

“A Family Supper”: An introduction to Kazuo Ishiguro and his early novels

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(Received September 30, 2022)

Key words : Kazuo Ishiguro, Japanese culture, Japan, U.K., first-person narrator, identity

Introduction

Nobel Prize winner, Kazuo Ishiguro, whose chosen nationality (U.K.) differs from his ethnicity (Japanese), may seem to be comparable to Japanese American writers of a similar age such as David Kan Gotanda and Julie Otsuka. However, upon a closer examination, Ishiguro differs from them because he spent his earliest years in Japan and only took on British nationality upon young adulthood while these Japanese American writers have spent their entire lives in the U.S. and had their nationality from birth. Ishiguro grew up and was educated in the U.K. while having contact with Japan and its culture through his parents. Having moved to the U.K. as a young child from his birthplace of Nagasaki and having both a “foreign” name and appearance, his bi-cultural background gave him an advantage in his early career as Cynthia F. Wong points out since it coincided with “a movement towards multiculturalism and a celebration of cultural diversity” that took place in Britain in the 1980’s and 1990’s (11). In his Nobel Prize speech “My Twentieth Century Evening and Other Small Breakthroughs,” Ishiguro describes himself when he was accepted into a creative writing course at University of East Anglia:

If you’d come across me in the autumn of 1979, you might have had some difficulty placing me, socially or even racially. I was then twenty-four years old. My features would have looked Japanese, but unlike most Japanese men seen in Britain in those days, I had hair down to my shoulders, and a drooping bandit-style moustache. The only accent discernible in my speech as that of someone brought up in the southern counties of England, inflected at times by the languid, already dated vernacular of the hippie era.... Had you mentioned Japan, asked me about its culture, you might have detected a trace of impatience enter my manner as I declared my ignorance on the grounds that I hadn’t set foot in that country—not even for a holiday—since leaving at the age of five. (2)

Ishiguro distinguishes himself from not only the Japanese in Japan but also most Japanese in Britain, asserting his individuality. He also describes in detail the type of British accent he has, which shows how fully he had assimilated and belonged to his new homeland. He does not pretend to have any special knowledge of Japan based on his ethnicity nor did he have an interest at first to writing about Japan. However, during his early days in the creative writing course, he found himself “writing with a new and urgent intensity, about Japan—about Nagasaki, the city of [his] birth, during the last days of the Second World War” (4). His tutors and classmates encouraged him to continue and this eventually led him to write his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*. Ishiguro admits in a conversation with Oe Kenzaburo that one of his reasons for writing novels was because he “wished to re-create this Japan—put together all these memories, and all these imaginary ideas I had about this landscape which I called Japan. I wanted to make it safe, preserve it in a book, before it faded from my memory altogether” (*Conversations* 53). It is therefore not surprising that Ishiguro would choose to write in the first person since one of his motivations for writing was so personal, yet it also allowed him to take on a persona that was not himself. In this paper, I will focus on “A Family Supper,” one of those first short stories that takes place in Japan and show how from this earliest writing, we can observe Ishiguro’s use of the first-person narrator and how he deals with cultural elements and stereotypes, which makes this story a good introduction to the world of Ishiguro.

I. First Person Narrator

Ishiguro is well-known for his first-person narrator/protagonists, elderly people in his first three novels looking back at their lives and trying to come to terms with the choices they have made that have led to regret. First-person narrators are recognized for being not entirely reliable and Ishiguro protagonists are no different. Greta Olson in her article, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators" addresses two primary concerns in assessing reliability:

Narrators...differ as to whether and to what degree they are fallible or untrustworthy. Depending on their perceived deficiencies, narrators elicit different responses and require varying reading strategies. When narrators are untrustworthy, their accounts have to be altered in order to make sense of their discrepancies. Fallible narrators by contrast make individual mistakes or leave open informational gaps that need to be filled in. Untrustworthy narrators meet with our skepticism about their characters, whereas fallible narrators are more likely to be excused for their failures to deliver on the informational goods. (104-105)

Thus, it falls on the reader to evaluate to what extent a narrator is untrustworthy, where they are willfully changing their stories and we must come up with a likely truth for ourselves, or fallible, where they make mistakes of a smaller scale or neglect to provide details through, for example, a lack of memory.

In Ishiguro's first two novels set in Japan, the two elderly protagonists often comment on a lack of confidence in their recollections which is, on one hand, understandable due to their advanced ages, but on the other, also a convenient means to avoid feelings of responsibility or pain. In *A Pale View of Hills*, Etsuko looks back at her decision to leave Japan and her ex-husband in order to marry an Englishman and the events that occurred before and after. Etsuko, orphaned by the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, is taken in by Ogata, the father of her soon-to-be, first husband, Jiro. While Jiro is unkind and abusive, her father-in-law dotes on her and treats her with affection. Etsuko portrays herself as an obedient and dutiful wife who increasingly becomes anxious about motherhood during her pregnancy with Keiko and befriends a radical young woman, Sachiko, who follows her own inclinations and is neglectful of her daughter, Mariko. Etsuko's memories are often confused and ambiguous so that the distinction between herself and Sachiko is blurred, leaving the reader to wonder if there really is a Sachiko or is "Sachiko" actually her alter-ego, especially since Etsuko ends up running away with a foreigner as did Sachiko. By doing this, Etsuko separates her daughter, Keiko, from both her father and her homeland which end up leading to tragedy. Like Sachiko, she ultimately puts her own happiness ahead of her child's and ends up being the neglectful, selfish mother she worried she might become. While living with these memories and the ghost of her lost daughter, she can only look forward to the occasional company of her second daughter, Niki.

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, Masuji Ono, the artist of this novel, has to deal with the repercussions of his wartime actions in creating propaganda and also betraying his talented, former student, Kuroda, by informing on him for his "unpatriotic paintings" which leads to his imprisonment and torture. This is not his first betrayal: Ono has also abandoned his former art master in order to pursue art in a different vein—to glorify an imperialistic Japan. Previously he has also been a disappointment to his father who had wanted him to carry on the family business when he chose to become an artist. His actions in the past influence his present when they jeopardize his daughter's marriage prospects should his wartime work be discovered. Ono also has to deal with seeing his old world gradually disappear as tall, modern Western buildings take over and his daughters are enthusiastic about Western apartments and their conveniences. Even Ono's grandson, Ichiro, has little interest for the likes of Miyamoto Musashi or Minamoto Yoshitsune and gets excited over fictional American icons like the Lone Ranger and Popeye the Sailor with the encouragement of his parents. As much as Ono tries to justify his actions and admits to some degree of regret, the reader cannot help but wonder if the regret is simply due to fear of exposure. He tries to convince himself as well as the reader of his good intentions but they often come off as merely self-justification for his past poor decisions. As much as he is obsessed with re-writing the past, Ono comes to realize that his daughters and their families are focused on the present and future – which is represented by the West or the U.S.-- and that they are eager to forget the past, particularly Japan's military past, in favor of emulating the West and its culture. This begs the bigger question as to whether the young generation has learned

anything from the actions of the older one or are they doomed to commit the same mistakes due to the refusal to face the past? Ishiguro ends his stories with some doubt and no neat resolutions.

While both Ono and Etsuko ponder their pasts, they remain uncertain as to whether the decisions they made in their lives were right or wrong. Ono sees himself as more important than he actually is and puts more significance in his actions than even his daughters do as he is treated as simply an old man who is becoming increasingly irrelevant to their lives. Etsuko's daughter, Niki, is firmly behind her mother's decision to leave Japan but had her mother stayed in Japan, she would not even exist. At the end of the novel, Niki is eager to leave the countryside and go back to her own life in the city, where her own future lies and where she is determined to stay single and live a different life than that of her mother's. Marginalized by their children, Ono and Etsuko can reach no affirmative conclusion about their lives or themselves nor how they came to the present. In this way, as Margaret Scanlan points out, Ishiguro provides the reader "with narrators whose selves do seem to be socially constructed and consequently decentered and unstable" and "ends by suggesting that a self no longer author of itself is a self in search of authority" (139). Unlike first person realistic novels like *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre*, human beings are NOT "the center of their world," they CANNOT "know themselves, and they are NOT "largely responsible for the courses their lives take" (139). Scanlan asserts that there is a difference between the unreliable narrators of older fiction and those of Ishiguro's in that he uses the first-person narrator to "explore the extent to which identity is socially constructed, and the consequent instability of selves formed in a traditional culture when that culture dies. Identity in these novels is not an essence but instead depends on a social context that has changed so radically as to leave characters floating in an unfamiliar world" (141). Therefore, use of the first-person narrator relieves the protagonists of gaining a full degree of self-knowledge because it is not possible, their instability is due to being part of a society, their roles in that society are limited, and as a result, they are unable to take full responsibility for the outcome of their lives. Scanlan concludes that this lack of self-confidence and being marginalized may make such people attracted to the "authority in totalitarian politics" (141), a view that Ishiguro and any reader may find rather alarming.

In "A Family Supper," such a conclusion may be possible in spite of the protagonist being an unnamed young man, instead of an elderly protagonist as in Ishiguro's first novels. He has returned as a prodigal son who had rebelled against his parents and have gone to live abroad in California for several years. His past is considerably shorter than that of Ono or Etsuko, with his father being of their generation. Despite his youth, the protagonist has his own regrets: his mother died during his absence and his defiance of his parents' wishes have not yet yielded any discernible benefit for his present or future. He ends up returning to Japan without any intention of returning to California, having broken off a relationship with an American girlfriend. When reunited with his father he finds it difficult to talk with him and does not speak about his time in the United States nor does his father ask him about it. As with *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*, the protagonist has a parent-child relationship fraught with conflict that cannot be discussed and a ghost from the past. The narrator leaves a lot of informational gaps that readers must interpret for themselves.

Ishiguro introduces an element of the man's haunted past as he sits in his father's home:

The tea-room looked out over the garden. From where I sat I could make out the ancient well which as a child I had believed haunted. It was just visible now through the thick foliage. The sun had sunk low and much of the garden had fallen into shadow. (435).

The well is "ancient" from the young man's point of view as it is part of his childhood. Both he and his sister, Kikuko, remember believing the well was haunted by an old woman. Who is this old woman and had she drowned in the well? Their mother, however, had explained to them that an old woman from a vegetable store walked through the garden as a short cut to her home, a story that neither of them chose to believe. Ishiguro then has the two characters discuss family matters and their father's co-worker's suicide before returning to the subject of the well as they stand in the garden. They continue their conversation as follows:

'I can't see any ghost,' she said. 'You were lying to me all that time.'

'But I never said it lived down the well.'

'Where is it, then?'

We both looked around at the trees and shrubs. The light in the garden had grown very dim. Eventually I pointed to a small clearing some ten yards away.

'Just there I saw it. Just there.'
 We stared at the spot.
 'What did it look like?'
 'I couldn't see very well. It was dark.'
 'But you must have seen something.'
 'It was an old woman. She was just standing there, watching me.'
 We kept staring at the spot, as if mesmerized.

'She was wearing a white kimono,' I said. 'Some of her hair had come undone. It was blowing around a little.' (438)

The shadows and darkness along with Ishiguro's repeated words denoting efforts to "see" (also meaning "to understand") in this short passage and throughout the story show the uncertainty of not only the man and his sister but also later their father. Neither the man nor his sister can see through the darkness but what the man does see is an old woman in a white kimono whom he takes to be a ghost. However, later he sees a photo of the same woman in the house and learns from his father that that was his mother. The man, realizing that his failure to recognize his own mother disgusts his father, attempts to defend himself using the same expressions twice: "You see, it's dark. I can't see it very well" and "It was the dark. I couldn't see very well." These responses along with other similar answers to questions such as "I'm not sure" and "I don't know" show his confusion, indecision, and his unstable state of mind. The protagonist, however, is not the only one in such a state. Kikuko does not know whether to go to California with her new boyfriend or even whether to stay with him, and his father does not know what to do with his time after the collapse of his firm and loss of his wife or what to do with the family home full of empty rooms. They are all in a figurative fog with a past that has been unresolved and a future that is undecided. They remain unsure of themselves and what they are doing with their lives and, to a great extent, they appear to be at the mercy of their circumstances. Ishiguro's use of the first-person narrator, a point of view known for unreliability, serves to show the immutability of the human condition and the reader, while trying to determine how much to believe, also has feeling of intimacy and a desire to understand the protagonist as well as a degree of sympathy, if not empathy.

II. Cultural Elements and Stereotypes

Ishiguro's bi-cultural background as a Japanese English allows him understand both Japanese and English culture to a certain degree. When asked by Graham Swift about his feelings about being English, Ishiguro commented the following:

People are not two-thirds one thing and the remainder something else. Temperament, personality, or outlook don't divide quite like that. The bits that don't separate clearly. You end up a funny homogeneous mixture.

This is something that will become more common in the latter part of the century—people with mixed cultural backgrounds, and mixed racial backgrounds. That's the way the world is going. (*Conversations* 36)

Having a mixed cultural background does not divide up easily as there are other non-cultural factors such as temperament and personality, not to mention one's life experiences. Ishiguro also comments that the way of the future is more complex than the past as people will have increasingly mixed backgrounds. In an interview with Christopher Bigsby, he explains that he did not have a purely English upbringing because, although he was educated outside the home, in a very British way, inside the home even at the present, he speaks Japanese with his parents and they brought him up "rather indulgently by Western standards" (17). However, Ishiguro points out a cultural difference:

But there is more to this than meets the eye. It's not simply that Japanese children are allowed to run wild and do whatever they like. There is another side to it. Japanese children are actually taught their moral obligations to parents very early in life and the moral pressure to do certain things becomes very great and occurs much earlier than with most Western children. For instance, I wouldn't do my homework because my mother or my father happened to be standing over me shouting at me to do it. I would do it because I would feel this terrible guilt if I didn't.... In this rather old way, with very little actually being said, the training starts very early. (17)

From the Western point of view, Japanese children grow up with an early understanding of having to fulfill parental expectations and the failure not to do so can result in a great deal of guilt. This is one of the themes in "A Family

Supper” where the young protagonist feels guilty about not being on good terms with his parents when his mother suddenly dies and his father feels guilty about not having spent enough time with his son when he was growing up. The father’s guilt makes him realize his responsibility in making his son the way he is. This recognition on the father’s part contradicts what Western readers and even the son and daughter in the story might mistakenly assume about Japanese men of that generation: that due to the patriarchy of Japanese culture, men willingly toiled many hours at the company, leaving the child-rearing almost exclusively to the mothers. While there may be some degree of truth to this, it does not mean that the fathers did not wish they could have spent more time with their children. The father in “A Family Supper” admits to such feelings which makes him against type. There is barely-concealed regret when the father says about his working years, “Too busy perhaps...Perhaps I should have been a more attentive father” in close juxtaposition with his comment about his wife’s death, “It’s my belief that your mother’s death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments” (439). This is not putting the blame on the son but on himself for leaving the bulk of the child-rearing to her. This is also reinforced by the father later saying “There are other things besides work” (442) which is also a criticism of his traditional, hard-working colleague, Watanabe. Ishiguro thus portrays the father as an individual who does not match the stereotype about old-fashioned, Japanese fathers.

Another very fascinating skewering of stereotypes can also be seen in this story in regards to suicide. Many British people or Westerners believe that the Japanese have a predisposition towards taking one’s own life and Ishiguro makes mention of this in an interview with David Sexton:

What the British make of it is a bit bizarre. They seem to think the Japanese are dying to kill themselves. They seem to pick up on aspects of Japanese culture like that; they seem to find that the most tenable thing about an otherwise rather contradictory culture. They like *kamikaze* and *hara-kiri*. I suppose in that story I was consciously playing on the expectations of a Western reader. You can trip the reader up by giving out a few omens. Once I set the expectation about the fugu fish up I found I could use that tension and that sense of darkness for my own purpose. (31)

Indeed, Ishiguro literally sets the bait out brilliantly from the beginning of “A Family Supper” with the first paragraph describing the danger of eating fugu and how difficult it is to separate the poisonous parts. Many people would give up on the idea of eating such a dangerous fish especially after Ishiguro’s description of fugu poisoning being “hideously painful and almost always fatal” and that the victim “rolls around in agony for a few hours and is dead by morning” (434). Yet he casually adds “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). Many Westerners would find this akin to an invitation to mass murder at worst or a game of Russian roulette at best. Right after this, the narrator mentions that his mother had died of fugu poisoning, despite the fact that she “had always refused to eat fugu, but on this particular occasion she had made an exception, having been invited by an old school friend whom she was anxious not to offend” (434). This hints that she may have committed suicide and also includes another element of Japanese culture, the desire not to offend or disappoint others even if it results in some self-sacrifice. Some readers may conclude that the mother died as a result of this tendency to consider the group (collectivism) rather than to follow one’s own inclination (individualism). This interpretation though seems to be a bit excessive to say the least, but Ishiguro may have also been making a subtle jab at a tendency to use culture as the reason for someone’s behavior.

However, Ishiguro continues to lead the reader to think of suicide when the protagonist’s father tells him of his colleague, Watanabe, killing himself after their firm collapses, since he “didn’t wish to live with the disgrace” and the father fondly emphasizes that Watanabe was “[a] fine man. A man of principle” (435). The father then turns to a discussion of his wife, reproving his son in a passive-aggressive manner with “Your mother too was always ready to welcome you back—upset as she was by your behavior” (435). Later, as they observe a plastic model of a battleship, the father continues in the same vein that he believes that his wife’s death was not accidental because of the aforementioned worries and disappointments. The father also appears to have a possible predilection for suicide as a *kamikaze* pilot when he tells his son that he had had an ambition for the air force during the war because, unlike a sinking ship, one could use the airplane as “the final weapon” against the enemy (440). In addition, Kikuko providing additional information that Watanabe also murdered his daughters before killing himself, gives the reader the idea that the father may have the same intentions as Watanabe. Using the suicide stereotype allows Ishiguro to manipulate the reader into a false conclusion.

Instead, anticlimactically, the family simply has dinner as the title benignly suggests. He turns the Western stereotype about the Japanese on its head and makes readers realize that they have such prejudiced views, and that while culture accounts for some differences, it is not the be-all and end-all to understanding human beings.

In addition, Ishiguro addresses ideas about gender and foreign influences. The father and son have difficulty speaking to each other and the protagonist remembers when he was a child, that his father had slapped him several times on the head for “chattering like an old woman” (435). The young man concluded from that time that talking too much is not behavior becoming to a man from his father’s point of view. The father also expresses some embarrassment for being able to cook as this was considered women’s work. Kikuko may feel irritated with her father for insisting on her help (and not that of her brother’s) but obeys him when he orders her to help him prepare dinner and later to make tea after the meal. Lastly, the father appears to have negative ideas toward foreign things. He complains to his son about the new business environment: “I’m too old to involve myself in new ventures now. Business these days has become so different. Dealing with foreigners. Doing things their way. I don’t understand how we’ve come to this” (435). These are the kinds of comments that Ono in *An Artist in the Floating World* would agree with wholeheartedly. The father also blames foreign influences for separating the son from his parents when he says, “I’ve come to believe now that there were no evil intentions in your mind... You were swayed by certain—influences. Like so many others” (435). The father does not blame his son, the individual, for what he has done, but instead, he and his generation are the victims of the new world that has arisen from the war, influenced by the victors of the war, namely the Americans. Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* would also share in the inability to understand Western thinking and difficulty in understanding of her own daughter, Niki. Thus, Ishiguro incorporates age-old conflict between the old world and old generation versus the new world and the young generation and the difficulties that both had in understanding the other. In addition, Western readers may interpret what they see as cultural differences in a negative way and then find themselves mistaken as do the young siblings in “A Family Supper.”

Conclusion

In one of his earliest works, “A Family Supper,” Ishiguro demonstrates his style of writing that he would use to good effect in both his early and later works, and, in this paper, I have discussed two major elements of an Ishiguro work: his use of first-person narrators and his ability to explore certain stereotypes that many Westerners have about Japanese culture. We have observed these elements in the two novels that take place in Japan: *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World*. Ishiguro’s Japanese background in having been raised in a Japanese household and his English background having lived in English society since the age of five allows him a unique perspective. He has both the insider and outsider points of view regarding the U.K. and Japan. As he himself recognized, it is not an even fifty-fifty split but a much more complex breakdown. Ishiguro resists the early pigeonholing of him as a Japanese writer or an English writer. Although he has called himself “an international writer,” as Wong points out, “he wants the term to denote his literary goals and not his ethnicity alone... For [him], ethnicity is not intended as the main subject of any of his books. Rather Ishiguro’s concerns are with the enduring perceptions of his audience from across cultures, particularly with the way they view his handling of important human themes” (8-9). He is writing for a universal audience, not only for the readers of today but also in the future.

The historical background in which many of his early novels take place require the reader to look not only at the actions of his protagonists but also the events going on before, during, and after the novels take place. They also demand that the reader examine his/her own view of his/her culture and to challenge one’s own preconceived notions about other cultures. The first-person narrator forces the reader to evaluate the reliability of the protagonist, but also can foster some sympathy for the characters and their part in world events. Rebecca Suter makes the following observations about Ishiguro and his writing:

Through their narrative and thematic structures, his novels and short stories make it impossible for readers to settle on a single perspective, and continually force us to realize the existence of multiple worlds... The author’s career was built on playing with, and often defying readers’ and critics’ expectations about his ethnic and cultural belonging... Ishiguro used this subversion of cultural stereotypes to produce specific narrative effects in his works,

which enabled him to create ‘a two-world literature’ that addresses universal human nature concerns avoiding the pitfalls of the single, Western-centric perspective” (3).

Ishiguro’s early short story, “A Family Supper” gives the reader a taste of these elements of his writing and thus is an excellent starting point for anyone interesting in exploring Ishiguro’s work. I intend to further study his use of first-person narration, cultural elements, and the “multiple worlds” that exist in his writing.

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