

Kazuo Ishiguro's "A Family Supper" – the Hermeneutics of Familiarity and Strangeness

Małgorzata Hołda

The Pontifical University of John Paul II, Kraków

Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's short story "A Family Supper" poses a query as for the two seemingly separate states of being: familiarity and strangeness. The ontological plane of the story's meaning is intertwined with its lingual texture in capturing the phenomenon of the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The exigency of explaining the concomitant existence of familiarity and unfamiliarity; variance/conflation links it to the possibilities and impossibilities of expression enshrined in language. My attempt in this article is to analyze the narrative of the story through the prism of the precepts of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics and Robert Jauss' reception theory. The hermeneutic quest regarding the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar is conducted on grounds of the narrative's deployment of fictional conventions: dialogue, suspense, anticipation and symbolism. I propose to see the use of these conventions as a vehicle bespeaking the instabilities of the partition between familiarity and strangeness, underscoring the in-between.

Keywords: familiarity, strangeness, hermeneutics, Ishiguro, Gadamer, Jauss

Abstrakt

Opowiadanie Kazuo Ishiguro "A Family Supper" stawia pytanie o dwa rozbieżne stany bytu: bliskość i obcość. Perspektywa ontologiczna splata się z płaszczyzną lingwistyczną w uchwyceniu fenomenu napięcia pomiędzy bliskością a obcością. Konieczność wyjaśnienia współistnienia bliskości i obcości, zawartej w nich paradoksalnie jedności/różnicy łączy się z możliwością i niemożliwością wyrażania zawartą w języku. Celem artykułu jest analiza narracji opowiadania w świetle hermeneutyki Hansa-Georga Gadamera i rezonansu czytelniczego Roberta Jauss'a. Hermeneutyczna interpretacja w odniesieniu do napięcia pomiędzy tym co bliskie i tym to obce jest przeprowadzona w oparciu o zastosowanie takich literackich konwencji jak: dialog, zawieszenie akcji, antycypacja i symbolika. Proponuję użycie tych kategorii do wyrażenia rozdźwięku pomiędzy bliskością a obcością, podkreślając to co 'pomiędzy'.

Słowa kluczowe: bliskość, obcość, hermeneutyka, Ishiguro, Gadamer, Jauss

Kazuo Ishiguro's story "A Family Supper", (1982) a remarkably short narrative, raises in only a couple of pages an intriguing issue of the disparity between the two states of being: familiarity and strangeness. It invites the reader to scrutinize the philosophical and the linguistic texture of the irresolvable rupture between what is commonly understood as the exterior, alien, isolated, strange and unfamiliar, and the interior, intimate, domestic, deep-rooted and familiar. The narrative shows that the barrier between these two completely varying states of mind and being might be very flimsy and that one can easily and unexpectedly infuse the other. I attempt to read the story through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, an iconic hermeneutic philosopher of the twentieth century, as well as Robert Jauss' reception theory. The nascent hermeneutic effort, coupled with the application of the precepts of reception theory in deciphering the story's meaning, yields interesting results as for the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. The dichotomy of the two states of being testifies to the irreducible force of the movement between one and the other in terms of the primordial character of human existence. An analysis of the phenomenon in question is substantiated by Gadamer's assertion that distance, the in-between can be viewed as something productive, as something which facilitates understanding. Ishiguro conjures up fiction which conveys not only the universality

of human experience, but raises queries as for its fundamentals. Ontology constitutes the perspectival framework for our analysis of the story's narrative.

"A Family Supper" features an unnamed hero, a young Japanese boy, his sister Kikuku and the father – a circle of people striving to cross the barrier of silence, ignorance, and the psychological partition caused by a long absence of the young man due to his studies. The family reunion is haunted by yet another absence – the death of the mother, which happened during the young boy's stay abroad. The sense of uprootedness and displacement permeate the characters' lives. Neither of them: Kikuku, her brother, and father live a fulfilled life, or have a sense of belonging. Kikuku does not identify herself with a role typically ascribed to a Japanese girl, the young student is geographically as well as psychologically separated from his Japanese roots, the father misinterprets the traditional Japanese sense of honor, alienating himself, both from the family bonds and the national character. On the other hand, images representative of rupture, indifference, or alienation, which saturate the narrative, always appear as accompanied by images of familiarity and a sense of domesticity. The story's narrative involves situations of undecidability; that which is strange and unknown seems at the same time to bear marks of the familiar, the well-known, which results in the *aporia* of meaning.

Reading in the light of Hans-Georg Gadamer's *hermeneutic horizon* and Robert Jauss' *reception theory*

One of the central categories in the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer is the concept of horizon. It is a metaphor which serves to demonstrate the 'production' of meaning. The metaphor betokens the possibility of transposing oneself as a reader into the author's mind – "into the perspective with which he has formed his views" (Gadamer 1993, 292). Significantly, this perspective for Gadamer leads him to yet another notion, that of the *fusion of horizons*, the merging of the horizons of the text and the reader (2008, xxviii). Although Gadamer uses the term primarily in the context of mediation of the historical distance between the text and the interpreter, it also finds its application in a wider, dialogic interplay in the production of meaning.

"A Family Supper", the text of the British writer of a Japanese origin, permeated with elements of Japanese culture, incites an important clash of mentalities – the Western and the Eastern. The reader/interpreter participates in the unravelling of the story's enigma dependent on and within the perspectival framework of either: that of the Westerner or

that of the Easterner. The findings resultant from the reading, therefore, seem reliant on the cultural milieu 'brought into' the text. Ishiguro highlights his attempt to tackle the universality of human experience (Wong 2005, 5–6). Acclaimed as an international writer, he crosses mentality boundaries in his fictional imaginings (7–9). However, despite the apparently universal themes, pain, death, loss, love and loss of love, Ishiguro's narrative cannot avoid the cultural strictures, but rather succumbs to them. The dialogic interplay between the text and the potential interpreters coming from different traditions produces slightly different shades of meaning. Interestingly, in reference to the story's cultural background, Ishiguro confesses:

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 purposes" (Shaffer et al. 2008, 30).

The hermeneutic model of a circle proposed by Friedrich Schleiermacher and advocated by Wilhelm Dilthey – the circle of whole and part, running along the text backwards and forwards – from part to whole and from whole to part, is re-conceptualized by Gadamer who introduces the idea of fore-understanding. Gadamer stresses that: "The understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding" (1993, 293). The hermeneutic model of the circular movement – ensures full realization of understanding. Significantly, the fore-understanding of the story for a Japanese reader is spurred by a perfect knowledge of the cultural context, e.g. the familiarity with the description of the fugu fish and its perilous aspect when it is a dish. This is of seminal importance for the interpretative process. The fore-understanding simultaneously sparks off and enriches the quest for meaning. The Japanese reader instantaneously recognizes the ultimate danger of fugu consumption concocted with the sheer pleasure of an act of eating; the ultimate hazard of one's life because of surrendering oneself and following the demand of the palate. On the contrary, in unravelling the enigmatic jeopardy behind the eating of the delicacy, the Western reader may resort to dictionary or encyclopedic resources. The Free Dictionary – Online defines fugu thus: "(Animals) any of various marine pufferfish of the genus *Tetraodontidae*, eaten as a delicacy in Japan once certain poisonous and potentially lethal parts have been removed". Fugu (or puffer fish) is said to give a special sensation, however, it contains tetrodotoxin poison and its consumption can turn out fatal. *Encyclopedia Britannica* gives the following account:

Many species, especially puffer fishes (Tetraodontidae), have poisonous flesh, at least during certain seasons of the year, but most of the highly poisonous substance (tetraodontoxin) responsible for the numerous annual fatalities in Indo-Pacific regions is contained in the viscera. The flesh of the poisonous species can be safely eaten only when the freshly caught specimen has been carefully cleaned and washed in the exacting manner of fugu (or puffer fish) chefs in Japan. The majority of tetraodontiforms are palatable, and in numerous tropical regions the flesh of various triggerfishes and trunkfishes is highly esteemed.

The two different primary perspectives for the Western and Eastern reader significantly influence the process of interpretation and participate respectively in the employment of various fashions of understanding, with the result of not necessarily the same effect on the reader and the final creation of meaning.

The other theoretical standpoint in the light of which I propose to view the story's meaning is Jauss' *reception theory* and the notion of the *horizon of expectations* as the pivotal theoretical tool in an explication of the story's meaning. In his theory Jauss stresses that: "The meaning of the work depends upon the horizon of expectations against which it is received and which poses the questions to which the work comes to function as an answer" (Culler 2001, 14). In the context of Jauss' proposition, it seems to be clear that Ishiguro's *tour de force* derives much of its appeal from the violation of the horizon of expectations. The story's title evokes the peacefulness, happiness and harmony of a family gathering, however, contrasted with the opening paragraph, it immediately results in a momentous confrontation of its connotative power with the reader's expectations which are radically disrupted. The story revolves around an apparent cliché theme of a family reunion, yet its opening instantaneously alarms the reader, subverting the obvious expectations of a mollifying, pleasurable subject matter and impels one to uncover the initial enigma.

The narrative seems to completely disavow the reader's initial viewpoint of a cordial meeting in the relaxed, cozy atmosphere of a family house. Ishiguro moves swiftly from the denotative content ingrained in story's title in order to destabilize the obvious no later than in the first paragraph. This prompt movement in the building of the narrative's tension is fortified in the subsequent paragraph. The first person narrator takes the wind out of the reader, suggesting in this very paragraph that the characters' lives are most certainly jeopardized – two completely different results of eating a simple dish – fugu fish are possible: if prepared correctly the fish is totally harmless; however, if not, it is fatal. So as the saying has it – the proof is in the eating. A family supper – the eating of fugu fish is

not only the central episode of the story, but the peak of the concomitant opposition and convergence of the familiar and the unfamiliar.

The mastery of the story lies in the process of verification of the initial question 'imposed' on the reader. He/she is thus led to verify the information from the start and discover if the fugu fish is to terminate the characters or whether they are to stay alive. As the story unfolds, the narrative poses questions much in the vein of those typical of a detective story, though the conventional query regarding the murder and the murderer constitutes merely a shadowy background of the 'living' drama. In the action's backdrop there is the motif of the mysterious death of one of the family members – the mother. This amplifies the effect achieved in the detective story/crime story. The fugu fish being a fatal dish most probably is to take its toll, and the discovery of the sinister truth is what incessantly thrills the reader till the very last word of the story.

According to Jauss the work of fiction functions as an answer to the questions arising from the reader's horizon of expectations (1982, 27–28). Ishiguro's text appears to provide an answer, but, on the other hand, it challenges this answer. The text of the Japanese writer excellently subscribes to Roland Barthes's proposition of the writerly text. In the *Pleasure of the Text* (1973) Barthes makes a distinction between the *readerly* text which evokes pleasure and the *writerly* text which induces bliss. The reading of the initially discomfiting or even disconcerting text; the process which is constrained with the presupposed ideas alters into the blissful process of 'writing' it. The fascinating process of reading/writing of the text derives its energy from entering the radically new. Once the reader crosses the threshold of the initial disquiet, he/she moves into the radically new – the incontestable is discarded, the ordinary is put aside, the preconceived is renounced.

Jauss' theory of the horizon of expectations in its most radical version manifests the possibility of a negation of what seemed to be taken for granted. Jauss claims that if the gap between the expectations and what the text proposes is substantial, it leads to an important change either by means of a negation of the familiar, or, as he argues, by "raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness" (1982, 25). In reading Ishiguro's text we experience both the negation of what is familiar (e.g. the title and its connotations juxtaposed against the content of the narrative), as well as the bringing of the 'newly deemed' to consciousness. The subtlety of Ishiguro's narrative of a seemingly detached, subdued prose accomplished through the laconic style topples as the entire text is saturated with the expressions of the characters emotionality through the psychological rifts and fissures which create an enormous part of the story's emotional appeal. Jauss' concepts similarly to Gadamer's demonstrate the possibility of a merger of the vintage

points of the reader and that of the text, and near us to an understanding of the text's meaning.

The cultural and literary context may be viewed as pre-determining the generation of meaning; however, the creation of meaning involves a wider literary intertextual context. As Tara Collington stresses: "Within a literary context, works satisfy or disappoint our horizon of expectation, which is formed through previous contact with literary works that shape our knowledge of certain literary conventions regarding genre, language, style, plot, and so on" (2013, 123). In terms of language and style, Ishiguro's narrative is immediately recognizable as belonging to the tradition of the stylistically economical prose, following, for instance, the style of Hemingway. As regards the genre, it might be seen as a hybrid of a suspense story, detective story, sharing the intricacy of the plot, or a ghost story. All these elements contribute to our understanding of the story's text, and all of these elements are constitutive of our pre-understanding of the text.

Dialogue; understanding, misunderstanding – reading through the lens of Gadamer's 'art of conversation'

One of the most prominent features of the text of "A Family Supper" which creates a constant sense of irreconcilable polarity is the story's characterization. The characters are not shown through the prism of direct, authorial characterizations or retrospection, but through an external scrutiny. This is mainly achieved by means of a dialogue, which not only takes up the major part of the text, but serves as a vehicle of evaluating the characters' motivations, and above all their relations to each other. The short repartees baffle the reader as they display the characters' continuous verging on the line between viewing the world they live in as foreign and alienating, or as that which brings comfort and unity. The story's narrator, his sister and the father, brought to the point of a family reunion, sometime after the mother's death, speak the language of unfamiliarity and strangeness. They are members of the same family, and yet they seem to be severely separated. There is a psychological rift; some wound which cannot be cured, some space or shortage which cannot be fulfilled. What they say is highly ambiguous and has multitudinous meanings. The brother never explains to his sister what really makes him stay abroad and who is the girl that he is truly fond of. The sister appears to be the best informed as for the reason for the mother's death, and yet she is the least informative and communicative in revealing the facts. The father never speaks his heart, he is the most withdrawn character, and the

reader can sense that the narrative line leads to a foreseeable suicide, or perhaps even murder of the family members gathered at a table.

Clearly, the story's leitmotif is misunderstanding; misunderstanding permeates the entire dialogic texture of the relations in the family. None of the family members seems to understand the other. None of the spoken words expresses an unambiguous meaning as if the otherness were uncontestable. Each of the interlocutor's worlds (brother's, sister's, father's) preliminarily riven with difference, heightens the degree of its difference while being conveyed in words. The dialogue, which is supposed to generate a chance for reciprocity in terms of emotional engagement and intellectual comprehension, introduces no deep change. The result is a blockage of understanding. According to Gadamer language is that domain in which we encounter both ourselves and the Other (*Sprache ist Gespräch*). He ascertains the linguisticity of understanding and maintains that conversation is the crux of hermeneutics (Palmer 2015, 39). The genuine encounter in the circle of the family members is blocked by their unwillingness to truly participate in a fruitful dialogue. The abruptness and fragmentariness of the conversation between the family members impedes genuine understanding. The utter superficiality of the repartees; the moving on the surface of words excludes the potentiality of both understanding the Other and self-understanding. It leads to an existential void. The characters seem to be enclosed in their mental worlds with their pre-supposed, pre-conceived ideas and constraints. This creates a situation of no real deliverance for either of them. None of them enters the area of transgressing the barrier between the self and the Other in a genuine openness to the response to the Other. Time, different geographical and mental milieus, reserve, withdrawal, economy in words verging on the ridiculous, contribute to an impasse in communication and paradoxically and horrifyingly bring about a sheer tragedy of the family reunion. The many possible occasions to reveal the truth pertaining to the past events do not come to realization and the rigidity of the positions of the interlocutors seems solidified. According to Gadamer the difference between the later understanding and the initial prejudice does not necessarily have to lead to a lack of understanding, but may be productive in understanding. Gadamer highlights that even the disconfirmation and negativity can lead to productive meaning (2004, 353). The superficiality of the conversation between the fictional characters in the story produces, however, a situation of no real deliverance; seeing difference as impossibility is mirrored in the superficiality of response. The reason why the characters in the story glide on the surface of communication seems to be the preconceived impossibility of seeing the Other as a tangible source of unraveling the truth; the sense of a perspectival difference mars an effectual communication and leads to an unresolvable quagmire.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer argues: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (1993, 379). Undeniably, the interlocutors in the narrative's dialogue never reach the point of intimacy and unity ensuing from understanding. The narrative of the story presents a situation in which the otherness of the Other amounts to an unsurmountable obstacle. The central point of reference here is the authority of the father and the cultural code of his undiluted claim to the right which he cherishes. Both the girl and the boy subscribe to the unspoken law of the father to be always right and though they sense the forthcoming disaster, they do not dare to refute what he says, or oppose what he does. Kikuku and her brother subconsciously obey what the father says something which cannot be repudiated. Downcast as they are, suffering from the foreseeable drama, they do not resort to any conceivable means in order to change their fate, do not negate the eating of the fugu fish, do not alter a single element of the dire event.

If the bulk of the story is made up of a dialogue, its characteristically repetitive fashion concentrates on absorbing the reader's energies in the ever shifting meanings of the unsaid and the uncanny. As a matter of fact, the story exerts much of its power by dint of the things it does not show or say. A notable absence of the mother is what gives the narrative much of its poignancy. At the outset of the story the narrator informs us about the death of the mother – a victim of the fugu poisoning. Later on, however, we learn that some mystery envelops the death. It is not certain even if it was not a suicide. The figure of the mother is all at once present and absent. She is physically absent, but meaningfully present in the minds of the family members, in the reminiscences of the past. She is present as depicted in the photograph in the dim light of the dining room, which serves as a setting of both the family reunion and the grim, mysterious outcome of the meal they are having. The tension and drama of the troublesome relationships in the family is expressed, for instance, in the young man's inability to recognize his own mother in the photograph:

'Who is that? In that photograph there?'

'Which photograph?' My father turned slightly, trying to follow my gaze.'

'The lowest one. The old woman in the white kimono.'

My father put down his chopsticks. He looked first at the photograph, then at me.

'Your mother.' His voice had become very hard. 'Can't you recognize your own mother?'

(Ishiguro 1987, 438).

Unsettling as the father's behavior is, he explains that the mother had many disappointments in life. Perhaps the son's decision to move to the States, most probably considered by the mother to be premature and unnecessary, was not her only worry. There must have been some frictions and tensions in the family on grounds of what was considered proper or improper according to the Japanese tradition, the social codes of behavior and the moral obligations of children towards their parents. More strangely, the father does not seem to be as involved and as moved by the sad fact of his wife's death as expected. He gloomily refers to this dire event; nostalgia, however, is conveyed without the power of conviction or presence of mind. The father is a man of tradition. He ascribes a subservient role to Kikuko; she is brought up to be a quiet girl, serving men in the family. Kikuko is afraid of the father, for instance, she does not smoke in his presence, being lively and talkative, she becomes mute when she is nearby. Kikuko wants to emancipate herself, liberate herself from the ties of the Japanese tradition; longs to go to the States, but at the same time she is unable to cross the barrier between the East and the West, she fears otherness; the difference of mentality. The father's stiffness coupled with a distance towards the children is what surprises the reader so very much. Nonetheless, such an attitude is a façade, behind which one can sense a potential of empathy. This, however, is fully restrained.

It is worth noticing that the story's narrative is riddled up with elements of a tense dialogue interwoven with almost unendurable silences and breaks in communication. The burden of the unarticulated emotions is felt more strongly when one takes into account the issue of the yearned for family reunion. The breakage in communication constitutes an absolutely strenuous situation. All moments of silence and conversation contribute to the narrative's final paradox and produce awesome underpinnings in the scene of consuming the fish, "just fish", as the father answers the son's questions as for what kind of fish it is that they are eating.

My father bowed slightly. 'You must be hungry,' he said again. He took some fish to his mouth and started to eat. Then I too chose a piece and put it in my mouth. It felt soft, quite fleshy against my tongue.

'Very good,' I said. 'What is it?'

'Just fish.'

'It's very good.'

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

'Some more?'

'Is there enough?'

'There's plenty for all of us.' My father lifted the lid and once more steam rose up. We all reached forward and helped ourselves (Ishiguro 1987, 441).

The response with a sinister undercutting leads to an unknowable result. It is a scene of high vagueness and an intellectual quandary, demanding on the part of the reader an immediate and extreme response as well as a moral judgement. Indefiniteness coalesces with enigma and ambivalence. The narrative strategies deployed by Ishiguro reveal solitude's most moving qualities. Solitude invades the intimacies of domestic relationships, it masks and distorts the truth about the past (Kikuku's eerie pondering on her mother's death, the father's enigmatic talk about the death, the son's disinterestedness and a lack of recognition of his own mother).

An analysis of the use of the dialogue in the text of the story testifies to Gadamer's hermeneutics of conversation. Gadamer states: "to understand meaning is to understand it as an answer to a question" (1993, 375). As the characters in Ishiguro's story tend not to give answers to the interlocutors' questions, or mostly absolutely evasive answers, they obliterate a possibility of a genuine dialogue. The true conversation involves an active reciprocity (Gadamer 2008, xx). All of the members of the family in the narrative restrict themselves from speaking to the Other, confronting the Other in the way which would be expressive of their true positions. In the ever shifting plane of omissions, stratagems, skillful maneuvering not to say what needs to be said, Kikuku, the brother and the father bereave themselves of a viable possibility to comprehend the import of the Other's thinking, the difference in thinking and a prospect of being profoundly influenced by the Other in order to meaningfully change one's own preliminary assumptions, biases or projections.

David Linge (editor) elaborates on Gadamer's notion of horizon:

Collision of the other's horizons makes us aware of the limits and questionableness of its deepest assumptions. Collision of the other's horizons makes us aware of assumptions so deep-seated that they would otherwise remain unnoticed (Gadamer 2008, xxi).

What happens is that the characters of the story deprive themselves of a possibility to validate their initial stances and as a matter of fact the conversation comes to a standstill. The speaking strategies of obliqueness and indirectness that they apply result in an impasse of understanding, also self-understanding. In Gadamer's explication of his philosophical hermeneutics and the workings of a genuine conversation, one can notice an essence of the hermeneutic effort to uncover the meaning. Explaining Gadamer's hermeneutics David Linge writes: "The hermeneutical has to do with bridging the gap between the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world" (Gadamer 2008, xii). The impossibility of bridging the

discrepancy between the familiar and the unfamiliar in the narrative attains the status of constancy. The resistant power of prejudices and unwillingness to open oneself to the Other obstructs any tangible leeway to understanding.

Familiarity ‘at a distance’ – Suspense and Anticipation

Ishiguro’s story has little to offer in respect of elements traditionally thought to make fiction possible: character revelation and development, completed actions, complications presented and resolved, shocks of recognition. What the story masterfully deploys, though, are the tools of suspense and anticipation. The initial description of the fugu fish and the fatal effect of eating it if it is not prepared strictly according to some rules set the backdrop for the major action the characters are involved in, which is the preparation and the eating of the supper. The initial description of the fatal effects of eating fugu foreshadows the dire mood that prevails till the story’s concluding lines and casts light on the narrative’s ending.

While the storyline progresses we never cease to lose the unspoken assumption that the outcome of eating of the fugu fish is going to be deathly. The culminating point comes when the family members start eating the dish. As the narrator’s premonitory remark at the story’s outset reminds us: “The proof is in the eating” (Ishiguro 1987, 339). And then there is a sudden volta; the ambivalence of which is never to be resolved. The reader does not know whether the family members die or not. The storyline both extends and withdraws the possibility of resolution. If it shimmers with anticipation, anticipation ultimately remains unfulfilled. The enigma of the story is tantalizingly out of reach; its grave, momentous ending equally thrills and disappoints us. The reader’s expectations as for the revelation of the truth are never satisfied.

No matter how painstakingly the reader attempts to unravel the true outcome of the troublesome performance of eating the fatal/or not (?) dish, the storyline ends up with its main conflict unresolved. There is no closure. The open-endedness of the story’s ending causes that the fusion of horizon of the text and the reader seems to expand. The polyvalence of meanings ingrained in the avenues which open for interpretation unlocks anew the hermeneutic interpretative process and amplifies the hermeneutic effort already existent in the interpretation of the deictic power of words, the narrative’s structure and the totality of its lingual fabric.

The Symbol of a Well – the Unfamiliar ‘Overpowers’ the Familiar

In the light of the meticulously created suspense and tension, the unflagging atmosphere of awe and drama, we get a better sense of the appeal of the symbolism in “A Family Supper”. Let me focus on the central symbol in the story – an ancient well. It is a place believed to be haunted. The mother used to tell eerie stories about it. Kikuko and her brother reminisce the ideas of the well they used to have in the past:

‘Do you remember,’ she said, as I came walking up to her, ‘how you used to say this well was haunted?’

‘Yes, I remember.’

We both peered over the side.

‘Mother always told me it was the old woman from the vegetable store you’d seen that night,’

she said. ‘But I never believed her and never came out here alone.’

‘Mother used to tell me that too. She even told me once the old woman had confessed to being the ghost. Apparently she’d been taking a short cut through our garden. I imagine she had some trouble clambering over these walls.’

Kikuko gave a giggle. She then turned her back to the well, casting her gaze about the garden

(Ishiguro 1987, 347).

Undeniably, the well is a part of the hero’s childhood, it belongs to the past. The past, however, seems to return and enter the present as the protagonist and his sister chat in the garden near the well. Kikuko feels deeply the sinister aura of the place. She bravely exposes herself to the fear in order to fight it, laughing loudly she looks into the well to deny the ghostliness of the place. Nonetheless the fear comes back. The narrator points to the shrubs and the figure of the old woman in a white kimono. Most strangely, the enigmatic old woman bears semblance to the narrator’s mother in the photo. The use of symbolism in the story accords with the indirect fashion of characterization accomplished by means of a dialogue, the deployment of the succinct yet powerful descriptions. The exceptionally economic delineation of the fugu fish and its poisonous quality produces no less startling effect than an elaborate description would do. Precisely the same laconic, minimalized manner is deployed in rendering an image of the old woman near the well (probably a ghost), designed to resemble the mother in the family. The narrator’s mother in the photograph is portrayed by means of exactly the same words. Does the ghost of the mother appear? The affinity between one woman to the other is more than obvious, but the simplicity of the link shocks us.

The well in the story appears to be the connection between the past and the present – the happy childhood and the sad present time. If it reminds us of the blissful time, denotes the past, what makes us wonder is the concomitant connotative force of ominousness. The familiar verges on the border line of the unfamiliar. The familiar gets enmeshed in the unfamiliar. The well might also be interpreted as a symbol of death or a gateway to a new life. The symbolic nature of the well induces intertextual echoes. For instance, the well alludes to the well in the Bible, mentioned in numerous ways. The most known image is Jacob's well in the Gospel (John, 4.1 – 42) – the encounter between Christ and the Samaritan woman, the scene bespeaking a way to the eternal life through the 'living water.' Overall, in the proposed hermeneutic reading of the narrative, focusing on the tension between the familiarity and strangeness, the well appears to betoken the unfamiliar, which overpowers the known, the familiar. It seems to be the opening to the radically new, the radically different.

Conclusion

My attempt in this article was to analyze the narrative of Ishiguro's short story "A Family Supper" in the light of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Jauss' reception theory. An application of the pivotal tools of these theories in an explication of the story's meaning allowed one to see the underlying tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar with which the story's narrative is saturated, and uncover the story's subliminal senses. The study yielded interesting results as for the paradoxical nature of the seemingly completely different states of being: familiarity and strangeness, and triggered off the interpretative process which demonstrates that the connotative power stretches beyond the rigidity of the demarcating lines between one and the other and reverberates with deep overtones.

The reading of the story's narrative in the light of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Robert Jauss' reception theory was done in a three-fold way. The analysis concerned three fictional conventions: the story's use of dialogue, which I argued to be the factor forefronting the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the deployment of suspense and anticipation, with a stress the keeping of the familiar in check, and finally the use of symbolism – in which I proposed to see the movement from the familiar to the unfamiliar with the latter 'overpowering' the former. With regard to the paradoxes ensuing from the tension between the two qualities: familiarity and strangeness, the hermeneutic reading of the narrative of "A Family Supper" posits human being as enclosed in the

lingual world. The narrative of the story, however, does not manifest effective communication achieved thanks to language as a medium in which the self, the Other and the world meet, but rather shows an impossibility of transgressing the barriers between various worlds; an impasse in the conversation undercut by fear, psychological wounds and enslavement in cultural norms. The deployment of Gadamer's hermeneutics and Jauss' reception theory allows one also to see the complementariness of these theoretical stances and propels an opening of new interpretative avenues in a discovery of the ontological and linguistic vistas. The story's themes – the paradoxes of fear, loss and death – the rudimentary elements of human experience, entwined with the problematic of the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar constitute some profound plane of philosophical interrogation enveloped in the fabric of language and infused with the vacillating referential possibilities/impossibilities of language.

Works cited

- Barthes, Roland. 1975. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Bartold, Swayne Lauren. 2016. "Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002)". *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed August 11. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/gadamer>.
- Collington, Tara. 2013. "Bakhtin's Chronotope and Metaphoric Models in Hermeneutic Discourse". In *Philosophy, Method and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Charlton McIlwain, 115–136. New York: Hampton Press.
- Culler, Jonathan. 2001. *The Pursuit of Signs*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Encyclopedia Britannica. 2016. "Tetraodontiform". Accessed August 10. <https://www.britannica.com/animal/tetraodontiform>.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1993. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Weinsheimer & D.G. Marshall. New York: Continuum.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2008. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Translated and edited by D. E. Linge. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.
- Ishiguro, Kazuo. 1987. "A Family Supper". In *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury, 434–442. London: Penguin.
- Itao, Alexis Deodato S. 2010. "Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Symbols: A Critical Dialectic of Suspicion and Faith". *Kritike* 4: no. 2. Dec. 1–17.

- Jauss, Hans-Robert. 1982. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Translated by T. Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- King James Bible. 2016. "John. Chapter 4". Accessed August 10. www.kingjamesbible-online.org/John-Chapter-4/.
- Palmer, Richard E. 2001. *Gadamer in Conversation*. New Haven: Yale University.
- The Free Dictionary. 2016. "Fugu". Accessed August 10. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Fugu+fish>.
- Shaffer, Brian W., Cynthia F. Wong. 2008. *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Wong, Cynthia F. 2005. *Kazuo Ishiguro*. Horndon, Tavistock, Devon: Northcote.