

Interpreting and Discussing Literary Texts

A study on literary group discussions

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Abstract

Reading and understanding literature does not necessarily have to be an individual act. The aim of this essay is to investigate what happens when six students read a text by Kazuo Ishiguro *Family Supper* and then discuss it in a communicative situation. The essay bases its ideas on the sociocultural theory and the reader-response theory. The sociocultural perspective argues that people develop and progress during social interaction, moreover by communicating with other people and by being inspired and subsequently educated through taking part in different social contexts. My idea with this essay is to observe a literary discussion in a group. The observation emphasizes both the individual contribution to the literary discussion and the function of the group. By analyzing the participation of the individual students, I reached the conclusion that the students deal with literature in many different ways. Some focus only on the text and the plot, others discuss social issues in connection to the text and some only respond to the others' arguments. When studying the group, I looked at the balance in the group, the turn taking between the members and the level of participation. The reader-response theory bases its idea on the reader and the text and the fact that they are connected in a mutual transaction. Every reader brings his or her experiences to the understanding of the text and thereby a text can have multiple alternative interpretations considering the amount of readers. The analysis section in this essay consists of several parts, such as an individual reflection, a group discussion and an individual evaluation.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, reader-response theory, social interaction, literary discussion, turn taking

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1. Introduction

As human beings, we are born into different social contexts. Since we encounter different groups throughout life, we need to have the ability to cooperate, to converse and function in a group. Furthermore, to be part of a unit, we have to be aware of aspects such as respect and consideration and consequently have the skills to communicate. The aim of this essay is to study the literary conversation in a social context. Subsequently, to see the development of the literary process and how the transaction, not only between readers and text, progresses, but also between the students, as the interaction develops. Since this is a literary essay with a pedagogical perspective, communication, cooperation and learning from interaction are important issues to emphasize. Roger Säljö expounds on the importance of communication as an individual development in his book *Lärande I Praktiken* (2000). Our comprehension of our environment, our frames of reference and our consciousness are formed through communication; we come into existence as thinking and communicating human beings through participation in interactive processes and we ourselves contribute to these courses of events (Säljö 233 *my translation*). He argues further that education and development accordingly occur through participation in social practices (236 *my translation*). Having this perspective as a viewpoint and a basis in connection to literature, this essay will deal with the act of reading literature in a social context. The aim is therefore to study the different actions that take place within the group while interacting with emphasis mainly on the group as a whole; however, also on some specific individual contributions, important for the group. In an article by Ann M. Trousdale and Violet J. Harris called “Missing Links in Literary Response: Group Interpretation of Literature” (1993) they say that: “A given literary text may offer multiple meanings and that a reader’s encounter with a text is affected as much by what the reader brings to the experience as by what the written text itself provides” (195). Consequently, how we understand a literary text can differ enormously due to our different experiences in life, thus a text has as many different interpretations as it has readers.

In this study, I will look for interesting features that occur during the literary discussion, both between the individual reader and the text and within the group. I will do this by investigating what happens in the process of understanding a literary text when students read it individually and then discuss it with other students. I will also look explicitly at what happens in the group during the interaction. Students are different and students obviously receive literature differently. Louise Rosenblatt says in her book *Literature as Exploration* (1995), that the same

text will have different meanings and values at different times and under different conditions (43). Reading literature is maybe generally seen to be an individual act, where students sit one by one, reading different books, completely unaware and independent of each other. The literary theory this essay relies on is called reader-response theory, which is a theory based on the idea that every single reader of a text interprets the text based on experiences and personal associations which can be read about in the study by Pat Mora and James Welch (1). However, reading literature can also be made in groups, where discussions and interaction are added to the act. The response here consists of not only individual opinions on the text, but also on the opinions of others. Rosenblatt argues further that one of the most valuable things that the students will gain by having a discussion is the ability to listen with understanding to what other people say and respond in relevant terms. In a balanced form, the interaction will now not only be between student and teacher, but also between student and student (Rosenblatt 69). As said before, literature can be dealt with in many different ways and there are benefits with them all. My emphasis is, however, on the group interaction and how a group deals with a literary text in a social context. It says in the syllabus that students are expected to be able to interact with other people in a relaxed and understandable way and be capable of reading texts on different levels (The National Agency for Education 16). In this essay, the aim will support the expectations from the syllabus, by the means of the literary conversation as a tool for the students' interactive development. My thesis statement and my main argument is that literature can be dealt with in a more aesthetic way, where the students more freely are allowed to respond to the text and reflect on what emotions the text brings forth. Furthermore, that a literary text can be used not only as a way to escape reality but also to emotionally be influenced and to share other people's personal reflections on the literary text. I think that the environment in a literary discussion has to be flexible and the supervisor has to be attentive to what the students find interesting to discuss. This in order to create an interaction based on the personal reflections of the students and thereby form a situation where the students aesthetically deal with literature in a cooperative way. Aesthetic reading and the opposite efferent reading are expressions used and created by Louise Rosenblatt and they are described in the section below.

1.1 Previous Research

Reading literature is not a one-way communication; in contrast, it is a process involving both the text and the reader. Rosenblatt argues for an understanding of the importance of having a good transaction between the text and the reader in an educational situation (5). Rosenblatt talks about efferent reading and aesthetic reading. She stresses that reading literature in school often is concentrated on searching for information, in which efferent reading is in focus. When the students read a literary text, they are perhaps supposed to study the plot, account for the characters and try to make sense of the meaning of the interpretation in a schematic way (5). Efferent reading is when you put aside your personal emotions, you ignore your intuitive, creative feelings about a text and the reading is basically only focused on impersonal and general reading and is mostly used when reading scientific reports. This kind of reading is advantageous when we search for information. Aesthetic reading on the other hand, focuses on creating an emotional transaction between the reader and the text. This is where we bring our own emotional personal reflections into the interpretative process and through literature new reactions and perceptions are created. Reading novels in a classroom situation should therefore according to Rosenblatt with advantage be an act of aesthetic reading, where the students are allowed and supposed to react and reflect, not only upon the plot of the novel, but also upon the feelings the text brings forth within them (11). In *Litteraturundervisning* by Ulla Lundqvist, we can read that when bringing a novel into a classroom situation it is important for the teacher to realize that he or she has to create a tolerant atmosphere where the students feel free to have their own opinions without restrictions and without stricter guidelines. What you can do with literature in a group interaction is to discuss different interpretations of the text. There is by no means a correct or given interpretation, since the understanding of the text lies in the personal experiences and reflections by the individual reader (Lundqvist 15 *my translation*). What the design of this study to a great extent has been influenced by is a program presented in an article called “Transactional Literature Discussions” (TLD) created and formed by JoAnn Dugan. In the article, Dugan presents her program and she discusses a reflection made concerning the advantages with having a group discussion based on a literary text:

Talk sessions allowed students to bring their concerns to the forefront and reflect on them with help from both the teacher and one another. The collaborative efforts of the group

provided opportunities for all children to become actively involved in making sense of the story. (91)

In the study, Dugan herself functioned as an active member of the discussion in order to supervise and lead the students through the discussion. In my discussion, however, my role was mainly to observe the students while they were communicating and to see how their interaction and transaction with the text lead to conclusions about the interpretation of the text. There are many different ways of working with literature in groups. The study made by Dugan, however is accordingly based on the idea of the reader-response theory constructed among others by Rosenblatt. The TLD program is based on the idea that reading literature is done best through social interaction (Dugan 87). This particular process contains steps such as:

- Getting ready: where the students receive necessary background information about the text
- Reading and thinking aloud: the students are here allowed to ask spontaneous questions during reading
- Wondering on paper: here the students write down their response and questions to the text.
- Talking: this is where the students share their wonderings and respond to each other's
- Thinking on paper: the students choose an angle from the text and develop the thoughts about this; the students are divided into peers and receive therefore feedback to their thoughts.
- Looking back: here they evaluate their own learning and reflect about the process. (Dugan 87)

This study worked out by JoAnn Dugan has several aesthetic advantages. She focuses more on the reflections of the students than on the actual plot of the text. She lets the students choose which issues in the text that interest them and thereafter gives them the opportunity to expand on these and develop their ideas about these questions. Dugan's results from the study were mainly positive. "The students grew from passive, timid readers to active readers who confidently expressed their thoughts and gradually assumed responsibility for reading, talking and writing about the story as a group" (93). However, Dugan also admits that the students had to struggle with the "thinking on paper"-part and that the free writing did not help them enough to be able to expand their ideas.

Several studies, articles and books are written to inquire into the importance of reading and discussing in a social context as a help for students to understand and interpret literature. In Elaine Rubinstein-Avila's article "Negotiating power and redefining literacy expertise: Buddy

Reading in a dual-immersion program” (2003) we can read about a program made to investigate this phenomenon. The author has focused her study a little more on the changed relation between the student and the teacher and the significance of the student as an independent searcher for knowledge, not only relying on the teacher for developing skills. Rubinstein-Avila’s study deals with the literacy behaviors of two Second- Grade peer readers, as they talk around and about texts while working collaboratively to complete a series of literary tasks. The programme both includes English and Portuguese in a dual-immersion and the goal is the continuous development of language and literary skills in both languages (84). Unlike this programme, my study does not include a part where the students’ English skills are examined; however, discussing literary texts in a group could henceforth gain the students’ language and literary skills.

Furthermore Roger Säljö writes about the significance of interaction and communication in *Lärande I Praktiken* (11 *my translation*). Human beings are social creatures, bound to each other and dependant on the cooperation with other people. Säljö states that we form others and ourselves through communication (89 *my translation*). My investigation took shape with this approach as a solid ground, and not only by using each other as a communicative basis but using a literary text as a foundation for the interaction. Säljö and the sociocultural perspective argue that every individual human being is a part of an educational process where we constantly develop (122 *my translation*). My idea is that communication and group discussions could be used as a general educational theme. Although Säljö clearly and specifically argues that education is reached in a more advantageous way through communication and not particularly at reading and communication, his discussion has great relevance for my understanding of social interaction. This approach is therefore also important for my investigation, as well as for my research methods. In *Interaktion i pedagogiska sammanhang* by Sverker Lindblad and Fritjof Sahlström we can read that by studying the complexity of reality and the problems people encounter while communicating in real life we can make sense of the meaningfulness that occurs from the perspectives of the actors in a group discussion and how an act is progressed through interaction. The mission of the observer is to catch the deeds of the actors, what they do while communicating or interacting in different ways (Lindblad 6 *my translation*). Accordingly, the importance is not only what the students actually find interesting in the text but also to detect how they communicate and how they solve problems they encounter on the way.

Another article found important in connection to my aim is “Social processes and knowledge building during small group interaction in a school science project” by Maarit Arvaja, Päivi Häkkinen, Helena Rasku-Puttonen and Anneli Eteläpelto (2002). The aim with their study is accordingly to: “investigate the meaning of symmetry of knowledge construction and sharing in social interaction during the report writing phase of an experimental science learning project” (161). This study is focused on general collaborative learning and is not aiming specifically at reading literature; however, this is one part of their investigation. They argue furthermore: “There are a number of social and contextual features affecting the quality of interaction and learning” (162). My opinion in connection to this is that social collaboration should be a natural part of the education in school and not forced just because it is a part of the syllabus. In their investigation, they emphasize the importance of the group setting. In their study, two boys and two girls were participating. The two girls were close friends, which affected the atmosphere in the group in both positive and negative manners. These issues made me consider the relation between the group members in my study. Moreover, they expand on the collaborative learning situation:

It can be concluded that collaboration is very much context related. The quality of social interaction, and thus collaboration or non-collaboration, changed all the time depending on what were the influential factors in the social contexts at the given time. Because of the situational nature of learning, the ideal circumstances for learning are very difficult to attain in schools. A teacher cannot possibly consider all the factors involved in the learning situation. However, teachers may become more aware of some of the factors affecting learning in social interactions, which enhances their ability to help their students get closer to a high level collaboration learning situation. (177)

There are many factors and aspects to have in consideration when using the collaboration learning alternative for students and when working with social interaction in school and some of these aspects will be considered in my study.

1.1.1 Pedagogical framework

In my investigation, I have focused on the sociocultural theory. One of the starting-points for a sociocultural perspective on learning and human thinking and acting is according to Säljö, how individuals and groups acquire and utilize physical and cognitive resources. In addition, the

cooperation between the collective and the individual is particularly in focus in this perspective (Säljö 18 *my translation*). When interacting with other people we do not only learn about them, but we also understand ourselves better. When having to argue for our opinions to others we consequently have to reconsider the relevance of our own thoughts and what we actually find important. Säljö explains further on that knowledge and skills that we possess come from the patterns of actions that have been built up historically in a society that we become parts of through interaction with other people (21 *my translation*). One great advocate of this theory is the Russian psychologist Vygotsky. In Kimberly McGlann-Nalsons's article "Exploring the Intersections of Sociocultural Theory and Gifted Education" (2005), it says that Vygotsky's theory does acknowledge the individual but emphasizes the social (48). A sociocultural theorist is of the opinion that social interaction between people is important for individual development. I base my investigation on these thoughts. McGlann-Nelson argues further that: "It is acknowledged that in order for humans to develop intellectually, we must be exposed to new cultural 'tools.' Specifically, these tools are things that aid us in reading and comprehending the world around us" (52). Accordingly, in my opinion in order to comprehend the world around us and additionally understand ourselves we need to be in contact with other people, we need to be questioned and to be challenged, only then do we have to question and challenge ourselves. According to Säljö and the sociocultural theory, it is through communication that the individual becomes implicated in knowledge and skills. It is by listening to what other people say and how they understand the world that the child becomes aware of what is interesting and valuable to discern from the amount of observations that we can do in every situation. The child is therefore born into the interactive and communicative process that already exists and in these processes the perspectives on and attitudes towards the environment are already built-in (Säljö 37 *my translation*). With this in mind, I want to investigate what happens when integrating literature into a social context, in this case a group discussion. Here literature is the basis of the social context and the discussion. The literary text functions accordingly as a foundation on which the social interaction is based. Säljö considers that texts are parts of communicative contexts where conversation and other forms of interaction occur (186 *my translation*). The group discussion will therefore proceed from the text and thereafter develop.

1.1.2 Literary theory

My study is mainly based on the reader-response theory, however somewhat modified. In the article, "Theory Overview" by Pat Mora and James Welch (2006) they explain that the reader-

response theory is a literary theory based on the reader and the feelings the readers receive when encountering a literary text (1).

Reader response stresses the importance of the reader's role in the interpreting texts. Rejecting the idea that there is a single, fixed meaning inherent in every literary work, this theory holds that the individual creates his or her own meaning through "transaction" with the text based on personal associations. Because all readers bring their own emotions, concerns, life experiences, and knowledge to their reading, each interpretation is subjective and unique (1).

Literary critics who have developed this particular theory are e.g. Stanley Fish, Louise Rosenblatt, Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser. Rosenblatt says in her book *Literature as Exploration* that the basic criteria for a student's reading and understanding of a text should be whether his or her reactions are sincere (68). Reader-response theory is, as I understand it, one kind of literary theory and it deals with the interpretations of a literary text and the fact that the text itself does not say anything until a reader reads, interprets and understands it. We base all our interpretations on earlier experiences and thereby we create our individual understanding of different literary works. Rosenblatt argues furthermore that reading, comprehension and interpretation are highly complex processes. Personal factors will certainly appear and they will inevitably affect the relation between the text and the reader. The students' earlier experiences and current interests can actively affect his or her spontaneous reaction. Sometimes they will lead to deep and balanced reflections, however sometimes they will limit and distort the interpretation (Rosenblatt 74). My idea with this study is to draw this theory somewhat further. I want to see what happens with the individual reader's understanding of a text if several other readers and their interpretations of the same text influence the reader. My interest lies in the study of the literary conversation. It lies in the fact that each reader brings his or her own understanding. What makes me curious is how the members of the group deal with each other's interpretation. My aim is to see what happens if several students challenge that single reader's interpretation. Furthermore, to expand the idea of group interpretation and study what factors affect the group, the understanding of the text and the interaction within the group. The reader-response theory is accordingly a theory based on the process of what happens when a dead material, the text, meets the eye of the reader, how ideas of interpretations begin and an understanding develops.

1.2 Aim and Scope

The aim with this essay is to study the process of reading literature and communicating with the literary work as a base in a group. I studied both the students' individual contribution and what happened in the group as a whole during the process. In the group, I looked at what different roles there can be in a group, how the group cooperated and if the group strived at being a unit or if the individuals stood over the group, regarding individual interpretations vs. interpretations created by the students together. I studied how the students worked with the literary text as a basis for a conversation. Furthermore, I examined what was discussed by the students and in what manners. The balance within the group and the attitudes between the students were also taken under consideration.

The scope of this essay is therefore only to investigate what happens in the group during the discussion and to study the members in the group not only as individuals but more as parts of a whole. I will exclude looking at the students' English skills or their development during the process. I will not do this, because improvement can only be discovered over a longer period, and cannot be detected in an hour's observation. My scope is therefore only to investigate the positive and the negative aspects in the process of reading literature and discussing it in a group. My investigation will be based on questionnaires answered by the students and on my own observations as well as transcripts of the group discussion.

1.2.1 Research questions

- What are the differences between students who are prepared before a literary discussion and those who have not?
- What interesting individual contributions can be found during the process of the literary conversation?
- What positive and negative aspects can be seen regarding the first and the second questionnaire?
- In what way is the literary discussion positive for the students from a socio-cultural perspective?

2. Material

My primary source in this investigation was Kazuo Ishiguro's short story *A Family Supper* (see Appendix 1). I chose this short story for several reasons. My main reason was that there are many different ways of interpreting the plot. There are many loose ends, where the reader her- or himself is allowed to interpret and understand as he or she wants. This I found interesting while I wanted to see how the group handled the different individual interpretations that could come up. Moreover, the text is rather easy when it comes to vocabulary and the text is on a reasonably good level for the students. I also used two questionnaires made in relation to the primary text and to the process of a whole. The first questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was mainly questions to answer about the text and the understanding of it, aiming at both letting the students ponder over the text and giving me a sense of their individual interpretation. The questions could be answered easily with short answers; however, it was also possible to develop the answers. My intention with the questions on the first questionnaire was to try to make the students emotionally reflect upon the text. The time aspect also has to be considered here, since the students only had a few minutes to reflect upon the questions on the first questionnaire. The second questionnaire (see Appendix 3), which was answered after the discussion was about the whole process, what impressions they had about the text, the reading, the questionnaires and the discussion. This was a way for the pupils to give response and to reflect over their learning. During the discussion, I recorded the interaction, which I subsequently could transcript and use as a base for selected quotations.

A secondary source I have used concerning learning and communication is Roger Säljö's *Lärande I Praktiken* (2000). This book is highly relevant since Säljö clearly is an advocate for the sociocultural perspective. By reading and consulting this book, it was easier to be consistent regarding the pedagogical framework. Another important source is Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*, (1995), mainly since this source supported my literary theory, the reader-response theory. By consulting the book, I obtained a well-structured and clear insight into the theory and how it deals with the reader and the text. When trying to make sense out of literature as a part of the classroom education I read *Litteraturundervisning* (1984) by Ulla Lundqvist. She gives examples of models of how to work and read literary texts which was useful for my study. Furthermore *Interaktion I pedagogiska sammanhang* (2001) by Sverker Lindblad and Fritjof Sahlström helped me even more to understand the significance of

interaction as a pedagogical tool. Articles I have found useful are e.g. “Social processes and Knowledge Building During Small Group Interaction in a School Science Project” by Maarit Arvaja, Päivi Häkkinen, Helena Rasku-Puttonen and Anneli Eteläpelto. (2002) and an article by Elaine Rubinstein-Avila called “Negotiating power and redefining literacy expertise: Buddy reading in a dual-immersion program” (2003). The article mentioned first by Arvaja, Häkkinen, Rasku-Puttonen and Eteläpelto was of great interest to my study since it is about a study made in Finland with almost the same purpose as my study. The second article by Rubinstein-Avila was also to see another project done regarding my interests. This is a case study of face-to-face interaction around and about texts between a second grade dyad in a dual-immersion programme (83). Moreover, when reading about and trying to find information about my pedagogical framework and literary theory I also used scholarly articles. An article supporting my literary theory, the reader response theory, was Pat Mora’s and James Welch’s “Theory Overview: Reader Response”. I have read Kimberly McGlann-Nelson’s “Exploring the Intersections of Socio-cultural Theory and Gifted Education”, an article I used as a source to understand and read more about my pedagogical framework. Additionally, the JoAnn Dugan article, “Transactional Literature Discussion”, (2006) was also helpful when considering strategies of how to structure the discussion and how to organize the whole process.

3. Approach/Method

My approach to this essay is the group and the group interaction with a literary text as a basis. The socio-cultural theory was therefore the theoretical framework that I chose to follow. Here the emphasis is on the interaction in the group, to study the way a group functions, based on the idea that the best development for the individual human being is to interact socially with other human beings (Säljö 21 *my translation*). The reader-response theory was used since the interaction was based on a literary text and since one of my interests during the discussion was to investigate how the students interpreted the text individually and then how they cooperated and dealt with their different understandings together. The centre of the data collection was the two questionnaires and the group discussion with the students. My main problem in the beginning of the process of the data collection was to find relevant sources and pertinent articles that actually could be useful for me and help me to be prepared for the discussion. Except for the data collection, my focus has been to choose a text that I could use as the basis of the discussion the students were supposed to have after having read the text. I had to

consider several aspects when choosing the text. I did not want the text to be too long, since then I thought the students would find it tiresome to read. Moreover, I had to be careful not to select a text that was too difficult. After having found secondary sources supporting my aim and selected my primary text, I contacted the students and their ordinary teacher. I also visited the school two weeks before the actual discussion in order to create a more comfortable atmosphere during the time of the discussion. I wanted to meet the students who were supposed to participate and accordingly to let them meet me. Subsequently, when seeing the students for the second time, we all were comfortable due to the fact that we had met before.

To start with, the students read the text and answered the following first questionnaire. This was where they could write down their own emotional reflections and spontaneous reactions to the interpretation of the text. The largest part of the process and from where I collected most of my data, the discussion, followed. I supervised the discussion mainly by responding to the students' reflections upon the text and then asking them follow-up questions in connection to their reflections. We discussed the text for approximately 40 minutes and thereafter the second questionnaire followed. Here the students were able to give response to the process and to the discussion. During the discussion, I recorded the conversation, since I found it easier to support the students when they were talking if I did not have to take notes. After the discussion, I wrote my immediate observations down and thereafter started listening to the discussion in order to find interesting aspects to bring up in my analysis. Thereafter, I studied the answers of the questionnaires to be able to draw conclusions from them both. Simultaneously when writing down the findings I consulted my secondary sources to find scientific evidence of my results. I analyzed my results from the observation and the questionnaires and compared the findings to other studies made in the same area. By doing this, I was able to select the most interesting findings and support these with facts from my secondary sources.

There are several ethical aspects to consider when making a study like this. To start with, I sent a letter to the students' parents to explain what their children was taking part in and explaining the level of confidentiality. It was pertinent to convince the students that everything would be completely anonymous and that their names would be replaced by pseudonyms. Additionally, I was the only one who listened to the recording of the discussion, by agreement with the students.

4. Result

The findings and the results of my investigation are comprehensive and extensive; however, this passage will only present the most interesting findings that are relevant to my aim and in connection to my research questions. The investigation and the cooperation with the students were divided into four parts. Initially, the students read the text, which was Ishiguro's *A Family Supper* (see Appendix 1); thereafter they answered the first questionnaire (see Appendix 2) where they were allowed to rather freely respond to the text. Then the discussion was introduced, which was partly directed by me; however, the students did also take initiative on their own. This will be discussed further in this passage. The last part of the investigation was the second questionnaire (see Appendix 3) where the students answered questions regarding the whole process. The group consisted of four boys and two girls. The participants were chosen only since they showed the strongest interest to participate in the group discussion. The gender perspective could have been considered, of that I am aware. However, I rather preferred students who were motivated than to force students who did not have the strongest interest to participate in order to maintain the gender balance.

The first part of the process where the students were supposed to read the text individually took approximately fifteen minutes. Consequently, since the text was sent out by e-mail in order for the students to have a chance to be prepared before the discussion if they wanted to, the two students who had read the text beforehand, were finished rather quickly and went on to the questions on the first questionnaire.

In the second part of the process, after having read the text, the first questionnaire was introduced and the students worked with the questions in different ways. Some of them wrote in great detail whereas some hardly wrote anything. The answers to the questions showed how differently the students understood the text. To the question why they thought the son had left Japan to live in America, explanations and reflections regarding intercultural differences, economical issues and personal reasons came up. The most interesting result from the first questionnaire was that except for two students all of them wrote their answers in short, simple sentences. There were no connections to the text in their arguments and some did not even write their answers in complete sentences.

The discussion lasted for approximately 40 minutes. The conversation went on rather fluently, and the students seemed comfortable and relaxed. As expected, some students had more to say than others did and especially the two girls in the group were very active. The discussion was generally aimed at arguing about the relationships between the different characters and furthermore about the plot. In the beginning of the discussion, I asked them about their spontaneous reflections on the text, which led to these reactions:

Sarah: “I think the father killed his family...”

James: “Yeah, I think so too...He poisoned them.”

Sarah: “Yeah...If you read between the lines... It is about the poisonous fish in the beginning and in the end they eat fish.”

The students immediately started discussing the plot and the interpretation of the text and what actually happened in the story. They did not support their arguments, however when I asked them where they could find evidence in the text that could prove their point they mentioned passages and pages:

Sarah: “In the beginning on page one they talk about...hmmm... fugu.. and that the mother died from that”

James: “The fact that the whole story begins with the story of fugu...and that the father always asks the son if he is hungry... on page one...and page six...and seven...”

The students showed that they were able to find evidence in the text that supported their arguments, but they did it only when they were asked to do it. Every now and then, the discussion changed its direction and the arguments were more related to current issues, such as morals of today, especially regarding the effects on war and on family relations in general.

Although the discussion was mainly supervised by me asking them follow-up questions and sometimes making statements they could respond to, the students on occasion brought up new issues concerning the text. These were mainly questions concerning issues in connection to the text, not particularly about the plot, however of high relevance to the discussion.

James: “Nowadays everything in Japan is very influenced by America, as the rest of the world, but before Japan was almost cut off from the rest of the world and I think the father is afraid of changes...”

Lucy: “I think it is hard for all parents to let go of the children, why would it be harder for this Japanese family?” (Directs her question to James)

James: “Well... Maybe since it is a country of strict traditions and the father talks much of honor, which Japan is famous for...”

The students respected each other’s opinions and behaved well when it came to issues such as interruption and filling in other students’ sentences. The students interrupted each other only when they were arguing for the same thing and not when they were disagreeing. In addition, when the students were filling in each other’s sentences it was either in order to fill in lost words or to support the other student’s argument.

The second questionnaire covered questions about their impressions of the process, what they thought of this way of reading literature and this way of interacting with literature as a basis. The general response to the first question was that it helped them to think about the text more intensely when having to write about it in advance, however they also felt that it was much easier to talk than write. To the second question about what they felt about having the group discussion, their response was without question positive. One student admitted that he had changed his first opinion about the text after having discussed it. Moreover, the reflections were mostly that the discussion was fun, interesting, and good. Furthermore, that it was easier to formulate one’s opinions in speaking than in writing. The students were also given the opportunity to give positive and negative feedback on the discussion as a whole. The positive aspects were in general that it was interesting to hear the others’ point of views on the text and that having a discussion felt more relaxed than having to write the opinions on paper. The students did not bring up many negative aspects, however one student expressed the opinion that not everyone was able to speak as much as some did.

In conclusion, the students were satisfied with this mode of working with literature; however, they claimed that it is not something that suits everyone.

5. Analysis

Many interesting conclusions can be drawn from this investigation; however, the focus will be on some particular aspects of the analysis in connection to the sociocultural theory, the reader-

response theory and to my research questions. The center of attention will mainly be on the group discussion, however, the relevance of the two questionnaires and the process as a whole will also be brought up in the analysis. When analyzing the group discussion both individual and group aspects will be considered. The first thing to be analyzed is the result of the fact that some of the students had read the text before the discussion and some had not. What are the differences and the effects in the process if the students have prepared or if they have not? Next, to be analyzed is the relevance of the first questionnaire. Why is it necessary to have this stage in the process? The third aspect will be about some interesting observations made concerning the students as individuals connected to the interpretation and understanding of the literary text, such as the process as a whole. What outcome can be seen regarding the different individuals and how they managed the different stages in the process? The following aspect is also connected to the group discussion, however with the group in focus. Here the dynamics, the communication and the balance in the group will be investigated. The last aspect will cover the relevance of the second questionnaire and the conclusion of how the process functioned.

5.1 Preparation

A few days before the day of the discussion, I sent out the text that the students were supposed to have a discussion about as an attached file in an email to everyone. The requirements regarding the text were only to give the students a possibility to be prepared if they wanted to when they attended the discussion, however it was not required of them to have read the text in advance in order to participate, since reading the text in class was a part of the process. The conclusions that can be drawn from this anyway are that those students who actually had read the text in advance, which were two out of eight, were more detailed and specific in their answers in the first questionnaire and furthermore had more advanced and organized arguments in the discussion. Some of the students who did not prepare beforehand did have opinions of specific issues, for which they argued. However, if the opinion was quite the opposite from one of those students who actually had prepared the prepared student's opinion was the one the group agreed as being the "correct" one. Here it is evident that the students on top of the hierarchy were the ones who had prepared and who were the most active in the discussion. In the article by Arvaja et al., it says that: "When the knowledge level among the participants is very different, it leads to different statuses and roles in the learning situation" (162). Furthermore, they argue that: "Differences in the persons' general academic status may affect interaction so that the power order of the group reflects the initial differences in status, even if

the participants share the same level of knowledge in the actual situation” (Arvaja et al 163). There might be other factors I could not recognize that also affected the roles in the group, since they knew each other before, however the fact that the prepared students were high in rank in the group was a pattern that could be seen. The relevance of preparing before a literary discussion, such as reading the text and consequently, presumably reflect over the interpretation of the text, help to make the student more confident in speaking his or her mind. It makes it easier for the student to have clear and strong arguments and furthermore to be able to connect the arguments specifically to extracts from the text. Moreover, one student had also made historical research on a particular issue relevant for the discussion in order to understand the text better. This gave the discussion a depth that would not have been possible without the research.

5.2 Individual Reflection

As stated in the result section the personal reflections and the answers in the first questionnaires regarding the interpretation and understanding of the text had many differences, such as length and content. However, when reading the answers in the second questionnaire it is evident that all the students agreed to the fact that it was good to have the opportunity to think about what the text was actually about before the actual discussion. Rosenblatt is of the opinion that studies of literature should give the student the same emotional release which all art offers and that a spontaneous reaction ought to be the first step towards more mature reflections (71). Nevertheless, some of the students were very limited in their answers and it might be that having a questionnaire with set questions restricts the students’ imagination and it might prevent them from pondering over the text in their own direction. This part of the process is what Dugan calls “*Wondering on paper*”.

By writing their wonderings..., students’ spontaneous responses are preserved so they can revisit their thoughts. Wondering on paper also encourages quiet students to respond and gives all a chance to contribute to the discussions Wonderings may be questions or comments that do not have specific answers but open the door for exploring ideas (2)

In this process the students are free to write whatever they like and whatever attracts them in the text. When looking at the results from the first questionnaire the students did in this

investigation, it is easy to draw the conclusion that the students either avoided reflecting upon the text for unknown reasons and that is the reason why most of the answers were so limited. One other explanation could be that the questions were too narrow and the questionnaire was holding back the students' immediate reflections about the text. However, there are also advantages with questionnaires with set questions, in this way the students get an idea of what is of relevance in the text and it helps them to narrow their thoughts down without being too confused. One other advantage with set questions might be if the teacher has a predetermined and conscious purpose with the text and the discussion and wants to lead the discussion in a specific direction. Proof of the relevance concerning the issue that Dugan argues in the quote above about the fact that individual reflections encourage quiet students, will be brought up in the next paragraph.

5.3 Analysis of the individual contribution

There are a few of the students in this investigation who are of special interest when looking at their answers on the two questionnaires and to the contribution of the group discussion. The students will be named James, John, Sarah and Lucy in order to make the arguments easier to follow. These students all had different roles in the process and illustrate important aspects of how to work with literature. The other two participating student also contributed to the discussion in many interesting ways, however their contribution did not stand out compared to the others.

5.3.1 James

The first student, James, was one of the two students who had prepared before the discussion by reading the text in advance; moreover, he was the student who also searched for facts connected to the text. Consequently, his reflections on the first questionnaire were relevant, interesting and thought through. Moreover, his contribution to the discussion was also important and his arguments well prepared. What was even more interesting was the fact that he often connected his reflections of the text to reality and current issues.

James: "Honor is important in Japan. Honor and respect. Just look at how the father calls his business partner "Watanabe San". San is a proof

of respect and pride. They are very polite to each other...”

Lucy: “So you think that the father will kill his family just because Watanabe did it?”

James: “I am just saying that the Japanese people are very proud and that the family means a lot for them... It is bad for the family if a son moves to the states since the two countries have much history together.”

There are always opportunities to bring up aspects about society in literary discussions. Many literary works are written and have a relevance to a certain social, political or economical situation. However, this level of discussion might seem too advanced for the students, especially if the students are not familiar with the aspects beforehand. One disadvantage with having a student who is fully prepared could be that the student might not be open for new thoughts and other viewpoints. His ideas and arguments and his interpretation of the text might already be determined and no one is able to change his conviction. This was partly the matter with James.

5.3.2 John

The second student, John, seemed from the beginning of the process incredibly interested in the project and appeared to be a skilled debater, however when the first questionnaire was done and the discussion was introduced, John hardly said anything. Nevertheless, he followed the arguments with interest but did not take part in the discussion. When studying his first questionnaire, it was startling to see how deeply he had analyzed the text. His thoughts were clear and interesting and he definitely had opinions worth expressing in the discussion. Here is an extract from his questionnaire:

How did the text make you feel about the relation between the father and son? “It made me think of how important it is to talk to each other. The father did not say much to his son, and the son did not seem to dare to ask his father questions. Especially when they talked about the mother and her death. It seems like the father often talked about things but he did not say right out what he thought, so the son did not understand him.”

This way of approaching the relationship between the father and the son was unique for John, no one else brought this issue up during the discussion and John himself did not mention it either. My conclusion was therefore that John evidently was one of those students who did not feel

comfortable in open discussions. However, when looking at the second questionnaire where the students were allowed to evaluate the process and reflect upon their own contribution to the process John's verdict was very favorable. He found his participation satisfactory, he enjoyed a nice chat, as he himself expressed it, and he thought that the discussion was interesting and enlightening. Consequently, my picture of John as uncomfortable and disinterested during the discussion was not correct. He was the image of the student that Dugan mentioned in the section above about the individual participation on page 17. A quiet student who actually took pleasure in listening to his friends discussing and although he did not take an active part he did not feel that was not contributing to the discussion. In his opinion, he was an attentive member of the discussion and he did not see himself as passive and quiet. Nevertheless, this kind of student might, as this way of working with literature develops, find himself becoming more active and gradually share his opinions with the group. In conclusion, this way of working with literature might not initially seem to suit this student; however, when studying his response in the second questionnaire, his opinion was quite the reverse.

5.3.3.Sarah

The next interesting student in the analysis is the girl called Sarah. Sarah did not prepare before the discussion and her answers in the first questionnaire were short, with incomplete sentences and sometimes vague arguments. However, when the discussion started, she was the one who took control of the situation and was the most active member of the group. Her arguments were always well connected to the text and she constantly brought up examples from the text to support her opinions. Her input often started with "Look at page two..." This way of arguing makes it easy to follow the arguments and as a listener, you get the feeling that her opinions are well structured and planned.

Sarah: "I think about the relationship between the father and Kikuko... There are many examples from the text where we can see that she is afraid of him..."

James: "Her father bosses her around..."

Sarah: "Yeah... And when she comes in she says that she is dying for a smoke... on page three... That shows that she is afraid that he will know she smokes..."

James: "And he asks her to make the tea..."

Sarah: "Yeah... And she hesitates... Maybe because she really wants to

refuse, but she hasn't the guts."

The difference between Sarah's and James' opinions is that Sarah is more direct about what she means and she gives examples from the text that support her arguments. Sarah is a good example of a student who is well suited for this kind of collaborative educational method. Her written parts were short and unstructured, whereas her contribution to the discussion were excellent.

5.3.4 Lucy

The last student is Lucy. Lucy was the second student who prepared before the discussion by reading the text in advance. What was particularly interesting with Lucy was that she constantly responded to others' opinions. She almost never brought up anything new or answered any of my questions, however she often reflected upon what the other students said. She asked follow-up questions, mentioned possible scenarios and argued for the opposite. Her contribution to the discussion became largely to draw the interest and attention away from me as a supervisor to the members of the group. She listened carefully to the others' opinions and reacted to their arguments. Whenever she felt that they were too weak, she made them be more clear and to explain further.

Sarah: "I think that the ghost by the well was the dead mother..."

Lucy: "Yeah...But the son saw the ghost when the mother was still alive... How do you explain that?"

Sarah: "It doesn't say that the mother was with him when he saw the ghost..."

Lucy: "So you mean that he saw his own mother but didn't recognize him?"

Sarah: Yeah...He didn't recognize her on the photo when they were eating in the end..."

Lucy: "Ok...That could be possible..."

In Rosenblatt's book, it says that by responding questions from teachers or from the other participants in the group, students are stimulated to search for knowledge that can elucidate the problems they meet (101). This way of arguing might seem lazy and easy, always to follow up on what someone else thinks. However, she was the one in the group who actually was interacting with the others. By responding to their arguments, she did not only focus her attention towards me, as the supervisor, as the others did. On the contrary, her focus was on the

other students and on their opinions. She was the one in the group who was really discussing with the others and not only presenting her opinions. As a consequence, of her reflecting upon their arguments, the student whom she responded to had to defend and develop his or her idea, which accordingly led to the fact that everyone had to reconsider their arguments and make them clearer. Her answers in the first questionnaire however show that she indeed had opinions of her own, quite similar to the others, which leads to the deduction that she did what she did in order to challenge the others. Whatever her reason was, the outcome was interesting and developing for the other students. Lucy's contribution to the group discussion clearly followed the sociocultural theory. She used the possibility to interact, to learn more about the others and to make the discussion an educational situation.

5.4 The Balance in the Group

In this paragraph, the focus will be on the group, the cooperation between the members in the group, the dynamics and the balance within. The group was studied from a sociocultural perspective where the focus is to look at how the communication and the discussion between the members worked. The structure of the group was as said before just made randomly and unconsciously. The members of the group did not have any particular relation to each other, although the four boys all volunteered in pairs whereas the two girls joined in as individuals. During the discussion, it was rather evident that the students were not completely comfortable with each other. Their contribution to the discussion was mainly focused on reasoning about the text with me and not particularly with each other. In addition, it was evident that they all, except for Lucy that is mentioned in the passage above about the individual contribution, were somewhat afraid of stepping on each other's toes. As mentioned above Rosenblatt and the reader-response theory say that during a group discussion students can in a friendly manner question each other and consequently force the other students to develop the consequences of the viewpoints they have taken. They will thereby develop a more critical and analytical attitude towards the understanding of literature and furthermore realize the necessity of a more well reasoned foundation for their thoughts and opinions (Rosenblatt 101). Nevertheless, the students more or less avoided clearly confronting each other's reflections of the text. If this was a sign of them respecting each other and valuing each other's individual opinions or if it was a matter of discomfort is hard to tell. Avila et al writes in their study about the atmosphere in the group during the conversation:

All ideas that were brought up into the joint discussion were considered and handled. A shared decision was made after joint consideration. The participants seemed to be committed to solve problems together. They seemed to respect each other's views. They did not try to pursue others to accept their personal points of view and were ready to admit the limitations of their arguments (166).

This was partly the matter in the literary group conversation held in my study, however I saw the silence and the lack of response rather as a way of avoiding confrontation than a proof of them actually respecting each other's opinions. This was a personal, hypothetical reflection which might not have any relevance. Säljö argues that in a sociocultural perspective it is important to have in mind that the communicative and collective thinking is in focus. Thinking is something we participate in and cognition is something that appears between people who are engaged in the same activity. This way of approaching the act of thinking is the opposite of the traditional perception of thinking as a private activity (Säljö 111 *my translation*). During the discussion, the students worked their way towards solving problems they encountered. If one student was not able to come up with a certain expression or word, the others suggested possible alternatives and finally the wanted expression was found.

Sarah: "I don't think that killing your own family is a... what is the word? Like what you do?"

James: "A thing?"

Sarah: "No... more like... It is not a...of honor."

Lucy: "Do you mean 'an act of honor'?"

Sarah: "Yeah! I do not think that killing your own family is an act of honor or principles. I think it is cruel and selfish"

This cooperation was made completely naturally, without any discernable feelings of irritation or shame from the student who was speaking. This is obviously a clear example of how the sociocultural theory works in practice. Säljö expresses that thinking is a process like the one the students were a part of during the discussion. The sociocultural way of describing the act of thinking is not a reflection of an individual absorbed in his or her own thoughts. However, more of a collective act and a form of communicative work where different contributions from the individual participants give the group a shared communicative solution (111 *my translation*). They seemed in general desperate to agree with what the others said and were sometimes afraid to question each other's opinions. The reactions the students expressed throughout the discussion was not to ask each other questions about the individual reflections on text, however

the students still showed their reactions to different opinions but then more by being silent or looking confused. This made the student insecure and as a result, he or she subsequently defended or explained the argument. This proves that there are other forms of interaction but verbal communication that can be effective while having a group discussion. Arvaja et al say in their investigation that: “The participants were avoiding disagreement. If someone did disagree on something, he/she was easily persuaded to agree with the others” (166). This quotation confirms this particular result of my study. The students strived for trying to find the correct interpretation of the text, instead of arguing for different ways of understanding it. Säljö argues that what holds an interaction or a conversation together is merely the fact that we give and take meanings according to certain predetermined rules, that we think in group (108 *my translation*). This cooperative thinking could be seen during the discussion when the students reasoned about certain aspects that initially were unclear, however after some deliberation; the students reached a conclusion and agreed to the same interpretation.

Sarah: “I think that the son will move back to Japan and to his father.”

Lucy: “Why do you think so? He doesn’t want to be there now, so why would he want to move home?”

James: “He has nothing left in the states. He has no girlfriend and his apartment is empty.”

Lucy: “Yeah... But don’t you think the bad relationship to the father... I mean... He doesn’t like his father so how could he move back?”

Sarah: “That’s true, but I think that he feels that he has to move home since his father is so lonely and that he wants to help his sister take care of him. He maybe doesn’t want to go home, but he feels that he has to.”

James: “Yeah, I think so too.”

Lucy: “Ok. Yeah, maybe.”

Rosenblatt and the reader-response theory argue that when several students at one point discussed the same poem the discussion stimulated the students to observe all the different components in the poem, and thereby a more complete and adequate reaction was reached (98). The text *A Family Supper* similarly brought up a conversation about childhood and family relations. When this occurred, the discussion accordingly became more personal. The students shared their more personal reflections connected to the family relations in the text. Rosenblatt makes a comment on the fact that we all bring our personal experiences to the written material and then make sense of it:

The reader, drawing on past linguistic and life experiences, links the signs on the page within certain words, certain concepts, certain sensuous experiences, certain images of things, people, actions, scenes. The special meanings, and more particularly, the submerged associations that these words and images have for the individual reader will largely determine what the work will communicate to him. (30)

The fact is, moreover, that when the discussion became more personal, when the students were allowed and felt comfortable in sharing their personal reflections, the feeling and the atmosphere in the group were more relaxed and the students now more explicitly turned towards each other when they talked. Avila et al., also reflect about this issue in their article: “Thus, *what* they were discussing had an impact on *how* they discussed it” (170). The reason for this change in attitude when they reasoned about the interpretation in contrast to when they were telling each other about their own private experiences might be their implied desire to find a correct understanding of the text. Moreover, that they unconsciously believed that there was a completely accurate interpretation. When talking about something personal, no one can know what is correct or what is wrong. Earlier it was mentioned that hierarchical rules could be observed within the group. Those rules were established mainly on the basis of the degree of contribution in the discussion and this in connection to the level of knowledge. Those students who had prepared before the discussion were both high in rank and their opinions were often considered the correct ones, according to the students and their wish to find an exact understanding of the text. However, Sarah’s active participation in the discussion also made her high up in the hierarchy. Moreover, since there were only two girls but four boys, the gender balance in the group was also unequal. However, the fact that the girls were underrepresented in the group was compensated by their active participation during the discussion and therefore their contribution was however highly valued by the rest of the members.

5.5 Individual evaluation

In this study, the second questionnaire was mainly done in order for me to receive response from the students regarding the process of reading a literary text and discussing it in a group. However, it was also an opportunity for the students to consider their level of participation, which is also a large part of the syllabus: “The student is supposed to reflect over and draw conclusions from his or her way of learning English. The student is supposed to, on his or her own and in cooperation with others make assignments and thereafter draw conclusions of his or her work” (The National Agency for Education 15-16). Reflecting upon what knowledge we

receive, and being aware of how and when we learn the most, is invaluable to our development as students. Rosenblatt argues for the importance of personal reflection: “It is when the student has had his or her spontaneous reactions to the literary text that the process of educational development can begin. Not until the student critically studied his or her reaction to the literary text, can the student understand his or her personal attitudes and thereby gain a more well founded reaction to literature” (93). Dugan also emphasizes the significance of the individual evaluation. In her study, she calls it “*Looking back*” and it is a part of her programme where the students are encouraged to evaluate their learning (88).

6. Conclusion

This section will briefly summarize the most interesting parts from the analysis. I will look at the conclusions that can be drawn regarding the individuals and special fascinating issues in connection to their contribution in to the literary discussion. In addition, this section will bring up the positive and negative aspects that could be detected from the literary group discussion. Moreover, I will consider future research and pedagogical implications in connection to literary group discussions.

The literary discussion held with the group, with Kazuo Ishiguro’s *A Family Supper* as a base for the conversation, appeared to lead to many more conclusions ever expected when the idea was initially formed. The discussion and the literary process with the questionnaires and the individual evaluation all appeared to have a positive impact on the students. The two theories on which the study was based, the reader-response theory and the sociocultural theory, both made it easier to remain focused on the important aspects during the process especially when it came to analyzing and reflecting upon the results. Originally, the aim was more concentrated on the individual contribution to the group regarding interpretation and understanding of a literary text. However, since the pedagogical framework emphasized the group as a unit and that the idea with the sociocultural perspective was the importance of collective interaction and communication between people as an ultimate foundation for an educational situation, my aim changed slightly. My focus changed from the individual towards the group as a whole. Since the research questions are connected to the sociocultural theory, which also was a reason to change the perspective of thinking.

The most interesting results found or conclusions drawn during the process concerning the individual participation are to start with, the fact that a group discussion clearly can give the individual reader another perspective of the same text. Each individual carries his or her experiences to the understanding of the text, which consequently form the interpretation and the individual reactions to a text. Sharing these experiences and consequently being influenced by others' individual reflections help the students widen their imagination and subsequently to receive a larger understanding of the complexity of literary texts. Another interesting conclusion is the fact that preparing before a literary group discussion might be advantageous for the individual reader. With preparing I mean reading the chosen text in advance, searching for facts about the author or reading about e.g. social issues in connection to the text. The student might then be able to reflect on the text and the interpretation more deeply and therefore present arguments that are more complex and well prepared. Preparing might additionally be in favor for the individual reader and the results from my study show that the students who prepared were in favored by this. However, there are no assurances that a student who has prepared before the discussion will be the most active during the interaction.

Another conclusion drawn from the individual contributions, but that affects the balance in the group is that in order to create an interactive environment within the group, it is beneficial if the students aim at having the discussing with each other and not with the supervisor. If this is the case, the discussion tends to be more of an examination between the student and the supervisor than a social group interaction. Furthermore, in order for the group to actually function as a group, it is an advantage if the students feel that they are comfortable in talking and reasoning with each other; to question each other and challenge each other's arguments. This develops the students' ability to argue and forces them to really have well-structured arguments with relevance. In addition, when reading literature and discussing interpretations in a group the results, in terms of deep conversation and students who feel free to share their reflections and reactions openly, might be of a higher level if the group is already established.

What is important to have in mind when having a literary discussion in a group regarding pedagogical implications, is to be aware of the importance of the supervisor's flexibility. The supervisor need to have an open mind when it comes to what issues the students will find interesting to discuss. It is unwise to take part in such as process with set expectations of how the discussion will progress. Since the group consists of human beings with individual thoughts and experiences, as a supervisor you can never know which direction the discussion will take

or what issues the students will find interesting. Finally, the conclusion of the study of the literary discussion with an emphasis on the sociocultural theory is consequently utterly satisfying.

During the analysis, I persistently tried to follow the set research questions. Since they were revised as my aim changed its focus, it was sometimes hard to answer them. However, the conclusion is still that I managed to find the answers in my result. In the future, it would be interesting to study a collaborative literary discussion in a longer period of time, where the development of the students' interaction skills and literary skills could be investigated.

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A Family Supper by Kazuo Ishiguro

Fugu is a fish caught off the Pacific shores of Japan. The fish has held a specific significance for me ever since my mother died through eating one. The poison resides in the sexual glands of the fish, inside two fragile bags. When preparing the fish, these bags must be removed with caution, for any clumsiness will result in the poison leaking into the veins. Regrettably, it is not easy to tell whether or not this operation has been carried out successfully. The proof is, as it were, in the eating.

Fugu poisoning is hideously painful and almost always fatal. If the fish has been eaten during the evening, the victim is usually overtaken by pain during his sleep. He rolls about in agony for a few hours and is dead by morning. 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 in for the feast.

At the time of my mother's death, I was living in California. My relationship with my parents had become somewhat strained around that period, and consequently I did not learn of the circumstances surrounding her death until I returned to Tokyo two years later. Apparently, my mother 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. It was my father who supplied me with the details as we drove from the airport to his house in the Kamakura district. When we finally arrived, it was nearing the end of a sunny autumn day.

"Did you eat on the plane?" my father asked. We were sitting on the tatami floor of his tearoom.

"They gave me a light snack."

"You must be hungry. We'll eat as soon as Kikuko arrives."

My father was a formidable man with a large stony jaw and furious black eyebrows. I think now in retrospect that he much resembled Chou En-lai, although he would not have cherished such a comparison, being particularly proud of the pure samurai blood that ran in the family.

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

“I am sorry to hear about the firm,” I said when neither of us had spoken for some time. He nodded gravely.

“In fact the story did not end there”, he said. “After the firm’s collapse, Watanabe killed himself. He did not wish to live with the disgrace.”

“I see”

“We were partners for seventeen years. A man of principle and honour. I respected him very much.

“Will you go into business again?” I asked.

“I am- in retirement. I am too old to involve myself in new ventures now. Business these days has become so different. Dealing with foreigners. Doing things their way. I do not understand how we have come to this. Neither did Watanabe.” He sighed. A fine man. A man of principle.

The tearoom 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.

“I am glad in any case that you have decided to come back,” my father said. “More than a short visit, I hope”.

“I am not sure what my plans will be.”

“I for one am prepared to forget the past. Your mother too was always ready to welcome you back- upset as she was by your behaviour.”

“I appreciate your sympathy. As I say, I am not sure what my plans are.”

“I have come to believe now that there were no evil intensions in your mind, “my father continued. “You were swayed by certain- influences. Like so many others.”

“Perhaps we should forget it, as you suggest.”

“As you will. More tea?”

Just then, a girl’s voice came echoing through the house.

“At last.” My father rose to his feet. “Kikuko has arrived”

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

"I must attend to the supper. Please excuse me for being burdened down by such matters. Kikuko will look after you. "

My sister relaxed visibly once he had left the room. Within a few minutes, she was chatting freely about her friends in Osaka and about her classes at university. Then quite suddenly, she decided that we should walk in the garden and went striding out onto the veranda. We put on some straw sandals that had been left along the veranda rail and stepped out into the garden. The daylight had almost gone.

"I have been dying for a smoke for the last half-hour", she said, lighting a cigarette.

"Then why didn't you smoke?"

She made a furtive gesture back towards the house, then grinned mischievously.

"Oh, I see," I said.

"Guess what? I have got a boyfriend now."

"Oh, yes?"

"Except I am wondering what to do. I have not made up my mind yet."

"Quite understandable."

"You see, he is making plans to go to America. He wants me to go with him as soon as I have finished studying."

"I see. And do you want to go to America?"

"If we go, we are going to hitch hike," Kikuko waved a thumb in front of my face. "People say it is dangerous, but I have done it in Osaka and it is fine.

"I see. So what are you so unsure about?"

We were following a narrow path that wound through the shrubs and finished by the old well. As we walked, Kikuko persisted in taking unnecessarily theatrical puffs on her cigarette.

"Well. I have got a lot of friends now in Osaka. I like it there. I'm not sure I want to leave them all behind just yet. And, Suichi- I like him, but I am not sure I want to spend so much time with him. Do you understand?"

"Oh, perfectly."

She grinned again, then skipped on ahead of me until she had reached the well. “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 had 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 even turned her back to the well, casting her gaze about the garden.

“Mother never really blamed you, you know”, she said in a new voice. I remained silent. “She always used to say to me how it was their fault, hers and father’s for not bringing you up correctly. She used to tell me how much more careful they had been with me, and that’s why I was so good”. She looked up and the mischievous grin had returned to her face. “Poor mother” she said.

“Yes. Poor mother”.

“Are you going back to California?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to see”.

“What happened to –to her? To Vicky?”

“That’s all finished with“, I said. There’s nothing much left for me now in California.”

“Do you think I ought to go there?”

“Why not? I don’t know. You’ll probably like it.” I glanced towards the house. “Perhaps we’d better go in soon. Father might need a hand with the supper”

But my sister was once more peering down into the well. “I can’t see any ghosts”, she said. Her voice echoed a little.

“Is father very upset about his firm collapsing?”

“Don’t know. You can never tell with father”. Then suddenly she straightened up and turned to me. “Did he tell you about old Watanabe? What he did?”

“I heard he committed suicide”.

“Well, that wasn’t all. He took his whole family with him. His wife and his two little girls”.

“Oh yes”?

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

“Yes. Father was just telling me how Watanabe was a man of principle”.

“Sick.” My sister turned her back to the well.

“Careful. You’ll fall right in”.

“I can’t see any ghost”, she said. “You were lying to me all the 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”.

Kikuko pushed her elbow against my arm. “Oh be quite. You’re trying to frighten me all over again”. She trod on the remains of her cigarette, then for a brief moment stood regarding it with a perplexed expression. She kicked some pine needles over it, then once more displayed her grin. “Let’s see if supper’s ready”, she said.

We found my father in the kitchen. He gave us a quick glance, then carried on with what he was doing.

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

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

“Just these vegetables need cooking now”, he said to her. “The rest just needs watching”. The he looked up and regarded me strangely for some seconds. “I expect you want to look around the house”, he said eventually. He put down the chopsticks he had been holding. “It’s a long time since you’ve seen it”. As we left the kitchen I glanced back towards Kikuko, but her back was turned.

“She is a good girl”, my father said quietly. I followed my father from room to room. I had forgotten how large the house was. A panel would slide open and another room would appear. But the rooms were all startlingly empty. In one of the rooms the lights did not come on, and we stared at the stark walls and tatami in the pale light that came from the windows.

“This house is too large for a man to live in alone”, my father said. “I don’t have much use for most of these rooms now”. But eventually my father opened a the door to a room packed full of books and papers. There were flowers in vases and pictures on the walls. Then I noticed something on a low table in the corner of the room. I came nearer and saw it was a plastic model of a battleship, the kind constructed by children. It had been placed on some newspaper; scattered around it were assorted pieces of grey plastic. My father gave a laugh. He came up to the table and picked up the model.

“Since the firm folded”, he laughed, “I have a little more time on my hands”. He laughed again, rather strangely. For a moment his face looked almost gentle. “A little more time.”

“That seems odd”, I said. “You were always so busy.

“Too busy perhaps”. He looked at me with a small smile. “Perhaps I should have been a more attentive father”. I laughed. He went on contemplating his battleship. Then he looked up. “I hadn’t meant to tell you this, but perhaps it’s best that I do. It’s my belief that your mother’s death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments”. We both gazed at the plastic battleship.

“Surely”, I said eventually, “my mother did not expect me to live here forever”.

“Obviously you don’t see. You don’t see how it is for some parents. Not only must they lose their children, they must lose them to things they don’t understand”. He spun the battleship in his fingers. “These little gunboats here could have been better glued, don’t you think”?

“Perhaps. I think it looks fine”.

“During the war I spent some time on a ship rather like this. But my ambition was always the air force. I figured it like this. If your ship was struck by the enemy, all you could do was struggle in the water hoping for a lifeline. But in an aeroplane- well- there was always the final weapon”. He put the model back onto the table. “I don’t suppose you believe in war”.

“Not particularly”. He cast an eye around the room. “Supper should be ready by now”, he said. “You must be hungry”.

Supper was waiting in a dimly lit room next to the kitchen. The only source of light was a big lantern that hung over the table, casting the rest of the room into shadow. We bowed to each other before starting the meal.

There was little conversation. When I made some polite comment about the food, Kikuko giggled a little. Her earlier nervousness seemed to have returned to her. My father did not speak for several minutes. Finally he said:

“It must feel strange for you, being back in Japan”.

“Yes, it is a little strange”.

“Already, perhaps, you regret leaving America”.

“A little. Not so much. I did not leave behind much. Just some empty rooms”.

“I see”. I glanced across the table. My father’s face looked stony and forbidding in the half-light. We ate on in silence. Then my eye caught something in the back of the room. At first I continued eating, then my hands became still. The others noticed and looked at me. I went on gazing into the darkness past my father’s shoulder.

“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”?

“My mother. You see, it’s dark. I can’t see it very well”. No one spoke for some seconds, then Kikuko rose to her feet. She took the photograph down from the wall, came back to the table and gave it to me.

“She looks a lot older”, I said.

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

“It was the dark. I couldn’t see it very well”. I looked up and noticed my father holding out a hand. I gave him the photograph. He looked at it intently, then held it towards Kikuko. Obediently, my sister rose to her feet once more and returned the picture to the wall. There was a large pot unopened at the centre of the table. When Kikuko had seated herself again, my father reached forward and lifted the lid. A cloud of steam rose up and curled towards the lantern. He pushed the pot a little towards me.

“You must be hungry”, he said. One side of his face had fallen into shadow.

“Thank you”. I reached forward with my chopsticks. The steam was almost scalding. “What is it”?

“Fish”.

“It smells very good”.

In amidst soup were strips of fish that had curled almost into balls. I picked one out and brought it to my bowl.

“Help yourself. There’s plenty”.

“Thank you”. I took a little more, then put the pot towards my father. I watched him take several pieces to his bowl. Then we both watched as Kikuko served herself.

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 is plenty for all of us”. My father lifted the lid and once more steam rose up. We all reached forward and helped ourselves.

“Here”, I said to my father, “you have the last piece”.

“Thank you”.

When we had finished the meal, my father stretched out his arms and yawned with an air of satisfaction. “Kikuko”, he said. “Prepare a pot of tea, please”. My sister looked at him, then left the room without comment. My father stood up.

“Let’s retire to the other room. It’s rather warm in here”. I got to my feet and followed him into the tea-room. The large sliding windows had been left open, bringing in a breeze from the garden. For a while we sat in silence.

“Father”, I said, finally.

“Yes”?

“Kikuko tells me Watanabe-San took his whole family with him”. My father lowered his eyes and nodded. For some moments he seemed deep in thought. “Watanabe was very devoted to his work”, he said at last. “The collapse of the firm was a great blow to him. I fear it must have weakened his judgement”.

“You think what he did – it was a mistake”?

“Why, of course. Do you see it otherwise”?

“No, no. Of course not”.

“There are other things besides work”.

“Yes”.

We fell silent again. The sound of locusts came in from the garden. I looked out into the darkness. The well was no longer visible.

“What do you think you will do now”, my father asked. “Will you stay in Japan for a while”?

“To be honest, I hadn’t thought that far ahead”.

“If you wish to stay here, I mean here in this house, you would be very welcome. That is, if you don’t mind living with an old man”.

“Thank you. I’ll have to think about it”.

I gazed out once more into the darkness.

“But of course”, said my father, “this house is so dreary now. You’ll no doubt return to America before long”.

“Perhaps. I don’t know yet”.

“No doubt you will”. For some time my father seemed to be studying the back of his hands. Then he looked up and sighed.

Kikuko is due to complete her studies next spring”, he said. “perhaps she will want to come home then. She’s a good girl”.

“Perhaps she will”.

“Things will improve then”.

“Yes I’m sure they will”.

We fell silent once more, waiting for Kikuko to bring the tea.

M.A Moskow and Britta Olinder, eds. Criss-Cross Tales. Short Stories from English-Speaking Cultures. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2002.

Questionnaire 1.

- 1. What was your first thought after having read *A Family Supper*?**
- 2. How did the text make you feel about the relation between father and son?**
- 3. How did the text make you feel about the relation between father and daughter?**
- 4. Why do you think the son lives in America?**
- 5. What do you feel about the ending?**
- 6. The father talks much about having principles in the short story. What do you think that means? What does he want to say to his son, do you think?**
- 7. What do you think the story wants to tell us, as readers?**

Questionnaire 2.

- 1. How did you feel about answering the questionnaire before the group discussion?**
- 2. How did you feel about discussing this short story in the group?**
- 3. What was positive about the group discussion?**
- 4. What was negative about the group discussion?**
- 5. What did you think about the questionnaires?**
- 6. How do you want to work with literary texts?**
- 7. Did you miss anything in the process?**

