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Annotations for Bone by Fae Ng

Key Motifs

Paper

One major motif in *Bone* is paper. The role of paper to document and legitimize written information is continually challenged by the novel. For example, Leon passes the immigration interrogation on Angel Island by buying identification papers to the Leong family name. While the papers themselves are legitimate, his usurpation of the identity of the true Leong is not. Leon manipulates the rigid credibility of official documentation to disguise himself and deceive the immigration officers. In this instance, paper is no more plausible than the readers' interpretation of its inherent meaning. Its intrinsic meaning is valueless.

However, for Leon, paper has an additional, cultural value. According to "the oldtimers" of Chinese culture, paper is honored because writing is believed to be "sacred" (57). Tradition dictates that paper be saved and then burned at "a special temple," and afterward the ashes are "discarded in a secret spot in the bay" (59). Leon keeps all his papers in stacks organized by date, and while Leila is frustrated when she has to sift through the piles to find evidence of Leon's actual identity to enroll him in social security, she reflects that "[f]or a paper son, paper is blood" (61). Leon will not burn these papers because they have become part of his identity. While his bought surname is not real, Leon has become ensconced in the paper man's history. This is witness by Leon's eagerness to retell the tale of memorizing the history of the true Leong and by the fact that he does not confess his illegal entry to the confession program officials in order to gain naturalization papers. In effect, Leon becomes transformed by the paper. He accepts the man who sold him the Leong name as a father and promises to return Grandpa Leong's bones to China like a son would. Leon obviously takes his relationship to Grandpa Leong seriously because when he is not available to see that promise carried out, he fears retribution in the form of bad luck that befalls him and his family. To Leon, the false identification papers are not a trivial ruse to gain entry to the United States. These sacred papers form a bond between him and Grandpa Leong, which consequently transforms his own identity. With this new history comes familial responsibility and the bad luck of his broken promise that he imagines plagues his family and is the cause of Ona's suicide.

Bones

Not only is "Bone" the title of the novel, but bones are an important motif throughout the story. Culturally, blood is believed to come "from the mother and the bones from the father" (104). Thus, bones often represent family ties or inheritance. For instance, Leon blames himself for Ona's death because of the "family's bad luck" when he did not keep his promise to Grandpa Leong to send his bones back to China. For every ill fate that befalls the family, Leon "blame[s] the bones" (50). Leon's interpretation of the family's bad luck is consistent with the idea that bones—and whatever blessings or curses that come with them—are inherited through the father, as the "oldtimers" believe.

When the shock of Ona's death wears off, Leila, too, reflects on the "oldtimers" traditional views on bones. She characterizes the realization of Ona being deceased as the "heavenly weight" of her bones (153). The Chinese elders believed one's fate "can be divined by the weighing of [the] bones"

(153). Leila feels the pressure of Ona's fate within her mind, but cannot understand what how she is supposed to interpret this feeling. She asks, "But what was left to predict or foresee? Ona was dead" (153). At this time, Leila is "too close to see the whole picture" of Leila's death and the family's resultant turmoil (135). It is not until the end of the novel, that Leila decides Ona's fate by deciding how to remember her beloved sister. She adopts Leon's philosophy that "what we hold in our hearts is what matters" and that "[t]he heart never travels" (193). She holds her sister's memory in her heart, and thus indirectly divines Ona's fate through her own. When Leila decides to leave Salmon Alley, she is "reassured" that "what she held in [her] heart would guide [her]," leaving the reader with a sense of closure (194).

Main Characters

Leon – Leon is the father of Ona and Nina, and is a stepfather to Leila. While Leon is married to "Mah," he moved out of Salmon Alley after Ona committed suicide. He lives in "the old-man hotel," the San Fran, on Clay Street (4).

Leon is a "junk inventor," in that he collects what others discard and fix them or invent new items (5). He finds the greatest satisfaction in "making old things work" (13). His pet projects may be an escape for Leon from the frustrations of daily life. They provide a safe space where he can engage his intellect and take pride in being resourceful. While he cannot always fix his relationships or his financial situation, he can at least turn to his pet projects to build a sense of accomplishment. However, while Leila thinks Leon's ideas are "pretty good," she notices that he "never finish[es] anything he start[s]" (13). From this perspective, Leon's projects are characterized akin to a distraction that can neither hold his attention nor produce any material or internal reward. The family members are generally charmed the fact that "for a man with so many failures," Leon has "a heart full of hope," that can show in his enthusiasm for "[e]ach new scheme, each voyage" (163). Sometimes his unfinished projects damage his relationships with others, like when he doesn't finish installing the lights for Mah's baby store. His inability to follow through on his promise frustrates Mah. Perhaps worse than not finishing projects, though, is his inability to start any after Ona's death. Leon feels his "concentration was gone, that something disconnected between his mind and his heart" (49). The other family members characterize his behavior as "dreamy" and "lost" (49). At this disparaging point in his life and after Mah has an affair with Tommie Hom, Leon finds refuge from the disappointments of Chinatown in the sea. Mason and Leila agree that "[d]isappearing is Leon's way of dealing[, because] he needs time away" (62). For example, when Ona dies, he goes to Cape Horn, "as far away as a ship could go," because he could not stand being reminded of the guilt from the bad luck he believes haunts his family due to his broken promise to Grandpa Leong (50).

Leon is one of the characters who believes most in the traditions and philosophies of ancient Chinese culture. Leila, however often, resents "Leon's madness, his blind lamenting to Confucius, his whole hocus-pocus view of the world" (91). Leila feels that Leon is holding himself back from accepting Ona's death and moving on with his life because he blames himself for creating the bad luck that he thinks persuaded her over the edge. He laments not taking Grandpa Leong's bones back to China as promised. That broken promise is what he perceives as the instigator of the family's curse. Eventually, though, his ties to tradition do help Leon heal and proceed with his life through the grief. For instance, "Leon's altar" was a reminder of Ona's memory and a way for him "to live with his grief" (102).

Leila also learns from and uses Leon's philosophies to heal after Ona's death. He believes that "what we hold in our hearts is what matters" (193). She learns to hold Ona's memory in her heart and use it to help guide her through life.

Mah – Mah is the mother of Leila, Ona, and Nina. Mah is self-employed at her "baby store". She previously worked as a seamstress for Tommie Hom, whom with she has an affair while married to Leon. Before she knew Leon, Mah wedded Lyman Fu for "a thrill" and to escape "war-torn villages" in China (12, 34-36). When her first husband "ran off on her," she married Leon "for convenience" and "to be saved from disgrace" according to Leila (12, 34-36). While Leila has a bleak view on Mah's reason for her marriages, Mah performs small acts of kindness for Leon that demonstrates her love. For example, she secretly has Leila put money in Leon's stash, even though her own finances are stretched.

Mah blames Ona's death on the "bad luck" acquired as fate's retribution for the "bad choices" she made: marrying Lyman Fu and her affair with Tommie Hom (51). Just as Leon used projects and sea voyages as an escape from the frustration the family faces in Salmon Alley, Mah may have used her affair with Tommie Hom as an escape. She has responsibilities to the family that tie her to Chinatown, so she escapes in the flesh since the freedom to physically remove herself is denied her (82). Mah's reason to have an affair might have also been based on bitterness that Leon the freedom to physically escape and her irritation that he does not stay and help work through the family's problems.

Leila, in part, blames Mah for the family's prolonged turmoil after Ona's suicide. She believes that because Mah "wanted to live with [the memory of Ona's death]" that the rest of the family was also obligated to "[live] with the ghost, the guilt" (15). This "dark[ness]" overwhelms the family and they all "just snapped apart" (15). She recalls that they all took a "trip," trying to make a "new life" and escape from the guilt. In the end, though, they "came back to [themselves], to [their] old ways" and are sucked in by Mah's guilt and grief (15).

Mah, like Leon, has deep ties to traditional Chinese culture. Her connections, however, are more social and behavioral. For instance, after Ona's death, Mah finds the "village advice" and food brought by the Chinese sewing ladies who work in the factory comforting (105). They know how to use her "personal name" and the traditional food to "draw out Mah's sadness and then take it away" (105).

Leila – Leila is the narrator of the story and the oldest sister of the three girls. She marries Mason Louie. She is employed at the Edith Eaton Elementary school as a community relations specialist. Leila is "the bridge between the classroom teacher and the parents" (16). She conducts home visits on a regular basis to encourage parents to get "involved" and to "[open] up a line of communication between them and the school" (16). Often the issues at school are not resolved, and Leila ends up performing social services for the parents like writing letters to the unemployment agency (17). Her job mirrors her relationship with her parents. She used to resent being the bridge, or translator, between her parents and the U.S. government and took the responsibility of performing English translation as a "curse" (17). As an adult, she plays the role of social worker in her career and with her parents. Leila plays this role well when she can remain a neutral in family conflicts. She is adept at recognizing others' feelings and anticipating their responses. This skill set allows her to manipulate her own behavior head-off potential issues early on. For example, Leila often takes Leon as "company" with her while she works because she is afraid he will get in trouble "hanging around with those fleabags" at the square (16). Leon is unaware of her intentions to protect him from falling in with a notoriously crass group.

While her talents serve her well in neutral situations, they pose a crippling detriment when she must assert herself. She hesitates to act when she is afraid that her actions will displease her parents. For example, Leila finds it hard to tell her mother about her marriage to Mason because Mah would “have to face her bitterness about her own marriages” and Leila wants to shield her from “[r]emembering the bad. Re feeling the mistakes” (12).

Leila feels even more pressure to please her parents because she feels responsible to ease the “ugliness” of their “discontent” spawned through the “humiliation” they suffer as immigrants in the United States so that she could have a better life (34-35). It is ironic that Leila’s parents want a happier and easier life for Leila, because she is continually sucked back into the toil and disparage of their dysfunctional marriage. Ona finds escape from the stress through suicide. Nina moves to New York. But Leila, as the oldest, feels the full weight of the pressure to salvage her parent’s thin happiness. For instance, when Mason asks Leila to marry him, she is living with and soothing her mother after Ona’s death. Leila resents “Mah her stubborn one-track moaning—crying over Ona who was dead, crying over Nina who was gone. ...[When she was there,] the living present daughter, and Mah was hung up on the other two” (91). Leila would like to leave with Mason, but Mah’s grief renews Leila’s “secret guilt” that she could have *said* something that might have anchored [Ona]” (51, 106). Leila doesn’t want to live with the “blame” yet cannot get away from the “fear” of disrespecting Mah’s sorrow and Ona’s memory by moving on with her life (46).

Nina thinks she has “peace of heart, knowing [she had] done [her] share for Mah and Leon” (32). This is exactly the opposite of how Leila feels, however. She experiences sharp back pain that is connected to the feeling of “being pulled back and forth between Mah and Mason” (50). The stress of “Mah’s being alone and Mason’s waiting for [her]” makes her feel stretched at the seams (50).

Leila eventually learns to forgive herself for any blame she might have for Ona’s suicide and uses her sister’s memory to help “guide” her through her life, out of Salmon Alley without the guilt of abandoning her parents (194).

Ona – Ona is the middle sister in the family. She committed suicide by jumping off the Nam Ping Yuen housing project in Chinatown. Leila feels guilty she didn’t intervene when she knew Ona was “doing ludes” and they were found in her system when she committed suicide. Ona becomes “a kind of silence” in the family members’ lives (15). Each person feels at least partially responsible for her death, and that guilt makes it difficult for the family to share their grief and heal together.

When Ona was alive, she was intelligent—always one step ahead of everyone, according to her restaurant boss. Leila reflected that Ona was “the forward-looking one” and that she “was always excited about the next day” (89). It is a tragedy that her life is cut so short when she “wanted to grow very old” and “be a smart old goddess” (89). However, Ona was always on the edge. She liked living dangerously. She “loved the fun of getting close to the danger and the thrill of getting away” (130).

Of the three girls, Ona had the closest relationship with Leon. Even her name is derived from Leon’s. Her mother deliberately chose the name “Ona” because “On was part of Leon’s Chinese name, too” (131). When Leon went out to sea, “she’d wait for him, shadowy and pensive, counting off the days till he came home” (172). Even her emotions correlated with his. For example, when Leon lost a job, “she went into a depression with him” or when “he got high on some scheme, she was drunk on it, too” (172). After Leon moved out when he found out about Mah’s affair, Ona was determined to keep Leon in their lives. She “wanted to show him how much she needed him,” and eventually she persuades Leon to meet with Mah (158).

It is likely that Ona feels particularly betrayed by Leon when he forbids her to be with Osvaldo, because she loves him so much and has worked so hard to maintain a relationship with him. Leila remembers how “[f]orbidding Ona was like daring her,” and how “[t]he harder Leon pressed, the tighter Ona and Osvaldo became” (172-173). Leila also reflects how “Ona felt stuck” as the middle child, caught up in love with the son of the man who swindled Leon out of his business. She felt the pressure of being “stuck in the middle of all the trouble” (139).

Nina – Nina is the youngest of the sisters and moves to New York. Mah and Leon used Nina “to vent their own frustrations and anger about Ona’s suicide” after she tells them about getting an abortion (25). Leila believes Nina tells them on purpose so that she can give herself a reason to escape Salmon Alley—to get away from the fighting. Whereas Leila can “shut [her] heart” and let Mah and Leon rant,” Nina “yelled back [...], said things, [... and] left” (25). Leila thinks she has “courage of heart, doing what she wanted” (32). Nina is cynical of her parents and criticizes them for huddling in “their world,” forcing their children to be the cultural translators instead of adapting to the modern day for themselves (33). Nina blames Ona’s death on the family “stir[ing] up bad luck” by being “cooped up on Salmon Alley” (51).

Leila feels even more responsible to take care of Nina after feeling the guilt that she might have been able to save Ona. She wants “an intimacy with [Nina she] hadn’t had with Ona the last few years” (25), yet finds it difficult not to resent Nina “her fast move, her safe distance, [...] her three thousand miles” from the trouble at home (91).

Mason Louie – Mason Louie is Leila’s husband. Leila confesses that while she “went for Mason for his looks, his long, lean build and his car[,] he’s got plenty of other qualities” (19). Many of those attributes are the exact opposite of those she dislikes about her family members’. For example, she is attracted to the fact that Mason “has a job and he finishes whatever she starts,” unlike Leon (19). She also like that he is “generous,” not only with his money, but with his time (19). This is one point on which she sharply criticizes Nina—that she’s a “hog” with her time (101). Finally, he “can let something go,” unlike Mah who cannot let go of her frustrations, guilt, and sorrow (19). Leila also finds it easy to relax with Mason, “being on the road, moving fast in a nice car,” because it offers the image of freedom: physical freedom from Chinatown and financial freedom (42). While Mason is not rich, he is a successful foreign car mechanic. Leila appreciates his thrift—it isn’t cheap; it easily utilizes and appreciates the resources available. One way he demonstrates this thrift is through the way he communicates. He tells her “it shouldn’t take too many words to get something right” (93). Leila is deeply relieved that she doesn’t have to continually “worry about [and] think for” him because she knows he can “take care of himself” (64). With Mason, Leila can finally think about taking care of herself. For example, when making love with Mason, Leila feels “safe” in a way that helps her forgive herself and try to forget the blame for Ona’s death (54).

Mason, like Leila, is also socially intelligent and has a deep understanding of family dynamics. For example, when Dale is clueless to Mason’s service on the car as a “family favor” he “put[s] his hand up, and [shakes] his head” in a silent, but firm affirmation of that favor (44). Leila mocks Dale’s ineptitude in a way that indicates that while Dale is financially successful, she find’s Mason’s social awareness and generosity much more important.