

# Inferencing and Donald Barthelme's "Concerning the Bodyguard"

- Learning through inference: An exercise in reading between the lines?
- Try this little story by Donald Barthelme. Have students then chart out a proposal or treatment for the story. Cut out sentences or highlight to indicate how one set of questions leads to a reasonable conclusion as to what is happening in the story behind the story. Place these conclusions in the second column.
- In the short story "Concerning the Bodyguard" do you think the person being described is good at his job? Explain your answer and support it with evidence from the selection.
- Write a good summary, without questions, of the story happening in the background. Try not to mention the bodyguard.

## Concerning the Bodyguard

By Donald Barthelme

Does the bodyguard scream at the woman who irons his shirts? Who has inflicted a brown burn on his yellow shirt purchased expensively from Yves St. Laurent? A great brown burn just over the heart.

Does the bodyguard's principal make conversation with the bodyguard, as they wait for the light to change, in the dull gray Citroen? With the second bodyguard, who is driving? What is the tone? Does the bodyguard's principal comment on the brown young women who flock along the boulevard? Or the young men? On the traffic? Has the bodyguard ever enjoyed a serious political discussion with his principal?

Is the bodyguard frightened by the initials D.I.T.?

Is the bodyguard frightened by the initials C.N.D.?

Will the bodyguard be relieved, today, in time to see the film he has in mind—*Emmanuelle Around the World*, will there be a queue for tickets? Will there be students in the queue?

Is the bodyguard frightened by the slogan *Remember 17 June*? Is the bodyguard frightened by black spray paint, tall letters ghostly at the edges, on this wall, on this wall? At what level of education did the bodyguard leave school?

Is the bodyguard sufficiently well-paid? Is he paid as well as a machinist? As well as a foreman? As well as an army sergeant? As well as a lieutenant? Is the Citroen armored? Is the Mercedes armored? What is the speed of the Mercedes? Can it equal that of a BMW? A BMW motorcycle? Several BMW motorcycles?

Does the bodyguard gauge the importance of his principal in terms of the number of bodyguards he requires? Should there not be other cars leading and following his principal's car, there also filled with bodyguards? Are there sometimes such additional precautions, and does the bodyguard, at these times, feel himself part of an ocean of bodyguards? Is he exalted at these times? Does he wish for even more bodyguards, possibly flanking cars to the right and left and a point car far, far ahead?

After leaving trade school, what sort of enterprises did the bodyguard engage before accepting his present post? Has he ever been in jail? For what sort of offense? Has the bodyguard acquired a fondness for his principal? Is there mutual respect? Is there mutual contempt? When his principal takes tea, is the bodyguard offered tea? Beer? Who pays?

Can the bodyguard adduce instances of professional success?

Had he a previous client?

Is there a new bodyguard in the group of bodyguards? Why?

How much does *pleasing* matter? What services does the bodyguard provide for his principal other than the primary one? Are there services he should not be asked to perform? Is he nevertheless asked from time to time to perform such services? Does he refuse? Can he refuse? Are there, in addition to the bodyguard's agreed-upon compensation, tips? Of what size? On what occasions?

In the restaurant, a good table for his principal and the distinguished gray man with whom he is conferring. Before it (between the two principals and the door), a table for the four bodyguards. What is the quality of the conversation between the two sets of bodyguards? What do they talk about? Soccer, perhaps, Hollans vs. Peru, a match which they have all seen. Do they rehearse the savaging of the Dutch goalkeeper Piet Schrijvers by the bastard Peruvian? Do they discuss Schrijvers's replacement by the brave Jan Jongbloed, and what happened next? Has the bodyguard noted the difference in quality between his suit and that of his principal? Between his shoes and those of his principal?

In every part of the country, large cities and small towns, bottles of champagne have been iced, put away, reserved for a celebration, reserved for a special day. Is the bodyguard aware of this?

Is the bodyguard tired of waking in his small room on the Calle Caspe, smoking a Royale Filtre, then getting out of bed and throwing wide the curtains to discover, again, eight people standing at the bus stop across the street in postures of depression? Is there on the wall of the bodyguard's small room a poster showing Bruce Lee in a white robe with his feet positioned in such-and-such a way, his fingers outstretched in such-such a way? Is there a rosary made of apple beads hanging from a nail? Is there a mirror whose edges have begun to craze and flake, and are there small blurrish Polaroids stuck along the left edge of the mirror, Polaroids of a woman in a dark-blue scarf and two lean children in red pants? Is there a pair of dark-blue trousers plus a long-sleeved white shirt (worn once already) hanging in the dark-brown wardrobe? Is there a colr foldout of a naked young woman torn from the magazine *VIR* taped inside the wardrobe door? Is there a bottle of Long John Scotch atop the cheese-colored mini refrigerator? Two-burner hotplate? Dull-green ceramic pot on the windowsill containing an unhealthy plant? A copy of *Explication du Tai Chi*, by Bruce Tegner? Does the bodyguard read the newspaper of his principal's party? Is he persuaded by what he reads there? Does the bodyguard know which of the great blocs his country aligned itself with

during the Second World War? During the First World War? Does the bodyguard know which countries are the preeminent trading partners of his own country, at the present time?

Seated in a restaurant with his principal, the bodyguard is served, involuntarily, turtle soup. Does he recoil, as the other eats? Why is this near-skeleton, his principal, of such importance to the world that he deserves six bodyguards, two to a shift with the shifts changing every eight hours, six bodyguards of the first competence plus supplementals on occasion, two armored cars, stun grenades ready to hand under the front seat? What has he meant to the world? What are his plans?

Is the retirement age for bodyguards calculated as it is for other citizens? Is it earlier, fifty-five, forty-five? Is there a pension? In what amount? Those young men with dark beards staring at the Mercedes, or staring at the Citroen, who are they? Does the bodyguard pay heed to the complaints of his fellow bodyguards about the hours spent waiting outside this or that Ministry, this or that headquarters, hours spent propped against the fenders of the Mercedes while their principals is within the (secure) walls? Is the thick glass of these specially prepared vehicles thick enough? Are his fellow bodyguards reliable? Is the new one reliable?

Is the bodyguard frightened by young women of goof family? Young women of good family whose handbags contain God knows what? Does the bodyguard feel that the situation is *unfair*? Will the son of the bodyguard, living with his mother in a city far away, himself become a bodyguard? When the bodyguard delivers the son of his principal to school where all of the children are delivered by bodyguards, does he stop at a grocer's on the way and buy the child a peach? Does he buy himself a peach?

Will the bodyguard, if tested, be equal to his task? Does the bodyguard know which foreign concern was the successful bidder for the construction of his country's nuclear reprocessing plant? Does the bodyguard know that the general amnesty of April coincide with the rearrest of sixty persons? Does the bodyguard know that the new, liberalized press laws of May were a provocation? Does the bodyguard patronize a restaurant called the Crocodile? A place packed with young, loud, fat Communists? Does he spill a drink, to disclose his spite? Is his gesture understood?

Are the streets full of stilt-walkers? Stilt-walkers weaving ten feet above the crowd in great papier-mache bird heads, black and red costumes, whipping thirty feet of colored cloth above the heads of the crowd, miming the rape of a young female personage symbolizing his country? In the Mercedes, the bodyguard and his colleague stare at the hundreds, men and women, young and old, who move around the Mercedes, stopped for a light, as if it were a rock in a river. In the rear seat, the patron is speaking into a telephone. The people pressing around the car cannot be counted, there are too many of them; they cannot be known, there are too many of them; they cannot be predicted, they have volition. Then, an opening. The car accelerates.

Is it the case that, on a certain morning, the garbage cans of the city, the garbage cans of the entire country, are overflowing with empty champagne bottles? Which bodyguard is at fault?