

Art as soul finder in the elegance of the hedgehog



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In Muriel Barbery's *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, Paloma grows up in a highly chaotic and disconnected world and feels pain and disoriented. She needs another world to support and protect her. Day after day, Paloma "pace[s] up and down [her] life the way [she] pace[s] up and down a passageway" because she cannot find meaning for her life—her body is a drag to her. But when she opens her heart to the small but pure beauty striking her constantly, she starts to be able to hear the calling from her soul. During her journey of finding the beauty, Art opens the door of another world in which she finds her soul, and therefore her reason to live meaningfully. Art guides Paloma to seek her soul, her innermost self. Feeling isolated, Paloma is torn between the outer world where she lives and her own inner world. "Hypersensitive to anything that is dissonant," Paloma feels "she has to disappear" from this "family contradiction" (Barbery 258). However, deep inside her heart, Paloma "[does] [not] really feel like dying" and still believes art "is beautiful enough to give life meaning" (Barbery 292). She thinks that she has been living in an arid world in which nothing can nourish her life until she finds Art—that can not only nurture her life, but can also be her whole life. Therefore, she begins to seek the beauty of all kinds of Arts that meet her expectations. During the choir performance, Paloma feels a deep connection to the harmonious melodies that overwhelm the vulgarity and triviality in the life she is "struggling" through (Barbery 185). When she paces up and down with the song, she suddenly enters a room in another dimension full of light. Paloma comprehends that Art can vacuum people's hatred as well as desire and "diffuse the ugliness of everyday life into a spirit of perfect communion" (Barbery 185). Paloma is constantly seeking to transition from the separation to communion. Music creates a wondrous

instantaneousness during which Paloma discovers that the overwhelming beauty of melody is calling deep inside from her heart. And at this instant, even Paloma herself does not realize that Art is in the process of finding its way into the secret places of her soul. Living in solitude and loneliness for years, Paloma finally has the “ chance to see beyond herself and truly meet someone” who sees beyond (Barbery 273). She befriends Renee and their mutual passion for Art makes Paloma as well as Renee, “[forget] even the very notion of trying to hide who [they] [are]” (Barbery 148). When Paloma stays in Renee’s lodge, Renee tells Paloma that “[she] ha[s] found a good hiding place” but rather, Paloma does not hide in front of Renee. Instead, they are soul-naked to each other because Art bonds their hearts tightly. Art penetrates into their body towards their inner soul. Paloma sees through the “ intuition of disaster in [Renee’s] heart”, which actually gives her hope—the possibility to “ change one’s fate” (Barbery 148). Asymmetrical in age, condition and circumstances, the incongruous connection—bonded by artistic solidarity—awakens and intertwines their souls. By consoling Renee, Paloma herself finds her life meaningful in the way which can serve others. Life is no longer a prison for her because Art blazes a way for Paloma, leading her to find the ultimate mission and meaning of her soul. At the end, a dry cleaner’s truck hits Renee and ends her life. Never before has Art been grasped so fully and soulfully as during this moment, when the tragedy of death seems to play about it. For a long time, it is Paloma’s body and mind that have been suffering, but when faced with the reality of “ never,” it is her soul that is hurting. Paloma, for the first time in her life, experiences true emotion and feels a deep connection to Renee. Paloma finally sees, “ the odd moment of beauty, where time is no longer the same” (Barbery 325).

Renee passes Paloma her Art spirit that creates a break in reality, a divine hole opening up in space and time where Paloma finds her enlightened soul. She eventually finds her calling, the mission from her soul: she “[will] be searching for those moments of always within never” (Barbery 326). Through Renee’s death, Paloma experiences “ never”, but she is also awakened to her true artistic soul—her “ always.” Under art’s subtle and gradual effect, Paloma’s thoughts, feelings, ideals, and pursuits have undergone profound changes that correct her understanding and awareness of life. Art is meant to affect Paloma and powerfully opens up a spiritual communication and insights about life. No longer a tortured body staggering through life, Paloma undergoes a rebirth when she finds and feels her soul. After it has for a long time hides silently in her heart, her soul finally takes complete possession of her, filling her life with meaning, her hearts with longing. Art bestows Paloma the noblest kind of beauty in her soul, in the new birth.