

Games at Twilight



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANITA DESAI

Born in India to a German mother and a Bengali father, Anita Desai grew up in New Delhi with two older sisters and an older brother. She spoke German at home and Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and English outside of her home. Desai received a BA in English literature in 1957 from the University of Delhi and married Ashvin Desai the following year. The couple has four children together, including novelist Kiran Desai. In 1958, recognizing how few Indian writers were published in India and the United Kingdom, Desai co-founded the publishing firm Writers Workshop and then published her first novel, *Cry the Peacock*, in 1963. In 1980, she published *Clear Light of Day*, and in 1984 she published *In Custody*. In 1993, she became a creative writing professor at MIT and continued to publish novels and short stories. In total, Desai has written 17 novels and several short story collections. Desai has also taught at Mount Holyoke College, Baruch College, and Smith College, and she's been shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although "Games at Twilight" takes place in an unspecified time, it is likely that it is partially based on Desai's own experience growing up in India in the 1940s and early 1950s, which was a time of large-scale political change. The British had ruled India as a colony since the 1850s. In the early 20th century, a reform movement slowly developed into the Indian Independence movement, which was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress Party in the 1920s. In 1947, the British granted Indian Independence, partitioning British India into India and Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress became the first Prime Minister of India after Independence, and oversaw the adoption of India's Constitution in 1950, which established the country as a republic. Afterward, Nehru took on widespread social reform, particularly concerning outlawing discrimination based on caste. The caste system in India delineated a hierarchy among Indian citizens based on the caste of their parents, and those born into a lower caste were often discriminated against and barred from education or job opportunities. This rigid social structure could be one source of inspiration for the social hierarchy depicted among the children in "Games at Twilight."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Games at Twilight" first appeared in a short story collection called *Games at Twilight and Other Stories*. Desai has also written

another short story collection entitled *Diamond Dust*. Other Indian novelists who came to prominence around the same time as Desai include Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*), Vikram Seth (*A Suitable Boy*), and Amitav Ghosh (*The Glass Palace*). Desai's writing is also often compared to that of her daughter Kiran Desai (*The Inheritance of Loss*). Other stories containing similar themes of children reflecting civilization more broadly and loss of innocence following games gone awry include William Golding's classic *The Lord of the Flies* and James Hurst's "The Scarlet Ibis."

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Games at Twilight
- **When Written:** 1978
- **Where Written:** New Delhi, India
- **When Published:** 1978
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** An unnamed city in India
- **Climax:** Ravi wins the game of hide and seek, only to realize that the other children had forgotten he was still hiding.
- **Antagonist:** Raghu
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Notable Names. The names of Desai's characters are apt: Ravi, who is fearful of the darkness, means "sun" in Sanskrit; Raghu, who has long legs and chases down the other children during their hide and seek game, means "swift" in Sanskrit.

Kid Wonder. Desai published her first short story at the age of nine years old.



PLOT SUMMARY

One hot summer afternoon, a group of children convinces their mother to let them play outside, on the condition that they stay on the veranda of the house. When they decide to play hide and seek outside, they fight over who will be "It." One of the girls, Mira (the mother of the group), decides that they will play a game to determine who is It. This results in an older boy named Raghu becoming the It, and the kids all scatter to hide. Raghu quickly tracks down a smaller, younger boy named Manu, who becomes the first out.

Another of the younger kids, Ravi, hides in a locked **shed** by

sneaking through a small gap in the wall. He is excited by his ingenuity in getting into the shed, but he is also afraid of being in there. It is dark and smells like death and animals. At various points, he thinks that a snake might be brushing up against him, or that insects might be crawling on him or watching him.

Raghu walks around, catching some of the other kids. He bangs on the shed with a stick, which both startles Ravi and makes him feel protected since Raghu is there. Ravi feels a tickle on the back of his neck and hesitates in terror before squashing a spider that's crawling on him. He stays frozen in place with his hand on his neck, feeling his legs grow tired as he looks around the shed. As Ravi's eyes grow more accustomed to the darkness, he sees old furniture all around him and decides to sit in a bathtub that he recognizes.

As time wears on, Ravi contemplates getting caught by Raghu so that he can go back outside and be with his siblings and cousins. But he is also excited at the idea of being the last kid who isn't caught, as he's never been victorious over all of the other older kids. He dreams about the glory and the triumph that he will experience when he emerges from the shed. It grows darker, and Ravi remains in the shed for what seems like hours. He wonders where the other children are, and whether the game is over—but he thinks that the game cannot be over without them having found him.

Ravi then realizes that he could have slipped out and run to their home base (a white pillar on the **veranda**) much earlier, but he had been so satisfied with his hiding place that he had forgotten this is necessary to winning the game. He bursts through the crack in the shed and runs to the den, tears streaming down his face as he declares himself the winner of the game.

The other children are stunned to see Ravi; they had completely forgotten about him. They had moved on to many other activities and games. Now, they are playing a game in which two children make a tunnel with their arms and the other children duck under it as they sing a rhyme about being remembered when they're dead. The children and their mother tell Ravi to stop crying and join the game, but he doesn't want to. Instead, he lays face down on the grass, feeling crushed by his own insignificance.

quickly establishes a distinct social hierarchy between Ravi and Raghu and illustrates Ravi's hopes of gaining greater status. When Ravi figures out that he can hide in the locked **shed**, he prides himself on his quick thinking and begins to dream of the glory that will come with his beating all of the other "older, bigger, luckier children." He is so rapt by this vision of victory that he both overcomes the fear he feels in the dark, creepy shed, and also forgets that he needs to reach the family's **veranda** in order to win the game. Ravi remains in the shed for what feels like hours, until he realizes that he could have run to the den much earlier. When he does so, tears streaming down his face at having waited so long, he realizes that his victory has been rendered hollow because the other children have completely forgotten about him and had finished the game of hide and seek a long time ago. Thus, Ravi is confronted with the reality of his own insignificance. His understanding is further heightened by the fact that the children are playing a game in which they are chanting about being dead. Ravi recognizes the irony in this and gains an understanding of how insignificance is connected to death. Desai implies that Ravi could be (or could have been) dead and no one would notice—a thought that contributes to his maturation and a loss of innocence at the end of the story.

Raghu – Raghu is the oldest child in Ravi's family and the "It" in the game of hide and seek. Raghu is described as being a "hirsute, hoarse-voiced football champion" and as having "long, hefty, hairy footballer legs." Thus, Raghu is established early on as a dominant force in the family—a sense which is only reinforced by the fact that he quickly takes down many of the other children in the game. He chases down Manu immediately after reaching his count of 100 and then walks around whistling to intimidate the other children, like Ravi. Ravi dreams of being able to win against Raghu because it would be so unusual an occurrence. Yet at the end of the game, Desai illustrates how the dynamics haven't shifted at all: as Ravi gushes over and over again that he won, Raghu tells him not to be a "fool" and pushes him aside. Thus, even though Ravi does actually win the game, his accomplishments are diminished by Raghu and by the fact that the other children had all completely forgotten about him while he was hiding. Thus, Raghu becomes another character who demonstrates how the game simply reinforces the existing social hierarchy in the group of children.

Mira – Mira is one of the children in Ravi's family. Mira is described as "motherly," and at the beginning of the story she stops a fight between the boys and figures out a game to determine who will be "It" in their game of hide and seek. At the end of the story, when Ravi emerges from his hiding spot, Mira tells him to stop crying and says him that if he wants to play in their singing game, he should get at the back of the line. The game of hide and seek both brings out and reinforces Mira's role as the mother figure of the group.

Mother – Ravi and some of the other children's mother lets the



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ravi – Ravi is the protagonist of "Games at Twilight." Ravi is one of the younger members of his family, illustrated by the fact that when Desai introduces him he is nervously picking his nose in fear of being caught by the older Raghu in a game of hide and seek. Ravi also laments the fact that he isn't very tall and knows that in comparison to Raghu's athleticism, he doesn't stand a chance at escaping him if he had to run from Raghu. Thus, Desai

kids outside to play at the beginning of the story and watches them play at the end. When Ravi emerges from the shed in hysterics at the end of the story, his mother tries to calm him down and tells him not to be a baby.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Manu – Manu is one of the youngest members of Ravi’s family. Manu is uncertain of where to hide when Raghu starts counting, and when the game begins, Raghu immediately chases Manu down and catches him.



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.



COMING OF AGE, GLORY, AND INSIGNIFICANCE

“Games at Twilight” focuses on a young Indian boy named Ravi who is playing hide and seek one afternoon with his siblings and cousins. When Ravi finds an ingenious hiding spot in a **shed** that only he is small enough to get into, he begins to dream of the glory that will come with winning the game, and he remains in the spot for what seems like hours. However, Ravi finally emerges from the shed to find that the other children have completely forgotten about him and have moved on to play other games, leaving Ravi overwhelmed by feelings of irrelevance. Ravi’s experience with the game thus marks an aspect of his coming of age: Desai argues for the idea that childhood is characterized by fantasies of being special and achieving glory, while growing up forces children to accept the reality of their own insignificance.

Initially, when Ravi is hiding, he dreams of the acclaim that he will garner when he wins the game, illustrating how children tend to conjure grand fantasies of glory even in something as simple as a single game of hide and seek. As the game begins, Ravi escapes from Raghu (an older boy in Ravi’s family who is the seeker) by ducking into a locked shed just before Raghu sees him. Desai writes how Ravi “shivered with delight, with self-congratulation.” To be able to outsmart Raghu fills Ravi with a deep sense of accomplishment, one that he had never known before as one of the youngest in the family. He fantasizes about having beaten Raghu, which he describes as “thrilling beyond imagination.” With these reflections, Desai reveals the desire in children to have this glory, to dream about being the most special in a group. Ravi’s fantasies grow as he hears more and more of the other children getting caught by Raghu. He thinks that “nothing more wonderful had ever happened” to him than

to be the last one standing. Desai describes how he “smile[s] to himself almost shyly at the thought of so much victory, such laurels.” He is merely playing a game of hide and seek, but the desire for glory leads him to exaggerate what that achievement means, as it takes on the proportions of a grand dream. Here, Ravi still has the innocence of believing that a simple achievement will make him lauded by the others.

Ravi’s dreams are quashed, however, when he finally emerges and touches the pillar in on the **veranda** (which serves as home base) what seems like hours later, only to discover that the other children have completely forgotten that he was still hiding. He is thus confronted not with glory but with a sense of insignificance which serves as a key point of maturation in Ravi’s young life. When Ravi finally runs out to get to home base, the children are completely surprised to see him. As he shouts out over and over again that he won the game, Desai writes that “It took them a minute to grasp what he was saying, even who he was. They had quite forgotten him.” Ravi is restored to reality in understanding that he has not earned glory. He took the game too seriously, and as a result, the children care very little about his winning a game from which they had moved on hours earlier. Ravi is deeply affected by this sense of being forgotten: the fact that he describes how the other kids forgot who he was is another exaggeration, one which illustrates the pain of the experience for Ravi as he fears not only being forgotten in the game but forgotten from the lives of his family members. Ravi’s sense of insignificance is heightened by the fact that when he emerges, the children are playing a game and singing about being remembered when one is dead. Ravi remarks on the tragedy of this, saying that “he had wanted victory and triumph—not a funeral.” Ravi feels “his heart go heavy and ache inside him unbearably.” Through this, Desai equates insignificance with a kind of death. Ravi’s maturation thus involves this comprehension that one day he will die and be completely forgotten, and this implies a loss of innocence as he moves past the fantasies of childhood and comprehends reality.

At the beginning of the story, Ravi is a child who dreams of adulation from the other children; at the end of the story, Ravi lies face down on the grass, “silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance.” Desai illustrates how this journey mirrors a loss of innocence or a coming of age, as Ravi’s childhood fantasies are curtailed by the mature recognition of the reality of a person’s insignificance in the world.



SOCIAL HIERARCHY

While Desai introduces the story’s central group of children as a kind of monolith when they are initially cooped up in their home, as soon as they start to play hide and seek outside and moderate themselves, each child takes on different roles within their group. As the dynamics among them are clarified, Desai illustrates how the

group of children exhibit a strict social hierarchy that is difficult to transcend. Desai demonstrates how social politics begin even in childhood, and how the dynamics of children's games can both reinforce that social hierarchy and reflect how rigid it is.

Desai sets up a social structure that the children follow from small descriptions of the kids, illustrating how size and age are integral to a child's role within their group. Desai's description of Raghu, who is the oldest, presents him as a kind of alpha male. Desai writes that other children are no match against "Raghu's long, hefty, hairy footballer legs." Raghu is picked as the "It," or the seeker of the group, and he intimidates and catches the other children. Thus, the game reinforces his role as a predatory top dog. The game also reinforces another child's role in the social hierarchy: Mira. She is described as "motherly," and when the boys begin to fight over who will be chosen as "It," she determines the means by which they will choose the person to become "It." Thus, the game brings out characteristics in her that reinforce her role as the mother of the group. Mira and Raghu are contrasted with Manu, who is described as "small" and uncertain of where to hide. He is immediately found by Raghu and starts to cry over losing—again, Desai exhibits how the structures in place within their group are reinforced by the game, because older children are shown to be dominant over younger ones.

Ravi, the story's central figure, also understands his place in the social hierarchy as one of the younger members. Due to this, however, his win is easily dismissed, illustrating how difficult it is to for a younger child like Ravi to gain the kind of status that will allow him to rise above his accepted place in the group. Desai quickly establishes Ravi as one of the younger children. In contrast to Raghu's athleticism and long legs, Desai writes that Ravi doesn't have "much faith in his short legs." When he encounters a locked garage, he laments that he isn't tall enough to reach the key so that he can unlock it. These descriptions set up Ravi as an underdog and help to emphasize his deep desire to flip the dynamic. Ravi instead finds another place to hide: a locked **shed** into which only he is small enough to wriggle. This fuels his desire to win against "older, bigger, luckier children," as he has an opportunity to subvert their rigid social hierarchy. Yet the end of the game does not afford Ravi this chance. After what feels like hours to him, he emerges from the dark shed sobbing over having waited so long. He then declares himself the winner, only to discover that the other children have forgotten about him. Seeing him so upset, Raghu tells him not to be a "fool" and pushes him aside. Mira tells him to stop howling and says that if he wants to play the game they are currently playing, he can go to the end of the line—she places him there "firmly." Despite the fact Ravi won the game, the roles are exactly as they were prior to the start, emphasizing the insurmountable rigidity of social hierarchies.

Even though Ravi is able to win the game of hide and seek, his

victory is hollow because the other children grant him so little credit for it. Thus, Desai illustrates how children's status within a group is clear and relatively immutable. While games can appear to afford children opportunities to change that status, in reality they mostly end up reinforcing the hierarchy that already existed.



SAFETY VS. FEAR

While childhood can often be an idyllic time, it is not without its rollercoaster of emotions and fears.

In "Games at Twilight," the protagonist, Ravi, constantly teeters between a sense of security and one of fear. As he plays a game of hide and seek, he yearns to rejoin his siblings and cousins in the sun, all the while growing more and more nervous in the dark and mysterious **shed** in which he chooses to hide. Through this wavering, Desai sets up two opposing environments that illustrate the same point: for children, safety is derived primarily from a sense of familiarity, in contrast to fear, which is prompted chiefly by the unknown.

The "dark" and "spooky" shed in which Ravi hides becomes a deep source of fear for Ravi, as he does not know what could be lurking inside it. The darkness and strangeness of the shed sets up the idea that Ravi isn't afraid of any particular thing, but rather by the sheer unknowability of what could hurt him. Desai writes how Ravi is afraid to be in the shed, which smells of animals but also "less recognizable horrors." The fact that there is so little light—it only gets in through the "cracks along the door"—also incites fear. Both of these ideas illustrate how the shed is scary not necessarily for any specific reason other than that it is unfamiliar to Ravi, meaning that he doesn't know what perils might exist within it. At first, Ravi is too afraid to move in the shed, as he is worried that he might touch something he didn't want to touch. When he feels something tickle the back of his neck, he has to wait a long time before mustering the courage to see what it might be. When he feels it is a spider, he immediately squashes it. The spider is not terrifying to him; instead, it is the feeling of not knowing "how many more creatures were watching him, waiting to reach out and touch him." Thus, Desai establishes again the sense that not knowing what lies in the shed is more upsetting than the reality of what is actually in there. This idea becomes even more salient when Ravi encounters things that are more familiar. When he is able to see slightly better, he recognizes an old bathtub that had been discarded, and he sits inside it, feeling comforted by the fact that the object is familiar to him. Similarly, when he hears Raghu—an older boy who is the seeker in the game—bang on the shed with a stick, this actually makes him feel "protected." Even though Raghu is trying to intimidate him, knowing that someone from his family is out there gives Ravi a sense of safety in the midst of an unknown environment. Desai contrasts the fear prompted by the shed with the security of the world outside it. Through symbols like sunlight

or the **veranda** (which acts as the children's home base for their game), Desai continues to correlate the idea of familiarity and clarity with safety. In contrast to the dark unknown of the shed, Ravi longs for "the sun, the light, the free spaces of the garden and the familiarity of his brothers, sisters, and cousins." Being able to see (and therefore know what lies in his surroundings) and being with people whom he knows affords him this sense of safety. Even though at any point he could return to them, the simple fact of being separated from that familiarity is scary for Ravi. And as the sunlight fades, he grows more and more worried about remaining in the shed, strengthening the idea that the light adds a sense of security and comfort when it is present. The veranda itself is another reinforcement of this idea that familiarity equates with safety. A white pillar on the veranda serves as the children's home base, the thing that confers safety in the game on the person who touches it. It is no coincidence, then, that this location is part of the family's house, as it represents a returning to the familiarity of home and family. When Ravi can't take remain in the shed anymore and realizes that he has to return to the veranda, he streaks to it as fast as he can, crying with despair at having waited so long but also gaining a sense of relief at returning safely. Together, these two primary environments of the story prove Desai's argument that fear is borne of a sense of the unknown, while safety is conferred by what is known and familiar.



SYMBOLS

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



THE SHED

The shed symbolizes how the unknown inspires fear. When Ravi ducks into the shed to hide from

Raghu during a game of hide and seek, he is immediately terror-stricken. It is very dark and Ravi cannot see, nor does he know what else might be inside the shed with him. These unknown aspects of the shed are what imbue it with such terror. There isn't anything specific in the shed necessarily that is scary to him; rather, it is the thought that there *might* be snakes or that he *might* touch something upsetting. Ravi's imagination, creating ideas of the horrible things that could be in the shed, is far worse than anything he'd actually encounter. In this way, the shed represents the idea that the unknown is often even scarier than tangible threats. This is why gradually, when Ravi's eyes adjust to the light, he becomes slightly less afraid. When he finds an old bathtub that he recognizes in the shed, he sits inside it, illustrating the very opposite as well: how Ravi is drawn to things that are familiar because they feel safe (which is also true of the family's **veranda**).



THE VERANDA / DEN

The veranda, or den, at the children's home represents the sense of safety and protection that familiar people, places, and things foster. The veranda, which is the children's home base when they are playing hide and seek, contains a white pillar that they are trying to reach in order to win the game. But the veranda denotes safety in many ways—not only safety in the game (as returning to it makes one safe from being caught by the seeker) but also more tangible safety. The pillar is located just outside children's home. Thus, it is a familiar structure and one that is near to their home and their parents, who truly keep them safe and protect them. The den thus symbolizes home and family more broadly, and the sense of comfort and security that these aspects of life provide. Desai puts the den in contrast with the **shed** in which Ravi hides, an unfamiliar place that inspires fear and a sense of being unsafe.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Cambridge University Press edition of *Our Stories Ourselves* published in 2018.



Games at Twilight Quotes

“Please, ma, please,” they begged. “We'll play in the veranda and porch—we won't go a step out of the porch.”

“You will, I know you will, and then—”

“No—we won't, we won't,” they wailed so horrendously that she actually let down the bolt of the front door so that they burst out like seeds from a crackling, over-ripe pod into the veranda, with such wild, maniacal yells that she retreated to her bath and the shower of talcum powder and the fresh sari that were to help her face the summer evening.

Related Characters: Mother (speaker), Raghu, Mira

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis


At the beginning of Desai's story, the central children are begging their mother to be let outside after being cooped up all day to stay out of the heat. This scene-setting exchange establishes two aspects of the story which will become crucial throughout: the first is the fact that the children act as a monolith, undifferentiated from one another in any way. It implies that, in the eyes of their

mother in this moment, they are simply a group and are united in their goal of trying to convince her to get outside to play. This contrasts with how the children are described as soon as they are allowed to go outside and start to play. The games highlight their roles within the group, like Mira taking on a motherly role, or Raghu, as the oldest, ending up as “It” and seeking out the other children. Thus, when they are with their mother, they simply defer to her, but when they are left to their own devices, they immediately establish a hierarchy among them.

Additionally, the exchange with their mother highlights the link between familiarity and safety. The veranda adjoining their house is a place that they know, and their mother’s insistence (even though it goes unheeded) that they remain within it indicates that the areas that they know are places of safety, while venturing farther into lesser-known places removes a degree of that safety.

●● Only small Manu suddenly reappeared, as if he had dropped out of an invisible cloud or from a bird’s claws, and stood for a moment in the centre of the yellow lawn, chewing his finger and near to tears [...] Raghu turned just in time to see the flash of his white shorts and the uncertain skittering of his red sandals, and charged after him with such a blood-curdling yell that Manu stumbled over the hosepipe, fell into its rubber coils and lay there weeping.

Related Characters: Raghu, Manu

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 296



Explanation and Analysis

As Raghu counts to 100 in the game of hide and seek, Manu (one of the younger children) appears, uncertain of where to hide. Manu runs away a hair too late, and when Raghu opens his eyes, he runs after Manu and catches him. The quote illustrates how the game of hide and seek reflects and reinforces the social dynamics between the children. Raghu is the oldest and is described as strong, “charging” after Manu. By contrast, all of the descriptions of Manu characterize him as younger and weaker, from Desai’s explicit description of him as “small”; to the idea that he might have been dropped off by a bird; to his relative immaturity of chewing his finger and crying over the idea that he can’t figure out where to hide. Even without directly providing Manu’s age, it is clear that he is a younger child and doesn’t have the authority that a kid like Raghu does.

Thus, when Raghu easily catches Manu (not even by outrunning him but by scaring him so much that he falls over), Desai illustrates how the game of hide and seek reflects the dynamic that already existed between the children. Because Raghu is older and a better athlete, and because Manu is younger, Raghu is easily able to win against Manu, only reinforcing the perception that Raghu is the top dog while Manu is a weaker child.

●● Ravi heard the whistling and picked his nose in a panic, trying to find comfort by burrowing the finger deep-deep into that soft tunnel. He felt himself too exposed, sitting on an upturned flower pot behind the garage. Where could he burrow? He could run around the garage if he heard Raghu come—around and around and around—but he hadn’t much faith in his short legs when matched against Raghu’s long, hefty, hairy footballer legs.

Related Characters: Manu, Raghu, Ravi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis


Just after Raghu takes down Manu, Desai introduces readers to Ravi for the first time. Like Manu, Ravi is quickly established as a younger member—perhaps even the youngest member—of the group. He picks his nose in his anxiety about what to do if Raghu approaches the flowerpot. Desai’s use of phrases like “deep-deep” and “around and around and around” introduce the simplistic vocabulary that characterizes young childhood. Desai again sets up a clear pecking order between Ravi and Raghu through the direct comparison of their athleticism and legs, illustrating again how the game clarifies the social hierarchy among children.

However, Ravi is then able to come up with a hiding spot that only he is small enough to wiggle into. The possibility that he might be able to win provides an opportunity to both subvert that hierarchy (as being small would give him an advantage and lead him to victory) and to give him a place of glory that he previously never had.

●● Ravi shook, then shivered with delight, with self-congratulation. Also with fear. It was dark, spooky in the shed. It had a muffled smell, as of graves. Ravi had once got locked into the linen cupboard and sat there weeping for half an hour before he was rescued. But at least that had been a familiar place, and even smelt pleasantly of starch, laundry and, reassuringly, of his mother. But the shed smelt of rats, ant hills, dust and spider webs. Also of less definable, less recognisable horrors. And it was dark.

Related Characters: Mother, Raghu, Ravi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis


Ravi ducks into the shed, gleeful at his ingeniousness in finding a hiding place that Raghu cannot get into. Afterward, however, Ravi appraises his hideout for the first time. Desai quickly establishes the different ways in which the shed represents the unknown for Ravi and how that incites fear in him. First, the darkness masks the potential dangers that Ravi might encounter in the shed. The darkness is perhaps the most concerning thing for Ravi, particularly because Desai bookends the paragraph with the statement that it is dark. This repetition suggests that it is the thing on which Ravi is most fixated—particularly because it obscures “less recognisable horrors.”

Desai also contrasts the shed with a linen cupboard, on another occasion in which Ravi had been stuck in a dark, enclosed space. Yet Ravi’s thoughts that the cupboard had at least been familiar and had recognizable smells, and that he had been reassured by the faint presence of his mother, contrasts with the shed. It demonstrates that a big part of Ravi’s fear here stems from the unfamiliarity of the shed, and the fact that he doesn’t know what else might be inside it. Thus, Desai sets up this duality, whereby familiarity confers safety, while unfamiliarity induces anxiety and feelings of vulnerability.

●● He hunched himself into a ball so as not to bump into anything, touch or feel anything. What might there not be to touch him and feel him as he stood there, trying to see in the dark? Something cold, or slimy—like a snake. Snakes! He leapt up as Raghu whacked the wall with his stick—then, quickly realising what it was, felt almost relieved to hear Raghu, hear his stick. It made him feel protected.

Related Characters: Raghu, Ravi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 297


Explanation and Analysis


After running into the shed and immediately realizing how dark it is, Ravi tries to protect himself as much as possible in this frightening space. Again, Desai emphasizes the idea that the most terrifying thing about the shed is the fact that Ravi doesn’t know what could be inside it. For example, here, he doesn’t actually feel a snake crawling alongside him—it is simply the thought that there *might* be a snake that terrifies him. Ravi doesn’t name anything truly concrete about the shed that scares him; instead, it is his own mind and his own trepidation about the unknown that is generating this sense of fear.

The opposite—that familiarity makes Ravi feel safe—is also proven here, when Raghu whacks the shed with a stick. Even though Raghu is trying to intimidate and scare anyone who might be hiding in there, Ravi actually feels “protected,” as he notes here. Just having someone familiar in the vicinity gives him that sense of protection that he lacks because the shed is so alien to him. Thus, this passage continues to reinforce the dichotomy of the unknown as scary and the familiar as protective.

●● He contemplated slipping out of the shed and into the fray. He wondered if it would not be better to be captured by Raghu and be returned to the milling crowd as long as he could be in the sun, the light, the free spaces of the garden and the familiarity of his brothers, sisters and cousins. It would be evening soon.

Related Characters: Raghu, Ravi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

After Ravi has been sitting in the shed for some time, he begins to contemplate being caught so that he can return to playing outside and being with his siblings and cousins.

Desai's description of what attracts Ravi to getting caught indicates the disparity between the fear inspired by the shed and the comfort of returning to the other children. His noting of how light and free it would be to go outside contrasts with the eeriness of being in a dark, enclosed, unfamiliar space, particularly as evening approaches and the light in the shed will grow dimmer. And even though it would mean he would lose the game after finding such a useful hiding spot (and thus return to the "milling crowd" of unremarkable children), his longing to be reunited with the others also indicates his desire to be around familiar people once more.

Thus, Desai again argues Ravi's inherent desire for familiarity because it makes him feel more secure, while remaining in the unknown shed (even after his eyes adjust and he can see a little better inside it) continues to unsettle him.


something wonderful as eating a whole slab of chocolate or driving in a pony cart, Desai illustrates how Ravi's childish point of view grandly exaggerates the importance of what the game will mean. This will contrast deeply with Ravi's realization later that neither he nor the game are as important as he believes in this moment.


Desai also returns to the idea of the social hierarchy among the kids, tying it to the idea of why winning the game would be so glorious for Ravi. The game provides an opportunity for him to gain status, particularly over children who always seem to have the upper hand like Raghu, whom Desai again points out is older and a more accomplished athlete. But again, while Ravi wishes to subvert the established social order among the group of kids, the end of the book shows how difficult it is for a young child like Ravi to feel as important or as successful as the older kids who continually disregard him.

●● Ravi sat back on the harsh edge of the tub, deciding to hold out a bit longer. What fun it they were all found and caught—he alone left unconquered! He had never known that sensation. Nothing more wonderful had ever happened to him than being taken out by an uncle and bought a whole slab of chocolate all to himself, or being flung into the soda-man's pony cart and driven up to the gate by the friendly driver with the red beard and pointed ears. To defeat Raghu—that hirsute, hoarse-voiced football champion—and to be the winner in a circle of older, bigger, luckier children—that would be thrilling beyond imagination. He hugged his knees together and smiled to himself almost shyly at the thought of so much victory, such laurels.

●● With a whimper he burst through the crack, fell on his knees, got up and stumbled on stiff, benumbed legs across the shadowy yard, crying heartily by the time he reached the veranda so that when he flung himself at the white pillar and bawled, "Den! Den! Den!" his voice broke with rage and pity at the disgrace of it all and he felt himself flooded with tears and misery.

Related Characters: Raghu, Ravi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

After spending some time in the shed, Ravi contemplates letting himself be caught by Raghu so that he can go back outside. But when he hears other children being caught by Raghu, he decides to wait a little longer, excited by the prospect that he might win against all of the other children. In this passage, Desai depicts Ravi's grand fantasies of winning, and how they take on epic proportions because of his innocent perspective. By comparing winning the game to

Related Characters: Ravi

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

After Ravi waits in the shed for what seems like hours to him, he realizes that he could have returned to the white pillar on the den (which serves as their home base) long before and won the game. Upset at waiting so long and eager to claim his victory, he bursts out of the shed and reaches the den. Making the home base a white pillar on their veranda, which Desai notes here for the first time, again underscores the idea of familiarity conferring protection. Returning to their house literally makes them "safe" in the game, but it also has a symbolic safety in being near to their home and their parents.


The fact that Ravi is bawling as he returns also reinforces the fact that he is still a young child, and that the experience

has been deeply upsetting to him. Even though he did in fact win the game, the outcome only serves to illustrate how the game makes the children's social hierarchy so difficult to transcend. The other children largely ignore him because of his passionate response and because of the fact that he waited so long to reappear, which allows them to dismiss him as young and overemotional.

●● It took them a minute to grasp what he was saying, even who he was. They had quite forgotten him. Raghu had found all the others long ago.

Related Characters: Raghu, Ravi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis


When Ravi finally emerges from the shed and makes it back to the veranda, shouting that he is safe and had won the game, the other children are stunned. While Desai, up until this point, has largely centered the story on Ravi's point of view, here she flips the narrative and relays what the other children are thinking. The disparity between the two is what provides for Ravi's deep subsequent disappointment, and it marks a moment of maturation for him.

While Ravi was stuck in the shed and dreamed of the glorious victory that he would experience upon winning the game—yet the reality of the situation contrasts sharply with this dream. Ravi's understanding of himself as being special or the most successful child is eradicated upon his realization that the other children have completely forgotten him. Far from continuing to search for him as the sole remaining player, they had moved on to play other games. Ravi's realization that the children had completely forgotten him then leads into the idea that this is a point of coming of age for him, as he is forced to broaden his perspective and recognize his relative insignificance in the world.

●● “Don't be a fool,” Raghu said roughly, pushing him aside, and even Mira said, “Stop howling, Ravi. If you want to play, you can stand at the end of the line,” and she put him there very firmly.

Related Characters: Mira, Raghu (speaker), Ravi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

Ravi returns to the group of children, sobbing and declaring over and over again that he's won the game of hide and seek. But he is immediately met with a reality far different than the glory he imagined: first, he realizes that he has been forgotten by the other children; second, he then receives treatment that only diminishes his victory even further. In these two small exchanges, Desai illustrates how the game simply reinforces the dynamics that were already in place at the start of the game. Even though Ravi was the real winner of the game and outwitted Raghu—who is older and more dominant—Raghu immediately reasserts his dominance both verbally through his belittling language and physically by pushing Ravi aside.

Similarly, Mira—whom Desai established as “motherly” early in the story—simply tries to calm him and reintegrate him into the game while still implying that he is the baby of the family and placing him last in their line. Thus, Desai shows how even though the game theoretically provides a means for children like Ravi to earn greater status in the eyes of the other children, in reality its outcome only reinforces the rigid social structure in place already.

●● He had wanted victory and triumph—not a funeral. But he had been forgotten, left out and he would not join them now. The ignominy of being forgotten—how could he face it? He felt his heart go heavy and ache inside him unbearably. He lay down full length on the damp grass, crushing his face into it, no longer crying, silenced by a terrible sense of his insignificance.

Related Characters: Ravi

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 299

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, after Ravi emerges from his hiding place and is quickly dismissed, the other children continue to play the game in which they'd been involved prior to his outburst. They had moved on to another game in which they

make a tunnel with their arms and sing about being remembered when they are dead as they go through the tunnel. Ravi refuses to join in this game, feeling bitter about the fact that his victory in the game of hide and seek is not being properly celebrated and crushed by the fact that they had forgotten he was still hiding.

The fact that the children are playing a “funeral” game adds to the irony and tragedy of the situation. In this passage, Desai equates insignificance with a kind of death, as Ravi

feels that could have been dead and the other children simply would not have noticed. Ravi’s newfound (and very upsetting) understanding of this insignificance is a point of maturation for Ravi. Thus, Desai concludes the story with the demonstration that Ravi has lost a degree of innocence in turning from the grand fantasies of winning the game and instead coming to the more depressing acknowledgement of the reality that, one day, he will die and be completely forgotten.



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.

GAMES AT TWILIGHT

One afternoon, a group of children begs to be let out to play after spending all day confined in their house because of the extreme heat. Their mother insists that she doesn't want them to go outside of their house's **veranda**, and they promise that they won't. Despite her protests, they plead relentlessly, until she finally lets them go outside. The children pour out of the house, where it is extremely hot and bright.

The children decide to play hide and seek, fighting over who would be "It" first. Mira, the mother figure in the group, intervenes and determines that they will play a game to determine who will be It. The game results in Raghu, the oldest, becoming It. He protests, but the others start to run away, ignoring their mother's instruction to remain on the veranda.

As Raghu approaches his count of 100, one of the younger children named Manu reappears, unsure of where to hide and near tears. Raghu finishes his count and catches a glimpse of Manu as he runs away. Raghu runs up to him and easily catches him. Manu cries and says that Raghu still has to find all of the others. Raghu sets off to find the others, whistling so that the other kids will hear him and fear being caught.

Ravi hears Raghu whistling and is also unsure of where to go. He is sitting in an upturned flowerpot but feels too exposed and knows that if Raghu chased him, Raghu's powerful legs would quickly allow him to catch up to Ravi. The garage behind Ravi is locked, and Ravi wishes he were tall enough to reach the key hanging on a nearby nail. Next to the garage is a smaller **shed**, which is also locked. However, the door is nearly off its hinges, and there is a small gap between the door and the walls just large enough for Ravi to slip into. As he hears Raghu approaching, he slips through the crack.

Desai initially establishes the children as a kind of monolith, illustrating that in their mother's eyes, they are simply a group with a singular desire which lacks a hierarchy. Additionally, their mother establishes the veranda as a place of safety because it is familiar and close to home, as opposed to places outside the veranda which are less familiar and potentially dangerous.



As the children gear up for their game of hide and seek, their roles within the group are quickly clarified and reinforced, in contrast with their monolithic nature earlier. Mira, who is the "mother" of the group, breaks up their fight and comes up with a diplomatic way to choose who will be the first "It." Thus, the game evokes characteristics and roles that the children already have within their social hierarchy.



The children's hierarchy is further illuminated here: Raghu is the oldest and strongest, whereas Manu is described as one of the younger children. As a result, Raghu is easily able to hunt down Manu and establish his own dominance in the game, reflecting and reinforcing their dynamic outside of the game.



Desai establishes Ravi as one of the younger and weaker members of the group as well, illustrating with these descriptions that he is closer to Manu in age and status than he is to Raghu. However, Desai also illustrates Ravi's hope that he might be able to subvert the dynamic between himself and Raghu, because only through his small size is he able to slip into the locked shed where he can likely avoid being found in order to win the game.



Ravi is impressed with himself for his boldness as he waits in the **shed**, particularly because the shed is very dark and somewhat eerie. Because he cannot see, he worries about what kind of creatures might lurk inside it—perhaps there are insects or snakes slithering around. Ravi refuses to move, also worried about what he might touch. Raghu hits the wall of the shed with a stick, and even though it frightens Ravi, he feels protected knowing that Raghu is there.

Raghu then moves away from the **shed**, and Ravi sits in the shed for a long time. He feels something tickle the back of his neck and gradually builds up the courage to feel what it is. He realizes it is a spider and squashes it against his neck, and he worries again about what other creatures might be watching him. Soon, Ravi's eyes get used to the dark and he sees pieces of old furniture. He finds an old bathtub that he recognizes and sits inside it.

Ravi contemplates getting caught by Raghu so that he could be free to be out in the sun with his siblings and cousins once more. But then he hears one of the girls scream as Raghu catches her before she touches the white pillar on the **veranda**, which they call the den, that serves as their home base. Ravi contemplates the idea that everyone else might be caught and he would be the sole winner. He's never felt that kind of victory over "a circle of older, bigger, luckier children." He decides to wait, hoping to win and smiling to himself at the thought of his future triumph.

Time passes, and Ravi occasionally gets up, tries to listen for sounds of the game, and then returns to the bathtub. He is determined to be the champion among the group. It grows darker, changing into twilight. Through the crack in the **shed**, Ravi tries to catch sight of the other children. He can't see them, but he can hear them chanting, singing, and laughing. He wonders whether the game is over but thinks that it can't be if he has not been found.

Ravi realizes then that he could have slipped out and run to the **den** a long time ago: he hid so successfully that he forgot it was necessary to do that in order to win. He bursts through the crack in the door, stumbles over his numb legs, and sobs as he flings himself at the white pillar on the veranda, crying that he is safe.

Here, Desai establishes the shed as a symbol of Ravi's fear of the unknown. The fact that Ravi can't see inside the shed due to the darkness, and the fact that he doesn't know what might be touching him or what might be around him, cause a deep sense of fear in him. That Ravi feels protected by Raghu further reinforces this fear. Even though Raghu is trying to intimidate Ravi, simply having someone around him who is familiar fills him with a greater sense of security.



Desai again establishes the idea that the unknown is the primary source of fear for Ravi. He is terrified to check what might be crawling on his neck, but as soon as he realizes it is a spider, he squashes it readily. What terrifies him is not the spider, but rather the fact that he doesn't know what kind of things could be lurking in the shed. By contrast, he is clearly drawn to and protected by things that are familiar to him, like the bathtub that he recognizes.



Desai contrasts the darkness and eeriness of the shed with the vision of sunlight and the comfort of playing with the other children, emphasizing how the unknown breeds fear, while clarity and familiarity bring about a sense of safety. Additionally, it is at this point that Ravi starts to dream of glory, maintaining the innocent fantasy of being able to win the game over other children. The fact that Desai particularly calls out the others as "older," "bigger," and "luckier" emphasizes Ravi's desire to improve his status in the social hierarchy.



Desai again emphasizes how Ravi's innocence prompts these fantasies of being lauded by the other children. At the same time, however, Desai foreshadows the idea that his dreams of glory might be misguided, and in reality the other children may have moved on to other activities.



The white pillar is tied to feelings of safety, particularly because it is located on the veranda connected to the children's home and therefore provides a sense of familiarity and protection. Meanwhile, Ravi's tears stem from the fact that he has been hiding for what feels like hours in a dark and terrifying place along with his palpable relief at ending this scary ordeal.



Out on the lawn, the children stop and stare at Ravi in amazement as he emerges. Their mother, who is sitting on a nearby chair, comes toward him, trying to calm him down and telling him not to be a baby. Ravi tears past her, adamantly shouting at the other children that he won. It takes the other children a minute to understand what he's saying, as they had completely forgotten about him. They had played several other games without noticing that Ravi was not there.

Raghu tells Ravi not to be a fool, and Mira tells him to stop crying. She says that if he wants to join the game, he can stand at the back of the line. In the game they are playing, two children make a tunnel with their arms and the other children duck under it, singing about being remembered when they are dead.

Ravi refuses to join in this "funeral game." He thinks that he wanted victory and triumph, but instead he had been forgotten. He wonders how he can face this humiliation, and he lays on the grass face down, overwhelmed by the understanding that he is insignificant.

The conclusion of the story serves as a marker for Ravi's loss of innocence. In contrast to Ravi's grand ideas of glory and praise, in reality his existence has been completely forgotten, thus proving his own insignificance. In addition, while Ravi thought he'd be able to rise in stature in the other children's eyes, his display of emotion in winning the game reinforces his status as the baby of the family, as his mother's comment underlines here.



The characters' final dynamics echo the dynamics at the beginning of the story, illustrating how winning the game has not given Ravi a new sense of success but has instead simply replicated his lower status. It has also proved to him how his presence is essentially superfluous to the other children's activities.



The final passage in the story illustrates Ravi's sense of his own unimportance, as Desai even equates that unimportance with a kind of death. Ravi's understanding of the game as a "funeral" implies his own recognition that he could be dead and the children would be relatively indifferent or possibly not even notice. This overwhelming reality is sobering. No longer can Ravi dream of glory; instead he loses a degree of innocence in recognizing his own insignificance and the fact that someday he will be completely forgotten, as he was on this day.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "Games at Twilight." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 9 Jul 2020. Web. 9 Jul 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "Games at Twilight." LitCharts LLC, July 9, 2020. Retrieved July 9, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/games-at-twilight>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Games at Twilight* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Desai, Anita. *Games at Twilight*. Cambridge University Press. 2018.

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Desai, Anita. *Games at Twilight*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018.