

“Perhaps we should forget it”: Reluctant narration in Kazuo Ishiguro’s “A Family Supper”

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For several years, Mats Johansson and I co-taught a general proficiency course in English for administrative and technical staff at Lund University. Kazuo Ishiguro’s “A Family Supper” (1982) was one of the texts we read on that course, Mats focusing on vocabulary and grammar and I on more literary angles. The following short contribution has been inspired by the ideas that Mats and I returned to in our discussions about the short story.

Abstract

Linking the fragmentary information provided in Kazuo Ishiguro’s “A Family Supper” (1982) to the first-person narrator’s unwillingness – or perhaps inability – to communicate, this brief note comments on a few passages that highlight the unforthcoming traits of the narrator.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s short story “A Family Supper” (1982) is set during an autumn afternoon and evening in Tokyo. The unnamed first-person narrator is picked up by his father at the airport and spends the evening in the family home, where his sister Kikuko soon joins them. What initially appears to be a straightforward story about a young person returning to Japan after having spent an unspecified period of time in California, turns out to be curiously vague as the narrator sheds very little light on matters that have gravely affected his family. What makes the narrator a puzzling character is also that he says virtually nothing about himself. First-person narrators often share their own experience of events they report on to the reader, but the narrator in “A Family Supper” at no point shares his sentiments on the issues in focus: his having left Japan, his parents’ disappointment in him, and the death of his mother. Whether the narrator consciously refrains from sharing information he possesses with the other characters and with the reader, or if what he presents in fact are the remaining fragments of past trauma, remains unclear.

Linking the fragmentary information provided in the text to the narrator’s unwillingness – or perhaps inability – to communicate, I will in the following comment on a few passages in the text that highlight the unforthcoming traits of the first-person narrator. One effect of what can be described as reluctant narration is that only fragments of what has taken place in the

past, and of what emerges as the narrator comes back to his family, are presented to the reader. The notion of fragmentariness can be part of the narrative form, or function as a theme, illustrating ways in which narrators and characters struggle to make sense of instable situations or to “relate personal and collective traumas” (Guignery and Drag xii). Though the word *fragment* often refers to something that is “detached from a whole”, it also suggests an “incomplete part [...] remaining or still [being] preserved when the whole is lost or destroyed” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In “A Family Supper”, a crucial question is whether the narrator holds back and only presents pieces from a puzzle of which he and the other characters are in possession of the complete picture, or if “the whole” has, indeed, been “lost or destroyed”. Although certain clues are provided in dialogue between characters, the reader is nonetheless prohibited from piecing fragments together into a whole due to the distance the narrator keeps the reader at throughout the story, only granting brief and undeveloped glimpses of past and present circumstances. For instance, a passing mention of a “boyhood memory” is the only reference to the narrator’s birth gender, and although it can be assumed that the narrator is a man, a degree of ambiguity is attached to the memory fragment as the narrator recalls how he, as a child, had been punished by his father for “chattering like an old woman” (435).

It could be argued that the fragmentary nature of the narrative demonstrates the effect of *underreporting*, that is, “when the narrator tells us less than he or she knows” (Phelan 52). Such withholding of information from the reader is, of course, a well-known device in detective fiction, for instance, but trying to piece together fragments in “A Family Supper” seems futile as no resolution is offered. In an interview about a later novel, *The Unconsoled* (1995), Ishiguro himself declared that it is an “absurd, unrealistic ambition to try and put back something that fragmented a long time ago” (Shaffer 3). In “A Family Supper”, the narrator, and initially also his father, appear to share such an outlook, both suggesting to the other that they “forget the past” (435). However, as the story progresses, a shift can be discerned in that it is mainly the narrator who appears to hold back, whereas the father makes attempts at reaching out to his estranged firstborn.

Even though the underlying conflicts of the story are not presented in detail, nor explained, the text nonetheless reads as a tightly structured *Kammerspiel*, or chamber play. The chamber play is characterized by a focus on the internal, rather than the external. As Strindberg phrased it in 1907, the genre transports the idea of chamber music onto the stage (quoted in Strindberg & Ollén 370). Just like a chamber music ensemble, then, the chamber play features a limited cast. Only three characters are present in “A Family Supper”: the narrator, his retired father, and his younger sister. To continue with the drama metaphor, the narrator’s mother and

his father's former business partner Watanabe are significant, although deceased, off-stage foils, whose dramatic demises provide material for the dialogues between the three characters present.

Equally important for the chamber play is the intimate stage setting in which the psychological drama unfolds. In "A Family Supper", the domestic setting forms a backdrop for a succession of dialogues between family members. Furthermore, the family home contrasts with the garden. Inside the house, most of the rooms are "startingly empty" (439). Presumably after his wife's death, the father, a "formidable-looking man [with a] general presence" (434-435), has reduced his life to one room, "packed full of books and papers" (439). There, he appears to live in memories of the past, building small models of battleships, similar to the one he served on during the war. Inside the house, memories are silenced by what initially appears to be the father's unwillingness to talk, although gradually it becomes clear that it is not the father, rather the narrator himself, who fails to communicate. The outdoor garden space offers more freedom in speech, as well as in actions. At least this is the case for young Kikuko, who lights a cigarette and talks freely with her brother once they have stepped out into the garden, away from the father's presence. In the garden, Kikuko brings up matters that she is indecisive about, such as her relationship with her boyfriend, and whether she should follow in the narrator's footsteps and go abroad. At the same time, she connects back in time, recollecting memories similarly related to doubt and uncertainty, such as a ghost-like female apparition by the well that had scared them when they were children.

In "A Family Supper", characteristics of the chamber play, such as the limited cast and setting, place a tangle of internalized family conflicts under the microscope. Yet, Ishiguro's text does not follow the conventions of the chamber play in that no answers are provided to the questions the text gives rise to. A sense of disappointment permeates the characters' utterances, and although several layers of conflicts are indicated, the narrator does not offer any solutions as to how tensions can be resolved, nor how he perceives them himself. From a dramaturgical point of view, then, what makes "A Family Supper" especially thought-provoking is that there is no resolution to the conflict, nor seemingly a wish in the narrator to reach one. The heightened tension ends in nothing, as it were.

The plot is structured in a way that elevates reader expectations for closure, not least through certain parallels in the beginning and the end of the story. "A Family Supper" opens with factual statements about fugo, a fish that is highly poisonous, unless prepared correctly, and ends as the narrator sits down for supper with his father and sister to eat a fish dish that the father has prepared for them. Almost encyclopaedic in style, the introduction paragraphs

connect the tradition of eating fugo with Japanese history: “The fish became extremely popular in Japan after the war. Until stricter regulations were imposed, it was all the rage to perform the hazardous gutting operation in one’s own kitchen, then to invite neighbours and friends round for the feast” (434). This link between fugo eating and Japan’s defeat in World War Two comes only a couple of lines after the narrator in his understated and matter-of-fact style pronounces that “[t]he fish has held a special significance for me ever since my mother died through eating one” (434).

Not surprisingly, the story has been discussed in relation to Japanese traditional codes of honour. Walkowitz reads Ishiguro’s introductory words about the popularity of fugo in post-war Japan as referring to “a more sociable form of collective suicide in the wake of national dishonour” (1059), while Karni argues that the story “plays on the readers’ stereotypes relating to Japan and ‘Japaneseness,’ and, more particularly, the expectation that suicide, one of the most common tropes frequently associated with Japanese culture, will play a prominent role in this tale too” (114). In light of this, it could be argued that readers might be predisposed to reading the mother’s eating of fugo as a risk willingly taken as she did not wish to offend her friend, although no conclusive motivation for her possibly being suicidal is provided.

With the focus on fugo in the opening of the story, readers may expect the deadly fish to reappear, but although the story ends with the father serving fish soup, no answer is given regarding what kind of fish it is. In a rare moment of apprehension, the narrator twice asks his father about the contents of the pot. To this, the father replies that it is “fish [...] just fish” (441). It should be acknowledged that it is the father’s refusal to name the fish that is relayed to the reader, and the narrator may, of course, be withholding information. Nonetheless, assuming that it is not fugo in the pot, this instance of Chekhov’s famous gun not having been fired accentuates the effect of what is not said and how narrative fragmentation possibly leads to false deductions. As readers might dread that the father will repeat Watanabe’s actions of familicide, fugo takes the role of the proverbial red herring by distracting the reader into presuming that the family supper indeed is a last supper. Yet, there is no textual evidence for the pot containing anything but “just fish” or for the narrator not having survived the supper. Early on in the story, the narrator refers to his telling the story “now in retrospect” which indicates that the events are related sometime after they took place, and (unless he is narrating from the dead), that he lives to tell the story (434).

Beside the correspondence between the opening and closing of the story, other parallels in the story include the subplot involving the father’s business colleague Watanabe and his family and the narrator’s own family drama. When the narrator returns to Japan, both his mother

and Watanabe have been dead for some time, and there are indications that both succumbed to burdens of tradition and pride. The narrator's sparse communication is exemplified by what is said about Watanabe. Sitting in his father's tea-room, he first learns from his father that after the company had failed, Watanabe "killed himself. He didn't wish to live with the disgrace" (435). The father here refers to Watanabe's death in terms of traditional values of honour. This turns out not to be the full story, however, as, a little later, Kikuko's description of Watanabe's death turns the act from honour to horror. Having brought her brother out into the garden, where the light has "grown very dim" (438) and having reminded him of ghost stories they shared as children, she relates the gruesome details of Watanabe's extended suicide: how their father's colleague had turned on the gas, killing his wife and children, before cutting "his stomach with a meat knife" (438). At no point does the narrator share his reaction to what has occurred; when his father first tells him about Watanabe's suicide, his answer is a mere "I see" (435), and in his response to Kikuko's account of the tragedy, he only refers back to what he has previously heard: "Yes, Father was just telling me how Watanabe was a man of principle" (438).

This narrative pattern is repeated in dialogues about the narrator's mother's death. When the reader is initially informed that the mother "died through eating [fugo]" (434), the narrator states to have known nothing more until his return to Japan two years after her death. Driving home from the airport, the father tells the narrator that, after having always refused to eat fugo, the mother had accepted an invitation from "an old schoolfriend whom she was anxious not to offend" (434). At this point, the reader is led to believe that her death was accidental and possibly related to traditional notions of politeness. Halfway through the story, however, more fragments are presented as the narrator reports how the father states that the mother "had many worries. And some disappointments", and that he is unconvinced that her death was an accident (439). Still, the reader does not know whether the mother willingly risked her life by eating fugo, or if the fish serves as a cover-up for a suicide possibly related to her disappointment in her son. Moreover, the narrator's own thoughts about his mother's death remain unclear. From the outset, he states that his relationship with his parents "had become somewhat strained" at the time of his mother's death (434), but he offers no explanation, nor reflection. Consequently, the exact nature of the mother's "worries [...] and disappointments" remains as vague as her cause of death. Whether she was disappointed in the narrator for leaving Japan for California, or if the parents' conviction that the narrator was "swayed by certain – influences" (435) refers to ideology, drugs, or perhaps to something completely different is thus never disclosed.

As the story progresses, the father's initial unwillingness to talk about the past is surpassed by the narrator's silence on all things related to himself and his life. In dialogues

about the narrator's plans for the future, his evasiveness widens the gap between father and son even further. Early on, the narrator admits that "[i]nvariably, our conversation since my arrival at the airport had been punctuated by long pauses" (435). In fact, throughout the story, dialogues between the two take the form of brief verbal duels resembling a game of table tennis: An initial serve launching a topic is followed by a few quick and short returns which, more often than not, fail to connect. Ultimately, the line of argument therefore either gets side-tracked and lost or is defeated with a drop-shot or a smash-like closing statement to which the counterpart fails to follow up.

Although no clear explanation is given as to the background of the tension between the narrator and his parents, a closer look at the father's statements indicates a humbled man. Already at the start of the story, telling his son that he is "prepared to forget about the past", he admits he has "come to believe that there were no evil intentions in your mind" (435). The father's recognising that a new generation inevitably means change potentially opens up for reconciliation: "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" (439). The narrator, however, fails to respond to this invitation, and he again is unresponsive when the father later indicates that Watanabe's suicide demonstrated a failure to understand that "[t]here are other things besides work" (442).

"A Family Supper" tells the story of a young man returning to his father after having spent time abroad. Although the father welcomes him back and although his remarks increasingly indicate a wish for reconciliation with the estranged son, the narrator avoids all opportunities to mend what has fallen apart and even to talk about the past. Dispersing fragmented information that his father and sister share with him, he conveys pieces of a puzzle that nonetheless remains incomplete. Similarly, he refuses to talk about the future. Having left "[j]ust some empty rooms" (440) behind in California, his future as he comes home to the empty rooms of his father's house, seems as vague as his perceptions of the past. Due to the consistent lack of information about the past, the present remains unclear, and even less is known about the future.

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