive civilization.

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