

Repressed Grief and the Unconscious Family: A Psychoanalytic Study of Characters in Kazuo Ishiguro's "A Family Supper"

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Abstract

The contemporary short story frequently represents psychological conflict not through direct confession but through silence, ambiguity, symbolic objects, fragmented memory, and strained interpersonal relationships. Kazuo Ishiguro's "A Family Supper" offers a particularly significant example of this mode of characterization. The story presents an apparently simple reunion between an unnamed narrator and his family in Japan following the death of his mother. Beneath the ordinary domestic setting, however, lie grief, fear, repression, guilt, unresolved conflict, and an uncertain relationship between the characters. This paper undertakes a psychoanalytic study of the major characters in the story, with particular attention to Freudian concepts of repression, the unconscious, displacement, repetition, death anxiety, and the conflict between instinctual desire and social restraint. The study argues that the father's emotional rigidity functions as a mechanism of repression, while the narrator's uncertainty and suspicion reveal the psychological consequences of unresolved childhood fear and family trauma. Kikuko's apparent detachment is interpreted as a defensive withdrawal from an emotionally disturbed domestic environment. The recurring images of poisonous food, ghosts, darkness, empty rooms, and silence are examined as symbolic expressions of unconscious anxiety. The paper further argues that the story's central tension emerges not from overt action but from what remains psychologically unspoken. The family cannot openly mourn the mother's death and therefore redirects its emotional conflict toward stories of suicide, business failure, poisonous fish, and family tragedy. By applying psychoanalytic theory to characterization and symbolism, the study demonstrates that *A Family Supper* is a narrative of repressed mourning in which the unconscious continually returns through objects, memories, fears, and silences. The paper concludes that Ishiguro transforms the domestic family space into a psychological landscape where ordinary actions conceal unresolved emotional conflict.

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro; *A Family Supper*; psychoanalysis; repression; unconscious; grief; family conflict; characterization

Introduction

Contemporary fiction has increasingly explored the hidden dimensions of human behaviour. Modern and contemporary writers often move beyond the representation of visible action and concentrate instead on memory, silence, trauma, fear, desire, and psychological conflict. In such narratives, the most important events may not be those that physically occur within the plot. They may exist in the minds of the characters as suppressed memories, fears, fantasies, or unresolved emotional experiences.

Psychoanalytic literary criticism provides an important method for examining these hidden dimensions. Influenced primarily by the theories of Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic criticism investigates the relationship between conscious behaviour and unconscious desire. It considers the possibility that human beings may act in ways whose psychological causes are not immediately visible to them. Repression, displacement, anxiety, guilt, defence mechanisms, and the return of suppressed memories consequently become important concepts for literary analysis.

Kazuo Ishiguro's fiction is particularly suitable for such an approach. His characters frequently struggle with memory, self-deception, emotional restraint, and the inability to confront painful truths directly. Rather than presenting psychological conflict through dramatic emotional statements, Ishiguro often employs understatement, hesitation, indirect speech, gaps in memory, and silence. His characters may appear calm while experiencing profound emotional disturbance.

"A Family Supper" presents a brief but psychologically complex account of a young man's return to his family home in Japan after a period of living abroad. His mother has died under disturbing circumstances, apparently after eating poisonous fish. His father's business partner, Watanabe, has also died after killing himself and his family. The narrator returns to a household shaped by absence and emotional uncertainty. He meets his father and sister, Kikuko, and eventually shares a meal with them.

On the surface, the narrative contains little conventional action. Yet the story produces considerable psychological tension. The narrator repeatedly encounters signs that create fear and uncertainty. The house seems unfamiliar. The dead mother remains psychologically present despite her physical absence. The father's emotional behaviour is difficult to interpret. Kikuko appears detached from the family situation. The repeated discussion of poisonous fish produces anxiety concerning the final family meal.

The present paper argues that these elements can be productively understood through psychoanalysis. The family's emotional life is characterized by repression. The characters do not directly express their grief, anger, fear, or guilt. Instead, their psychological conflicts emerge indirectly through objects, memories, stories, pauses, and symbolic images.

The study therefore examines the major characters—the father, the unnamed narrator, and Kikuko—as psychologically divided individuals. Their external behaviour does not fully reveal

their internal emotional condition. Each character develops a different response to loss and family tension.

The central argument of this paper is that *A Family Supper* represents the family as an unconscious psychological structure. The family members are connected not only by visible relationships but also by shared silences, repressed memories, inherited fears, and unresolved grief. The house itself becomes a symbolic space in which the past continues to influence the present.

Review of Literature

Critical discussions of *A Family Supper* have frequently emphasized its atmosphere of ambiguity, silence, cultural tension, and psychological uneasiness. Scholars have observed that the story's apparent simplicity conceals significant emotional and narrative complexity.

One important area of criticism concerns Ishiguro's use of silence. The conversations between characters are frequently interrupted, indirect, or incomplete. The characters often avoid sustained discussion of emotionally painful subjects. Silence therefore functions not merely as an absence of speech but as a meaningful element of characterization.

Another important approach examines the influence of ambiguity and dramatic tension in the story. The narrative repeatedly encourages the reader to suspect that an event may occur while refusing to provide complete confirmation. The poisonous fish, the father's behaviour, the memory of Watanabe's family tragedy, and the uneasy atmosphere of the final meal all contribute to this uncertainty.

Recent studies have also drawn attention to Ishiguro's use of non-action, visual stillness, pauses, and emotional distance in the construction of family relationships. Such approaches demonstrate that psychological tension in Ishiguro's fiction often develops through what the characters fail to do or say.

Studies of intercultural communication have similarly examined the story's indirect language and restrained dialogue. These analyses reveal how meaning may be produced through implication rather than explicit statement.

However, while silence, ambiguity, visual stillness, and indirect communication have received considerable attention, these features can also be examined as manifestations of unconscious psychological conflict. The present study contributes to this discussion by concentrating specifically on the psychoanalytic dimensions of characterization.

The story's characters do not openly process their emotional experiences. Instead, grief is displaced into conversations about other deaths. Fear is transferred onto food. The dead mother reappears through memory and imagined presence. Childhood authority continues to influence the adult narrator's perception of his father. Kikuko withdraws from meaningful communication and appears emotionally detached.

A psychoanalytic approach therefore allows these separate elements to be examined within a single framework: the persistence of repressed emotion.

Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis and Literary Character

Psychoanalytic criticism originates in the work of Sigmund Freud, whose theories fundamentally transformed the understanding of human consciousness. Freud argued that the conscious mind represents only a limited part of psychological life. Beneath conscious awareness exists the unconscious, a domain containing desires, memories, fears, and conflicts that may not be directly accessible to the individual?

One of Freud's most influential concepts is repression. Repression refers to the psychological process through which painful, unacceptable, or disturbing experiences are prevented from entering conscious awareness. However, repression does not destroy the suppressed material. The repressed experience may return indirectly through dreams, anxiety, repeated behaviour, symbolic objects, slips of language, or apparently irrational fears.

This concept is particularly relevant to *A Family Supper*. The central family trauma—the death of the mother—is rarely discussed in a direct and emotionally complete manner. Instead, the story repeatedly approaches the subject indirectly. The characters discuss poisonous food, suicide, family tragedy, and the consequences of business failure. These subjects function as substitutes through which the family can approach its own emotional crisis without confronting it directly.

Freud's concept of displacement is also useful. Displacement occurs when an emotional response is transferred from its original object to another object or situation. A person may be unable to express fear or anger toward its actual cause and instead attach that emotion to something safer or more manageable.

The family's anxiety about food can be understood through this concept. The poisonous fish is not simply a physical object within the narrative. It becomes psychologically connected with the mother's death and with the narrator's fear that the father may possess destructive intentions. Food, which normally represents family unity and care, becomes associated with danger and death.

The concept of repetition is equally significant. Freud observed that individuals may repeatedly return to painful experiences, even when those experiences produce suffering. This repetition may represent an unconscious attempt to understand or master unresolved trauma.

In Ishiguro's story, the family repeatedly circles around the subject of death. The mother has died. Watanabe has killed himself and his family. The possibility of poisoning appears again during the final meal. The narrative repeatedly returns to death without directly resolving its emotional meaning.

Psychoanalysis also provides a useful method for examining the relationship between childhood experience and adult behaviour. The adult narrator continues to perceive his father through the emotional memory of childhood. His fear and uncertainty cannot be understood only as reactions to the present situation. They are shaped by earlier experiences of paternal authority.

Thus, the story's psychological complexity emerges from the interaction between past and present. The characters are physically located in the present, but their behaviour is influenced by memories that remain emotionally active.

Repressed Grief and the Psychological Structure of the Family

The mother's death is the emotional centre of *A Family Supper*, yet she is physically absent from the narrative. This absence is psychologically significant. Although she does not appear as an active character, her death shapes the atmosphere of every interaction.

The family's inability to mourn openly suggests a process of repression. Mourning normally involves recognizing loss and gradually integrating that loss into emotional life. In the story, however, grief remains unresolved because the characters do not communicate openly about it.

The father's response is particularly complex. He appears controlled and emotionally restrained. His behaviour may initially suggest strength, but psychoanalysis encourages a different interpretation. Emotional restraint can function as a defence mechanism. The father may suppress grief because acknowledging emotional vulnerability threatens his sense of authority and control.

The death of his wife is therefore not fully expressed through language. Instead, his emotional condition appears through indirect actions. His invitation to his children, his discussion of the family home, and his behaviour during the meal suggest a desire for connection that he cannot openly articulate.

The narrator also experiences the mother's absence indirectly. Her death remains connected with the disturbing image of poisonous fish. The object becomes a psychological reminder of trauma. The narrator cannot encounter food without associating it with danger and death.

The family home further intensifies this experience. The physical spaces of the house preserve memories of the past. Empty rooms and familiar objects become reminders of absence. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the home functions as a memory structure. The characters move through physical spaces that contain emotional traces of previous relationships.

The mother's absence consequently becomes a form of presence. She is gone, yet she remains psychologically active. Her memory influences the narrator's perception, the father's behaviour, and the emotional atmosphere of the house.

This relationship between absence and presence resembles the psychoanalytic return of the repressed. What the family attempts to avoid does not disappear. It returns in altered forms.

The Father: Repression, Authority, and the Fear of Emotional Collapse

The father is one of the most psychologically ambiguous characters in the story. He appears authoritative, controlled, and emotionally distant. Yet beneath this external discipline lies the possibility of profound emotional disturbance.

His character can be examined through the psychoanalytic concept of repression. The father's identity appears strongly connected with control. He represents an older form of paternal

authority associated with discipline, work, responsibility, and emotional restraint. Such an identity leaves little space for openly acknowledging grief or vulnerability.

The loss of his wife and the collapse of his professional world create a serious psychological crisis. His business has changed, his family has become divided, and his domestic life has been permanently altered by death. These losses threaten the stability of his identity.

Instead of openly confronting this crisis, the father maintains an appearance of composure. This restraint can be interpreted as a defence against emotional collapse.

His conversation about Watanabe is particularly revealing. Watanabe's suicide and the destruction of his family provide the father with an indirect narrative through which he can discuss despair. The father's reaction to Watanabe may therefore contain a displaced response to his own psychological condition.

The story does not establish that the father wishes to repeat Watanabe's actions. A psychoanalytic reading should not impose a diagnosis that the text does not support. However, the narrative deliberately places the two men in a psychological relationship. Both experience professional failure and family crisis. The discussion of Watanabe consequently creates anxiety about the father's emotional stability.

The father's preparation of the family meal intensifies this uncertainty. Food traditionally represents care and domestic unity. In the story, however, the meal is connected with the mother's death. The narrator's anxiety transforms the supper into a potentially dangerous event.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the father's role becomes divided. On one level, he is the provider who prepares food for his family. On another level, he becomes an object of unconscious fear. The narrator cannot determine whether the father represents protection or danger.

This ambiguity may originate partly in childhood experience. The father remains psychologically powerful even though the narrator is now an adult. The narrator's uncertainty suggests that the childhood image of paternal authority continues to influence his present perception.

The father therefore represents more than an individual character. He becomes a psychological figure through whom authority, fear, repression, and emotional dependence intersect.

The Narrator: Anxiety, Memory, and the Return of Childhood Fear

The unnamed narrator provides access to the story, but his perspective is not psychologically neutral. His observations are shaped by memory, fear, and uncertainty.

The narrator returns home after living abroad, and his return creates a confrontation between his adult independence and his unresolved connection with the family. Although he has physically separated himself from the household, he has not completely escaped its psychological influence.

His relationship with his father is especially important. The narrator appears cautious in the father's presence. His memories of childhood authority remain emotionally active. This suggests that the past continues to shape his interpretation of the present.

Psychoanalytic theory emphasizes that early family relationships may influence later emotional behaviour. The narrator's fear cannot be explained solely by what the father does during the visit. It is also connected with what the father has represented throughout the narrator's life.

The poisonous fish becomes the clearest expression of this anxiety. The narrator has reason to associate the fish with his mother's death, but his fear develops beyond factual knowledge. The final meal becomes psychologically charged because it brings together several unconscious associations: the mother, death, the father, Watanabe's family tragedy, and the possibility of self-destruction.

The narrator's imagination therefore transforms an ordinary supper into a threatening event.

This does not necessarily mean that his fear is irrational. Psychoanalysis does not require a strict division between rational and irrational experience. Instead, it investigates how emotional associations intensify perception.

The narrator's anxiety is also connected with the concept of repetition. The family appears to be approaching another meal associated with poisonous fish. The past seems ready to repeat itself. The narrator's fear may represent an unconscious expectation that unresolved trauma will return in the same form.

The narrator is thus caught between knowledge and uncertainty. He does not know the father's intentions, but he cannot escape the possibility that the past may repeat itself.

This psychological uncertainty is one of the story's central achievements. Ishiguro does not provide complete access to the father's mind. The reader experiences the father largely through the narrator's anxious perception. Consequently, the possibility of danger may reveal as much about the narrator's unconscious fear as about the father's actual intention.

Kikuko: Withdrawal, Detachment, and Psychological Defence

Kikuko appears less verbally dominant than the father and narrator, yet her behaviour is psychologically significant. She often seems detached from the emotional tension surrounding her.

A psychoanalytic reading may interpret this detachment as a form of defence. When an individual cannot comfortably confront a painful emotional environment, withdrawal may become a method of psychological protection.

Kikuko's distance from family conversation suggests that she has developed her own response to the household's emotional restrictions. She neither directly confronts the father's authority nor openly processes the mother's death.

Her behaviour can therefore be understood as a defensive withdrawal. Instead of participating fully in the emotional conflict, she creates psychological distance.

This does not mean that Kikuko lacks feeling. On the contrary, her apparent indifference may indicate that emotional engagement has become difficult or unsafe. Silence can function as protection.

Her character also reveals the consequences of a family structure in which painful experiences are not openly discussed. Each family member develops an individual defence mechanism. The father represses. The narrator becomes anxious and suspicious. Kikuko withdraws.

These different responses demonstrate that trauma does not produce a single psychological reaction. The same family event may generate different forms of defence according to the individual's position within the family.

Kikuko's presence is therefore essential to the story's psychoanalytic structure. She represents the silent observer whose emotional life remains largely inaccessible. Her opacity reinforces the larger theme that individuals within the same family may remain psychologically isolated from one another.

Poisonous Food as a Symbol of Death and the Unconscious

The poisonous fish is the most important symbolic object in the story. Its significance extends beyond the literal circumstances of the mother's death.

Food usually carries positive cultural associations. It represents nourishment, hospitality, family unity, and care. Ishiguro reverses these associations. The object that should sustain life becomes connected with death.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the fish becomes a symbolic container for repressed anxiety. The narrator's fear is transferred onto the food because the food is materially connected with the mother's death.

The final supper therefore represents more than a family meal. It becomes a symbolic repetition of the original trauma.

The psychological power of the object arises from its ambiguity. The narrator cannot fully determine whether the food is dangerous. The father's intentions remain uncertain. The possibility of poisoning exists primarily as an atmosphere of fear.

This uncertainty allows the object to function as a projection screen for unconscious anxiety. The narrator's fear attaches itself to the fish because the fish provides a concrete form for a deeper emotional crisis.

The object may also symbolize the destructive potential within the family. The family appears outwardly ordinary, yet its domestic space contains unresolved grief and fear. Food, the most familiar element of family life, becomes threatening.

The transformation of nourishment into danger reflects the psychological transformation of home into an unstable space. The narrator cannot completely trust the objects or relationships around him because his return has reactivated unresolved memories.

Ghosts, Darkness, and the Return of the Repressed

The story contains images that suggest haunting and psychological return. These images should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence of supernatural events. Instead, they can be understood as manifestations of memory and unresolved emotion.

In psychoanalytic criticism, the past often returns when it has not been successfully integrated into consciousness. A suppressed memory may reappear through dreams, symbols, fantasies, or obsessive associations.

The mother's absence creates precisely this condition. She is physically dead, but her psychological presence remains active. The family house becomes a space in which the dead continue to influence the living.

Darkness intensifies this atmosphere. The limited visibility of the environment corresponds to the limited psychological knowledge of the characters. They cannot clearly see one another's motives because they do not openly communicate.

The narrator's perception of the house is therefore connected with his mental state. The physical environment becomes psychologically expressive.

The ghostly atmosphere also reflects the persistence of memory. The mother is absent, yet the characters cannot escape the emotional consequences of her death.

This relationship between absence and return is central to psychoanalysis. Repression does not create complete disappearance. What has been suppressed may return in altered and symbolic forms.

The story's imagery consequently transforms the domestic setting into an unconscious landscape. Darkness represents uncertainty. Empty rooms represent loss. Food represents anxiety. Ghostly presence represents memory. Silence represents repressed emotion.

Silence as a Psychoanalytic Language

Silence is one of the most important structural and psychological features of *A Family Supper*. The characters speak, but they rarely communicate completely.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, silence should not be interpreted simply as the absence of language. It may represent resistance.

Resistance occurs when the mind avoids confronting a painful truth. The characters may approach emotionally difficult subjects but then change the direction of conversation. They discuss Watanabe rather than directly examining their own grief. They refer indirectly to the mother's death without fully exploring its emotional consequences.

Silence therefore becomes a form of speech.

The father and narrator share moments of conversation that remain incomplete. These gaps reveal the emotional distance between them. Neither character possesses a language capable of fully expressing vulnerability.

The narrator's silence is shaped by fear and uncertainty. The father's silence is shaped by authority and repression. Kikuko's silence is shaped by withdrawal.

Although these silences have different psychological causes, they produce the same result: emotional isolation.

The family occupies the same physical space but remains psychologically separated.

This is one of the story's central paradoxes. The family supper should symbolize unity. Instead, it reveals the limits of family communication.

The meal brings the characters together physically while exposing their emotional distance. The family's inability to speak openly becomes the strongest evidence of their shared trauma.

Death Anxiety and the Repetition of Family Trauma

The repeated presence of death in the story can be understood through the psychoanalytic concept of death anxiety.

The mother's death initiates the emotional crisis. Watanabe's suicide introduces another family tragedy. The poisonous fish suggests the possibility of further death. These elements create a pattern in which mortality repeatedly enters the family's consciousness.

The characters are unable to control death, but they repeatedly attempt to explain it.

The father's discussion of Watanabe demonstrates this need for explanation. If Watanabe's actions can be understood as the result of professional failure or psychological weakness, then death may appear more manageable. Yet the explanation remains incomplete.

The same uncertainty surrounds the mother's death. The family cannot arrive at a stable emotional interpretation of what happened.

The result is repetition without resolution.

The family repeatedly returns to stories of death because the original trauma has not been fully processed. This pattern resembles Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, in which the individual repeatedly encounters or recreates aspects of unresolved experience.

The final meal becomes the most powerful example of this repetition. The object associated with the mother's death returns to the family table.

The story therefore creates psychological tension through recurrence. The past does not remain in the past. It reappears within the present.

The Family Home as an Unconscious Space

The house in *A Family Supper* is more than a physical setting. It can be interpreted as a symbolic representation of the family's psychological condition.

The different rooms contain memories of previous relationships. The changes within the house suggest that the family structure itself has been altered by death and separation.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, enclosed spaces frequently acquire symbolic significance because they create boundaries between what is visible and what is hidden.

The family house similarly contains visible and invisible histories. The characters move through familiar spaces, but those spaces have changed because the people and relationships associated with them have changed.

The home therefore becomes psychologically unstable.

For the narrator, returning home involves returning to earlier versions of himself. He is not simply visiting a building. He is confronting the emotional environment in which his childhood identity was formed.

This return produces anxiety because the adult narrator must encounter memories that he has not completely resolved.

The house also contains the father's loneliness. His invitation to the children can be interpreted as an attempt to restore a lost family structure. Yet the restoration is impossible because the past cannot simply be recreated.

The family's psychological crisis is therefore reflected in the physical environment. The house contains both memory and absence.

Findings

The psychoanalytic analysis of *A Family Supper* produces the following findings:

Repression is the central psychological mechanism

The major characters avoid direct emotional confrontation. Grief, fear, guilt, and loneliness are expressed indirectly through objects, pauses, memories, and conversations about other people.

The father represents controlled repression

The father's emotional restraint should not be understood as the absence of feeling. His controlled behaviour suggests an attempt to maintain authority in the face of personal and professional loss.

The narrator's fear is shaped by unconscious memory

His anxiety concerning the final meal emerges from the interaction between present uncertainty and earlier experiences of paternal authority, maternal death, and family trauma.

Kikuko represents defensive withdrawal

Her emotional distance can be interpreted as a strategy for surviving an environment in which grief and conflict cannot be openly expressed.

Symbolic objects reveal hidden psychological conflict

The poisonous fish, darkness, empty rooms, and ghostly images transform physical objects and spaces into representations of anxiety, memory, and loss.

Silence functions as an unconscious language

The characters' inability to speak openly does not indicate the absence of meaning. On the contrary, silence becomes the principal medium through which their emotional conflict is revealed.

The family repeatedly returns to unresolved trauma

The repeated association of death, poisonous food, and family destruction demonstrates the persistence of unprocessed grief.

Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Family Supper* demonstrates how a short story can create profound psychological complexity through restraint. The narrative does not depend on extensive action or direct emotional confession. Instead, it constructs its meaning through silence, memory, symbolic objects, anxiety, and unresolved relationships.

A psychoanalytic study of the characters reveals that the family is united by a shared experience of repression. Each character responds differently to emotional trauma. The father attempts to preserve control and authority. The narrator experiences anxiety and uncertainty. Kikuko withdraws into emotional detachment.

The mother's death remains the central but largely unspoken trauma. Because the family cannot fully confront this loss, grief returns indirectly. It appears through poisonous food, conversations about suicide, memories of childhood, ghostly presence, darkness, and silence.

The final supper becomes the symbolic centre of the narrative. It should represent family unity, but it instead exposes the psychological instability of the family. The characters are physically gathered around the same table, yet they remain separated by what they cannot say.

The psychoanalytic concepts of repression, displacement, repetition, and unconscious anxiety provide a productive framework for understanding this tension. The story demonstrates that suppressed experience does not disappear. It returns through symbolic forms.

The father's emotional restraint conceals vulnerability. The narrator's suspicion reveals the continuing influence of childhood fear. Kikuko's silence functions as psychological withdrawal. Together, these characters create a family structure in which emotional communication has broken down.

The study therefore concludes that *A Family Supper* is fundamentally a narrative of repressed mourning. Its psychological power arises from the gap between external calm and internal disturbance. Ishiguro transforms ordinary domestic elements into symbols of unconscious conflict and demonstrates that the most significant events in human relationships are often those that remain unspoken.

By examining characterization through psychoanalysis, the present study also highlights the importance of the unconscious in contemporary short fiction. The characters' behaviour cannot

be explained solely through visible events. Their present actions are shaped by hidden memories, fears, and emotional histories.

Ultimately, *A Family Supper* presents the family not as a space of complete intimacy but as a psychological structure filled with concealed histories. The story's enduring power lies in its recognition that silence may preserve emotions that language cannot easily contain.

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