Novel and play 10

**Grasp of Subtext**

Repeating a word or phrase

“Charles, you’re going to kill me when you hear what I’ve done.”

“Emmy, I’d never kill you no matter what you’ve done.”

Using innuendo

“Would you like to come upstairs—perhaps for a little something?”

Talking about one thing, meaning another

Uncle Charlie talks about how to give a good speech, but he is actually explaining his method of killing women:

“You’ve got to make a plan. Think of every detail of what you’re going to say or do. Nothing in the world is difficult if you plan ahead. . . . Then when you’ve planned everything to the last detail, forget it until the moment arrives. Use the moment when it comes. Don’t keep turning it over in your mind beforehand. . . or after. . . Soon, it’s all over, and you’ll be thinking of other things.”

Choosing the description

Description of a parlor: “Lit only by the light from the office spilling in.” Later, description of the walls in the room: “Fat roses splatter the wallpaper.”

Choosing the right word

Stevens said that the housekeeper and under-butler “ran off together last month”. He might have said, “They left together” or “eloped” or “quit”. (*The Remains of the Day*)

Subtext shows attitude

“Children should be brought up to know what the world is really like. They should be prepared. . . like an army. . . .”

“I read these books—any books—to develop my command and knowledge of the English language. I read to further my education.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Character’s age

“She must be in her thirties, but she dresses younger, trendily, and gets away with it.” What does this tell us about her?

**Theme**

**Beginning**

The Santa Anas blew in hot from the desert, shriveling the last of the spring grass into whiskers of pale straw. Only the oleanders thrived their delicate poisonous blooms, their dagger green leaves.

The tide this time of year washes hundreds of tiny starfish up onto the beach. It leaves them stranded in salty constellations, a sandy galaxy within reach.

I have a meanness inside me, real as an organ. Slit me at my belly and it might slide out, meaty and dark, drop on the floor so you could stomp on it. It’s the Day blood. Something’s wrong with it.

I can feel a better version of me somewhere in there—hidden behind a liver or attached to a bit of spleen within my stunted, childish body—a Libby that’s telling me to get up, do something, grow up, move on. But the meanness usually wins out. My brother slaughtered my family when I was seven. My mom, two sisters, gone: bang, bang, chop chop, choke choke.

3.

My mouth won’t quit, though mostly I whisper or subvocalize like I’m reading aloud, my Adam’s apple bobbing, jaw muscle beating like a miniature heart under my cheek, the noise suppressed, the words escaping silently, mere ghosts of themselves, husks empty of breath and tone.

We were putting a stakeout on 109 East Eighty-fourth Street, a lone town house pinned between giant doorman apartment buildings, in and out of the foyers of which bicycle deliverymen with bags of hot Chinese flitted like tired moths in the fading November light.

4.

“This is an enchanted place. Others don’t see it, but I do.” (opening line, narrative voice)

“There is too much pain in the world, that’s the problem.”

“Pain and beauty, and beauty in the pain.” His voice is a whisper that strokes her.

“If only I knew love,” she told her friend, “I’d be powerful enough to do anything.”

“I get glimpses of the horror of normalcy. Each of these innocents on the street is engulfed by a terror of their own ordinariness. They would do anything to be unique.

“What I’m asking is, am I crazy to have this liking for my tail?. . . You must have wished a million times to be normal.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I’ve wished I had two heads. Or that I was invisible. I’ve wished for a fish’s tail instead of legs. I’ve wished to be more special.”

“Not normal?”

“Never!”

**Theme**

**Middle**

1.

There is a considerable crowd outside when Herr Thiessen finally reaches the gates, and despite the crowd, he would have spotted his clock instantly, even without having been informed of its placement. It looms across from the ticket booth, just inside the large iron gates. It is about to strike seven o’clock, and he stands back to watch it, letting the line for the tickets pass in front of him as the harlequin juggler pulls out a seventh ball from thin air, as the dragon’s tale twitches and the clock chimes seven quiet chimes, barely audible over the din of the circus. (*The Night Circus*)

2.

“Have a good trip, amigo,” he said—looking at me, then up at the sky.

“Enjoy the sunshine out there for me. You know how I am about the sunshine—I’m a tropical bird, you know?”

3.

At the abandoned community center, the playground slides gleamed silver in the moonlight. We sat on the side of the empty fountain, our feet dangling in the dry basin, and passed the bottle back and forth until we began to lose track of time.

4.

I’d set out to hike the trail so that I could reflect upon my life, to think about everything that had broken me and make myself whole again.

5.

“About my future,” Bailey says. “My grandmother wants me to go to Harvard, but my father wants me to take over the farm.”

“. . . came to a wide swath of snow on a steep incline, a giant ice-crusted sheath that obliterated the trail. It was like a rockslide, only scarier, a river of ice instead of stones. If I slipped while attempting to cross it, I would slide down the side of the mountain and crash into the boulders far below, or worse, fall farther into who knew what.”

6.

“And I had my whole funeral planned out and everything, and then right before the surgery, I asked my parents if I could buy a suit, like a really nice suit, just in case I bit it. Anyway, I’ve never had occasion to wear it. Until tonight.”

“So it’s your death suit.”

We were both really full, but dessert—a succulently rich *crémeux* surrounded by passion fruit—was too good not to at least nibble, so we lingered for a while over dessert, trying to get hungry again.

7.

He flipped himself onto his side and kissed me. “You’re so hot,” I said, my hand still on his leg.

8.

His face turned away from me, my ear pressed to his chest, listening to his lungs settle into the rhythm of sleep.

. . . his sob roaring impotent like a clap of thunder unaccompanied by lightning, the terrible ferocity that amateurs in the field of suffering might mistake for weakness.

9.

But even then he was strong, holding me tight so that I could see the sinewy muscles of his arms wrapped around me. . .

10.

“Oh, God, Augustus, we have to get you to a hospital.”

“Please just look at it.” I gagged from the smell but bent forward to inspect the place above his belly button where they’d surgically installed the tube. The skin of his abdomen was warm and bright red.