

## ***Haruki Murakami: The Elephant Vanishes***

*"The town has any number of other responsibilities it should be taking care of before it gets into the business of keeping an elephant."*

*The Elephant Vanishes* is both the final story in Murakami's collection and the title story. In a pattern with which the reader is probably familiar, *The Elephant Vanishes* presents a strange incident that leaves the narrator disoriented: an aged elephant and his keeper disappear mysteriously from an elephant house at the zoo. The story retells events leading up to the sudden vanishing, the news coverage of the event, and the futile efforts of the townspeople to find the elephant, who seems to have completely disappeared into thin air.

As the final story in the collection, *The Elephant Vanishes* is also one of the most sombre. Like other stories, it's imbued with a sense of things being out of order in our contemporary world, of something indefinable gone missing, leaving characters feeling alienated, disillusioned, and unable to make choices about their lives.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*How well do you know these chapters?*

**1. What time does the narrator's alarm clock wake him in the morning?**

- (a) 6.02
- (b) 6.13
- (c) 6.37
- (d) 6.54

**2. Who was the last known person to see the elephant?**

- (a) The narrator
- (b) School children
- (c) The zookeeper
- (d) The town mayor

**3. What is the most defining characteristic of the elephant?**

- (a) His long trunk
- (b) His sturdy legs
- (c) His circular ears
- (d) His sharp tusks

**4. Which of these is NOT one of the problems in explaining the elephant's disappearance?**

- (a) His enclosure gate was too small for him to pass through
- (b) The steel cuff was still fastened to his leg
- (c) The route of escape was blocked by a high fence
- (d) There were no tracks left by the elephant

**5. When does the narrator meet the magazine editor?**

- (a) End of September
- (b) Middle of October
- (c) Beginning of December
- (d) Christmas Eve

**6. What does the narrator say is the most important point in kitchen design nowadays?**

- (a) Beauty
- (b) Function
- (c) Unity
- (d) Price

**7. What sound does the narrator like?**

- (a) Ice in a whiskey glass
- (b) Rain on a windowpane
- (c) Elephants playing in the sun
- (d) The rustle of magazine pages

**8. What does the narrator say he saw with his own eyes that he cannot explain?**

- (a) The elephant vanished completely
- (b) The elephant squeezed through the bars of his enclosure
- (c) The elephant seemed to be shrinking
- (d) The elephant was speaking to his keeper

**9. What does the editor say she lost when she was a little girl?**

- (a) Her diary
- (b) Her best friend
- (c) Her sense of self
- (d) Her cat

**10. What colour is the editor's umbrella?**

- (a) Black
- (b) Blue
- (c) Pink
- (d) Red

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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. The story takes place in an affluent Tokyo suburb and is set in the 1980s. How does the story give you a sense of time and place, particularly in terms of modern life and modern values?
2. Throughout, the narrator follows the story of the elephant's disappearance through various media including newspaper and television news. How is the news media depicted in the story?
3. Describe the relationship between the elephant and its keeper. How does this relationship compare to others in the story, or in the wider collection?
4. The story features several minor characters (also known as stock characters) amongst the townspeople, such as the mayor, and soldiers of the Japanese Defence Force. How are these characters presented?
5. What does the narrator's conversations with the magazine editor reveal about his values, worldview, or viewpoint? Why do you think the conversation failed?
6. As the final story, the way *The Elephant Vanishes* ends is the final impression the reader will have about the whole collection. Describe the thoughts and feelings this story (maybe the last page, or the last paragraphs) leaves with you:

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## Important Symbolism: *disappearances and vanishing*

*"I had wondered at the time whether my eyes were playing tricks on me..."*



In the story of *The Elephant Vanishes*, an unnamed narrator is haunted by a sense of disequilibrium; even as he becomes financially more successful as a modern kitchen salesman, espousing a pragmatic viewpoint that he does not necessarily believe, he feels his life tilting out of balance. He becomes fixated with a strange incident that occurred in his town: an

elephant and his keeper suddenly disappeared. As a symbolic character, the elephant stands for older ways of living, ways that have been pushed aside in a world marked by corporate consumerism. A feature of the story is the elephant's warm relationship with his keeper, '*their affection was evident in every gesture*' recalls the narrator when describing their unusually strong bond. The '*pragmatic world*', with its emphasis on consumerism and economic development, provides no room for this kind of intimacy. Therefore, the elephant vanishing becomes a symbol of the cost of progress. What's even sadder is the way wider society fails to recognise what they are losing and soon forgets the mystery at the heart of the elephant vanishing.

By this point in Murakami's stories, the reader is accustomed to things disappearing, often without explanation. With the word '*vanishes*' in the collection's title, it's no surprise that this motif is a central metaphor symbolising different philosophical or emotional themes. For example, in *The Wind-up Bird and Tuesday's Women*, the narrator is asked by his wife to search for their cat, who's been missing for several days. Over the course of the story, the cat comes to represent ideas about the narrator's own self-regard and self-confidence (he tries to picture his own cat and can't) and his relationship with his wife (who accuses him of killing it through inaction). In the same story, a mysterious girl appears and disappears, and a '*wind-up bird*' is heard but never seen. Each has a symbolic interpretation: for example, the narrator wonders whether the world is capable of turning by itself, without the wind-up bird appearing every now and then to wind its spring like a mechanical toy.

Whether its realising that the world is bereft of bakeries (*The Second Bakery Attack*), barns being burned to the ground and girlfriends disappearing overnight (*Barn Burning*), a narrator feeling like she's become invisible to her own family (*Sleep*), or strange little creatures dissolving in front of our eyes (*The Little Green Monster*), the collection is full of people who disappear, vanishing animals, places that can't be found any more, and missing items... all representing ideas such as alienation from others, disconnection from history, the fragility of memory, and all the things that are inevitably lost as the world transforms.

### Activity

Roam through the story collection, considering stories you've studied in class and read by yourself. Collect all the things that have gone missing (people, places, items, animals, and even things less tangible) and try to account for what they represent. You could present this activity in a chart, as a mind-map, or create a Museum of the Lost displaying vanished items with explanatory captions.

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## Literary Study: *water imagery*

*“Amid the endless surge and ebb of daily life, interest in the elephant could not last forever.”*



*The Elephant Vanishes* is one of the most evocative stories in the collection and contains some of the most meaningful uses of imagery and symbolism. Beyond the elephant himself, there are many other symbols hidden in the folds of the story. For example, Murakami develops the **motif of water** to reinforce the reader's awareness of the theme of disappearing or dissolution. He likens the feeling of daily life to the eroding action of the ocean

through imagery in the line: *“Amid the endless surge and ebb of daily life, interest in the elephant could not last forever.”* Several lines later, the **water motif** reappears when Murakami describes happy summer memories *“flowing into rivers and sewers, to be carried to the deep dark ocean.”* The ceaseless flowing of water conveys a sense of things being carried away and disappearing inevitably and irretrievably into the unseen depths of the sea. Water's liquid quality parallels the idea of impermanence and helps evoke the sensation of reality being flowing, permeable, unfixed.

Through a related figurative technique called **pathetic fallacy**, Murakami shapes moody images of rain that reflect the emotional states of human characters. After the elephant is gone, the narrator describes the empty elephant house, stating 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.”* As in a film when bad events always seem to play out against a backdrop of rain, so too does Murakami envelop the desolation of an empty animal enclosure in a gloomy pall. Later, in his uncomfortable date with the magazine editor, the narrator repeatedly notes the presence of a soundless, damp rain falling, once again suggesting the persistent presence of an eroding force. As the conversation gets weirder and more uncomfortable the narrator notices ice melting in the editor's drink and compares it to *“a tiny ocean current.”* Once again, the feeling of something solid dissolving into nothingness is evoked through **water imagery**.

### Analytical Writing Practice

Choose a figurative image, description of the natural or urban environment, use of weather, or other examples of imagery from the stories in *The Elephant Vanishes*. Use your selection(s) to write a mini-essay in answer to the following prompt:

- *How does Murakami craft figurative imagery to reflect the mood, condition, or concerns of the characters in a story from *The Elephant Vanishes* collection?*

