A Family Supper

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KAZUO ISHIGURO

At the age of six, Kazuo Ishiguro moved with his family from his birthplace in Nagasaki, Japan to Surrey, England. He attended the University of Kent at Canterbury, where he received a BA in both English and Philosophy. Then, he obtained his MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, where he studied under Angela Carter and Malcolm Bradbury. Ishiguro published his first major literary works, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, in 1982 and 1986, respectively, and he was awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction for his 1989 novel *The Remains of the Day*. He has since produced four more novels, a collection of short stories, and (along with Guy Maddin and George Toles) the screenplay for the 2004 film *The Saddest Music* in the World. In 2017, Ishiguro was awarded the Nobel Prize for his contributions to international literature, and in 2019, he was knighted by Prince Charles of England for the artistic value of his body of work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical event associated with the time period in which "A Family Supper" is set is World War II, the 20th century global conflict that resulted in the loss of tens of millions of lives on an international scale. Military conflict between the United States and Japan, which began with Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and ended with the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, certainly looms large in the memories of both veterans and civilians who survived the war. The protagonist's parents in "A Family Supper" are both survivors of this era, and they carry with them the psychological trauma they incurred as well as the cultural values they worked hard to maintain during the conflict. After World War II, Japan entered a period of rapid economic growth and began to embrace globalization rather than isolation. The young protagonist of "A Family Supper" and his sister are much more familiar with this era than the wartime era their parents were forced to endure. Their desire to travel and expand the scope of their opportunities reflects modern changes in Japanese culture, advancements in international air travel, and the significant influence of Western countries like the United States in an increasingly globalized Japan.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like many of Ishiguro's major works, "A Family Supper" is written in a realist style that infuses a great deal of psychological complexity and insight into even the briefest moments of plot and dialogue. Ishiguro's realist treatment of human psychology and relationships—particularly as he investigates them through time and memory—is quite similar to another contemporary author: the British novelist Ian McEwan. McEwan's *Atonement* and *On Chesil Beach*, for example, employ older protagonists looking back upon and reevaluating the events of their lives just as Ishiguro's elderly butler does in his Man Booker award-winning novel *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro is also known for deconstructing cultural norms and illuminating complex moments in which seemingly disparate cultures interact with one another. Two of his earlier novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, like "A Family Supper," explore Japanese culture and history through the lenses of Japanese protagonists. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Ishiguro's protagonist is a Japanese woman who reflects on a life spent in England. The meeting of two cultures is not only present in these novels, but is also a fact of Ishiguro's biography. Because he was a first-generation Japanese immigrant to England, Ishiguro has remained interested in immigration and cultural exchanges throughout his body of work. Though primarily a contemporary realist author, Ishiguro has also experimented with a realism-inflected form of science fiction commonly known as speculative fiction. This experiment, the novel *Never Let Me Go*, has become one of Ishiguro's best-known and beloved works, and can be compared in scope and style to speculative works like *Oryx and Crake* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, both by prominent contemporary author Margaret Atwood.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Family Supper"
- **When Written:** Unknown
- **Where Written:** United Kingdom
- **When Published:** 1983
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction; short story; literary realism
- **Setting:** Kamakura, Japan
- **Climax:** The narrator confronts his father about the details of Watanabe's suicide.
- **Antagonist:** Death; traditional values
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Jack-of-all-Trades. According to a 2005 interview conducted by Nicholas Wroe for *The Guardian*, Ishiguro is not only a talented writer, but also a passionate songwriter and "serious

guitar player." While discussing the music he loved during his early years, Ishiguro remarked, "My hero was and still is Bob Dylan."

Lending a Hand. Ishiguro was not always a scholar and professional writer. According the British Council, Ishiguro spent time working with the homeless community in Glasgow, and he served as a social worker in London before entering his MA program at the University of East Anglia.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, a young Japanese man who has been living in America, explains that **fugu**, a fish popularized in Japan after World War II, has a "special significance" to him because it killed his mother. His mother ate *fugu*, which is poisonous if prepared incorrectly, after a friend served it to her for dinner. The narrator adds that he learned the details of his mother's death two years after her passing, when he traveled to Japan to visit his family.

The narrator's father picks him up from the airport and drives him to his childhood home. The narrator mentions the collapse of his father's law firm, and his father explains that he considers his partner Watanabe, who was so ashamed about the firm's collapse that he committed suicide, a "man of principle." They are soon greeted by the narrator's younger sister Kikuko. Kikuko is quiet around her father, but becomes more animated when he leaves the siblings alone. When the siblings go to the backyard to chat, Kikuko tells the narrator that she and her boyfriend are considering hitchhiking through America. The siblings then discuss **the well** in the backyard and the ghost that they used to believe haunted it. The narrator mentions Watanabe's suicide, and Kikuko reveals that Watanabe murdered his wife and two children before killing himself. Without responding directly to this news, the narrator tells Kikuko that he sees the ghost, and describes her as an old woman in a white kimono. Kikuko thinks he is trying to scare her.

The siblings' father sends Kikuko to finish making dinner while he takes the narrator on a tour of the house. He shows the narrator several empty rooms, and then a single cluttered room that houses a model battleship. The father briefly confesses his belief that the narrator's mother committed suicide. When the family sits down to dinner, the narrator examines a photograph that depicts an old woman in a white kimono. The narrator's father is surprised that he doesn't recognize her as his own mother. When they begin to eat, the narrator asks the father what kind of fish he has prepared, and he replies: "Just fish." After a long silence, the narrator asks if there is enough fish for seconds. The father replies that there is plenty, and they all reach for more.

After dinner, the narrator sits with his father in the tea-room. The narrator confronts his father about Watanabe's suicide. His father admits that Watanabe murdered his family, an act he labels "a mistake". The story ends as the father expresses his hope that his children will come back home to live with him. He admits his suspicion that the narrator will return to America, but believes that Kikuko will come home after finishing college.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Narrator – The narrator of "A Family Supper," who remains unnamed, is a young Japanese man who is living in America when he learns that his mother has died by eating a poisonous fish called **fugu**. At the beginning of the story, the narrator reveals that before he learned of his mother's death, "[his] relationship with his parents had become somewhat strained." Two years after his mother's death, the narrator returns to his childhood home in Kamakura, Japan to visit his father and his younger sister, Kikuko. During the his first conversation with his sister, he informs her that he is no longer with his girlfriend Vicki, and that he is unsure whether or not he will return to California. While remembering the fact that they used to believe that a ghost haunted **the well** in their backyard, Kikuko tells her brother that their mother "never blamed [him]" and that she did not think that she and the narrator's father raised him as well as they did Kikuko. The suggestion that the narrator's decision to move to America deeply hurt his parents is confirmed later, when the father explains that the mother did not understand the narrator's choices in life. During the climax of the story, the narrator confronts his father about his business partner Watanabe's suicide, and the father not only reveals the violent details of the suicide that he previously withheld, but also admits his hope that both of his children will move back home. However, it seems unlikely at the end of the story that the narrator really will return for good.

Father – The narrator's father, who also remains unnamed throughout the story, is a Japanese man of retirement age. The narrator describes him as stoic, "formidable-looking," and "proud of the pure samurai blood that ran in the family." At the beginning of the story, the father picks the narrator up from the airport, where they have an awkward conversation about the collapse of his law firm and the fact that Watanabe, his partner at the firm, committed suicide out of shame as a result. During this first conversation, the narrator's father says that he considers Watanabe "a man of principle." When he gives his son a tour of his home, which includes a model of a battleship that he has taken up building for a hobby, it becomes clear that his wife's death, as well as the death of his partner Watanabe, has caused him a great deal of loneliness and loss of purpose. During a pivotal conversation that serves as the climax of the story, he reveals that his partner also killed his own wife and

children, and he says that "there are other things besides work," a statement that charts a change in his perspective with regard to Watanabe's suicide. During this vulnerable moment, he expresses the hope that both of his children will return home, but neither of them appears interested in the prospect.

Mother – Though the narrator's mother is not alive during the short story, her presence looms large in the lives of her family members. At the beginning of the story, the narrator explains that his mother died a "hideously painful death" after eating an improperly prepared poisonous fish called **fugu** at a friend's house, where she was invited for dinner. Her death's connection to upholding conventional expectations of etiquette furthers the theme of the painful consequences of sticking to traditional values. Throughout the course of the story, the mother takes on a ghost-like quality. First, while discussing a childhood belief that **the well** in the backyard was haunted by a ghost, the narrator tells his sister Kikuko that he sees a ghost in the form of an old woman in a white kimono, and she thinks that he is trying to scare her. Later, the narrator sees a photograph of an old woman by the same description on the wall, and his father is surprised to discover that the narrator does not recognize the woman in the photograph as his mother. When the father takes the son on a tour of the home, he reveals his suspicion that the mother's death was not an accident, but a suicide, explaining that she suffered from "many worries. And some disappointments."

Kikuko – Kikuko is the narrator's bubbly and energetic younger sister, who returns to her childhood home from university in Osaka for the family supper. Though she is obedient to her father, her behavior at the house demonstrates that she has an inclination toward independence and is beginning to shake off the traditional gender role that her father wants her to fulfill. In her first private conversation with her brother, she smokes and hides her cigarette, and reveals that she is interested in hitchhiking in America with her boyfriend Suichi. She also tells her brother that their father did not tell him the complete story about Watanabe's suicide, explaining that Watanabe not only killed himself, but also violently murdered his wife and two children. In this way, Kikuko serves as a contrast to the narrator's neutrality when it comes to confronting the tragedy of recent events. Without her intervention, the narrator might not have initiated the vulnerable conversation about life, death, and work with his father that occurs toward the end of the story. The siblings' father says that he would like Kikuko to move home, but she does not seem to intend to do so.

Watanabe – Like the narrator's mother, Watanabe is never physically present during the events of the short story. However, the narrator, his father, and his sister discuss the fact that he killed himself after the collapse of the father's law firm several times, and, like the mother of the family, the violent nature of his passing seems to haunt the family. While talking with the narrator in the backyard, Kikuko reveals that Watanabe murdered himself by stabbing himself in the gut--recalling the way in which Japanese samurai committed acts of honor suicide—and subsequently murdered his wife and two children.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Suichi – Kikuko's boyfriend. While talking with the narrator in the backyard, Kikuko confesses that Suichi is planning on traveling to America, and he wants her to go with him.

Vicki – The narrator's ex-girlfriend. Though he does not provide many details about the circumstances of their break-up, he says that now that they are separated and that there is "nothing much left for [him] in California," suggesting that Vicki was the reason he was living there to begin with.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HERITAGE AND TRADITION

"A Family Supper" follows an unnamed narrator returning to his native Japan from the United States two years after learning of his mother's death. Though the story is not clearly set during a particular period of time, readers can assume that the story is set in the modern day due to the presence of modern technology and language familiar to 21st-century readers. This modern setting creates a clear tension between the progressive sensibilities of the story's unnamed narrator and the perspective of his parents' generation. The narrator's observations about the circumstances of his mother's passing, as well as his conversations with his father and younger sister Kikuko, reveal conflicting perspectives on the role of traditional values in modern life. Ishiguro questions the value of upholding tradition for tradition's sake by demonstrating the ways in which his characters' tendency to fulfill traditional cultural expectations has painful consequences in their lives.

Ishiguro quickly establishes the commitment to honor and self-sacrifice prioritized by Japan's older generations. Central to the story is the death of the protagonist's mother, who died after eating a fish called **fugu** that is poisonous to humans if prepared incorrectly. According to the narrator, the mother did not typically eat *fugu*—a traditional Japanese dish popularized during the war—but ate it in order to avoid offending a friend who invited her to dinner. Her resultant death must have been "hideously painful." Another key event is the suicide of Watanabe, the narrator's father's business partner. During the

car ride home from the airport, the narrator's father explains that his law firm's collapse led Watanabe to commit suicide, an act that corresponds with the long history of honor suicide in Japan. In imperial Japan, the act of killing oneself after committing an unethical or shameful act was an acceptable, and even obligatory, form of penance. The ritual form of honor suicide practiced by Japanese samurai, called *seppuku* in Japan and hara-kiri in the West, entailed disemboweling one's stomach with a knife. The narrator's father, himself "particularly proud of the samurai blood that ran in the family," praises Watanabe on two occasions throughout the story, calling him a "man of principle and honour." The father's praise suggests that he approves of his partner's decision to kill himself after the dissolution of the law firm. For both Watanabe and the narrator's mother, it's clear that rigid respect for tradition has led to immense suffering. The story thus implicitly questions the worth of continuing to honor to such cultural expectations.

By populating "A Family Supper" with intimate conversations between the narrator and his father about ethics and family values, Ishiguro demonstrates the narrator's youthful individualism and highlights how it contrasts with traditional Japanese cultural expectations. While discussing his father's new hobby, building model battleships, the narrator and his father briefly talk about his father's time serving in the Japanese Navy. The father assumes that his son doesn't "believe in war," which the son admits is true. Their differences in opinion demonstrate a marked contrast between the institutions and values that father and son respect, which Ishiguro suggests is at least partly due to their generational differences. The narrator's father's respect for Watanabe is complicated by the fact that he seems to adjust his assessment of the suicide at the end of the short story. When he finally opens up about the suicide during a private moment with his son, he admits that Watanabe brutally killed his wife and two children before killing himself, and concludes that "there are other things besides work" that one should value in life. The father's revelation suggests that the murder-suicide has him to reconsider what he once thought was honorable: self-sacrifice, stoicism, and a firm commitment to one's career. This incident, coupled with the death of his unhappy wife and the absence of his adult children, seems to have convinced the father that his generation's loyalty to these qualities may have destructive consequences in the lives of individuals and their loved ones.

Furthermore, Ishiguro's decision to include a paranormal element in the story, the presence of a "ghost" in the backyard of the narrator's childhood home, illustrates that the death of traditional values is perhaps inevitable. When they were children, the narrator and his sister believed that **the well** in their backyard was haunted by a ghost. When Kikuko asks her brother if he sees a ghost by the well during his visit, he claims that he does, and describes an old woman in a white kimono. Kikuko cannot see the woman and thinks that her brother is trying to scare her. Later in the story, the narrator's father is surprised to find that the narrator does not recognize an old woman in a photograph as his mother. The woman in the photograph matches the description of the ghost. The narrator's failure to recognize his own mother is a result of the amount of time he has spent away from Japan, as well as the way in which his mother's face has changed due to the aging process. In this way, the narrator's moment of misrecognition represents the way in which he has become distanced from his cultural and familial roots. Unlike her brother, the narrator's sister Kikuko cannot see the ghost—which represents both the siblings' mother and the past itself (given that the siblings associate it with childhood memories). The fact that Kikuko, the youngest child in the family, is not "haunted" by the specter of the past suggests that traditions fade despite attempts to uphold them. This theme is even further evidenced by the fact that the siblings' father wants them to move back home to care for him, but that they have both set their sights on futures outside of Japan.

Throughout "A Family Supper," Ishiguro questions the worth of cultural expectations and socially constructed values, especially when those values lead to suffering. By juxtaposing his young, Westernized narrator's views with those of the narrator's aging father, Ishiguro suggests that his characters' ideas about ethics are shaped by their ages, generations, and cultures. Furthermore, by demonstrating the ways in which his young characters are alienated from the "haunting" presence of their mother, and how they are largely uninterested in their father's traditional ways, Ishiguro illustrates the difficulty—and perhaps even impossibility—of preserving traditions in a more globalized generation of Japanese youth.

GENDER ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Though "A Family Supper" has a relatively uneventful plot, the story is rife with instances of cultural and societal expectations. One of the most prevalent of these is the pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles, which exert their influence on every member of the narrator's family. The narrator's father not only embodies the prototypical hard-working, stoic, and self-sacrificing Japanese father, but he also attempts to propagate traditional gender roles through his role as a parent—encouraging his daughter Kikuko, for instance, to step into the role of caregiver following her mother's death. However, despite his attempts to encourage his children to act according to Japanese gender customs, the siblings' desire to forge unique identities for themselves, regardless of gender, appears to ultimately overcome their father's influence. In addition to critiquing the value of unquestioned tradition, then, the story also suggests that traditional gender roles—however influential—are ultimately too restrictive and limiting to persist in the modern world.

Ishiguro's depiction of Kikuko focuses in large part on the way in which she has begun to occupy some of the submissive, domestic, and maternal qualities expected of a traditional Japanese woman. The narrator's father praises Kikuko for completing domestic tasks and places her in the role of a mother or caretaker. For example, he calls her "a good girl" for preparing the food to be served at dinner, and he excludes her from a private conversation with the narrator by ordering her to make a pot of tea. The narrator notices Kikuko adhering to her father's orders whenever he is physically present, even if those orders are nonverbal. For example, describing the father's actions when he finishes looking at the photograph, the narrator says: "He held it out to Kikuko. Obediently, my sister rose to her feet…and returned the picture to the wall." Her tendency to submit to male authority, much like her willingness to complete domestic tasks, reflects her understanding of gender expectations of a respectable Japanese woman devoted to her family. At least within the confines of her childhood home, Kikuko temporarily fulfills these expectations, seemingly out of respect for her father.

Ishiguro suggests that the influence of traditional gender expectations is so strong that both the narrator and his sister have begun to mimic certain gendered behaviors of their parents. The narrator, who has returned to Japan after living alone in the U.S., remarks to his father that he has left behind "empty rooms" in America, directly paralleling the remarks his father makes while explaining that their house in Japan is now too large for him after the death of his wife and the departure of his children. The protagonist's narration also emphasizes the fact that Kikuko fulfills her father's requests even though she often expresses hesitation before doing so. Kikuko's submission to her father's domestic demands parallels the relationship between her mother's death and gender-based ideas of etiquette. Her mother ate the poisonous **fugu**, a dish she "always refused to eat" in the past, because she did not want to offend a friend who invited her to dinner.

However, it's also clear in the narrator's family that the influence of traditional Japanese gender roles, though still strong, is waning. Because the siblings' mother has died and their father is aging out of his ability to function as the head of the household, Kikuko and her brother are expected to step into their adult roles, suggesting that family structures and aging are wrapped up in the inheritance of traditional gender roles. Yet even as the narrator and his sister embody several features of their respective gender roles, they also challenge gender expectations in marked ways throughout the story. Despite Kikuko's apparent domesticity and obedience, Ishiguro reveals that she has not truly adopted all of the maternal or daughterly qualities her father expects of her, and she even rejects some of these qualities outright. For example, she smokes cigarettes (a habit she is clearly trying to hide, given that she attempts to cover up her cigarette butts in the garden) and proclaims a love for hitchhiking. Perhaps most important in terms of her rebellious qualities is her confession that, like her brother, she is interested in living in America. Like Kikuko, the narrator himself also moves away from the gendered expectations that his father still holds. The father comments more than once that he considers Watanabe, his former business partner, an honorable man for committing suicide after their law firm failed. Though the father seems to question this perception later on, it also seems that he wishes the narrator would follow Watanabe's masculine example by putting honor above everything else. However, the narrator clearly abhors Watanabe's actions and seems uninterested in becoming the kind of honorable businessman that his Watanabe and his own father epitomize.

Finally, the narrator and Kikuko's reluctance to move home and take care of their father serves as a pointed rejection of the demands of traditional gender roles. Though it is clear that the father in the story wants both of his children to move back to their childhood home in Japan, Ishiguro implies that neither the narrator nor his sister plans on doing so. When the father asks the narrator if he plans to stay in Japan now that he has come to visit, he responds with ambivalence, and though Kikuko is also not certain about her future, she confides in her brother about her desire to move away from her boyfriend and her childhood home. In this way, though Japanese tradition dictates that respectable sons and daughters stay home to care for their aging parents, both children express very little interest in adhering to this custom.

Gender roles exert a strong influence in "A Family Supper;" the story's narrator and his sister in particular fulfill many of the respective gender expectations of males and females in the domestic sphere. In fact, the narrator and Kikuko perform many of the habits and daily tasks of their mother and father, suggesting that they have learned from their parents' gender performances. Kikuko has filled the mother's role as the family caretaker to some extent, while the narrator may have become a lonely bachelor like his father. However, the fact that the siblings often diverge significantly from these roles, and that they both demonstrate a clear desire to leave the space in which they learned gendered habits, suggests that tradition is perhaps easier to circumvent for young people who are unmarried, relatively independent, and capable of imagining alternate futures for themselves beyond those prescribed for them by gendered traditions.

GRIEF, ABSENCE, AND PRESENCE

"A Family Supper" centers around the death of the protagonist's mother, and so it is clear from the start that grief is one Ishiguro's primary thematic concerns. The consequences of the mother's passing—as well as the circumstances that led up to that unexpected event—are present on every page. By highlighting both literal and

figurative forms of absence in a brief depiction of an uncomfortable family dinner, Ishiguro demonstrates the way in which grief fixates on a departed person's nonexistence, while simultaneously allowing their memory to haunt the spaces they have left behind. Though the narrator's family cannot speak candidly with one another about the depth of their grief, they express their complicated experiences of grief by acknowledging other painful absences (and presences) in the family home.

Ishiguro employs empty space as a motif to highlight the ways in which the physical absence of the narrator's mother is felt by the members of his family. The sudden absence of the narrator's mother is emphasized by the conspicuous quantity of empty rooms in the house. While giving the narrator a tour of the changes to his childhood home, the narrator's father describes the empty rooms as useless and excessive, especially now that there is no one but him left to occupy them. Later, in a moment of vulnerability, the father suggests that his children move back into the home. In this way, not only is the mother's death brought into relief by her physical disappearance from the rooms she once occupied, but the father's largely unspoken grief is made apparent by his request that his children fill those unoccupied spaces once again.

The presence of ghosts and the phenomenon of "haunting" in Ishiguro's narrative adds further depth to this tension between absence and presence. The ghost suggests that the characters in "A Family Supper" utilize the paranormal to navigate the irony of the fact that their mother is suddenly absent from their lives, but that the tragedy of her death makes them feel her presence more acutely than ever. **The well** in the backyard, which the siblings thought was haunted during their childhood, represents the narrator's mother and her memory. The first time the siblings mention their mother is in reference to the stories she told about the ghosts in the backyard. Later, the narrator looks out at the well while having an emotional conversation about death with his father, suggesting that he is thinking about his mother's passing.

The well is haunted by a ghost whom the narrator describes as an elderly woman wearing a white kimono. At the end of the story, during the family supper for which the story is named, the narrator finally recognizes an elderly woman of the same description in a photograph as his mother. Though the narrator has returned home because of his mother's death, it is not until he recognizes the image of his elderly mother as "the ghost" that he appears to acknowledge the fact that by traveling to America, he missed a large portion of her life. Like his father's description of the house's empty rooms, the narrator's acknowledgment of the painful absence of his mother's death is mediated through entities that are still present: the ghost and its accompanying photograph.

"A Family Supper" is saturated with numerous silences and lengthy pauses in conversation. These silences—literal absences of words—further highlight that which is ultimately inexpressible about grief, as well as the family's inability to verbally process the tragic nature of the mother's death. Throughout the narrator's visit, the family discusses the fact that their father's law firm partner, Watanabe, disemboweled himself. The narrator eventually learns that Watanabe also murdered his wife and two children. Rather than focusing on the death that has brought them together, the family fixates on this murder-suicide, again using a proxy to confront the loss that affects them most.

The most significant silence in the short story occurs during the dinner itself. The lack of sustained conversation during the dinner seems to be primarily due to the family's inability to address the uncomfortable fact that they are eating fish, the same food that killed their mother. When the narrator asks his father what kind of fish he has prepared, he refuses to answer him directly, responding that it is "just fish." With the exception of a brief moment when the narrator's father mentions his suspicion that the mother's death was a suicide, the narrator's family largely avoids the topic and conceals specific details about her "hideously painful" death. The family's fixation on the violence of Watanabe's own suicide—and their more substantive conversations about its ethical ramifications—proposes that they are all grappling with the mother's death internally, but that they can only manage to articulate that struggle indirectly.

Employing several forms of presence and absence—in the materiality of the home and its rooms, in the mysterious occurrences of the paranormal, and in the revelations and omissions that form the family's uncomfortable conversations—Ishiguro explores how grief seeks to understand and overcome the pain of losing a loved one. Though the family has difficulty frankly discussing the pain of the mother's death, the fact that they focus their conversations on emptiness, haunting, and silence, qualities associated with the sudden absence of a human being, suggests that they are still navigating profound grief. However, they are doing so by using a less painful shared language: that of their home, their childhood memories, and stories about someone outside the family.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WELL

The backyard of the narrator's childhood home contains a well, which the narrator and his sister Kikuko believed was haunted during their youth. While discussing childhood stories about the ghost that haunted the

well, the narrator and Kikuko are reminded of their mother, who told them that "the old woman from the vegetable garden" was the ghost. The narrator explains that he can still see a ghost near the well and describes her as an old woman wearing a white kimono. Kikuko thinks he is trying to scare her. Later in the story, the narrator sees an old woman by the same description pictured in a photograph on the wall. His father is surprised to discover that the narrator does not recognize the woman in the photograph as his own mother.

The well symbolizes the way in which grief causes the siblings' mother to appear both absent and present in the lives of her grieving family members. When they see the well, they are reminded that she is gone. But her "ghost" suggests that grief is a kind of haunting; she maintains a presence in the form of memories, even though her family may try to avoid remembering. Like the fish that reminds the family of their mother's death by poisonous **fugu**, the well forces the family—who often avoid talking about her—to confront her absence, thus causing her image and the emotions associated with her passing to reappear momentarily in their lives. It's also notable that the well likely contains water, but that the water itself is never mentioned; this hidden depth may hint at the family's deep but invisible grief and even their suppressed tears. After the narrator and his father finally have a vulnerable conversation about Watanabe's death and the father's loneliness, the narrator notices that "the well is no longer visible" through the window, a change which suggests that speaking more openly with one other has lessened the "haunting" quality of the family's unarticulated grief, and brought them at least the beginnings of a sense of closure with regard to the mother's passing.

FUGU

The narrator of "A Family Supper" opens the story by explaining that *fugu*, the Japanese term for blowfish, has a "special significance" to him because it killed his mother. He describes the way in which the fish, which contains poison in its sexual glands, "became extremely popular in Japan after the war," and how his mother did not normally eat it, but agreed to do so when a friend served it to her for dinner. She ultimately died a "hideously painful" death after ingesting the dish. The fact that the mother ingested such a dangerous dish (one that she did not even like) in order to respect her friend's invitation serves as an important symbol for the obligations and risks associated with upholding cultural norms. Additionally, the fact that the poisonous element of the fish resided only in the parts of its anatomy needed for sexual reproduction indicates that there may be gendered element to the demands of culture. For example, though Kikuko and her brother are both expected to adhere to gender roles, Kikuko is expected to be even more submissive than her brother. The cultural norms that she is expected to comply with are often articulated or dispensed by her father, who remains a rather strict and patriarchal figure throughout the narrative.

Fish also serves as a reminder of that which remains unspoken about the death of the family's mother, which the narrator's father ultimately reveals may have been a suicide. This concept is reintroduced when the family eats an unnamed fish for their "family supper." The father is reluctant to provide further details when asked what type of fish they are eating, claiming it is "just fish." This response is in keeping with the sparse nature of the family's conversations in the short story, and especially those that are related in some way to the death of the mother. The fish highlights the family's reluctance to discuss the tragic details of the mother's death by poisoning, as well as the awkwardness of navigating the emotional complexities of grief.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories* published in 1987.

A Family Supper Quotes

His general presence was not one which encouraged relaxed conversation; neither were things helped much by his odd way of stating each remark as if it were the concluding one. In fact, as I sat opposite him that afternoon, a boyhood memory came back to me of the time he had struck me several times around the head for 'chattering like an old woman.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 435

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes his father's personal characteristics after his father picks him up from the airport. He suggests that his father tends to act in a formal manner that makes open or casual conversation difficult, a fact that is emphasized by the quantity of sparse, awkward conversations that Ishiguro builds into the plot of the short story.

The narrator's description of these character traits also aligns with information readers receive later in the book about the father's commitment to traditional values like self-sacrifice, stoicism, and masculinity. The fact that the narrator's father goes as far as to "strike him" for what he perceives as a feminine habit, "chattering like an old woman,"

indicates that he not only applies rigid gender roles to himself, but that he expects his son to embody them as well.

"Despite our difference in years, my sister and I had always been close. Seeing me again seemed to make her excessively excited and for a while she did nothing but giggle nervously. But she calmed down somewhat when my father started to question her about Osaka and her university. She answered him with short formal replies. She in turn asked me a few questions, but she seemed inhibited by the fear that her questions might lead to awkward topics. After a while, the conversation had become even sparser than prior to Kikuko's arrival.

Related Characters: Narrator (speaker), Father, Kikuko

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 436

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator describes his sister Kikuko as she enters their childhood home. The fact that Kikuko's energy and joy upon seeing her brother is quickly muted when her father enters the conversation demonstrates the patriarchal influence that he exerts over his children. Because their father adheres to traditional Japanese cultural values, he expects a degree of obedience and respect from them, even after they have grown older and moved away from the home. Kikuko's "short formal replies" indicate that she is aware of her father's expectations of her both as his child and as a young woman (who, based on the father's earlier decision to punish his son for "chattering like an old woman," is likely obligated to remain even quieter than her brother).

The narrator's claim that Kikuko "seemed inhibited by the fear that her questions might lead to awkward topics" is a moment that, like many other awkward conversations in the story, highlights the family's anxiety about addressing the mother's death. Though each member of the family is still navigating some form of the grieving process throughout the narrative, they are all uncomfortable with situations that cause the "awkward topic" of her passing to arise in conversation.

"Those two beautiful little girls. He turned on the gas while they were all asleep. Then he cut his stomach with a meat knife."

"Yes, Father was just telling me how Watanabe was a man of principle."

Related Characters: Narrator, Kikuko (speaker), Watanabe, Father

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 438

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation, Kikuko reveals the real details of Watanabe's suicide. Their father told the narrator that Watanabe killed himself because he was ashamed that their law firm had collapsed. He did not tell the narrator, as Kikuko does here, that the reality of the suicide was much more violent, and that Watanabe murdered his wife and two children before killing himself. This revelation not only demonstrates that the sibling's father was not entirely truthful, evidence that coincides with his commitment to preserving a sense of formality and dignity in his conversations, but also makes his assessment of Watanabe appear unrealible.

Watanabe's form of suicide—disemboweling himself with a knife—is related to the way in which ancient samurai performed ritual suicide after a defeat or shameful event. Readers know from the narrator's earlier commentary that his father is proud of his own "samurai blood," and considers acts of self-sacrifice respectable, so it makes sense that he calls Watanabe a "man of principle." However, the fact that Watanabe's suicide involved killing innocent family members makes his praise appear incomplete and unsettling at this point in the story. Also unsettling here is the fact that the narrator responds "Yes," to his sister despite the fact that he did not know these details before. His response suggests that he finds it unsurprising that his father concealed these violent details from him during their earlier conversation about the suicide.

"Father's become quite a chef since he's had to manage on his own," Kikuko said with a laugh. He turned and looked at my sister coldly.

"Hardly a skill I'm proud of," he said. "Kikuko, come here and help." For some moments my sister did not move. Then she stepped forward and took an apron hanging from a drawer.

Related Characters: Father, Kikuko (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 438

Explanation and Analysis

This interaction, though seemingly playful, reveals many of the sources of cultural and intergenerational tension in the short story. Here, Kikuko pokes fun at her father while he cooks supper. It is a funny phenomenon to her because her father did not do much cooking in the house before his wife's death. Because she was committed to many of the same values and gender roles as the siblings' father, the mother did most of the cooking. After his children moved out and his wife passed away, the father was obliged to cook for himself. The fact that he does not really play along here (both undermining his cooking skills and not laughing along with his daughter) and then immediately asks Kikuko to help suggests that he is not happy with the reversal of roles.

In this passage, the narrator emphasizes Kikuko's hesitation after her father commands her to help cook. This is not the only instance in which Kikuko pauses after her father orders her to do something. These instances coincide with Ishiguro's implication that Kikuko is not fully committed to upholding gender roles or cultural customs that she considers outdated. Though she is not significantly rebellious, especially in the presence of her father, she does demonstrate a marked ambivalence and even a quiet rejection of her father's expectations.

"Surely," I said eventually, "my mother didn't expect me to live here for ever."

"Obviously you don't see. You don't see how it is for some parents. Not only must they lose their children, they must lose them to things they don't understand."

Related Characters: Father, Narrator (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 439

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs when the narrator's father gives him a tour of his childhood home, knowing that it has changed a great deal since the narrator has been away. During the tour, the narrator's father reveals to him that he believes his mother committed suicide, explaining that "She had many worries. And some disappointments." Though his father does not state explicitly what these worries and disappointments were, the narrator assumes he is referring to the fact that the narrator moved away from home in order to live in America. When he expresses his disbelief that his mother wanted him to live at home "for ever," the narrator's father contends that he doesn't see how painful his departure was for his mother, particularly because she did not understand why he wanted to leave in the first place. Notably, this is the only instance in which the narrator's father says anything explicit about his own grief, but even here he focuses on the narrator's disappointing actions rather than his own devastation at losing his wife.

There are several indications in this short story that the narrator's parents believe that "good" children stay near their parents, and that the narrator's move to America is a source of sadness and betrayal. Their perspective is certainly tied to the way in which Japanese tradition values respect for elders and family ties. In a traditional Japanese household, children care for their aging parents. Moreover, especially because the narrator's relocation to America was long-term (rather than a trip), his parents interpreted the move as an indication that he was rejecting his roots in Japan. The father's hint that this interpretation may have led to the mother's suicide reinforces how destructive rigid cultural expectations can be.

"During the war I spent some time on a ship rather like this. But my ambition was always the air force. I figured it like this. If your ship was struck by the enemy, all you could do was struggle in the water hoping for a lifeline. But in an aeroplane—well—there was always the final weapon."

Related Characters: Father (speaker), Narrator

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 439-440

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs when the narrator's father shows him the model battleship that he has been building. This quotation not only reminds readers that the narrator's father is a World War II veteran, a biographical fact in keeping with his interest in respectability, masculinity, and discipline, but also underscores the continued presence of suicide in the short story. Watanabe commits suicide, and

suicide is mentioned here in a reference to the Japanese pilots who killed themselves by flying their planes into military targets. Suicide is also revealed to be the mother's true cause of death during this very conversation. Though he quickly changes the conversation, the father finally tells the narrator during the house tour that he believed his wife ate the poisoned fugu on purpose. The father's statement about World War II here—which indicates that he understands the justification for using the "final weapon" of suicide instead of "struggling…for a lifeline"—proves that he may empathize with his wife's motivations for killing herself. This moment shows one way in which the mother is still very much present despite her death, and the father also hints again at how social expectations of honor can respectability can lead to death.

"Already, perhaps, you regret leaving America."

"A little. Not so much. I didn't leave behind much. Just some empty rooms."

Related Characters: Narrator, Father (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 440

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs during the "family supper" itself. Here, the narrator's father asks him whether or not he regrets leaving America in order to visit his family, seeming to assume that the answer is yes. The narrator replies that he does not, in fact, miss it very much, and has only left behind some empty rooms. From the narrator's conversation with his sister earlier in the story, readers know that he has broken up with his girlfriend, Vicki, who appears to be at least partially the reason that the narrator continued to live in America.

Though it is not clear how honest the narrator is being with his father here, the fact that he says he has only left behind "empty rooms" is important. This phrase recalls the conversation the narrator had with his father during the tour of the house. When his father points out that many of the rooms in the house are empty, he emphasizes the fact that he has become quite lonely in the past couple of years. Because the narrator is using the same language here to describe how his life has become in America, it is clear that he is also experiencing some degree of loneliness and lack of fulfillment. Not only does this loneliness indicate the way in which the mother's death has impacted members of her family, but it also suggests the despite their numerous differences, the narrator and his father share some of the same sources of suffering. It seems, then, that the narrator has inherited some of the painful consequences of traditional Japanese masculinity from his father, despite deviating from his example in many ways.

"She looks a lot older," I said.

"It was taken shortly before her death," said my father.

"It was the dark. I couldn't see very well."

Related Characters: Father, Narrator (speaker), Mother

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 441

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange occurs when the narrator pulls a photograph off of the wall in order to get a closer look at its subject. His father is surprised that he does not recognize the woman in the photograph as his mother. Here, it is clear that the narrator is ashamed that he has not recognized her, which is likely why he comments that her appearance has changed and that it is too dark to see clearly.

Importantly, the old woman in the photograph matches the narrator's description of the "ghost" that haunts the well in the garden. When he describes the ghost to Kikuko, he says that it is difficult to see the ghost due to the lack of light in the backyard. These parallel circumstances suggest that the ghost is not simply a childhood story, but evidence of the fact that the mother's presence continues to haunt her family. The darkness that causes the narrator to have a difficult time recognizing her is related to the way in which the family has failed to fully confront her death and the grief that it has caused them.

The three of us ate on in silence. Several minutes went by.

"Some more?"

"Is there enough?"

"There's plenty for all of us." My father lifted the lid and once more steam rose up. We all reached forward and helped ourselves.

"Here," I said to my father, "you have this last piece."

"Thank you."

Related Characters: Narrator, Father (speaker), Kikuko

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 441

Explanation and Analysis

This sparse conversation occurs during the family supper for which this short story is named. During the supper, the father serves a delicious fish dish, but he will not tell his children what kind of fish he has cooked when asked. The long silence here is indicative of the discomfort the family feels about eating the fish. The fact that the mother died eating fish is lingering in the air; they seem to want to address it, but cannot. However, the fact that the scene moves from a palpable awkwardness to a companionable moment of sharing marks an important tonal shift. The generosity present at the end of the scene suggests that they are perhaps ready to move forward in their grieving process as well as in their capacity to experience happiness as a family.

"Kikuko is due to complete her studies next spring," he said. "Perhaps she will want to come home then. She's a good girl."

"Perhaps she will."

"Things will improve then."

"Yes, I'm sure they will."

Related Characters: Narrator, Father (speaker), Kikuko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 442

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation occurs when the narrator and his father discuss plans for the future while they drink tea after supper. The narrator's father, who has previously implied that he is lonely and lacking personal fulfillment, expresses his belief that Kikuko will move back home. This belief coincides with the perception he shared with his late wife that "good" children live near their parents and care for them as they age. It makes sense that he would expect this of Kikuko in particular, given that he respects traditional gender roles and is likely to want Kikuko to occupy a maternal or domestic caretaking role. His suggestion that "things will improve then" provides evidence that things have not, in fact, been going well at all—something that the narrator's father might have been reluctant to admit earlier in the story, but is ready to confess during this intimate conversation.

Though the narrator comforts his father here by suggesting that he is "sure" that things will change, his earlier conversation with his sister provided him with enough information to reasonably doubt that conclusion. Kikuko might have been undecided about her future plans, but she did not appear at all interested in moving back home. She also expressed excitement about the prospect of moving to America like her brother. In this way, though the narrator's final conversation with his father is more honest than other conversations in the narrative, it is clear that he is still not willing to be entirely sincere with him. Like the mother's ghostly presence, social norms of propriety still haunt the narrator and his family to some extent.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A FAMILY SUPPER

The narrator, a young Japanese man who has been living in America, describes the way in which **fugu**, a fish popularized in Japan after World War II, has a "special significance" to him because it killed his mother. The narrator explains that he did not know about the "circumstances surrounding [his mother's] death" until two years after the fact, when he returned to Japan to visit his father and sister. When his father picks him up from the airport, he finally begins to provide the narrator with these details. During the car ride, the narrator learns that his mother did not regularly eat *fugu*, which is fatal if prepared improperly, but she ate it on that particular occasion because she did not want to offend a friend who was serving it to her for dinner. The narrator adds that given what he knows about *fugu*, his mother's death must have been "hideously painful."

The beginning of the short story establishes the fact that the narrator's family is not candid with one another about difficult topics, and that the narrator's return to Japan will highlight the ways in which he has become both geographically and emotionally distant from his family. The revelation that it has taken two years for the narrator to learn what really happened to his mother serves as particularly clear evidence of the lack of open communication in his family. The opening passages of the book also demonstrate that the short story takes place at some point after World War II, at a time in which young Japanese citizens can more easily relocate to the U.S. This timeline informs many of the cultural and intergenerational conflicts present in the narrative to come.

The narrator describes his father as a stoic man who is difficult to converse with. After they arrive home, the narrator mentions the collapse of his father's law firm, and his father explains that he considers his partner Watanabe, who was so ashamed about the firm's collapse that he committed suicide, a "man of principle." The narrator's father then expresses his hope that the narrator's visit to Japan will not be a short one, and says that he is prepared to welcome him back despite his actions. He also adds that the narrator's mother was also "always ready to welcome [him] back—upset as she was by [his] behavior." The narrator responds that he is unsure what his plans are.

These first pieces of dialogue indicate several interrelated sources of tension that grow more intense throughout the short story. Here, the narrator illustrates that his father is an older Japanese man with traditional values. These values are associated with conventional masculinity (his "stoicism" reflects that he is not willing to openly show emotion), and a commitment to both hard work and self-sacrifice. In this moment, it appears that his father's assessment of Watanabe's suicide is perhaps a statement of approval, given that he sees Watanabe as a "principled" man even after he takes his life due to a career-related failure. Though the father suggests that he and his late wife were disappointed in the narrator's failure to adhere to their values, his attempt to encourage his son to return home is the first indication in the story that he is lonely, and that he perhaps regrets the way in which his stringent standards may have alienated the narrator.

The narrator and his father are greeted by the narrator's younger sister Kikuko, a college student who has returned from Osaka to join them for the "family supper." Though Kikuko is quiet and submissive around her father, she becomes bubbly and high-spirited when he leaves the siblings alone in order to finish preparing dinner. In the backyard of their childhood home, Kikuko pulls out a cigarette and begins smoking, indicating that she has waited to smoke until the two were outside because their father does not approve of the habit. She tells her brother that she has a boyfriend now and that they are considering hitchhiking through America, even though Kikuko is not yet certain she wants to live in America.

The arrival of Kikuko emphasizes the way in which the narrator's father exercises a large degree of control over the siblings' behavior, even though they have both reached adulthood and have moved away from home. Kikuko's change in attitude, however, as well as her smoking habit and interest in hitchhiking, attests to the fact that the siblings are not entirely submissive to their father's expectations. Kikuko's articulation of her future plans also indicates that, like her brother, she is not certain about what she plans to do next, suggesting that they are both at an age---and even part of a generation—that has more options than their parents did, making decisions about the future difficult to set in stone.

The siblings discuss **the well** in the backyard, and the fact that they used to believe that a ghost haunted it. They remember how their mother used to tell them that "the woman from the vegetable garden" was the ghost. Kikuko tells the narrator that their mother "never blamed [him]," and that their mother thought that she and the siblings' father had done a better job raising Kikuko than they did raising him. Kikuko then asks her brother about Vicki, his ex-girlfriend. He replies that "That's all finished with," and that he is not sure if he will return to California.

Here, the presence of the well invokes the presence of the narrator's mother (or motivates her family members to confront memories associated with her life and death). Through this conversation about the childhood ghost, Kikuko is able to bring up her mother's belief that she had failed the narrator as a parent, and that he had not turned out as "good" as his sister as a result. The tragedy of the mother's regret, which was also addressed earlier in the conversation between the narrator and his father, is one of the sources of emotional tension that seems to grow as the narrative continues. Kikuko's reference to Vicki functions as an attempt to change the subject to a less painful topic, but her brother's vague response reveals that this subject is also painful. His response also suggests the possibility that Vicki was the reason he moved to America or stayed in California for as long as he did.

The narrator brings up Watanabe's suicide, and Kikuko explains that their father did not tell him the full story of the incident. In fact, Watanabe murdered his wife and two daughters and subsequently disemboweled himself with a knife. Without responding directly to this news, the narrator tells Kikuko that he sees the ghost, and describes her as an old woman in a white kimono. Kikuko thinks he is trying to scare her.

Kikuko's statement coincides with what readers already know about the narrator's father: he tends to avoid confronting difficult topics. In the same way that the narrator did not learn the real details of his mother's death until years after she died, he learns that his father was not forthright about the real details of the Watanabe's suicide. It is likely for this reason that he does not seem to be surprised by the fact that the suicide was much more violent than he was initially led to believe. However, the narrator does not seem to condone Watanabe's actions, as his father does, which indicates he's not willing to prioritize masculine ideals in the way his father might want him to. Additionally, the narrator's ghost sighting serves as yet another attempt to divert the difficult conversation about the murder-suicide. Kikuko does not appear to take the sighting seriously, which suggests that she considers herself too grown-up to believe in the ghosts of her childhood, or too modern to believe in the cultural spirits that members of older Japanese generations continue to honor.

The siblings go inside to see if supper is ready. Kikuko comments that their father has become "quite a chef" as he cooks dinner, a remark that appears to bother him. Leaving Kikuko to finish the supper, the narrator's father takes the narrator on a tour of the home, which now has many empty rooms. He comments that the house is "too large for a man to live in alone." He then shows his son a model battleship that he has been working on, and notes that he could have been "a more attentive father" to his children. He also briefly mentions his belief that the narrator's mother committed suicide due to "many worries. And some disappointments," before quickly changing the subject back to the model battleship.

These moments call attention to the way in which the narrator's father's life has substantially changed shape since his wife passed away and his children left home. Not only has he been obligated to take up the gendered domestic tasks that his wife used to perform—a situation that he appears to resent—but he has also had to adjust to living alone in a large home without much personal fulfillment. His conversation with the narrator during the house tour implies that the emptiness of his new life has begun to teach him that his priorities were misguided in the past, and that he should have been a more caring father. This moment of vulnerability leads to another, in which he confesses that his wife likely killed herself due to her own sadness and regret. However, the family's pattern of redirecting emotional topics continues here when the father suddenly begins talking about the model battleship again.

When the family sits down to dinner, the narrator's father wonders aloud if the narrator regrets leaving America, but the narrator replies that he only regrets it "a little," claiming that he has only left behind "some empty rooms." The narrator sees a photo on the wall of an old woman in a white kimono who matches the description of the ghost in the backyard. His father expresses his surprise that the narrator does not recognize the woman as his mother. The narrator, clearly ashamed, justifies his confusion by saying that she looks much older than how he remembered her, and that the photograph is difficult to see in the dimly-lit dining room.

Here again, the narrator's father tries to gauge whether or not the narrator will move back home to Japan—and perhaps back to his childhood home. The narrator's comment illustrates that though it was his decision to move to America, his life there has not brought him happiness. The "empty rooms" he mentions recall the conversation the narrator and his father had about his father's lonely life in his now-empty home, and indicates that the narrator has perhaps inherited his father's stereotypically masculine tendency to alienate those close to him. This alienation also appears in the moment with the photograph. The narrator has been so estranged from his mother in recent years that he does not recognize her. The way in which the narrator's mother is described in the same manner as the garden ghost demonstrates that her death still haunts him, but that he is more capable of recognizing her as an ethereal ghost than as his mother in the flesh, a fact he is clearly ashamed of.

The narrator asks his father what kind of fish they are eating for dinner, and he responds: "Just fish." The family eats in silence, though they all seem to find the dinner delicious. When the narrator asks if there is enough fish for seconds, his father emphasizes that there is "plenty for all of us." They all help themselves to more fish.

The father's reluctance to provide any details about the fish he has prepared underscores the discomfort the family experiences when confronting the death of the mother. Because she died eating fish, the circumstances of her death haunt the dinner table, but none of her family members wants to address the palpable awkwardness of that reminder. However, the painful silence here shifts when the narrator asks for more fish, symbolizing that he is willing to confront the messiness of the pain they are experiencing. When the whole family joins in, sharing the fish together, it is as if they are moving toward a less avoidant and more communal relationship to their debilitating grief.

After dinner, the father asks Kikuko to go make a pot of tea. The narrator and his father sit down together in the tea-room. The narrator confronts his father about Watanabe's suicide, and his father admits that his partner indeed murdered his family before killing himself. He says that he believes Watanabe had "weakened judgment" when he committed the act, and that it was "of course" a mistake. With respect to the incident, he concludes that "There are other things besides work," and the narrator agrees.

Though it is clear that the father intends to initiate an important conversation by inviting his son to the tea-room, he does not invite Kikuko, a decision that reflects his faith in traditional gender roles. He assigns Kikuko to a domestic task rather than encouraging her to participate in the discussion. During the conversation itself, it becomes clear that despite the father's respect for Watanabe, he does not, in fact, approve of his partner's violent actions. This shift opens the door for a more nuanced understanding of masculinity than the one implied by traditional gender roles, one that the narrator might be more comfortable embodying. The father's conclusion about the nature of work also provides further evidence of that he has truly been working to reevaluate his priorities in the wake of his partner's death, his wife's apparent suicide, and the departure of his children.

The narrator and his father sit in silence for a long moment, and the narrator notes that the well is no longer visible in the darkness. His father again asks if he plans to stay in Japan, emphasizing that he is very welcome to move back home. The narrator replies once more that he is not sure. His father says that he has "no doubt" that the narrator will return to America, especially given that "this house is so dreary now." The story ends with the father expressing his belief that Kikuko will return home in the spring, and that "things will improve then." The narrator replies that he is sure they will.

The disappearance of the well during this particular silence, which is a quite comfortable silence compared with others in the story, indicates that the haunting presence of the narrator's mother has subsided, and that the family is poised to move forward in their relationships with one another. However, Ishiguro does not provide an entirely hopeful ending. The narrator claims that he has not decided what he will do next, but he does nothing to dispute his father's claim about the dreariness of the house. And though he agrees that things "will improve" if Kikuko returns home, his earlier conversation with his sister showed that she was unlikely to do so, making the narrator's agreement appear more like an attempt to comfort his father than a reflection of his genuine thoughts.

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