The Way Up to Heaven

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROALD DAHL

Roald Dahl was born in Wales to Norwegian parents in 1916. His father and one of his sisters died of illness when he was three. In *Boy: Tales of Childhood*, he recounts happy summers in Norway with his family and miserable experiences at British boarding schools, characterized by corporal punishment, negligent adults, and older students' abuse of power. Later in life, he worked as an air force pilot and intelligence officer during WWII before publishing fiction for both adults and children. He married American actress Patricia Neal in 1953, with whom he had five children. Their first child, Olivia, died young of measles, and, to add to his personal tragedy, his wife Patricia suffered brain aneurysms while pregnant with their fifth child. However, she made a full recovery, and they remained married until 1983, when Dahl remarried Felicity Crosland. He wrote twenty books for children, several novels for adults, two autobiographies, nearly fifty short stories, and several film and television scripts, some of which were based on his own works. He died in 1990 and remains one of the best-selling authors in the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The story probably takes place during the period in which it was written: the mid-1950s. It certainly takes place before Idlewild Airport in New York was renamed for John F. Kennedy in 1963. In that era, it was more common for husbands to be the family breadwinners and, indeed, Mr. Foster is described as "no longer active in his many enterprises," presumably retired. Mrs. Foster is not a part of the workforce, and she is therefore dependent on her husband financially, which emphasizes the imbalance in their relationship and exacerbates the control Mr. Foster hastens to wield over her.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Dahl's short stories are equally dark and contain satirical elements. "Lamb to the Slaughter" also features a murderous wife who is clever enough to get away with killing her oppressive husband. "Man from the South" and "The Landlady" are just as dark and expertly executed, while "The Hitchhiker" and "The Umbrella Man" also have unexpected endings, but are not as grim. Kurt Vonnegut wrote in the same period and was also an expert on dark satire: *Breakfast of Champions* and *Cat's Cradle* have similar darkness with an element of science fiction.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Way Up to Heaven
- **When Published:** February 27, 1954
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Short story, crime, macabre
- **Setting:** New York City, Paris
- **Climax:** Mrs. Foster leaves her husband trapped in the elevator
- **Antagonist:** Mr. Foster
- **Point of View:** Third-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Television Adaptations. This story has been twice dramatized on television: once by Alfred Hitchcock in his short-lived show *Suspicion*, and once as part of the largely Dahl-inspired series *Tales of the Unexpected*, which he is credited with writing.

PLOT SUMMARY

Mrs. Foster lives with her domineering husband, Eugene Foster, in a sixth-floor apartment in New York City. She is supposed to be boarding a plane to Paris to visit her beloved daughter and grandchildren, but her husband is running late to accompany her to the airport. She has a pathological fear of being late for things, as her husband well knows, but he nonetheless always waits to get ready until the very last minute. While this might be an accident, the narrator suggests that it's possible he is doing this on purpose, just to watch her suffer.

They leave just a few minutes late, but Mrs. Foster and the driver are convinced that she can still get to the airport on time. Unfortunately, fog is rolling in and the plane is delayed for an indeterminate amount of time. Mrs. Foster is happy to stay at the airport alone because it means she won't miss the plane, but night falls and travelers are told to come back in the morning. Despite her fear that he will somehow keep her from boarding the flight, Mrs. Foster calls her husband. He insists that she stay at the house with him, even though the servants have already left for vacation. That night, he asks her to drop him off at the club on the way to the airport in the morning. She reluctantly assents, though she is beginning to suspect that he is going out of his way to keep her from going on her trip.

The next morning, they get in the car on time, but at the last minute, Mr. Foster remembers that he left a **gift** for their daughter in the house. Mrs. Foster begs him to leave it so she can make it to her flight, but he insists and goes back inside. In

the meantime, Mrs. Foster finds the gift that he described wedged in between the seats "as though with the help of a pushing hand." She tells the driver to go get her husband, but then realizes it'll be faster if she does it herself.

As she starts to unlock the door, she hears some unexplained sound and stops. With an authoritative air and something changed about her, she turns around and tells the driver that they must leave immediately so as not to be late, and that her husband will simply get a cab to the club. She enjoys herself in Paris with her daughter and grandchildren, writing home once a week, and returns six weeks later. She finds the place deserted with a bad smell, but there is a "little glimmer of satisfaction on her face." She calls the elevator repair company and asks them to come fix their elevator: the implication is that her husband has been stuck in the elevator the whole time she was gone, and she left him to die.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Foster – Mrs. Foster is the protagonist of the story. For thirty years of marriage, she has been a "good and loving wife" to her husband, Mr. Eugene Foster. She and Mr. Foster live in New York, while their only daughter lives in Paris. Mrs. Foster is meek, but kindhearted and loyal, and she has an "almost pathological" fear of being late. This fear drives her nearly to the point of hysteria, physically manifesting in a persistent eye twitch. At the beginning of the story, she is planning to board a plane to see her daughter in Paris and meet her grandchildren for the first time, but Mr. Foster is careless about being on time, as he always seems to be. As the story progresses, she begins to suspect more and more that he may be making her late on purpose to inflict a kind of psychological torture on her. This suspicion is confirmed when he runs into the house to look for their daughter's **gift**, but she finds it hidden in the seat of the car, presumably so that she would miss her flight. When Mrs. Foster runs to the door to tell him, she hears something that makes her return to the car and tell the driver to take her to the airport without her husband. At the end, Dahl implies that Mrs. Foster heard the sound of their elevator getting stuck between floors and she left anyway, knowing that her husband would die trapped there. This decision brings out a new confidence and satisfaction in Mrs. Foster, doing away with her prior nervousness.

Mr. Eugene Foster – Mr. Foster, whose first name is Eugene, is a domineering, cunning, and abrasive man who has retired from his "many enterprises," which allowed him to afford a private six-story house in Manhattan with several servants. He is generally unkind to his wife, often ordering her around, calling her "foolish" or "stupid," or speaking to her in a condescending tone. He is indifferent to his daughter and grandchildren, and to his wife's obvious distress at potentially arriving late for things. He refuses to allow the servants to continue their upkeep of the house in the couple's absence, because it would cost him more money, and he suspects they might get up to untoward things without them there, revealing his classist nature. The extent of his cruelty is clearest when Mrs. Foster finds that he hid the **gift** for their daughter in the seat of the car to purposely make her late for her flight to Paris, and his death, though gruesome, is justified.

The Butler (Walker) – The butler, whose name is Walker, is sympathetic to Mrs. Foster's anxiety, reassuring her that she will make her flight and not indulging her fears the way Mr. Foster, his foil, does. As a neutral party, his reaction to Mrs. Foster's anguish seems a more normal one than her husband's, which raises the reader's suspicions against Mr. Foster early on.

Their Daughter (Ellen) – Ellen is Mr. and Mrs. Foster's only daughter who married a Frenchman and relocated to Paris where she had three children. The Fosters have never met their grandchildren, although Ellen often sends photographs and Mrs. Foster often sends packages, which makes it seem that Ellen and her mother (though not her indifferent father) are close. In the story, Mrs. Foster makes the trip to Paris to visit Ellen and has a marvelous time, implying that she may relocate to be with her daughter once her husband is out of the picture.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Driver – The driver, who takes Mrs. Foster to the airport, is only minimally described: he has a "small rebellious Irish mouth" and he disapproves of the Fosters' inability to leave on time.

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.

CRUELTY AND REVENGE

The marriage at the center of "The Way Up to Heaven" is characterized by cruelty: for years Mr. Foster deliberately stokes Mrs. Foster's "pathological fear" of being late, so, ultimately, Mrs. Foster leaves her husband trapped in an elevator to die. This might seem an extreme overreaction by Mrs. Foster, but Dahl depicts Mr. Foster's persistent and malicious lateness as the crueler behavior—after all, it causes Mrs. Foster such distress that it leads her to effectively kill her spouse in order to free herself from suffering. By portraying Mrs. Foster's act not as unjustifiably cruel, but rather as righteous revenge, Dahl

suggests that persistent and malicious cruelty (however subtle or trivial) can be worse than a single act of murder. When someone suffers at the hands of another, she is righteous, rather than cruel, to take action and escape her suffering.

To justify Mrs. Foster's decision to leave her husband in the elevator, Dahl meticulously catalogues Mr. Foster's cruelties, particularly surrounding her planned trip to Paris. Her solo trip to Paris, to visit her daughter and grandchildren, is something Mrs. Foster wants dearly. Despite that it would bring her great happiness and it seems like a normal thing for Mrs. Foster to do, Dahl is clear that Mr. Foster does not want his wife to go. Mrs. Foster considers it a "miracle" that he's allowing her to go in the first place, and she suspects constantly—and with good reason—that he is trying to make her miss her flight in order to sabotage her trip. That Dahl never specifies why Mr. Foster opposes his wife's trip makes him seem pathologically controlling, and his attempts to make her late for her flight are doubly cruel, because they are simultaneously meant to ruin the trip while also needling her most acute anxiety, punctuality. All of this behavior is especially cruel, since Mrs. Foster has been a "good and loving wife" for several decades, who had "served him loyally and well." She has done nothing to bring about his cruelty; rather, it is unjustified and malicious, meant exclusively to torture and control a kindhearted woman.

By contrast, Dahl portrays Mrs. Foster as a sympathetic character, even though she commits a monstrous act, because she is kind, relatable, and has experienced years of emotional torture at the hands of her husband. For many years, Mrs. Foster has given her husband the benefit of the doubt, allowing that his cruelty could possibly be accidental or careless. This shows her generosity of spirit, since she wants to assume the best in him. She's also shown to care deeply for her family. Of her grandchildren, Dahl notes, "She doted on them, and each time a new picture arrived she would carry it away and sit with it for a long time." All she wants is to "take them out for walks, and buy them presents, and watch them grow," a selfless and generous desire, but she worries that this desire is disloyal, as her husband does not want the same thing. Clearly, she puts others before herself, even though her husband doesn't deserve it.

Mrs. Foster's kind personality and the acute suffering her husband is causing her (shown by her twitching eye and her profound anxiety) make her a sympathetic character, while Mr. Foster's callous and malicious behavior towards his wife makes him a villain. Because of this, when Mrs. Foster hears that Mr. Foster is stuck in the elevator and decides to go to the airport instead of rescuing him, readers see her not as behaving cruelly, but rather as claiming justified revenge on the man who made her suffer and stood in the way of her happiness. Therefore, while Mrs. Foster essentially murders her husband, she is much less cruel: after all, his own cruelty justified her behavior, while her sweet nature did not justify his.

GENDER AND MARRIAGE

In the 1950s, when "The Way Up to Heaven" was published, husbands were expected to be the heads of household, while their wives were meant to be comparatively passive. In "The Way Up to Heaven," Dahl pushes this unequal dynamic to its extreme. Mr. Foster is not simply controlling, but also sadistic: ordering Mrs. Foster around, exploiting her pathological fear of being late, and indirectly trying to stop her from going to visit their daughter. To make matters worse, strict 1950s gender roles dictate that Mrs. Foster must passively allow his cruelty and give his intentions the benefit of the doubt. Furthermore, while the rigid gender norms of the day exacerbate their mutual unhappiness, the strict social taboo against divorce keeps them in a volatile and miserable marriage. The characters' adherence to social and gender norms therefore leads to an absurd and outrageous outcome: when their dynamic becomes unbearable for Mrs. Foster, it seems more normal to her to leave her husband to die in an elevator than to simply leave their marriage. This is a clear critique of the norms of gender and marriage, which discourage Mrs. Foster from standing up for herself, encourage Mr. Foster to believe he can be sadistic with impunity, and ultimately lead Mrs. Foster to a state of murderous distress.

For most of the story, Mrs. Foster adheres strictly to her socially-mandated role as a wife and mother. She is a dutiful wife who supports her husband, having "served him loyally and well" for over thirty years, and she is a good mother who thinks often of her daughter and her grandchildren, sending them presents whenever possible. Dahl describes her as "modest" and "faithful," traits that are not considered important in the same way for men. These traits of hers are exactly what Mr. Foster takes advantage of; his cruelty relies on her being a "good wife" who will not protest and who will always give him the benefit of the doubt.

By contrast, Mr. Foster inhabits an extreme stereotype of the male role. He is clearly the family's breadwinner (although he appears to be retired from his "many enterprises"), and he is indifferent to family life, dismissing Mrs. Foster and ignoring altogether their daughter and grandchildren. Mr. Foster is in charge of the household, as he makes decisions without regard to his wife's desires or objections, such as sending the servants away on vacation while Mrs. Foster is gone, or forcing her to accompany him to the club before she catches her flight. Since having a command of the household was considered normal for men of that era, Mr. Foster's cruelty nearly passes as typical masculinity: perhaps his controlling behavior is simply good management of the household, and perhaps his inattention to punctuality is a result of having more important matters to attend. It's certainly part of Dahl's commentary on gender roles that Mr. Foster's cruelty is almost indistinguishable from socially normal male behavior.

While Mr. and Mrs. Foster drive each other crazy, the two of

them never contemplate divorce, as divorce was a social scandal in the 1950s. Since the Fosters are stuck together despite their suffering, Dahl paints marriage as a trap for both Mr. *and* Mrs. Foster: Mr. Foster seems miserable in the company of his wife, and Mrs. Foster explicitly contemplates that her life will be restricted as long as "her husband was still alive." So, with no way out of a bad marriage, Mr. Foster takes out his unhappiness on his wife by torturing her, and Mrs. Foster leaves her husband to die in an elevator, a fate that seems more socially normal to her than simply leaving her marriage. Therefore, Dahl critiques both the rigid gender roles that push Mrs. Foster essentially to murder, and the social conventions surrounding marriage that prevent Mr. and Mrs. Foster from finding fulfilling separate lives.

PROPRIETY AND CLASS

In "The Way Up to Heaven," Mr. and Mrs. Foster behave with a strict sense of propriety. While propriety is normally associated with decency, Dahl parodies this notion by having propriety exacerbate the couple's cruelty. Mr. Foster uses upper-class propriety to his advantage by using his manners to conceal that he is being surreptitiously cruel to his wife. Meanwhile, Mrs. Foster is smothered by her sense of propriety, since she feels that it's not proper for her to accuse her husband of cruelty or make a fuss, so she remains silent and compliant even while he abuses her. However, Mrs. Foster ultimately finds her own way to be cruel while maintaining the illusion of propriety when she leaves him in the elevator to die, a deliberate act that will seem, to outsiders, like an accident—a tragic result of being rich enough to afford an elevator at home. By decoupling propriety from decency, then, Dahl demonstrates that class and manners have nothing to do with whether somebody is cruel or kind. In fact, sometimes those who are acting most properly have the most to hide.

Mr. Foster is the epitome of propriety masking maliciousness. This is clearest in his behavior towards his wife, as he tortures her with a "manner so bland" that it's difficult to discern whether he is behaving normally or sadistically. He makes her late for things (exacerbating her anxiety over punctuality) by doing normal tasks, such as washing his hands, musing over the weather, fetching cigars, or searching for a **gift**. All of this behavior seems perfectly normal for an upper-class man, and yet this is what makes it so insidious: Mr. Foster's seeming normality and unflagging propriety allow him to get away with literally torturing his wife, and his upper-class status and manner give him an authority that his wife and servants would not dare question.

While propriety frees Mr. Foster to behave badly, Mrs. Foster is smothered by propriety for most of the story. Part of being a good, upper-class wife is being passive and compliant in serving her husband's needs. This, of course, means putting his desires before her own, such as when she refuses to contemplate moving to Paris to be with her daughter since her husband would never want to do this, or when she agrees to drop her husband off at the club before going to the airport, even though this will make her anxious and might even make her miss her flight. Worse, Mrs. Foster's sense of propriety prevents her from pushing back when she suspects that her husband may be making her suffer on purpose. Even as evidence mounts that his lateness is deliberate, she gives him the benefit of the doubt until his cruelty is absolutely undeniable, because it would be improper for her to accuse him of bad behavior. Therefore, Mrs. Foster's propriety traps her in passive behavior, preventing her from prioritizing her own desires and from standing up for herself in the face of abuse.

However, when Mrs. Foster finally discovers her husband's deceit and takes her opportunity to get revenge, she gets away with leaving him in the elevator to die because her behavior never seems improper. Mrs. Foster is alone when she hears Mr. Foster get stuck in the elevator, so nobody knows that she was aware he was trapped when she left for the airport. Furthermore, she continues to behave as a dutiful wife during her trip, writing letters to her husband weekly and returning home to him when the six weeks is up. Then, when she finds the house eerily empty, she takes the natural next step and calls the elevator repair company to fix her broken elevator, pretending not to know that anything is amiss. Mrs. Foster has plausible deniability that her behavior is normal rather than cruel, which mirrors the way her own husband used propriety to mask his malicious behavior.

Furthermore, just as Mr. Foster's authority as an upper-class man made him immune from suspicion, Mrs. Foster evades suspicion by leaning into the role of helpless, elderly rich lady. She tells the elevator repair person to come immediately because she can't walk up stairs, which prepares the elevator repair person to feel sympathy towards her even before discovering her dead husband in the elevator. The norms of propriety that have smothered her for so long—the very norms that pushed her to this absurd act—are suddenly helping her to get away with her crime. Dahl therefore ridicules upper-class standards of decorum, showing how propriety can exacerbate and mask cruelty, snobbery, and neglect, allowing wealthy, well-mannered people to maintain moral authority while acting depraved.

DECEPTION AND DISLOYALTY

Throughout most of "The Way Up to Heaven," Mrs. Foster is loyal and kind while Mr. Foster is cruel and dishonest, tormenting his wife psychologically while pretending that his behavior is careless rather than malicious. However, when Mrs. Foster discovers the extent of her husband's cruelty and deception, she herself takes on his qualities: she betrays him by leaving him to die in an elevator,

and then acts deceptively when she pretends that all is normal. Therefore, Dahl depicts deception and disloyalty as feeding on themselves; once discovered, deceptive and disloyal acts initiate a vicious cycle of betrayal that, in this case, ends in death.

Mr. Foster deceives his wife by pretending that his tardiness is accidental or careless, rather than deliberate psychological torture. The fact that he would torture his wife also marks his disloyalty to her, which is clear in his other cruel behavior, too. He speaks to her in a patronizing and chauvinistic way, calling her "foolish" and "stupid," and often bossing her around. Furthermore, he makes clear that he does not intend to write to her when she is away, and he has no feelings of loyalty or compassion toward their daughter or grandchildren, to whom he can't be bothered to write, let alone visit. By contrast, Mrs. Foster has "served [her husband] loyally and well" for over thirty years, caring for him, their child, and the household. She always gives him the benefit of the doubt (even though his behavior is suspicious and painful to her), and when she has moments of wishing that she could live in Paris with her daughter and grandchildren instead of remaining in New York with her husband, she immediately pushes those thoughts away because she fears they may be disloyal to Mr. Foster.

Mrs. Foster is not deliberately deceitful or disloyal until she discovers, beyond a reasonable doubt, that her husband has betrayed and deceived her. When he makes her late for her plane by pretending to look in the house for a **present** for their daughter (a small box that Mrs. Foster finds hidden between the car seats), she deduces that his cruelty was deliberate all along. In light of this, when she then hears him get stuck in the elevator, she feels justified in betraying him by leaving him there, seemingly knowing that he will die. At this point, she feels no regret about her actions—only relief, since this single moment of disloyalty will end her suffering.

Just as her husband pretended for years that his tardiness wasn't intentional, after Mrs. Foster leaves Mr. Foster trapped in the elevator, she pretends that all is well at home. She writes letters to him from Paris, and when she returns to a curiously empty house, she simply calls the elevator repair man as though the only thing amiss is a broken lift. Their deceptions, therefore, are mirror images of one another, as each Foster pretends that all is normal in order to be cruel to the other. Clearly, though, Mr. Foster was the corrupting influence on his long-suffering, kindhearted wife: without his misdeeds, she would never have betrayed or deceived him. As such, Dahl shows disloyalty, mistrust, and deception create a vicious, self-perpetuating, and toxic cycle that can spiral out of control.

SYMBOLS

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

THE GIFT

The gift (a comb in a small, wrapped box) that Mr. Foster means to give to their daughter is a symbol of his deception and cruelty. As they are departing for the airport, he pretends to have forgotten the box inside, and he tells Mrs. Foster—who is pathologically afraid of being late to her flight—to wait in the car for him to find the gift. However, as Mrs. Foster soon discovers, he has hidden the box in between the car's seats to purposely make her miss her flight. The gift is small and inconspicuous—it's just a little box wrapped in white paper, one that could easily go missing—which is part of Mr. Foster's attempt to maintain plausible deniability about losing the gift on purpose. This mirrors Mr. Foster's general behavior towards Mrs. Foster: the subtle cruelty with which he makes her late for things without appearing to be malicious. However, finding the box hidden makes Mrs. Foster certain that his cruelty and deception have been intentional all along, which explicitly associates the box with the evil sides of Mr. Foster's character. When Mrs. Foster begs him not to go back to the house to look for the box because "it's only one of those silly combs anyway," Mr. Foster becomes furious that she has "forgotten herself for once." Her dismissal of the box is a way to sidestep his deception and cruelty towards her, which he will not allow.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Best of Roald Dahl* published in 1990.

The Way Up to Heaven Quotes

❝ At least half an hour before it was time to leave the house for the station, Mrs. Foster would step out of the elevator all ready to go, with hat and coat and gloves, and then, being quite unable to sit down, she would flutter and fidget about from room to room until her husband, who must have been well aware of her state, finally emerged from his privacy and suggested in a cool dry voice that perhaps they had better be going now, had they not? ...His timing was so accurate - just a minute or two late, you understand - and his manner so bland that it was hard to believe he wasn't purposely inflicting a nasty private little torture of his own on the unhappy lady.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, Mr. Eugene Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Foster has already been introduced as a rather normal woman with an unfortunate anxiety. While her fear of missing a plane or train is exaggerated to the extreme, it is still understandable—many people get anxious about missing flights. The physical manifestation of the anxiety makes it doubly clear that, however strange her fixation may be, it is not something that she can help. By contrast, Mr. Foster is portrayed as calm and unhurried, but certainly cruel in his treatment of his wife, either because he does not notice her distress or because he is pretending not to, the latter of which is certainly worse. This problem puts a strain on their marriage and thus their relationship hardly seems sustainable. Mrs. Foster's sense of propriety keeps her from ever suggesting or even thinking that her husband may be delaying her on purpose.

> And now, lately, she had come more and more to feel that she did not really wish to live out her days in a place where she could not be near these children, and have them visit her, and take them out for walks, and buy them presents, and watch them grow. She knew, of course, that it was wrong and in a way disloyal to have thoughts like these while her husband was still alive.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, Mr. Eugene Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Foster's anxiety about missing her flight is heightened because it is so important to her to see her daughter and the grandchildren she has not yet met. She longs to see this part of her family all the time, and she recognizes that she may not feel that way about her husband, a thought that strikes her as disloyal, so she tries to dismiss it. In addition, her comment that she cannot fulfill her desire for family while her husband is "alive" foreshadows his impending death at her hands. In her devotion to her grandchildren and her daughter, she is a good mother and grandmother. However, her feelings about her own disloyalty are misplaced—ironically, it is her husband who is extremely disloyal, though she does not realize it yet.

> "But don't you really think Walker should stay there all the time to look after things?" she asked meekly.

"Nonsense. It's quite unnecessary. And anyway, I'd have to pay him full wages."

"Oh yes," she said. "Of course."

"What's more, you never know what people get up to when they're left alone in a house," Mr. Foster announced, and with that he took out a cigar and, after snipping off the end with a silver cutter, lit it with a gold lighter.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, Mr. Eugene Foster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. and Mrs. Foster have this conversation when they are first driving to the airport. Mr. Foster's opinion on leaving their house neglected while they are gone, even though they can afford to keep servants there, reveals several aspects of his character.

First, he is cheap, unwilling to pay for services even though they would benefit him. Second, he does not think highly of his own servants, possibly because of class bias. He doesn't trust them alone in the house (liars always think other people are dishonest), and he is unconcerned with their low pay for weeks on end. Third, he is unwilling to stay at the house and take care of it himself, which shows his dependence on his wife. There is a touch of irony to his insistence on creating the circumstances that lead to his demise (since he would have been found in the elevator if the servants stayed), as well as in his dismissal of other people's rude habits while he lights up a cigar inside the car without asking if it bothers anyone.

> She couldn't be sure, but it seemed to her that there was suddenly a new note in his voice, and she turned to look at him… She glanced at him again, and this time she noticed with a kind of horror that he was staring intently at the little place in the corner of her left eye where she could feel the muscle twitching.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, Mr. Eugene Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This moment takes place when Mr. and Mrs. Foster are stuck in the fog on the way to the airport. She is hysterical, asking for the time over and over again, while he keeps telling her she's going to miss the flight, adding to her misery. Mrs. Foster senses the change in her husband's tone, which the reader assumes to be some kind of perverse joy in her suffering, but she cannot be sure, mostly because she does not want to believe that her husband would be so cruel. Yet a few seconds later, she notices that he is staring at her involuntary twitch fixedly. Mrs. Foster, on some level, becomes aware that he knows exactly how miserable she is—her anxiety has manifested physically, but again, she prefers to believe that he is somehow in the dark about her suffering, even as his plausible deniability evaporates.

> "In that case, dear, I'll just get myself a room somewhere for the night. And don't you bother yourself about it at all."

"That would be foolish," he said. "You've got a large house here at your disposal. Use it."

"But, dear, it's empty."

"Then I'll stay with you myself."

"There's no food in the house. There's nothing."

"Then eat before you come in. Don't be so stupid, woman. Everything you do, you seem to want to make a fuss about it."

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, Mr. Eugene Foster (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This is a phone conversation that occurs just after Mrs. Foster has been told her flight is delayed and she must come back the next morning. Mrs. Foster's naïve affection for her husband is demonstrated by her repeated use of the word "dear," and is contrasted by her husband's use of the rude and dismissive words "woman," "stupid," and "foolish." He only speaks to her in commands, and uses gendered language like "fuss" to shame her into compliance. He also suggests that she intentionally fusses, which is untrue and more accurately describes his own behavior (in fact, it even describes his actions during this scene). However, gender roles keep Mrs. Foster submissive and, despite her obvious discomfort, she agrees to come home. Again, her husband will attempt to delay her.

> "No," he said slowly. "I don't think I will. But there's no reason why you shouldn't drop me at the club on your way."

She looked at him, and at that moment he seemed to be standing a long way off from her, beyond some borderline. He was suddenly so small and far away that she couldn't be sure what he was doing, or what he was thinking, or even what he was.

Related Characters: Mr. Eugene Foster (speaker), Mrs. Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mr. Foster is again forcing his will upon his wife—he insists that she drop him off at the club on the way to the airport on the second day that she tries to make her flight, even though it is out of the way. This is his most suspicious act yet and Mrs. Foster suddenly feels extremely distant from him. "What he was" instead of "who he was" indicates a lack of humanity, and Mr. Foster certainly seems to be inhuman in his unwarranted cruelty towards his wife. This sentence is particularly alarming in the context of the Fosters' marriage, which has lasted for over thirty years. Yet still she agrees to drop him off in the end, refusing to make a fuss both for the sake of propriety and for the sake of her marriage.

> At this point, Mrs. Foster suddenly spotted a corner of something white wedged down in the crack of the seat on the side where her husband had been sitting. She reached over and pulled out a small paper-wrapped box, and at the same time she couldn't help noticing that it was wedged down firm and deep, as though with the help of a pushing hand.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, Mr. Eugene Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mr. Foster has just left to go look for a gift he said he

wanted to give to their daughter, even though Mrs. Foster is desperate to catch her flight. This is a pivotal moment because finally, she realizes the full extent of Mr. Foster's inexplicable cruelty towards her. He has intentionally been stalling her for years, but he will also go so far as to lie to her outright to guarantee that she misses her flight. At first, it seems that Mrs. Foster may again give him the benefit of the doubt: she wastes a bit of time asking the chauffeur to go get her husband. Then, she decides to go herself and her husband's fate is sealed.

> The chauffeur, had he been watching her closely, might have noticed that her face had turned absolutely white and that the whole expression had suddenly altered. There was no longer that rather soft and silly look. A peculiar hardness had settled itself upon the features. The little mouth, usually so flabby, was now tight and thin, the eyes were bright, and the voice, when she spoke, carried a new note of authority.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster, The Driver

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Foster's new, authoritative nature manifests itself physically in her face. Dahl often attributes characterizations to physicality—fat characters are greedy, stingy characters are thin, evil characters are ugly, while good-hearted characters are attractive. As such, Mrs. Foster's physical changes accompany her behavioral ones. Her face is white because of her sudden, terrifying idea, and her eye twitch is gone. The hardness in her features suggests a hardness of resolve or perhaps a hardening of the heart. While a flabby mouth might, according to Dahl, have previously indicated a lack of control or of petulance, now her mouth is tight and thin, a soldier's grimace. The driver doesn't notice, which suggests that perhaps no one will notice her final act of cruelty towards her husband.

> Once a week, on Tuesdays, she wrote a letter to her husband, a nice, chatty letter—full of news and gossip, which always ended with the words "Now be sure to take your meals regularly, dear, although this is something I'm afraid you may not be doing when I'm not with you."

Related Characters: Mr. Eugene Foster, Mrs. Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

This passage refers to Mrs. Foster's correspondence to her husband while she is abroad. Although Mr. Foster had said he wasn't going to write (a mark of his distant and cold nature), his wife had said she would, so it is important that she maintain the façade that her husband is still alive by continuing to play the role of the faithful, long-suffering wife. There is an ironic touch to her note about his meals: she has ensured that he will starve to death in the elevator, so she is hardly going to be worried about him taking his meals regularly. The routine of letter writing and the repeated false concern for his health suggests that Mrs. Foster is taking some pleasure in finally being free from her husband—it seems that she wants to bask in her power over him, writing ironic notes that she knows nobody will be home to collect.

> "Hello," she said. "Listen - this is Nine East Sixty-second Street...Yes, that's right. Could you send someone round as soon as possible, do you think? Yes, it seems to be stuck between the second and third floors. At least, that's where the indicator's pointing...Right away? Oh, that's very kind of you. You see, my legs aren't any too good for walking up a lot of stairs. Thank you so much. Good-bye."
>
> She replaced the receiver and sat there at her husband's desk, patiently waiting for the man who would be coming soon to repair the lift.

Related Characters: Mrs. Foster (speaker), Mr. Eugene Foster

Related Themes:

Page Number:

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last lines of the story, in which Mrs. Foster is on the phone to the elevator repair service. Finally, it is revealed that Mrs. Foster has committed the ultimate act of disloyalty and let her husband die after she realized that he'd been manipulating and torturing her for years. This is a particularly unexpected twist after Mrs. Foster had been characterized as meek and submissive for most of the story. The quote shows how cruel Mrs. Foster is capable of being

in her revenge. She encourages the person on the other end of the phone to think of her as a helpless, elderly lady by telling them that her legs aren't so good. Meanwhile, she is sitting at her husband's desk (which represents her taking over of his position of authority) and she is actually more powerful than she has ever been before in her life.

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 WAY UP TO HEAVEN

Mrs. Foster has an "almost pathological fear" of being late, especially for a trip. While not otherwise a nervous woman, just thinking about being late makes her so nervous that her eye twitches. This has grown into a "serious obsession"—a half hour before leaving for anything, Mrs. Foster emerges fully ready and frets until her husband, Mr. Foster, ("who must have been well aware of her state") is ready to go.

Mrs. Foster is a sympathetic character, with just one unlucky quirk: like an eye twitch, her fear is a hindrance that she cannot help. She is portrayed as deferential to her husband: she must "flutter and fidget" from room to room while he makes her wait. The power imbalance in their relationship is established immediately.

While it's reasonable that Mr. Foster might be irritated by Mrs. Foster's nervousness, it's not an excuse for deliberately making her wait. This is not necessarily what he is doing, but he is always precisely a minute or two late, and he is so nonchalant that it seems like he is "inflicting a nasty private little torture" on his wife. What's more is she would never dare to bring it up because he "disciplined her too well for that."

Mr. Foster's habit of making his wife wait makes him somewhat suspicious: he is either uncaring and does not notice, or he does notice and is being deliberately cruel. Either way, Mrs. Foster has learned over the years that she cannot even tell him to hurry without risking his anger and further cruelty. He is taking advantage of the power dynamic.

If indeed Mr. Foster was deliberately making her wait, this behavior was "doubly unreasonable" since Mrs. Foster has been a good wife for over thirty years who had "served him loyally and well." She is such a good and modest woman that she hasn't allowed herself to believe that her husband could be torturing her on purpose, but more recently, she has found herself beginning to wonder.

Mrs. Foster is undeserving of her husband's treatment, having "served him loyally" for over thirty years. This characterization again adheres to stereotyped gender roles. There is a suggestion of disloyalty on the part of Mr. Foster, but nothing is certain yet.

Mr. Foster and his wife live in a six-story house in Manhattan with four servants. Normally, the place is quite grim, but today it is abuzz. Servants are draping furniture and bringing down suitcases while Mrs. Foster is dithering about nervously, fearing she will miss her plane and repeatedly asking the butler the time. They are supposed to leave at nine fifteen and the plane takes off at eleven.

Mr. and Mrs. Foster are part of the upper class, which is why they are able to employ several servants, and they are often concerned with propriety. The fact that Mrs. Foster only dares to complain in front of the butler shows how complete Mr. Foster's control over her is.

Mrs. Foster is headed to Paris to visit her daughter and finally meet her grandchildren of whom she has only seen pictures. It took her months to persuade her husband to "allow" her to go, and she fears that if she misses the plane he will cancel the trip. He insisted on seeing her off at the airport, so she is, again, waiting for him.

Mr. Foster's cruelty in regards to this trip is especially distasteful: his wife only wants to see their daughter and their grandchildren. It is not a selfish trip and it is one that a good mother (and grandmother) would certainly want to make, so it's inexplicable and sinister that he's trying to stop her.

More and more, Mrs. Foster finds herself wishing that she could live in Paris to be with her grandchildren all the time. She holds their photographs dear and, more than anything else, she longs to visit them, take them on walks, buy them presents, and watch them grow. But this would involve living in Paris and her husband would never agree, so she dismisses this these thoughts as disloyal.

As a devoted parent, Mrs. Foster is a sympathetic character. Mr. Foster, in comparison, expresses no interest in seeing his family. Furthermore, the question of disloyalty emerges here: if Mrs. Foster is disloyal for merely thinking about being a benevolent grandmother while living elsewhere, what, in comparison, is Mr. Foster in his cruelty?

Finally, Mr. Foster emerges and says casually that they should probably get going. Mrs. Foster replies that the butler has his coat and reminds him that the car is waiting. He examines her carefully, squirrel-like in his movements, and then calmly insists on washing his hands first. Mrs. Foster asks Walker (the butler) if she'll make it in time, and he reassures her that he thinks she will. Mrs. Foster hurries to the car and Mr. Foster walks slowly behind, saying he wouldn't be surprised if the flight were already cancelled.

Mrs. Foster's hysteria is even clearer in comparison to Mr. Foster's calm, calculating nature. Her desperation is exacerbated by his cruelty, and it also has to do with her powerlessness thanks to the unequal power dynamic. His stalling by washing his hands and pretending to examine the weather reveal his insistent deception and disloyalty.

As they drive, Mr. Foster says that he arranged everything with the servants, giving them half-pay for six weeks, and he will telegram when he wants them back. He will be staying at the club while she is gone, only occasionally stopping by the house to get the mail. Mrs. Foster meekly suggests that their butler could stay and do that, but Mr. Foster refuses because he'd have to pay Walker full wages and he wouldn't trust him alone in the house. Mrs. Foster asks if Mr. Foster write back to her while she's gone but he tells her probably not.

Mr. Foster is distrustful of his own servants, and opts not to keep any of them on while Mr. and Mrs. Foster are away, even though it would be convenient for the Fosters in several respects. This reveals his cheapness and a certain class bias, and it also shows that Mr. Foster has a suspicious nature, unlike his trusting wife. Even though Mrs. Foster seem to have a point about the value of keeping them around, she is again cowed by her husband's authority.

The fog thickens as they approach the airport and it seems unlikely that Mrs. Foster will fly that day. Mr. Foster tells her to stop fussing, his tone somehow changed. He tells her to resign herself to missing her flight, and Mrs. Foster notices to her horror that her husband is staring at the place where her eye twitches.

Mr. Foster's cruelty again comes through in his insensitivity to his wife's misery and preoccupation. He abuses his power by talking down to her, bullying her, and browbeating her, repeating that she will miss her flight. She catches a glimpse of his dishonesty in his strange change of tone, but she cannot clearly read his expression, so she suspends disbelief about the intentional nature of his cruelty since she can't prove it.

Though visibility is poor, they keep driving, guided by the driver's single yellow lamp, and then they finally stop. Mr. Foster cries that they must be stuck, but the driver tells them they are at the airport. Mrs. Foster rushes out of the car and is told that her flight is postponed but that she should stay there and wait.

Mr. Foster's cruelty is emphasized by the driver's neutrality. While Mr. Foster is eager to see them stuck, the driver is a neutral party that calmly intervenes.

Mrs. Foster runs back to tell her husband the news and they agree that there's no point in him staying. He says goodbye to her. She waits all day at the airport, checking with the clerk every thirty minutes or so until she is told around six o'clock that the flight is postponed till eleven o'clock the next morning. Exhausted, Mrs. Foster would like to just sleep in the airport, but she realizes this would be a ridiculous thing for an elderly lady to do, so instead she calls her husband.

Mrs. Foster does not stay at the airport because of her sense of propriety and class, and also because of her gender. It would not be "ladylike" to find a place to sleep at the airport. It's odd and troubling, though, that she would rather sleep at the airport than go to her own home. She still relies on her husband, which is shown by her decision to call him.

Mrs. Foster wants to get a hotel, presumably near the airport, but her husband tells her to use their house. He insists on staying with her, browbeating her for her anxieties about there not being food in the house and the servants being gone. She meekly accepts and goes home. The fog is slowly clearing up.

Mrs. Foster proposes staying at a hotel because the servants have gone and she relies on them, indicating her class status. Mr. Foster is cruel here, berating his wife with gendered language (he insists that she always wants to "fuss" and calls her "woman") with no sympathy for her anxiety about making the plane. Again, in keeping with their adherence to strict gender roles, Mrs. Foster acquiesces to his desires. He is being essentially disloyal by insisting that she come back to the house when she would be much happier and more likely to have a smooth trip if she were to stay at a hotel.

Mrs. Foster arrives home, tells her husband of her new departure time, and that the weather is clearing. Mr. Foster says he has ordered a car for nine o'clock the next morning. He won't come see her off again, but he insists that she drop him off at the club on her way. Mrs. Foster suddenly feels he is a million miles away and that she doesn't even know him. She reminds him that the club is out of the way, but he says they'll have plenty of time. As always, she acquiesces.

Taking advantage of his wife's exhaustion, Mr. Foster craftily finds another way to interfere in his wife's travel plans, showing the extent of his cruelty and disloyalty. Mrs. Foster is starting to realize his cruelty, which manifests in her feeling that he is "suddenly so small and far away that she couldn't be sure… even what he was." He has already ordered the car for nine o'clock in the guise of taking care of her, but again he is forsaking his duties as a good partner by insisting that they go first to the club.

The next morning, Mrs. Foster is again ready long before nine, but her husband does not appear until just after the hour. He asks about coffee and her luggage, as nonchalant as ever. She, on the other hand, is even more desperate than the previous morning. He insists on getting some cigars and meanders outside, telling her perhaps she'll be lucky this time.

Mr. Foster, with his insistence on bringing his cigars and his "curiously cut Edwardian jacket," becomes a grotesque caricature of a wealthy but sadistic husband. Mrs. Foster's assessment of his "goat's legs in… narrow stovepipe troupers" shows her slowly changing perspective on her husband and makes him seem all the more ridiculous, foreshadowing his downfall. Mr. Foster's disloyalty and cruelty manifest themselves in his slow walk to the car and in his nonchalant comment that perhaps his wife will be lucky this time, as if he himself isn't the reason she is always delayed.

They are already a few minutes behind, and Mrs. Foster asks the driver to please hurry. Just as they are about to leave, Mr. Foster stops the driver. He claims he can't find the small **gift**, a white paper box that he wanted Mrs. Foster to give to their daughter. He doesn't find it in his jacket and concludes he must have left in the bedroom. Mrs. Foster says she never saw such a box and she begs him to leave it: they can mail it, it's only a silly comb anyway. Mr. Foster blows up, furious that she has "forgotten herself for once." He commands her to stay in the car while he returns to the house to look.

Since Mr. Foster cares so little for his daughter and grandchildren, his sudden commitment to giving his daughter a gift is perplexing and suspicious. Mrs. Foster pleads with him to leave it, in her desperate state revealing her thoughts on her husband's gift-giving abilities. While this is the smallest of slights, it is not permitted in their relationship and he yells at her because she has forgotten herself "for once." This implies that he is very much aware of how often she accepts his abuse. There is also the issue of propriety and class: as a wealthy man, it is more embarrassing for his wife to slight him in front of "the help."

Mrs. Foster pleads with him to be quick, and she asks the driver again if they have enough time, to which he responds, "Just about." Then she spots something wedged down in the crack of the seat and realizes it is the **gift** that her husband was talking about, but it seems awfully deep in the crack of the seat to be placed there by accident. She tells the driver to go and get him, but the door is locked, and she realizes it'll be faster if she does it herself.

Finally, Mrs. Foster discovers how deep her husband's sadistic streak runs, since there is no way to interpret this besides that he has hidden the gift on purpose to make her late. In this, her long-held suspicions of his cruelty are confirmed. He has been deceiving her throughout the story, but the trick of the box feels particularly nasty since it is in the guise of gift giving, an act of goodwill.

Sliding the key into the keyhole, Mrs. Foster suddenly stops, all franticness gone, listening for some unnamed sound. She stays there for over ten seconds, then suddenly springs to life again and runs back down the steps, telling the driver it's too late and she has to go. Her husband will get a cab to the club. Her whole attitude seems to have changed, becoming somehow harder and more authoritative, but the driver hardly notices.

Though the reader will only become aware of it later, this is where Mrs. Foster enacts her revenge. She hears her husband get stuck in the elevator, and, knowing no one will come for him, makes the decision to leave him there to die. This revenge is a long time coming, justified by her husband's abuse, and it's strikingly deceptive, because no one will be able to prove that she did it. It also indicates the shift in the balance of power in their marriage. Mrs. Foster is now speaking with authority and has lost that "soft and silly look" about her. She takes control of her fate and her husband's.

Mrs. Foster urges the driver to go quickly, and she makes her plane with a few minutes to spare. She is finally relaxed, in a strange, calm new mood. She feels wonderful and strong. In Paris, she enjoys herself with her grandchildren, buying them presents, telling them stories, and taking them for walks. She writes to her husband every Tuesday, reminding him to eat his meals regularly. After six weeks, she returns, but with an air of someone who will be back soon.

Mrs. Foster's revenge frees her in both the literal and figurative sense. She finally feels comfortable and strong, and she can interact with her daughter and grandchildren, unburdened by her abusive marriage. She reminds her husband to eat his meals, but this is an ironic touch when she knows that he's starving in an elevator. She has been disloyal towards her husband, but she has become loyal to herself and remains loyal to the rest of her family.

Arriving back in New York, there is no car to meet Mrs. Foster. She gets a cab, but no one answers the door at their house. With an amused and calm air, she opens the door, only to find a huge pile of mail, clearly untended. The place is dark and cold, with a strange atmosphere and a peculiar, unfamiliar smell. She briefly disappears to a certain corner of the house and returns with a "glimmer of satisfaction" on her face. Then she calmly picks up the phone and dials the elevator repair company, asking them to come fix the lift, which is stuck between the second and third floors.

Mrs. Foster's trick is finally revealed: she heard the elevator get stuck and decided to leave her husband in there while she was away for six weeks, killing him. She behaves with the utmost propriety, calmly calling the elevator service. Her revenge, likewise, has been very intentional, but within the realms of propriety for her class status, because no one knows that she did it. She can be just as cruel and disloyal as her husband, it turns out, but she only chooses to do so in retaliation for his years of making her suffer.

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