

Cave Man

By Clara Chow

From "Hook & Eye: Stories from the Margins"

Note: These are reflection notes, done by Teacher Jo (www.teacher-jo.com). You will find that there's a distinct lack of opinion and not that much annotation. This is because this collection was put together with the intention that readers develop their own meaning based on their own life experiences.

How then should you use these notes to help yourself?

Reflect on and answer all the questions I have listed.

When attempting to answer these questions, be as open-minded and honest as possible. Where your opinion is needed, try to answer those questions in the PEEL format. Have evidence and reason, and elaborate as if trying to explain it to someone else who doesn't understand. Pretend to persuade someone else to accept your opinion.

Good luck!

Teacher Jo

Scene Summary	Analysis & Reflection
<p>The scene begins with Alfred looking at the spreading leak on his ceiling. It is an old problem that was never solved. He associates it with living underground, in tiny shoebox apartments. Soon, he will move above ground, where things would be better, although he doesn't know much about life above ground.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The story starts with a narrative hook – specifically, a description that summarises the condition of his apartment. • “The ceiling was leaking <u>again</u>.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Repetition: the use of the word “again” in relation to his ceiling is repeated 3 times in this first page. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “And now the ceiling was leaking <u>again</u>.” ▪ “He thought of lifting the black comms horn, mounted on the kitchen wall, to call building management to complain <u>again</u>.” ○ By starting the story with this “again”, it sets the mood – frustration, irritation, resignation. Things don't work, people don't work, it's a ridiculous living situation, etc. ○ It also helps us to understand the setting – the story is set underground, and the living conditions are not pleasant. ○ Diction and Imagery: “Alfred could see moisture blooming like <u>tumours</u> on the plaster overhead. Tiny nubs formed within these dark patches, the beginnings of stalactites.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ By describing the wet patches as “tumours”, we get the sense that the problems are hidden, not visible, under the surface, potentially dangerous (not all tumours are malignant), and not something we want to live with. ▪ It reflects his living underground in this tiny space, so close to Mary and her daughter.

- It might also reflect his own personal problems, which we will understand more of later.
- The stalactites remind him of a trip he made with his parents a long time ago to the caves near Perth. The underground caverns were large, magnificent. He compares that with his tiny, structured apartment and reflects *ironically*.
 - “Why did people ever stop living in caves? ... There had been majesty in that cave, and he had missed it.”
 - It is ironic that he should think this way since he does live in a cave under the ground. The water problems he faces with the stalactites forming are all part and parcel of living underground in a cave.
 - This irony sets the theme for the rest of the story – that the grass always seems greener on the other side, even if the other side is really the same as this side.
- As he complains, we learn that his woes are soon to end – in four days, he will move to a house-unit above ground.
 - He can leave this awful world for something different, something that is supposed to be better – although he himself isn’t certain since he doesn’t know what to expect.

Reflect:

- Singaporeans have a reputation of complaining incessantly about everything. Some even say that it’s part of Singaporean culture. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- When we do complain, is it often justified or because we are entitled/ungrateful?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do we always think the grass is greener on the other side? How often is this really the case?
<p>He reflects on life in Singapore, underground, and how things have progressed. However, it cannot be compared to living above ground. He goes on to describe what he knows about living above ground. The description is stiff and does not mention all the things that one might be interested in when contemplating a big move. Rather, we get the sense that whatever he knows about above-ground life is based on marketing brochures or what sounds like hear-say.</p> <p>Nevertheless, he is eager, holding off on buying more household goods even though he desperately needs to.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • His description of life in underground Singapore sounds different yet comfortable. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Everything had to be created artificially so, why not control it to be comfortable? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dichotomy: Stark difference in comfort versus his apartment, though, with its leaks and mould. Also, state-of-the-art versus useless and disinterested maintenance people. • “Deep down inside, people were all hardwired to be <u>beansprouts</u>.” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Ironic Juxtaposition: because beansprouts are best when grown in the dark → they become short, fat, juicy and sweet, which is precisely how they are sold for consumption. ○ We don’t sell beansprouts that have been grown in sunlight → long, thin and green, because they become fibrous and unpleasant to eat. • His description of above-ground life sounds like he sewed bits and pieces of travel brochures and what other people say about above-ground life. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The tone and diction sound promotional, with holiday imagery: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “azure satin fabric”, “sea gulls started out as specks in the distance”, “coarse, sand-like brown sugar, coating you”, “it had grown lush and canopied”.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In fact, we get the impression that he's so unfamiliar with these things that his description also comes across as odd. He describes the waves as "exposing shiny hooks, the little glittering teeth of zips". <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It's such a strange choice of words → hooks and teeth aren't words normally used to describe waves and the sea. He must have thought of them because that's how they look to his foreign eyes on the brochures. • ∴ It sounds like he is sold on the idea of above-ground living and what it means rather than what it actually entails. • From this dreamy description, we are dragged back to reality and the state of his apartment. We better understand why he dislikes it and why he wants something seemingly better. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The dichotomy presented in this text – would you say that this is an accurate representation of Singapore? If yes, in what way and why do you think it is the case? • Have you ever been so sold on an idea, without actually knowing anything about it, and becoming obsessed over the idea? What was that like? Why were you so obsessed?
<p>We are introduced to the Mary character. She is something of a mess, and Alfred reflects on</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary is a physical mess, but Alfred's lack of surprise suggests that this is a normal state for Mary.

how she used to look better. Things are awkward between them.

The story shifts to the past – how they met, how they used to hang out. They used to be close, but she met someone new and got married. However, the marriage did not work out and they got a divorce. Now, she has a child and Alfred has been helping to look after her.

- Every time Mary says something related to his move, he gives a vague reply or ignores it, which suggests that he doesn't want to talk about it with her.
 - Later, we get confirmation that it's because she had asked to join him and he had to turn her down. The awkwardness of that situation has lasted.
 - There is also a discomfort about leaving her and her daughter for the next three years. A lot can happen in that time and there is no telling that the friendship might last the distance.
- The **atmosphere** between them is awkward and **tense**. So much so that a very detailed paragraph is dedicated to describing the things on the table between them and how he'll maintain his job whilst above-ground.
- There is one pull-factor for Alfred → Mary's daughter, Rachel. He clearly cares for her and worries that his three years away might affect or change her. That she might even forget him.
 - Nevertheless, he reminds himself of what a good opportunity this move will be, trying to convince himself that he has made the right decision. (**Feeling:** doubt; hesitation)
- The **flashback** about where they used to go reminds us of a lot of Singapore today. Recycling, education, agriculture, integrating infrastructure with entertainment → it all sounds very familiar.
 - Yet, Alfred fights against it. It bothers him greatly that despite the government's efforts to make everything as normal as possible, Alfred is dissatisfied and wants to leave. Why?

- After all, things like small apartments/flats, mold in corners or behind our cupboards, leaky ceilings → these are all commonplace experiences even today, above-ground.
- “So you can take your time to say goodbye to me...”
 - A very awkward statement that creates **tension** between them, especially as Alfred pretends to ignore it.
 - However, it is a loaded statement, especially with the **choice of words** “so you can take your time”. She is implying that Alfred is very slow when it comes to making a move, to expressing his feelings towards her.
- Eventually, she decides not to wait for him anymore and marries Kelvin instead.
 - “It was the right time, the right conditions, the right temperature. Her ovaries had been knocking around inside her for awhile, and they had recently started weeping.” → Again, she is implying that she has been waiting and he isn’t moving/taking action.
- Alas, the relationship doesn’t work and, baby in tow, Mary leaves him and returns to Alfred’s couch.
 - This is **symbolic**. This is how their “relationship” started in the first place → with her making herself comfortable on his couch.
 - To add to the symbolism, the arrival of Rachel further cements this because he ends up being a substitute father, doing all the things a father would like reading to her, soothing her when she whines in her rocker, holding her to his chest whilst he rests.

	<p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your role or position in your social circles? Do you see your place amongst your friends and family? Why or why not? • If you leave them now, to start life anew somewhere else, what will you lose? What will your friends and family lose? • How difficult would it be for you to let go and leave? Why?
<p>A flashback brings us to the day when he is notified of his winning the ballot to live above-ground. It is such a big deal that his student and the postman celebrates with him. This commotion alerts Mary who comes out of her apartment. Upon hearing the news, she is immediately hopeful and asks if she can join him too. Awkwardly, he breaks it to her that only family can join him. In doing so, he implies that they aren't family and hurts her.</p> <p>It is then that he realises the water stains on the ceiling.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Another flashback, this time to when he is notified about his move to the time-shared above-ground unit. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Time-share: whereby a group of people pay for a house. They each then get a fixed amount of time to live in it – in this case, in three year slots. • On top of his usual job, Alfred gives extra music enrichment lessons → just like today. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Life really isn't all that different underground. The infrastructures are similar, every day life is similar, relationship issues aren't unique. So, why is he so dissatisfied that he wants to leave and hates life underground so much? • To be fair, Mary's request is somewhat audacious. She left Alfred to start life with someone else. In doing so, she does disregard his nature and didn't accept him for who he is. • Characterisation: However, Alfred is also at fault as he clearly did not learn his lesson about being <u>complacent</u> and too comfortable. He does not push himself to change to get what he wants. Instead, he chooses to remain in <u>denial</u>, wanting to

believe that whatever is between them is long gone (just like his dead orchid, which Mary jokes about keeping alive).

- He has this chance to try again, especially with Rachel in tow. Rachel who needs a father. Rachel to whom he has been a father.

- **Imagery:** “The sound reminded Alfred of the dull echo of hammer striking firing pin. A bullet jogged into its chamber, like an amnesiac pounding on his forehead.”

- The auditory and tactile imagery draws an image of a gun being cocked and the bullet being fired.
- It **symbolises** how he has hurt Mary, and how it is like he has shot her.
- At the same time, the imagery of the amnesiac pounding on his forehead illustrates how Alfred himself has forgotten and is trying to remember → this is the mistake he made last time too. Why is he making it again? Why is he keeping her away at arms length? Why is he keeping himself at the margins, away from Mary and Rachel who are at the centre?

- His refusal to be vulnerable about a woman he has feelings for has resulted in his pain when she left him for another. However, if he had just allowed himself to be vulnerable around her in the first place, to commit himself to her, he might never have gotten hurt in the first place
- He reflects on his failure to explain to Mary, although his explanation really wouldn't have helped.
 - Saying that he couldn't bring her to above-ground because he “could not” instead of “wished not” → what difference does it make? At the end of the

	<p>day, the fact is that she <i>will not</i> be going up with him because she still wasn't a part of his life. Not in any significant manner.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ He is like Primitive Man, a cave man living in a cave. He could think that he was really meant to be above ground, that evolution needed time before humans could live below-ground comfortably, but once again, that is just denial. ○ The reality is, he is still stuck under the cave, unenlightened, and too brutish and simple-minded to consider understand even his own feelings. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cave as a symbol of being unenlightened, being in the dark, hiding from the light. <p>Reflect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just as with “The Boy with the Missing Thumb”, Alfred is a character who keeps himself in the margins and away from his social circle. Why does he do that? • Shifting our perspective back to the real world, these stories are reflective of reality. So, why do some people intentionally move themselves away from their social circles and into the margins? • Have you ever found yourself marginalising yourself just because it is easier? Reflect and ask yourself – was it worth it? In what way? What did you lose in the process? • What is your cave?
Alfred takes the elevator to the surface, with the look on Mary's face etched in his mind.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just as the cave is symbolic of being in the dark and hiding, the light above-ground is symbolic of truth and enlightenment.

He had one final chance to make things right with her but failed to do so. He gets the sense that things are truly over between them. Standing in his apartment, in the live, out of his cave, he sees that everything is as he expects – he is truly in the margins now, and he doesn't want to be.

- As Alfred leaves the darkness, he gets his first stirrings of realisation.
 - That he could promise to return, that he wants her and wants to be with her and will come back for her. ← He says none of these things. It was his last chance to make things right. Even if he could not bring her along with him, he could promise to return for her. But he does not.
 - He realises that the look in her expression was that of disappointment because he has not changed at all, and that her hopes were all for nought.
 - The finality suggests that she will not make this mistake with him again.
- Upon realising that he has gotten what he wanted, complete marginalisation away from his job, away from the rest of society, away from Mary, that this isn't what he wanted.
 - In reality, he just wanted to get away because he could not change himself to do what needed to be done to get what he truly wanted – Mary.
 - That perhaps, he didn't hate his apartment all that much, but he just wanted to get away from the awkward situation that he had created from himself.
- In the light, Alfred realises the truth – that by marginalising himself, he has lost what he truly wanted but refused to acknowledge.

Reflect:

- Think about your relationships, with friends and family. In what way do you matter to them?
- Would you say that you have been running away from your role in your social circles? If yes, why?
- When you think about how the grass is greener elsewhere, ask yourself – is there something you're running from?