The Elephant Vanishes Study Guide

The Elephant Vanishes by Haruki Murakami

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Haruki Murakami's □The Elephant Vanishes□ was first published in English in the *New Yorker* in November 1991 and is found in his short story collection *The Elephant Vanishes: Stories* published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1993. Jay Rubin translated the story from Japanese into English. The short story was also included in the anthology *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, edited by Theodore Goossen. *The Elephant Vanishes: Stories* consists of seventeen short stories told in first-person point of view.

Like other stories in this collection, □The Elephant Vanishes□ focuses on a strange incident that leaves its protagonist disoriented. An unnamed narrator tells the story of how an aged elephant and its keeper mysteriously disappear one night from his town's elephant house. The narrator, who is the protagonist of the story, recalls the events leading up to the elephant's sudden vanishing, the news coverage of the incident, and the futile efforts of the townspeople to find the elephant and the keeper. He also discusses the strange circumstances of the elephant's disappearance, which indicate that the elephant apparently vanished into thin air. After meeting a magazine editor who is a potential love interest, the narrator ends up talking about how he witnessed the elephant shrinking or the keeper becoming bigger or both on the night of their disappearance, and the story concludes with the bewildered narrator lamenting the loss of the elephant and the keeper. Like other Murakami stories, this one is imbued with a sense of things being out of order in urban, contemporary society, which leaves its characters feeling alienated, disillusioned, and unable to make choices about their lives.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: Japanese

Birthdate: 1949

Haruki Murakami was born on January 12, 1949 in Ashiya City, Japan, a suburb of Kobe. The son of two high-school Japanese literature teachers, Murakami became fascinated with American pop culture as a teenager and began reading works of American literature in English as an adolescent. In 1968, he began studies at Tokyo's Waseda University, eventually graduating with bachelor's degrees in screenwriting and Greek drama in 1975. In 1971, he had married fellow Waseda student Yoko Takahashi. With Takahashi, Murakami opened a jazz bar called the Peter Cat in a Tokyo suburb in 1974, and together, they managed the club until 1981, when Murakami began devoting himself full-time to his writing.

In 1979, Murakami published his first book, a novel entitled *Hear the Wind Sing*, which he first wrote in English and then translated into Japanese. *Hear the Wind Sing* won the prestigious Gunzo Award, a first-novel prize, and the book launched Murakami's career as the leading fiction writer of Japan's post-war generation. Following this novel, Murakami published two more novels, *Pinball, 1973* (1980) and *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1982), which was the first of Murakami's works to be translated into English. In 1981, Murakami also began publishing his translations of works by modern American writers from English into Japanese, including writings by Grace Paley, Raymond Carver, Ursula K. Leguin, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. In 1985, Murakami published his fourth novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, which garnered major critical and commercial success in Japan and won the coveted Junichiro Tanizaki Prize.

Murakami's fifth novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987) sold over two million hard-cover copies in Japan. He published his sixth novel *Dance, Dance, Dance* in 1988 and his seventh novel *South of the Border, West of the Sun* in 1992. From 1985 to 1995, Murakami lived abroad, first in Greece and Italy and then in the United States where he held positions at Princeton University, Harvard University, and Tufts University. While at Tufts, Murakami wrote his three-volume novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994-1995).

Although primarily known as a novelist, Murakami has also written several volumes of short stories, seventeen of which were published in his English-language collection *The Elephant Vanishes* (1993), in which the short story □The Elephant Vanishes□ appears. Some of these short stories, translated into English by his regular translators Jay Rubin and Alfred Birnbaum, appeared originally in the *New Yorker*.

Following his return to Japan, Murakami published a two-volume non-fiction book *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (1997-1998) and, following that, novels *Sputnik Sweetheart* (2001) and *Kafka on the Shore* (2005), as well as another short story collection *After the Quake: Stories*, translated into English by Jay Rubin in 2002. Murakami's works have been translated into over twenty languages, and

his many awards include the Noma Award for new writers in 1982, the Yomiuri Literary Prize in 1996, and the Kuwabara Takeo Award in 1999.

Plot Summary

□The Elephant Vanishes□ begins with the narrator recalling how he read in the newspaper about the disappearance of an elephant from his town's elephant house. The narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the story, describes his daily routine, which includes reading the newspaper from start to finish. He then describes the article that tells about the elephant's mysterious disappearance the day before. He notes that according to the article, both the elephant and its keeper have vanished leaving authorities baffled.

The narrator interrupts his description of the newspaper article to relate how the elephant had come to be adopted by the town a year earlier. He recalls that when financial problems caused a private zoo to shut down, the zoo's other animals had been placed in various zoos throughout Japan. However, because the elephant was so old, other zoos would not take it, so the elephant remained in the abandoned zoo until an agreement was reached among various parties in the town. The parties included a high-rise condo developer who had bought the land where the old zoo had stood, the mayor of the town, and the former zoo's owners. The narrator describes the negotiations among the parties, as well as opposition to the plan by opponents of the mayor, who eventually accepted the new plan.

The narrator notes that the debate about the elephant problem concluded with the town's taking charge of the ancient elephant and relocating it to an elementary school's old gym, which was located in a clearing in a wooded area. The elephant's aged keeper from the zoo also came to live in a small, prefab house next to the elephant, so he could continue to tend to the animal's needs.

The narrator goes on to humorously recall the elephant-house dedication ceremony. He describes in detail how the elephant was secured to a concrete slab by a heavy steel chain and shackle around its right rear leg. He describes the keeper as □not an unfriendly□ old man who maintained a close, mysterious bond with the elephant that the narrator futilely tried to understand.

The narrator then says that after a year of living in the new location, being visited by elementary school children and others, the elephant completely vanished without warning. Resuming his description of the newspaper article about the elephant's disappearance, the narrator says how odd he finds the article to be. He attributes the article's strangeness to the reporter's efforts to maintain a neutral, objective tone, while clearly being confused by the absurdity of the situation.

The narrator then gives three reasons why the elephant could not have escaped□in spite of the reporter's use of this wording□but instead had to have vanished. The narrator points out that the steel cuff binding the elephant had been found still locked in the house and that this improbable event had occurred in spite of the fact that the keys to the cuff were kept in locked safes in police headquarters and the firehouse. The

narrator notes that both keys were found in their respective safes after the elephant's disappearance.

The narrator also points out that the elephant house had been surrounded by a massive fence consisting of heavy iron bars almost ten feet high. In addition, the only entrance to this enclosure had been found locked from the inside after the elephant's disappearance. The third strange circumstance the narrator describes is the lack of elephant tracks. He notes that a steep hill occupied the back of the elephant house, so that the only route of escape would have been a path at the front of the house, which completely lacked elephant prints in its soft earth. Following his listing of these circumstances, the narrator reiterates that the elephant could not have escaped but had to have vanished.

The narrator adds, however, that the mayor, the reporter, and the police would not openly admit that the elephant had vanished and that the police were investigating the incident. He recalls how the mayor held a news conference defending the elephant security system and denouncing the persons responsible for the elephant's disappearance. The narrator describes news coverage of the event, which called for citizens knowing anything about the incident to come forward. As he drinks his second cup of morning coffee, the narrator thinks about telling the authorities what he knows but decides against contacting the police, as he thinks they would never believe him.

The narrator then recalls how he cut out the elephant article and pasted it into a scrapbook he fastidiously keeps of all the articles about the elephant. He relates how he watched the seven-o'clock news, which showed hunters with rifles, Self-Defense troops, police, and firemen searching for the elephant in the woods and hills of the Tokyo suburb where the narrator resides. The narrator states that although the search took several days, the authorities were unable to find a single clue concerning the elephant's whereabouts. As he recalls reading and pasting all the news clippings into his scrapbook, the narrator talks about the pointlessness of the articles, which reveal nothing substantial about the incident. He states that over many months, interest in the incident waned as the elephant case fell into the category of □unsolvable mysteries.□ In spite of the reduction of general interest in the elephant story, the narrator says that he continued to visit the old elephant house whenever he got a chance. He describes the thick chain around the gate and □the air of doom and desolation□ that hung over the empty space.

In the final part of the story, the narrator recalls meeting an editor of a magazine for young housewives several months after the elephant's disappearance. The narrator meets the editor at a party his company is throwing to launch its new line of kitchen appliances. Since the narrator is in charge of the company's publicity campaign, he shows the editor around the display, and he explains the principle of unity governing the design of the kitchen appliance line. The editor questions the importance of unity in a kitchen and asks the narrator what his personal opinion of the matter is. He declines to answer until he's off work and says how □things you can't sell don't count for much□ in the pragmatic world in which they live.

After debating whether the world is indeed pragmatic, the editor and the narrator continue to flirt and talk over champagne and later over drinks in the hotel's cocktail lounge. Although the conversation flows smoothly at first and the narrator recalls being drawn to the editor, he notes that things took a turn when he brought up the topic of the elephant. He immediately regrets bringing up the subject, but the editor presses him for more details when he says he was probably not shocked by the elephant's disappearance. After balking a moment, the narrator tells the editor what he knows about the elephant.

He tells the editor that he is probably the last person to see the elephant before it disappeared, as he saw the elephant after the zoo closed that evening. The narrator explains that he had sometimes watched the elephant and the keeper through an air vent in the elephant house's roof, which was visible from a spot on a cliff behind the house. He recalls how impressed he had been by the obvious trust and affection the elephant and the keeper displayed when they were out of the public eye.

When the editor asks him whether he always liked elephants, the narrator admits that he did, although he is not sure why. The editor also asks him if there was anything unusual about the elephant or the keeper on the night of the disappearance. After hesitating, the narrator says there was and there wasn't. He goes on to explain that although the keeper and the elephant were doing the same things they always did, the balance in size between the two of them had changed. He tells the editor that either the elephant had shrunk or the keeper had gotten bigger or both simultaneously. When asked, he also admits that he did not tell the police, because he thought they would not believe him and that he would have become a suspect in the case.

When pressed further about the occurrence, the narrator states that he can only say he probably saw the change in appearances, since he does not have any proof of the change actually happening. To himself, he notes that he had the feeling that □a different, chilling kind of time was flowing through the elephant house□but nowhere else.□

When the editor asks him whether he believes that the elephant either shrunk until it was small enough to escape or dissolved into nothing, the narrator again hesitates and says he does not know what happened and that it is impossible for him to imagine events beyond what he thinks he saw. Following this revelation about the elephant, the conversation between the editor and the narrator becomes awkward, and they part outside the hotel.

The narrator says that that was the last time he saw the editor. Although he considered asking her out for dinner, he ended up not doing so due to a sense of emotional paralysis that he experiences after the elephant's vanishing. The story ends with the narrator describing his unease following the incident and how in spite of succeeding more than ever in his job, he feels bewildered and permanently unsettled. He comments that the papers print almost nothing now about the elephant and that the elephant and its keeper will never return.

Characters

The Editor

An unnamed editor of a magazine for young housewives appears in the second part of the story as the narrator's potential love interest. She meets the narrator at a party to launch an advertising campaign thrown by the manufacturing company for which the narrator works. An intelligent and curious twenty-six-year-old woman, the editor talks to the narrator about the kitchen appliances his company is selling, the idea of pragmatism, and other topics at the party and afterward while they are having drinks in a hotel bar. Although they seem to enjoy an initial connection, after the narrator recounts his witnessing of the bizarre circumstances leading to the elephant's disappearance, the conversation dead ends and after leaving the lounge, the editor does not see the narrator again.

The Elephant

The unnamed elephant is a symbolic character in the story, representing an old way of life. Although its exact age is not known, the elephant arrived in the town from East Africa twenty-two years before it disappeared. The elephant is so old that it cannot be relocated to another zoo when the town's zoo closes. The elephant maintains a close bond with its keeper, and the two characters mysteriously vanish at the same time.

The Mayor

The mayor negotiates the agreement among the town, a real-estate developer, and the zoo's former owners to relocate the elephant to new surroundings after the old zoo closes down. A minor character, the mayor is a kind of stock figure of a suburban politician who holds ineffective news conferences following the elephant's disappearance.

The Narrator

An unnamed narrator tells the story of the disappearance of an old elephant and its keeper from the Tokyo suburb where he lives. A thirty-one-year-old man who works for the public relations section of a major electrical appliance manufacturer, the narrator obsessively tracks the elephant's story from the time of its relocation to an old elementary school gym through its mysterious vanishing. He meticulously keeps a scrapbook of articles on the elephant's disappearance and witnesses the strange circumstances that may account for the occurrence. Like many of Murakami's characters, the narrator is an isolated and quirky person who seems bewildered by the absurdity of his daily life. He also meets and thinks about courting a young magazine editor. However, following the elephant's disappearance, the narrator finds that he has

become so unsettled by the loss of balance in the world that he cannot act, and he never bothers to ask the editor out.

Noboru Watanabe

The only named character in the story, Noboru Watanabe is the sixty-three-year-old zookeeper who has tended the elephant for over ten years. The narrator describes the keeper as a □reticent, lonely-looking old man,□ who faithfully takes care of all the elephant's needs and lives next to the elephant after it is relocated from the old zoo. The keeper and the elephant enjoy a special bond, which the narrator notices as he spies on them through an air vent in the elephant house. The keeper is generally kind to children who come to see the elephant, and the zoo authorities describe him as knowledgeable and dependable. However, the keeper remains a mysterious character throughout the story, and in the end, he disappears along with the elephant.

Themes

Imbalance

One of the major themes of the story is the idea of things being out of balance. This theme is introduced when the narrator tells the editor about the importance of unity in kitchen design, as he states, □Even the most beautifully designed item dies if it is out of balance with its surroundings.□ The narrator later emphasizes the importance of balance between a creature and its environment when he talks about witnessing the change in the elephant's size in relation to the keeper's size. He states that the balance in size between the two has become more equal, because the elephant has shrunk or the keeper has gotten bigger, or both. Following the disappearance of the elephant and the keeper, the narrator again expresses the idea that □things around me have lost their proper balance.□ He is no longer able to take action on his own behalf, as he is haunted by this sense that the urban world is out of balance, and he feels that a kind of natural balance has broken down inside him.

Appearances and Reality

Related to the theme of imbalance is the difference between appearances and reality. The narrator points out that the article covering the story of the elephant's disappearance is strange, because the reporter tries so hard to maintain that the elephant escaped, when the facts indicate that the elephant had to have almost magically vanished. The characters in the story try to maintain an appearance of normality in the face of an event that defies logic, leading to pointless acts that do not address the nature of the situation. The discrepancy between reality and appearances also arises in the narrator's job as he basically just goes through the motions, trying to maintain a professional, pragmatic approach although he does not personally believe that a kitchen has to have unity or any of the other maxims his company invokes to sell its products. The narrator finds that he cannot reconcile the differences between appearances and reality, and as he questions his own perceptions, he experiences a sense of disorientation and confusion.

Modern Times

Another theme of the story concerns how modern developments have supplanted old ways of life. The story takes place in an affluent Tokyo suburb during the 1980s, when Japan was experiencing an economic boom. The event that sets all the other events of the story in motion is the construction of high-rise condos, which literally take the place of the old zoo, forcing the elephant to be relocated to the new elephant house. The old elephant and its aged keeper are emblems of former times, ways of life, and longstanding intuitive relationships, which have been pushed aside by commercial ventures. Throughout the story, Murakami lightly satirizes the absurdity of modern life,

particularly when the narrator describes the town's reaction to the elephant's disappearance. The reactions of various townspeople such as the mayor, a □worried-looking□ mother, the police, Self-Defense Force troops, an anchorman, and the reporter show how inept and illogical conventional urban responses can be. As the narrator puts it, the newspaper articles were all □either pointless or off the mark.□ Police response is ridiculous and futile. In all, the absurd civic response to the bizarre situation of a misplaced elephant shows, in almost a comic way, how urban mindset fails to imagine, much less comprehend, the fantastic or intuitive.

Alienation

Throughout the story, Murakami subtly reveals how the vanishing of the old ways leaves people feeling disoriented and how the new ways of being create a sense of disconnection and unease. The narrator, for example, performs his job as a public relations executive successfully by espousing the commercial viewpoint that □things you can't sell don't count for much.□ Because in truth he does not necessarily believe this statement, saying it and operating from this pragmatic mode seem to confound the narrator, confusing him about his purpose in life. Like other Murakami characters, he is also a loner, a single person, living alone with no apparent ties to family or friends. The narrator watches the elephant and the keeper and marvels at their closeness, their special bond. In the wake of the elephant's disappearance, the narrator feels despondent, more isolated and alone than ever.

Style

Setting

The short story takes place in a suburb of Tokyo during the 1980s, when Japan was experiencing an economic boom. The town is affluent, and its inhabitants enjoy a relatively peaceful life, which is only occasionally disrupted by bizarre incidents such as the vanishing of the elephant. Prosperity has led to new developments such as the high-rise condos destined to replace old institutions like the zoo. The story also takes place at a time when the process of Americanization was well under way in Japan, as the narrator states that his company likes to use English words such as □*kit-chin*□ to sell products.

Point of View and Conflict

The story is told from the first-person point of view, with an unnamed narrator relating the events. The primary conflict in the story is internal, with the narrator trying to make sense of the events immediately preceding the elephant's disappearance and the essentially strange but apparently normal world he inhabits. At the end of the story, the conflict remains mostly unresolved, as the mystery of the elephant's disappearance is never solved, and the narrator feels unsettled by a permanent sense of imbalance in the wake of the elephant's vanishing. The first part of the story is propelled by the narrator's recollections of the events leading up to the elephant's vanishing and his thoughts on how the case was handled by his town and in the newspapers. The last part of the story focuses on the narrator's recollections of his conversation with an editor and includes dialogue between the two characters.

Flashback

Several times in □The Elephant Vanishes,□ Murakami uses the device of flashback to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story. He begins the story in the past, and most of the story consists of the narrator's recollections of events in the recent past. Murakami begins the story with the narrator relating what he was doing when the elephant disappeared from the elephant house. He then uses flashback as the narrator recalls earlier events such as the elephant's relocation to the elephant house from the zoo that went out of business. This flashback gives the reader information about the town, its workings, and how the elephant and its keeper came to live in the new elephant house.

Dialogue

Murakami also employs dialogue to relate events that occurred prior to the beginning of the story. The last part of the story consists mostly of dialogue between the narrator and

the editor. In this dialogue, the narrator reveals what he saw the night the elephant and its keeper vanished. The dialogue also serves to reveal the personalities of the narrator and the editor.

Motifs

Murakami uses the motif of water to reinforce readers' awareness of disappearance or a sense of dissolution. When describing how general interest in the elephant's disappearance waned after some months went by, the narrator states, □Amid the endless surge and ebb of everyday life, interest in a missing elephant could not last forever,□ thus likening daily life to the eroding action of ocean tides. The water motif occurs again several paragraphs later, when the narrator compares summer memories to water flowing □into the sewers and rivers, to be carried to the deep, dark ocean.□ Here too the water motif conveys a sense of things disappearing inevitably into a vast ocean. Since water can evaporate into air and is inherently unstable, this motif mirrors the vanishing, parallels the idea of impermanence, and suggests the narrator's sense of being unsettled by a world out of balance.

Murakami also specifically invokes the image of rain to convey a sense of sadness and gloom. Describing the empty elephant house, the narrator states that □A few short months without its elephant had given the place an air of doom and desolation that hung there like a huge, oppressive rain cloud.□ Later when he talks to the editor, the narrator notes several times the presence of a soundless, damp rain, again suggesting the presence of a persistent eroding and unsettling force. After their conversation takes a turn toward the weird, when the narrator starts talking about the elephant, the narrator compares ice melting in the editor's drink to a □tiny ocean current.□ With this image, Murakami again creates a feeling of things dissolving in some insidious, pervasive force.

Simile

Murakami uses similes or comparisons using □like□ or □as□ throughout the story to describe various states or situations, as when the narrator likens the atmosphere of the empty elephant house to □a huge, oppressive rain cloud.□ In another example, the narrator says that □a number of unremarkable months went by, like a tired army marching past a window.□

Historical Context

Murakami wrote and first published □The Elephant Vanishes□ in Japanese during the 1980s, and the story is set in Japan during this time. At the time of the writing, Japan was experiencing economic development, as were many countries in the world, including the United States. Following its crushing defeat in World War II, Japan had the fastest growing economy in the post-war period from 1955 to 1990. During the 1980s, Japan became the leading industrial state of East Asia, and it continued into the early 2000s to support one of the most advanced economies in the world, with only the United States out-producing it. With rapid industrialization during this time, Japan also became a thoroughly technological culture, with city dwellers using modern conveniences such as commuter trains, cars, and appliances. However, along with embracing technological advances and other aspects of modern life, Japan as of 2005 maintains traditional customs and culture, with modern and traditional values coexisting sometimes uneasily side by side.

The story reflects the affluence of middle-class Japanese society during the 1980s, with the building of high-rise condos in the narrator's town and the narrator's own success in his public relations job for an appliance manufacturer. It takes place in a wealthy suburb of Tokyo, one of the largest cities in the world. However, as in other Murakami stories, this short story could theoretically take place in any number of cities in the world, as very few details in the story mark the setting as specifically Japanese.

Murakami is widely recognized as one of the most popular novelists of his generation of writers, who grew up in post-World War II Japan and who disregarded traditional Japanese culture in favor of embracing American Pop culture. The story reflects the overall sensibility of Murakami's generation of writers, who were seemingly more interested in stylistic invention than overt political themes and who eschewed traditional Japanese modes of storytelling. However, Murakami also uses satire and humor to critique the banality of the culture he evokes, with its emphasis on selling products, materialism, and ultimate failure to value or experience the deeper, more mysterious aspects of life. As Celeste Loughman notes in her review of the collection in *World Literature Today*, Murakami has remarked that □'Something has vanished in these twenty-five years, some kind of idealism. It has vanished, and we became rich.'□ She comments that □His people are part of the get-rich society of mass production. They work in law offices, in quality control for department stores, in PR for appliance manufacturers. All are dissatisfied.□

Critical Overview

The Elephant Vanishes: Stories, the collection in which □The Elephant Vanishes□ appears, has received much acclaim from American and Japanese critics, who have lauded Murakami's originality and cosmopolitan style. Herbert Mitgang writing in the *New York Times* notes: □There are 17 charming, humorous and frequently puzzling short stories in *The Elephant Vanishes*, some of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*. Nearly all bear the author's special imprint: a mixture of magical realism, feckless wandering and stylish writing, often ending at a blank wall.□ Similarly, an anonymous reviewer writing in *Publishers Weekly* praises Murakami's unique talents, concluding that □In both his playful throwaway sketches and his darkly comic masterpieces, Murakami has proven himself a virtuoso with a fertile imagination.□

While acknowledging that Murakami has his detractors in Japan with some critics dismissing Murakami's writings as not serious enough to be high literature, Celeste Loughman in her review in *World Literature Today*, notes that the author remains □immensely popular in Japan.□ She also praises Murakami's subversive satirical techniques and his ability to critique contemporary Japanese society in fresh ways, as she notes, □Dissatisfaction with life in a depersonalized, mechanistic society is an overworked theme. Murakami's stories rise above the cliché by the inventiveness, the fantasies and dreams, with which the characters respond to their situations.□

Like other reviewers, David L. Ulin writing in the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* applauds Murakami's renderings of a strange, supremely international world: □But the 17 stories here also reflect strains of literature and popular culture ranging from classical fairy tales to 'The Twilight Zone,' making □The Elephant Vanishes□ one of the most consistently universal volumes of fiction you'll ever come across, a book that reflects the often disassociating experience of living at the end of the 20th Century, even for those who've never been within 5,000 miles of Japan.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hong is a published poet and the editor of the fiction and memoir anthology Growing Up Asian American*. In the following essay, Hong discusses how Murakami humorously and empathetically portrays a modern world marked by a sense of imbalance, emptiness, and unease.*

Like many of the stories in Murakami's acclaimed collection *The Elephant Vanishes: Stories*, □The Elephant Vanishes□ focuses on the life of an individual haunted by a sense of general disequilibrium. In this story, that individual is an unnamed narrator who relates how an old elephant and its keeper suddenly disappear one night from his town's elephant house. As an obsessive chronicler of the events related the elephant's disappearance, the narrator recalls news coverage of the incident, the futile attempts of the townspeople to find the elephant and the keeper, and the strange facts surrounding the case, which indicate that the elephant apparently vanished into thin air. In relating this odd, humorous, and surrealistic tale, Murakami lightly satirizes the problems of contemporary, urban society and explores the phenomena of alienation and imbalance that many people experience in the modern world.

The story opens with the narrator, a thirty-one-year-old public relations executive at a major kitchen appliance manufacturing company, telling how he read about the elephant's disappearance in the newspaper. From this initial description, Murakami draws attention to the absurdity of contemporary life by having the narrator recall the details of the article, as the narrator states, □The unusually large headline caught my eye: ELEPHANT MISSING IN TOKYO SUBURB, and, beneath that, in type one size smaller, CITIZENS' FEARS MOUNT. SOME CALL FOR PROBE.□ This headline seems both implausible and ridiculous, but as the narrator's recollection of events continues, the reactions of the townspeople to the missing elephant seem more and more absurd.

The first part of the story proceeds with the narrator interrupting his description of the newspaper article to tell how the elephant came to live with its keeper in a lone elephant house. He notes that the elephant's age led to its adoption by the town a year before the animal disappeared. When a private zoo had to close due to financial problems, the zoo relocated the other animals to zoos throughout Japan, but because the elephant was so old, no one would take it. The elephant then remained alone in the abandoned zoo until a deal was struck by the town's mayor, the developer who had bought the land the zoo was on, and the former zoo's owners. The narrator meticulously recounts the debates over how to deal with the elephant problem and the eventual outcome, with the town taking care of the elephant and relocating it to a new elephant house along with its long-time keeper. Throughout this section, Murakami pokes fun at modern life, again by having the narrator recall all the details with a wry, detached tone. Following his description of the new elephant house dedication ceremony, the narrator says, □The elephant endured these virtually meaningless (for the elephant, entirely meaningless) formalities with hardly a twitch, and it chomped on the bananas with a vacant stare. When it finished eating the bananas, everyone applauded.□

In this part of the story, Murakami also sets up the central theme regarding how commercialism and urban developments have supplanted older ways of life. The story is set in a wealthy Tokyo suburb during the 1980s, when Japan, the United States, and other countries were experiencing an economic boom. The event that sets the other events in the story in motion is the closing of the old zoo due to financial problems and the buying of that land by a developer who plans to build high-rise condos. This act□the literal replacement of a place of recreation and enjoyment with the money-making project□forces the elephant to be relocated to the new elephant house. The old elephant and its elderly keeper represent longstanding relationships and symbolize former ways of life, which have been pushed aside by commercial ventures. The narrator emphasizes that it is the elephant's age that keeps it from being adopted elsewhere, as it is deemed too feeble to be a good investment. But the relationship between the keeper and the animal is one of familiarity, love, and trust, not financial arrangements.

As the narrator begins again to describe the newspaper article about the elephant's disappearance, he discusses the facts surrounding the case that make it highly improbable that the elephant actually escaped. Upon rereading the article, the narrator concludes that the elephant had to have miraculously vanished somehow much to the bafflement of the town's authorities, who persist in denying this possibility. As he goes on to recount the town's responses to the elephant's vanishing, the narrator points out the futility of these actions, and again in having the narrator relate these details, Murakami satirizes the blind literalness and lack of imagination in modern life. Among other details, the narrator recalls how the mayor held a news conference defending the elephant house's security system and denouncing persons responsible for the elephant's disappearance and politicizing an event which defies ordinary comprehension: □'This is a dangerous and senseless anti-social act of the most malicious kind, and we cannot allow it to go unpunished.'□

The narrator also describes the reactions of a □worried-looking□ mother interviewed on the news; Self-Defense Force troops, firemen, and policemen combing the woods for the elephant to no avail; and the silly commentary of a news anchorman about the incident. As he notes how interest in the story inevitably waned after several months of not finding the elephant or discovering how it disappeared, the narrator also mentions how dissatisfying all the official responses were. As he puts it, □Despite their enormous volume, the clippings contained not one fact of the kind that I was looking for.□ The narrator searches for answers regarding the mysterious case, which these typical contemporary actions have all failed to address, and he is left feeling increasingly bewildered. Another aspect of modern life is the often bizarre discrepancy between unanswered questions and the reductive, matter-of-fact news reporting that distorts a story in order to compress it.

As the story progresses, the narrator continues to feel confused by the elephant incident and saddened by the disappearance of the elephant and its keeper. He feels □the air of doom and desolation□ hanging over the empty elephant house, which he continues to visit. His sense of disorientation following the vanishing is so strong that he finds he cannot make decisions he would like to make. His confusion becomes most apparent

after meeting a magazine editor at a party thrown by his company. The narrator recalls how he and the editor flirted at the party and continued their conversation at a hotel bar afterward as two people who □were beginning to like each other.□ However, after telling the editor about the elephant case, which had occurred a few months earlier, the narrator finds that their conversation becomes awkward.

While talking about the case, the narrator admits to having seen the elephant and the keeper on the night of their disappearance and says he was probably the last person to have seen them. He explains that he had been in the habit of spying on the keeper and the elephant through an air vent in the elephant house, which was visible from a spot on a cliff. When the editor asks if there was anything unusual about the two on the night they disappeared, the narrator goes on to say that there was and there was not. After hesitating, he says that although the two were doing what they always did, their relative size seemed to change, as either the elephant had shrunk or the keeper had gotten bigger or both. When the editor asks if he thinks the elephant shrunk until it was small enough to escape or □simply dissolved into nothingness,□ the narrator concludes that he does not know and that he has a hard time imagining what happened beyond the strange sight that he thinks he saw.

The editor and the narrator part ways soon after this conversation, and the narrator says he never saw her again. In spite of wanting to ask her out for dinner, he ends up never doing that, because it does not seem to matter one way or the other. The story concludes with the narrator admitting to feeling paralyzed. He finds it difficult to take action of any kind on his own behalf. He describes a sense of external and internal imbalance, which has left him disoriented:

I often get the feeling that things around me have lost their proper balance, though it could be that my perceptions are playing tricks on me. Some kind of balance inside me has broken down since the elephant affair, and maybe that causes external phenomena to strike my eye in a strange way. It is probably something in me.

Although the narrator blames himself for his sense of things being not quite right, Murakami conveys that the narrator alone is not to blame, as the banality of the world in which the narrator lives fails to provide the connection, continuity, and security that older ways of life offered. In the last few paragraphs of the story, the narrator notes that even as he feels things have lost their proper balance, he has become more successful than ever in his job, selling appliances by espousing a pragmatic viewpoint which he does not believe. The narrator points out that his campaign has been successful, because people crave □a kind of unity in this *kit-chin* we know as the world.□ In this statement, both the narrator and the author seem to emphasize that as modern society replaces traditional modes with things to buy, people will continue to long for some kind of security or sense of familiar order.

That longing for solace accounts for the narrator's strange, obsessive interest in the elephant and the keeper, as they represent old ways of life that are being pushed to the literally invisible margins. The elephant and the keeper palpably demonstrate what has been lost in the transition to modern culture, as the two of them display an unusually

strong bond of affection. The narrator watches them on a regular basis, because he marvels at the empathy he perceives, as he notes, □Their affection was evident in every gesture.□

This long-term closeness and warmth contrasts dramatically with the isolation the narrator experiences in his everyday life as a company man and with the empty gestures offered by the narrator's society at large, which fails to see the mystery at the heart of the vanishing much less to explain it. The pragmatic, consumerist contemporary world provides no room for the kind of intimate, intuitive bond shared by the elephant and the keeper, and Murakami seems to suggest that their vanishing is inevitable in the face of the new prosperity and materialistic values. Murakami subtly underscores the immeasurable price of this loss by his narrator's paralysis. The loss fills the last lines: □The elephant and keeper have vanished completely. They will never be coming back.□

Source: Anna Maria Hong, Critical Essay on □The Elephant Vanishes,□ in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

The Elephant Vanishes was adapted as a play by Simon McBurney and performed at the Setagaya Public Theatre in June of 2003. A description of the adaptation of the book to the stage appears online at http://www.ums.org under the title □An Elephant's Long Journey,□ written by Jay Rubin, one of Murakami's translators.

The publisher Random House maintains an official Murakami website at http://www.randomhouse.com/features/murakami which features ample information about the author, his books, and other online resources pertaining to Murakami.

Topics for Further Study

Read the scene in the story in which the narrator meets and talks with the editor. With a partner, re-enact this part of the story as a scene in a play. You may want to work in small groups to create scenery and adapt the dialogue.

Imagine that it is 1985, and you are living in a major city such as Los Angeles, New York, London, or Tokyo. Write a short journal entry that describes what your life is like on a typical day. Be creative, and use details that show what daily life is like, including your daily habits. You may want to research what was going on in the city of your choice before you write.

Pick a Japanese or American company and research the products that company sells. Then, imagine you are a public relations executive for that company and write and give a speech to persuade people to buy that company's products. Create a slogan and use supplementary photos, charts, or other graphics in your presentation.

Take a trip to the zoo and observe the elephants and find out how the elephants are cared for, what they eat, and what their habits are. Then, write an article about the elephants. You may also want to include details about where the elephants originally came from, how they came to live in the zoo, and arguments against confining animals in zoos.

Explore the ideas of balance and imbalance by creating a work of visual art that shows both states. Think about using color, shape, and size to heighten your effects. You may want to consult an art instructor or book to learn more about balance as a principle of art.

Rewrite the ending of the story by telling it from the keeper's or the elephant's point of view. Tell that character's version of what happened on the night the narrator observed the elephant shrinking and explain what happened to the elephant and the keeper and where they are after they disappear from the elephant house.

What Do I Read Next?

Murakami's *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle: A Novel* (1994-1995) traces the story of Toru Okada, an ordinary Japanese man who experiences a strange, unsettling journey when his cat and his wife disappear and he goes searching for them.

In *Underground: The Tokyo Gas Attack and the Japanese Psyche* (1997-1998), Murakami gives a riveting factual account of the tragic events that took place in Tokyo on March 20, 1995, when followers of the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo unleashed deadly sarin gas into the Tokyo subway system, killing and injuring many commuters on their way to work.

Murakami's two-volume novel *Norwegian Wood* (1987) tells a realistic love story of a man who falls in love with two women. This book catapulted Murakami to fame, as it sold over four million copies in Japan.

Murakami's novel *Kafka on the Shore* (2005) follows the strange paths of two characters: fifteen-year-old Kafka Tamura, who runs away from home in Tokyo to a town called Takamatsu, and Nakata, an elderly man who cannot read or write but who can speak with cats.

Japanese American historian Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1989) provides a comprehensive history of the contributions and struggles of different Asian Pacific Islander American groups, including Japanese Americans in the United States from the early 1800s through the twentieth century.

Cynthia Kadohata's novel *The Floating World* (1989) tells the story of a Japanese American family traveling around the United States during the 1950s in search of work and home. Narrated by the twelve-year-old Olivia, the novel depicts family dynamics against a backdrop of the so-called floating world of menial jobs and shifting locales.

Further Study

Goossen, Theodore W., ed., *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, Oxford University Press, 2002.

This anthology, which includes a version of □The Elephant Vanishes,□ comprises short stories from the end of the nineteenth century to the early 2000s.

Henshall, Kenneth G., *A History of Japan: From Stone Age to Superpower*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Henshall, a New Zealander professor of Japanese studies, provides a sweeping and lively account of the history of Japan, focusing on both political and cultural history.

Ikeno, Osamu, and Roger Daniels, eds., *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Culture*, Tuttle Publishing, 2002.

The editors, a Japanese professor and a British professor living in Japan, provide a guide to some aspects of contemporary Japanese culture, including rituals, myths, and ideas about social organization.

Rubin, Jay, *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*, Harvill Press, 2002.

Rubin, a translator and Harvard professor of Japanese literature, combines biography and critical analysis to portray Murakami. Rubin chronicles Murakami's obsessions, such as his fascination with cats and other animals, as he analyzes Murakami's writings.

Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edition, University of Hawaii Press, 2000.

Now in its fourth edition, Varley's book has been praised as an introductory text on Japanese history and culture.

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Murakami, Haruki, □The Elephant Vanishes,□ in *The Elephant Vanishes: Stories*, translated by Jay Rubin, Vintage International, 1994, pp. 308-27.

Review of *The Elephant Vanishes: Stories*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 240, No. 5, February 1, 1993, p. 74.

Ulin, David L, □Disorder Out of Chaos,□ in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, April 4, 1993, pp. 3, 11.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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