

Interpreter of Maladies



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Though born in London, Jhumpa Lahiri moved with her Bengali-Indian family to America when she was still an infant and settled in Rhode Island. As a child Lahiri often returned to Calcutta, India to visit relatives. After completing graduate studies, including a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies at Boston University, Lahiri took the literary world by storm in 1999, when her first book of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies* (of which “The Interpreter of Maladies” is the title story), was published, going on to win the Pulitzer Prize in the year 2000. Books that followed include the 2003 novel *The Namesake*, and *The New York Times*-bestselling collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth*, published in 2008. Her 2013 novel, *The Lowland*, was a finalist for the National Book Award and was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Lahiri’s work deals primarily with the Indian-American immigrant experience, considering the bi-cultural worlds and identities that Indian-American immigrants inhabit and navigate.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While Lahiri’s texts often focus on family life and the domestic sphere, the central historical backdrop to her writing is often the immigration of Indians to America. The late 1990s, when *The Interpreter of Maladies* was published, were peak years of foreign immigration into the U.S.—largely as a result of an economy that was booming at the time. Indians especially constituted an ever-larger proportion of highly-educated and high-skilled immigrants moving to America, lured there by the prospect of well-paying jobs in sectors such as science, technology, and engineering. The movement of Indians to America in search of better lives often structures the identities, experiences, and relationships of Lahiri’s characters. Her writing delves into the obstacles they face as they attempt to navigate the distance between two worlds.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lahiri cites Irish author William Trevor and Canadian author Alice Munro—two masters of the short story—amongst her most important influences. Lahiri has noted in an interview that she devoured Trevor’s *Collected Stories* in 1995, a few years before publishing *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and her sparse, precise prose recalls Trevor’s own descriptive style. Parallels with Munro’s stories are also evident, particularly in both authors’ emphasis on epiphanies—or flashes of insight—as a structuring device in their fiction. Like the Canadian author,

Lahiri is adept at building deeply nuanced worlds of emotion within a few pages of a story. Nineteenth-century influences on her work include the Russian writers Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, as well as the English writer Thomas Hardy. Lahiri’s meticulous, observant prose, as well as her capacity for rendering the domestic tragedies of everyday life, owe a debt to these nineteenth-century authors.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** “Interpreter of Maladies”
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Literary Fiction, Short Story
- **Setting:** India
- **Climax:** Mrs. Das confesses to Mr. Kapasi that her son Bobby is the product of an affair.
- **Antagonist:** Mrs. Das
- **Point of View:** Third Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Nicknames: Jhumpa Lahiri’s real name is Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri. “Jhumpa” was the nickname given to her by her family, which her teachers used because they found it easier to pronounce.

Buongiorno: Jhumpa Lahiri wrote her most recent book, the memoir *In Other Words* (2015), in Italian. An account of her love affair with the Italian language, the book chronicles her attempts to master the language, and explores her experience of moving to Rome, Italy, with her family in 2012.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Das family is on their way to the **Sun Temple**. In the driver’s seat is the family’s hired tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, who has to stop shortly after setting off because the family’s youngest daughter, Tina, wants to go to the bathroom. Mr. Kapasi watches as Mr. Das and Mrs. Das bicker over who will accompany Tina to the restroom. Mrs. Das finally goes with her daughter, leaving Mr. Kapasi in the car with Mr. Das and his two sons. As they sit waiting for mother and daughter to return, Mr. Kapasi learns from Mr. Das that all members of the Das family were born in America, where they still live. However, the family is of Indian origin. Mr. and Mrs. Das’s parents have retired to

India, and the family visits them every couple of years.

Tina and her mother return to the car. As he watches her walking over, Mr. Kapasi is struck by Mrs. Das's appearance. Like her husband, she seems very young, and is very good-looking. Mr. Kapasi is intrigued by the entire Das family, which is completely Americanized in its speech and mannerisms despite its Indian roots.

The group continues on its way, and the children become excited when they notice **Hanuman monkeys** perching on branches along the road. One of the monkeys suddenly jumps in front of the car, forcing Mr. Kapasi to brake, and another lands on top of the hood. Mr. Das takes pictures of the monkeys with his **camera**. While he does so, Mrs. Das paints her nails in the backseat, and refuses to allow Tina, who sits beside her, to participate in the activity.

Once Mr. Das has finished taking pictures, Mr. Kapasi starts the car and continues driving towards the temple. He makes chit-chat with Mr. Das and his son Bobby, who sit beside him in the front seat, about differences between cars in India and America. Mr. Kapasi is struck by the Das parents' relationship to their children, to whom they seem more like siblings. Again, Mrs. Das bickers with her husband. Finding it too hot, she complains about him hiring a car without air-conditioning simply to save a few pennies.

Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi whether he enjoys his job as a tour guide. Mr. Kapasi responds that he does, and then tells him that he has a second job working as an interpreter in a doctor's office. There, he translates for patients who cannot speak directly to the doctor. Mrs. Das is intrigued by this and asks the guide to share typical situations he encounters in his work as a translator.

Although he himself does not think much of his job at the doctor's office, Mr. Kapasi is flattered by Mrs. Das's interest. For him, the job signifies his failed ambitions; he had hoped, as a young man, to work as an interpreter for people of importance, such as diplomats and dignitaries, but ended up working in the doctor's office to support his sick son (who has since passed away) and the rest of his family, including a wife from whom he has grown estranged.

Mr. Kapasi wonders to himself whether Mrs. Das is as unhappy in her marriage as he is in his. He continues to glance at her surreptitiously in the rearview mirror as he drives, beginning to believe that his attraction to her is reciprocated.

When the group stops for lunch, Mr. Das takes a photograph of his wife sitting beside Mr. Kapasi. Mrs. Das asks Mr. Kapasi for his address, so that they can send him a copy of the photo. Mr. Kapasi carefully writes out his address on the scrap of paper that Mrs. Das gives him. He begins to fantasize that he and Mrs. Das will exchange letters, and that through these letters their romance will blossom.

Finally, the group reaches the Sun Temple at Konarak. They

walk around the huge sandstone structure, as Mr. Kapasi informs the family about the temple and Mr. Das reads from his "India" guidebook about it. At one point, Mrs. Das approaches Mr. Kapasi to ask him to explain a statue to her. Mr. Kapasi does so, again taking their interaction to signify a latent attraction growing between them. He thinks about the letters they will write to each other and is suddenly crushed by the thought that Mrs. Das will soon be away in America.

On the way back from the temple, Mr. Kapasi suggests taking a detour to visit monastic dwellings located on hills at Udayagiri and Khadagir. The family agrees, and Mr. Kapasi is relieved that he will get more time with Mrs. Das.

When they arrive at the monastic dwellings, Mrs. Das says she is too tired to walk, and asks Mr. Kapasi to remain in the car with her. They watch Mr. Das and the children from the car. Bobby passes a stick back and forth with one of the Hanuman monkeys, who have again appeared. Mr. Kapasi comments that he is a brave boy. Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi that Bobby is brave because he is not Mr. Das's son, but the product of an affair that she had had with a friend of her husband's years ago. Mr. Kapasi is the first person to whom she is confessing this secret—neither Mr. Das, Bobby, nor the boy's actual father know the truth. For years, Mrs. Das has felt terrible around her family, and she hopes that Mr. Kapasi can say something, in his role as an interpreter of maladies, to help alleviate her pain.

Mr. Kapasi is shocked by all this but tries not to show it. He listens to Mrs. Das as she tells him about the unhappiness and loneliness she has suffered as a mother and wife. Mr. Kapasi realizes that Mrs. Das thinks of him differently than he had imagined; she is not interested in him romantically, and instead sees him as a father-figure who can help her deal with her predicament. Mr. Kapasi asks Mrs. Das whether it is really pain she feels, or simply guilt. This outrages Mrs. Das, who storms out of the car to find her family. Monkeys begin to follow her as she drops crumbs of a snack she is eating along the path. Mr. Kapasi leaves the car and follows her to scare away the monkeys.

The two reach Mr. Das and the children. Mr. Das is preparing to take a family photograph, but suddenly they realize that Bobby is missing. They look for him and eventually find him alone, crying, surrounded by monkeys that are beginning to attack him. Mr. Kapasi shoos away the monkeys and picks up the terrified boy. As he carries Bobby back to his family, Mr. Kapasi is tempted to whisper the secret of the boy's paternity into his ear, but resists.

Mr. Kapasi delivers Bobby to Mr. and Mrs. Das, who fuss over him. Mrs. Das takes out a comb from her handbag to brush Bobby's hair. As she does so, the piece of paper on which Mr. Kapasi had scribbled his address slips out of her bag. Mr. Kapasi watches as the paper is swept up and away by the wind.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Kapasi – A forty-six-year-old tour guide working in India, who accompanies the Das family on a sightseeing trip to the **Sun Temple**. Although written in the third person, “The Interpreter of Maladies” is largely filtered through his consciousness and point of view. Polite, responsible, and observant, Mr. Kapasi is intrigued by the foreignness of Mr. Das, Mrs. Das, and their three children. As a young man he had dreamed of working as an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, but life has not lived up to Mr. Kapasi’s expectations. Instead, in middle-age, he finds himself chaperoning tourists and working a second job as an interpreter of maladies in a doctor’s office to support his family. He is stuck in an unhappy marriage with a wife from whom he has grown estranged following the death of their son. Perhaps because of these dissatisfactions and disappointments, Mr. Kapasi is particularly drawn to the young and attractive Mrs. Das, and begins to fantasize about a romantic relationship with her. During the course of his outing with the family, he begins to believe that his attraction to her is reciprocated. By the end of the story, however, his hopes are once again dashed, as he realizes that Mrs. Das does not seek his love, but merely his professional help.

Mrs. Das – The object of Mr. Kapasi’s romantic interest, Mrs. Das is on holiday in India with her husband, Mr. Das, and their three children, Ronny, Bobby, and Tina. Like her husband and children, Mrs. Das is of Indian origin but was born and raised in America. At twenty-eight, Mrs. Das is young and attractive, stylishly dressed in western fashion. On her family outing to the **Sun Temple**, which Mr. Kapasi chaperones in his role as a tour guide, she behaves in an unpleasant way towards her children and her husband, often bickering with the latter. Having married and had children at a young age, she has led a lonely, isolated life weighed down by family responsibilities, and is a very unhappy woman. Towards the ends of the story she reveals to Mr. Kapasi that she cheated on her husband with a friend of his years earlier, in a secret affair that led to the birth of her son Bobby. Despite professing to feel terrible around her family because of this, she proves unwilling to take responsibility for her actions. She instead turns to Mr. Kapasi for some relief which, of course, he is unable to offer her; when Mr. Kapasi suggests she is not suffering from any malady other than guilt, she storms away from him.

Mr. Das – Mr. Das is the husband of Mrs. Das and the father of Bobby, Ronny, and Tina. A middle school science teacher in New Jersey, where he lives with his family, he is on holiday with his wife and children in India. Like the rest of the Das family, Mr. Das has roots in India but was born and raised in America. Throughout the family’s outing to the **Sun Temple**, Mr. Das is

busy reading from an “India” guidebook and snapping pictures with his **camera**. He seems to be out of touch with his wife and children, who often ignore or challenge his directions and wishes. Such interactions reveal that he lacks authority and respect as a father and a husband. Indeed, Mr. Das himself is unaware of how completely out of touch he is: he does not even know that his second son, Bobby, is in fact not his biological child, but a product of an affair that his wife had with a friend of his.

Bobby – The second son of Mr. Das and Mrs. Das, Bobby, eight years old, is different in appearance from his younger sister Tina and his older brother Ronny. This is because he is in fact not Mr. Das’s biological son, but rather was conceived as a result of an affair that his mother had with a friend of her husband’s. Neither Bobby nor his father know the truth about his paternity. Born and raised in the United States, Bobby is dressed like an American and speaks English with an American accent. The sights and sounds of India—where his family is vacationing—are new to him. He’s also a brave and adventurous boy. When the family encounters **Hanuman monkeys**, Bobby takes a stick and passes it back and forth with one of the animals. At one point, however, he is threatened by danger when he wanders away from the family and is surrounded by a group of monkeys who begin to attack him. Mr. Kapasi comes to the boy’s rescue.

Ronny – Eldest son to Mr. Das and Mrs. Das, and brother to Bobby and Tina, Ronny, like his brother and sister, is excited by the sounds and sights of India. Born and raised in America, Ronny is Americanized in his speech, dress, and mannerisms. He and his siblings are especially excited by the **Hanuman monkeys** that the family encounters on a tourist outing to the **Sun Temple**. Ronny doesn’t seem to have much respect for his father’s authority, ignoring Mr. Das when the latter warns him not to touch a goat. He’s also mean to his younger brother Bobby, calling the boy a “dummy” when Bobby asks an innocent question about why the driver’s seat is on the “wrong side” of cars in India.

Tina – The youngest child of Mr. Das and Mrs. Das, Tina often seeks her mother’s attention, wanting to participate in activities such as painting their nails together, but is ignored by Mrs. Das. Being the youngest, Tina requires the most looking after. Both Mr. and Mrs. Das are reluctant to take full responsibility for her, however, as is suggested at the beginning of the story when they argue over who should take Tina to the bathroom. Like her brothers Ronny and Bobby, Tina is excited by the sight of the **Hanuman monkeys** that the family encounters on an outing to the **Sun Temple**. Born and raised in America like her siblings and parents, she is Americanized in her ways, dress, and speech, and the sights and sounds of India are new to her.

Mr. Kapasi’s wife – Mrs. Kapasi, wife of the tour guide Mr. Kapasi, never makes a direct appearance in “The Interpreter of

Maladies.” However, Mr. Kapasi reflects on his unhappy relationship with her throughout. Mr. Kapasi works two jobs in order to provide for her and his children, partly as a result of the guilt he feels over the death of a son. Mr. Kapasi has felt disconnected from his wife ever since the passing of their child.

The doctor – The doctor has a practice where Mr. Kapasi has a second job working as an interpreter, translating maladies of patients who do not speak the physician’s language. This is the same doctor that Mr. Kapasi had taken his ill son to before he died. Mr. Kapasi took the job at the doctor’s office in order to pay for his son’s care before his death.

Mr. Kapasi’s Son – Mr. Kapasi had a son who suffered from an illness which eventually led to his death. The boy’s illness marked the beginning of the family’s troubles. Mr. Kapasi accepted a second job as an interpreter at the doctor’s office where he took his son for treatment in order to pay for medical bills. The son’s death also led to a deterioration in the relationship between Mr. Kapasi and his wife, who grew estranged from one another as a result of the death.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Das’s Friend – A friend of Mr. Das’s with whom Mrs. Das once had an affair, resulting in her son Bobby.

color their perspective. Mr. Kapasi watches the Dases closely, noting behaviors and qualities that seem odd to him—such as the fact that Mr. Das refers to his wife by her first name, Mina, when speaking to his daughter Tina. Mr. Kapasi uses these observations to interpret the family members’ relationships to one another—for example, by assuming they are more like siblings than parents and children. These observations, however, are largely a projection of Mr. Kapasi’s own beliefs and desires. Because Mr. Kapasi has been born and raised in India and the Das family is from the United States, the latter comes across as strange and foreign.

Mr. Kapasi’s most obvious projection, of course, is in his fantasizing about a romantic connection with Mrs. Das. He grasps onto trivial moments to support this fantasy, such as the fact that Mrs. Das uses the word “romantic” to describe his occupation as a sign of her interest in him. He even directly conflates his own experience of marriage with hers, wondering “if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were.” He begins to imagine their future together, constructing an image of Mrs. Das to align with his fantasy.

While Mr. Kapasi is correct in his assumption that Mrs. Das is unhappy in her marriage, however, by the end of the story it becomes clear that the rest of his fantasy is not reciprocated. In fact, Mrs. Das sees Mr. Kapasi more as a parent than a potential lover. Not only is Mrs. Das interested in his professional, rather than romantic, assistance, but the revelation of her past affair quickly causes Mr. Kapasi’s crush to evaporate. The woman he imagined never existed, and, ironically, the closer Mr. Kapasi comes to knowing Mrs. Das, the more estranged from her he feels. Through Mr. Kapasi, then, Lahiri suggests the difficulty of truly knowing another person. What’s more, projecting desires on to another seems only a recipe for alienation and disappointment.

The simultaneous difficulty and danger of knowledge is further reflected within the Das family itself. Mrs. Das reveals that she has known her husband since childhood, and that in the early days of their relationship they “couldn’t stand the thought of being separated.” Yet with time—and the familiarity such time entails—they drifted irreparably apart. Now, Mr. Das is not aware that his wife has cheated on him, nor that their son Bobby is not actually his biological child. Such awareness would, in all likelihood, lead to a shattering of the Das family, again underscoring the appealing yet precarious nature of fantasy and delusion in place of genuine knowledge.

The connection between knowledge and pain or loss is made most explicit by Mr. Kapasi’s second job as an “interpreter of maladies,” from which the story gets its title. It is his job to understand—to know—what is wrong with ill patients and relay this information to a doctor. But, the story suggests, people don’t always *want* to know what is wrong with them. Just as people project their own beliefs and desires onto others, they are prone to constructing fantasies of themselves. This is why



THEMES

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KNOWLEDGE AND FANTASY

On the surface, Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies” is a simple story about a family on vacation in India. As the lonely tour guide Mr.

Kapasi drives Mr. Das and Mrs. Das and their three children to visit a **temple**, however, Lahiri’s tale becomes one of poignant estrangement. By telling the story largely from the perspective of Mr. Kapasi, a stranger to the Das family, Lahiri is able to highlight the ways in which, in the absence of genuine knowledge, people project their own beliefs and desires onto others. Beyond suggesting the inability to ever truly know another person, the story also closely links knowledge with a sense of loss: the closer characters become—the more they know each other—the more alone they feel.

“Interpreter of Maladies” is told in the third person, sticking very closely to the point of view of Mr. Kapasi. The reader gets no insight into any member of the Das family’s interior thoughts, and as such has only Mr. Kapasi’s observations to

Mr. Kapasi is “disturbed” upon learning that Mrs. Das thinks of him as a parent, for instance; he views himself as seeming younger than he actually appears. This is also why Mr. Kapasi’s interpretation of Mrs. Das’s pain leads to her anger; deprived of the fantasy that something beyond her own actions is causing her discomfort, she is forced to confront the reality of her guilt over her affair.

Not only can people never truly know one another, the story ultimately suggests, but they may never even know—or want to know—themselves. The absence of knowledge allows for the projection of one’s own fantasy and desires onto another, for an escape from the mundanity and pain of familiarity. Knowledge, on the other hand, robs people of the imaginative joy of possibility—both for those around them, and for themselves.



CULTURE AND IDENTITY

“The Interpreter of Maladies” is set in India, and the story’s main characters are all of Indian origin.

While both the Das family and Mr. Kapasi share a certain cultural heritage, however, their experiences of the world are very different. The members of the Das family have all been born and raised in America, whereas Mr. Kapasi has lived and worked his entire life in India. Lahiri emphasizes the subsequent gulf between the affluent, very American Das family and their Indian-born tour guide to suggest a specific cultural tension between Indians and Indian-Americans, as well as the notion that identity in general goes beyond heritage. While one’s understanding of and response to the world is certainly, in part, the product of their cultural history, the story suggests that identity is above all shaped by one’s environment and social status.

Mr. Kapasi repeatedly notes the cultural differences that separate him from the Dases. He is particularly struck by the family’s appearance, noting, for example, that while they “looked Indian,” they “dressed as foreigners did.” He observes that they sound like characters on American television, and that the children have English names (“Tina,” “Bobby,” and “Ronny”). Sometimes Mr. Kapasi is unsure of the Americanized expressions that the characters use, such as when Mrs. Das uses the word “neat” to mean that something is interesting. The members of the Das family embody a different cultural identity not only in the way they dress and speak, but also in the way they behave. Mr. Kapasi is surprised, for example, that in speaking to his daughter, Mr. Das refers to his wife using her first name. By using Mr. Kapasi’s perspective to register all the ways that the Das family comes across as foreign, Lahiri suggests that having shared roots does not necessarily mean that people will share an automatic sense of connection or understanding.

The Das family’s attitude and reactions during the excursion with Mr. Kapasi suggests that they, too, approach their country of origin as strangers. Mr. Das carries a travel guide entitled

“INDIA,” which he uses to learn about the different sights that the family visits on the trip. He also takes pictures of things with his **camera** that, in the context of India, are normal. For instance, he snaps a picture of a barefoot man wearing a turban. In this way, Mr. Das is positioned as a tourist despite his ethnic background.

The family is often depicted as surprised by or wary of the environment surrounding them, further underscoring their sense of foreignness in their ancestral land. Mr. Das tries to dissuade his son Ronny from touching a goat, for example, even as Mr. Kapasi reassures him that the goat is harmless. The children are also excited upon encountering **Hanuman monkeys** on the way to the **temple**—a common sight in the area, but a new experience for the American children. They are even surprised that the driver’s seat that Mr. Kapasi occupies is on the “wrong side” of the car (in India, the driver’s seat is on the right, rather the left, side). Such details suggest that, whatever their roots, the Das family aligns far more closely with their familiar American home than an Indian past they never knew.

Importantly, the divide separating Mr. Kapasi from the Das family is not just cultural, but also one of affluence and wealth. Mr. and Mrs. Das are clearly of a higher economic status than Mr. Kapasi. For one thing, they can afford to go on a family vacation in India. Their clothes and the expensive accessories they carry (such as the camera with a “telephoto lens” that Mr. Das continually snaps pictures with), all signal their relative material comfort.

The story sets up a hierarchy based on this material privilege. Mr. and Mrs. Das pay Mr. Kapasi to accompany them as a tour guide, and in this regard are in a position of power; Mr. Kapasi literally serves the Das family in exchange for money. Mr. Kapasi’s different economic status is further underscored by the fact that he has to work two jobs—one as a tour guide and one as an interpreter in a doctor’s office—in order to support his family. Although, like Mr. Das, Mr. Kapasi had once worked as a teacher in a school, he was unable to afford his sick son’s medical bills. It was for this reason that he took on working as a translator at the doctor’s office. In setting up a parallel between Mr. Das and Mr. Kapasi through their shared occupations as teachers, and then revealing that only Mr. Kapasi could not provide for his family in this role, Lahiri highlights the ways in which financial status shapes and separates people’s experience of the world. The gulf that exists between Mr. Kapasi and the family he chaperones further suggests the gulf that exists between the scarcity prevalent in India and the affluence of America.

In presenting the reader with characters who share cultural roots but who are nonetheless deeply foreign to one another, Lahiri questions the degree to which heritage shapes identity. The Das family do not appear to feel innately connected to Mr. Kapasi nor to India, and instead seem distinctly a part of the

world in which they were raised—that is, America. Ultimately, the story associates this assimilation with a sense of loss, as the family enjoys the comforts of an American life yet are distinctly cut off from their history. The image at the end of the tale, of Mr. Kapasi watching the paper with his address written on it flutter from Mrs. Das's purse, suggests that the rift between their cultures may be too large to ever cross.



LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

The importance of language in “The Interpreter of Maladies” is alluded to in the story's title itself.

Language is central to Mr. Kapasi's second job as an interpreter of patient ailments in a doctor's office, where he must rely on his linguistic prowess to communicate effectively between people who do not understand one another. The power—and limits—of language is further present in the interactions between Mr. Kapasi and the Das family, as well as within the Das family itself. As all of the characters struggle to express themselves meaningfully, Lahiri's story suggests the depth of the gap that often exists between language and communication.

In addition to his work as an interpreter, Mr. Kapasi reveals that he had a passion for languages in his youth and became proficient through self-study in several. As a young man, Mr. Kapasi's interest in languages was motivated by his belief in the nobility of translation as an occupation. He once dreamt of serving as an interpreter to “diplomats and dignitaries,” and thereby hoped to help resolve “conflicts between people and nations.”

Mr. Kapasi's youthful passion points to his idealistic belief in the power of language as an instrument of communication and reconciliation. However, his work as an interpreter at a doctor's office is a far cry from his dream of serving as a translator for dignitaries. Though he himself views the job as a “sign of his failings,” the dignity of his current work is affirmed by Mrs. Das, who is impressed by the responsibility that he carries in interpreting the illnesses of patients. By highlighting Mr. Kapasi's interests and background, Lahiri evokes the power of language as a tool for understanding.

Yet, even as the story emphasizes the positive potential of language, it also highlights the ways in which language often fails people. This is reflected in the interactions between members of the Das family, who are unable to engage with each other meaningfully and effectively during their excursion with Mr. Kapasi. Though members of the Das family speak to one another often, they are not really communicating. Mr. Das warns his son Ronny against touching a goat at the beginning of the story, for example, and yet the boy ignores his father. Mr. Das commands his second son, Bobby, to follow Ronny, but Bobby refuses. Mr. Das's linguistic commands are repeatedly rebuffed, stripping his voice of any power when it comes to controlling his children.

The Das family also often interacts through bickering rather than meaningful discussion of the sights around them. Mrs. Das complains to her husband about ordering a car which is not air-conditioned to take them on their excursion, for instance. When Tina asks her mother to polish her nails for her, Mrs. Das, untouched by her daughter's pleading, simply tells the girl to leave her alone. Though Mr. Kapasi once believed in the healing potential of language, the tensions that characterize the communication between the Dases suggest the ways in which language can heighten, rather than resolve, conflict and disagreement.

Despite Mr. Kapasi's talent for languages, it's clear that he has trouble interpreting and understanding his relationship to Mrs. Das, even though they both speak English. Mr. Kapasi fixates on Mrs. Das's description of his work as an interpreter as “romantic.” He takes her use of this word to indicate the fact that she has more than a friendly interest in him. By the end of the story, however, it becomes clear that Mrs. Das has no romantic interest in Mr. Kapasi at all. Instead, she views him as someone who might help her deal with the guilt that she carries as a result of having an affair. The words that Mrs. Das speaks to Mr. Kapasi, therefore, communicate something other than what he thinks they do. Her flattery is likely an attempt to get what she wants out of him, again suggesting a distinction between language and genuine meaning.

“The Interpreter of Maladies” works to challenge readers' understanding of the relationship between language and communication. While the story acknowledges the potential of language as an invaluable means for understanding, it also points to all of the ways in which language falls short in allowing people to communicate effectively. In the end, language is presented as a tool that can both reveal and obscure meaning.



GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY

Both Mr. Das and Mrs. Das neglect their duties as parents and partners. Most obviously, Mrs. Das has a secret affair—the guilt over which is eating away at her, and the revelation of which would threaten to tear her family apart. Mr. Das also displays a distinct aversion toward his role as a husband and father, failing to discipline or keep an eye on his children. The fact that Mr. Kapasi thinks Mr. and Mrs. Das behave more like siblings than parents to their three children further underscores their immaturity. Through Mr. and Mrs. Das, Lahiri argues that refusing to take responsibilities for one's actions results in a sort of toxic stasis that leaves families vulnerable. Genuine growth and healing, the story ultimately suggests, requires a genuine acknowledgment of obligations to loved ones—something of which neither Mrs. Das nor Mr. Das seem capable.

Mrs. Das most clearly reflects the danger of failing to take responsibility for one's actions. Her betrayal of her husband has

trapped her in a painful state of guilt, made clear in her confession to Mr. Kapasi about the affair that she had many years earlier and which led to the birth of her second child, Bobby. She tells Mr. Kapasi that, ever since, she has felt “terrible” looking at her husband and children. Given that Mr. Kapasi has a second job working as an interpreter of maladies in a doctor’s office, she hopes that he can help her find some “relief.”

Mr. Kapasi correctly diagnoses Mrs. Das’s state as one that is provoked by guilt over her affair rather than any bodily malady, but Mrs. Das is hardly relieved to hear this. On the contrary, she becomes so angry that she storms away from Mr. Kapasi. This encounter suggests that Mrs. Das is, in fact, plagued by shame, yet refuses to confront her guilt in order to move beyond her pain.

Mrs. Das’s betrayal of her husband is just one of many ways in which responsibilities and obligations are neglected in the Das family. By choosing not to tell her husband about the affair, Mrs. Das compounds her initial betrayal by continuing to allow her husband to believe that she has been faithful. However, Lahiri suggests that Mr. Das is also culpable for the breakdown of their marriage. Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi how lonely and tired she had felt after the birth of her first child, Ronny, which implies that Mr. Das failed to pay attention to his wife’s needs after she became a mother. Instead, he was content with returning from work to watch television and bounce “Ronny on his knee.” The story that Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi about her marriage suggests that the responsibility for parenting and running the household had fallen squarely on her shoulders, and this is part of the reason that she had come to feel estranged from her husband. As such, both Mr. and Mrs. Das have failed, in different ways, in their responsibilities towards one another as husband and wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Das’s relationship to their three children further reveals that they are failing in their duties as parents. Mrs. Das allows Bobby to grow up believing that Mr. Das is his father, effectively lying to her son. More immediately, throughout the car trip Mr. and Mrs. Das often ignore, or fail to respond adequately, to their children’s needs. For instance, the story begins with Mr. and Mrs. Das bickering over who should take Tina to the bathroom, with neither parent wanting to accept the responsibility. When Tina later asks her mother to polish her nails, Mrs. Das coldly tells her to leave her alone, again underscoring her resentment of and aversion to her maternal obligations.

Mrs. Das’s negligence results in direct danger for Bobby—not incidentally, the physical reminder of her affair and guilt. It is the trail of puffed rice that she leaves behind as she storms away from Mr. Kapasi that leads the **Hanuman monkeys** to surround Bobby and attack him at the end of the story. For his part, Mr. Das shows little concern about his directives being repeatedly ignored by his children and has failed to properly

keep an eye on Bobby in this moment. Mr. and Mrs. Das’s negligence is further reflected in the fact that it is Mr. Kapasi, rather than the boy’s parents, who comes to his rescue.

The Dases in Lahiri’s story represent a family riven by guilt and failure. Mr. and Mrs. Das’s refusal to accept their obligations towards one another or their children leads only to family dysfunction and pain. The danger that Bobby is put in at the end of the story ultimately suggests that this repeated denial of responsibility on the part of the parents hurts everyone in their orbit.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



HANUMAN MONKEYS

Throughout “The Interpreter of Maladies” Hanuman monkeys represent the dangers that threaten the Das family as a consequence of Mr. Das and Mrs. Das’s negligence as both parents and partners. The animals first appear while Mr. Kapasi is driving the couple and their children towards the **Sun Temple**; one causes the tour guide to brake suddenly when it jumps in front of the car—in this moment, representing a literal, physical threat to the family’s safety. In response, Mr. Das displays a distinct lack of concern, instead simply remarking on his children’s excitement to see the animals and pulling out his **camera**. His wife, meanwhile, begins painting her nails.

When Mrs. Das later storms away from Mr. Kapasi after confessing that her son Bobby is the product of an affair, the monkeys, lured by crumbs of puffed rice that she has dropped from a snack bag, trail her ominously. They then begin to attack Bobby—the unwitting product of Mrs. Das’s affair—having been led to him by the food that his mother left behind. Mrs. Das’s failure to watch where she is dropping crumbs reflects her broader refusal to take responsibility for her actions; both this and the affair—itsself a betrayal of her marriage vows—put her family directly in harm’s way. Mr. Das is similarly neglectful, having failed to pay much attention to his wife or keep an eye on his son. The presence of the monkeys in this final moment thus underscores that, by neglecting their duties to each other and their children, Mr. and Mrs. Das have left their family vulnerable to attack.



THE CAMERA

The expensive camera with a telephoto lens that Mr. Das uses to snap pictures throughout the story symbolizes the Das family’s bi-cultural identity and wealth. Mr. Das often uses the camera to take photographs of things that

are common sights in India—for instance, the **Hanuman monkeys**, as well as a man with a turban sitting atop a cart. In presenting Mr. Das taking pictures of these everyday sights, Lahiri positions him and his family as outsiders in relation to their own country of origin. The Das family may have Indian roots, but their identity is ultimately shaped by having been born and raised in America.

On another level, the camera represents the Das family's wealth, especially in comparison with that of their tour guide, Mr. Kapasi. Mr. Kapasi has to work two jobs to support his family. Mr. Das, meanwhile, not only can afford to go on vacation in India, but can also afford expensive equipment to document the trip. In this way, the camera signifies the gap in affluence that exists between the Das family and Mr. Kapasi, as well as that between India and America more broadly.



THE SUN TEMPLE

The Sun Temple is a tourist site in India that Mr. Das and Mrs. Das and their children visit, accompanied by their tour guide Mr. Kapasi. On one hand, the ancient temple symbolizes the cultural heritage that all of these characters share, given that they all have roots in India. On the other hand, the characters' contrasting relationship to the Sun Temple signals the cultural gulf that exists between Indians and Indian Americans. Although the Das family is of Indian origin, and the temple is therefore a part of its history, the family approaches the site strictly as tourists: Mrs. Das displays a distinct impatience upon learning how far they must drive to reach the temple, suggesting a lack of excitement about or respect for the site, while Mr. Das relies on his guidebook for information about it—information that, in fact, proves inaccurate. Having spent their entire lives in America, the Das family are more American than Indian, and their identity is reflected in their distanced, touristic attitude to the temple.

Mr. Kapasi, however, is much more closely connected to the temple than the family he chaperones. He is intimately familiar with the site, which he refers to as one of his “favorite places,” and readily shares his knowledge about it with the Das family. This, of course, is partly because of his work as a tour guide, yet Lahiri suggests that the connection that Mr. Kapasi feels to the site is not simply because of his work. Unlike the Americanized Das family, Mr. Kapasi has spent his entire life in India and, it follows, identifies much more closely with Indian culture and heritage. As such, the intimacy that he feels is borne out of his physical as well as his cultural proximity to the site, a proximity that, regardless of their ethnic background, the Das family does not share with him.

Mariner Books edition of *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999.

Interpreter of Maladies Quotes

☞ The first thing Mr. Kapasi had noticed when he saw Mr. and Mrs. Das, standing with their children under the portico of the hotel, was that they were very young, perhaps not even thirty. In addition to Tina they had two boys, Ronny and Bobby, who appeared very close in age and had teeth covered in a network of flashing silver wires. The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors.

Related Characters: Tina, Bobby, Ronny, Mr. Das, Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Kapasi waits in the car with Mr. Das and his two sons for Tina and her mother to return from the restroom during a stop, the narrator sums up Mr. Kapasi's initial impressions of the Das family. That he notes Mr. and Mrs. Das's youth suggests the emotional immaturity of the parents and alludes to their inability or unwillingness to behave as responsible caretakers of their children. Indeed, Mr. Das and Mrs. Das will neglect their children's needs throughout the story.

Mr. Kapasi's impression of the family's mixed appearance—they look Indian but dress like Americans—is also significant because it highlights the family's complicated cultural identity. While they have roots in India, they are also very much American, as is reflected in their clothes and the boys' braces (“the network of flashing silver wires”). The physical description of the family, filtered through Mr. Kapasi's thoughts, positions the relationship between cultures—Indian and American—as a central theme of the story.

☞ While Mr. Das adjusted his telephoto lens, Mrs. Das reached into her straw bag and pulled out a bottle of colorless nail polish, which she proceeded to stroke on the tip of her index finger.

The little girl stuck out her hand. “Mine too. Mommy, do mine too.”



“Leave me alone,” Mrs. Das said, blowing on her nail and turning her body slightly. “You're making me mess up.”




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the

Related Characters: Tina, Mrs. Das (speaker), Mr. Das

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 


Page Number: 15-16


Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to stop the car for a moment so that he can take photos of monkeys that have appeared on the road. As they wait, Mrs. Das begins painting her nails in the back of the car. Her subsequent cold refusal of Tina's request to participate highlights Mrs. Das's distance from her daughter. Not only does Mrs. Das tell Tina to leave her alone, but she also accuses Tina of making her "mess up" her nail-polishing. This exchange (as well as Mrs. Das's action of "turning her body slightly" from her daughter), points to the ways in which Mrs. Das, as a mother, fails to engage with and respond lovingly to her children. Here, she prioritizes her own needs over her daughter's, and even this small action reflects the many ways in which she lets her family down, both during this trip as well as back in New Jersey.

●● Mr. Kapasi pulled over to the side of the road as Mr. Das took a picture of a barefoot man, his head wrapped in a dirty turban, seated on top of a cart of grain sacks pulled by a pair of bullocks. Both the man and the bullocks were emaciated.

Related Characters: Mr. Kapasi, Mr. Das

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis


Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to stop the car so that he can take a picture of a barefoot man on a cart pulled by bullocks. This is likely an ordinary scene in the Indian landscape, making Mr. Das's desire to take a picture of it reflective of his distance from his country of origin. Though Mr. Das and his family have roots in India, they have been born and raised in America and approach India from a distance, as tourists.

The camera with which Mr. Das snaps pictures not only points to his touristic relationship to his country of origin, but it also highlights his wealth relative to the people that surround him in India. Mr. Das's expensive camera suggests

an affluence that contrasts starkly with the barefoot, "emaciated" man he photographs. The economic gulf between Mr. Das and the man more broadly suggests the gap between the affluence of America and the widespread deprivation of India.

●● For this reason it flattered Mr. Kapasi that Mrs. Das was so intrigued by his job. Unlike his wife, she had reminded him of its intellectual challenges. She had also used the word "romantic." She did not behave in a romantic way toward her husband, and yet she had used the word to describe him. He wondered if Mr. and Mrs. Das were a bad match, just as he and his wife were.

Related Characters: Mr. Kapasi's wife, Mr. Das, Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19



Explanation and Analysis

While engaging in small talk with Mr. Das, Mr. Kapasi mentions that in addition to his work as a tour guide, he has a second job as an interpreter in a doctor's office, translating the maladies of patients. Mrs. Das especially is intrigued by Mr. Kapasi's second job and describes the work as "romantic." This remark flatters Mr. Kapasi, who feels unappreciated by his own wife. Mrs. Das's comment also restores his sense of pride in his work by suggesting that interpretation requires genuine skill.

Of course, Mr. Kapasi's interpretation of Mrs. Das's use of the word "romantic" here proves entirely misguided. He takes Mrs. Das's use of the word to apply to him as a man, when in fact Mrs. Das uses the word solely to describe his work as an interpreter. This moment of bolsters Mr. Kapasi's fantasies of romance with Mrs. Das, who, in reality, is only interested in his professional help. In this moment, then, Lahiri draws attention to the way that language can mislead characters, serving as a vehicle for miscommunication rather than understanding.

She would write to him, asking about his days interpreting at the doctor's office, and he would respond eloquently, choosing only the most entertaining anecdotes, ones that would make her laugh out loud as she read them in her house in New Jersey. In time she would reveal the disappointment of her marriage, and he his. In this way their friendship would grow, and flourish.

Related Characters: The doctor, Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 20


Explanation and Analysis


When Mr. Kapasi and the Das family stop for a lunch break, Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to pose for a picture with his wife. Mrs. Das then asks Mr. Kapasi to write down his address, so that she can send him a copy of the photo. As Mr. Kapasi does so, he begins imagining that the photos that Mrs. Das will send to him will precipitate a long-distance correspondence between the two of them.

Mr. Kapasi's thoughts in this moment are entirely a projection of his attraction to Mrs. Das. Mrs. Das has only told him that she will send photos, yet Mr. Kapasi immediately fantasizes that this will not only be the beginning of a long correspondence, but that through letters their relationship will "grow, and flourish" into something beyond friendship—presumably a romantic relationship. Mr. Kapasi's projections show him to be misinterpreting Mrs. Das's simple request for his address and again reflect the story's themes of fantasy and miscommunication. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Mr. Kapasi's interpretation of Mrs. Das's feelings and intentions has been completely misguided.

They reached Konarak at two-thirty. The temple, made of sandstone, was a massive pyramid-like structure in the shape of a chariot. It was dedicated to the great master of life, the sun [...] "It says the temple occupies about a hundred and seventy acres of land," Mr. Das said, reading from his book.

Related Characters: Mr. Das (speaker), The doctor, Bobby, Ronny, Mr. Das, Mr. Kapasi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 21


Explanation and Analysis

The Das family, who have set out with Mr. Kapasi to visit the Sun Temple at Konarak, reach their destination after a long drive. In the story, the Sun Temple functions as a symbol representing the characters' shared Indian heritage. Though all of the same ethnic origin, however, the characters relate to the site very differently. The Das family is visiting India from America, where they have lived their entire lives. As such, despite their Indian background, they approach the temple primarily as Americans and outsiders, with little connection to the artifact beyond that of any other tourist. This lack of inherent connection to the site is particularly reflected in the fact that Mr. Das reads from a guide book, entitled "INDIA," to learn about the temple.

Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys, after the friend learned that a London pharmaceutical company had hired him, while Ronny cried to be freed from his playpen. She made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back as she was about to make a pot of coffee, then pulled her against his crisp navy suit.

Related Characters: Mr. Kapasi, Bobby, Mr. Das, Mr. Das's Friend, Mrs. Das

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Sitting in the car during a detour to monastic dwellings after the visit to the Sun Temple, Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das watch her husband and children make their way up a path. Bobby, the middle boy, passes a stick back and forth with a monkey, and Mr. Kapasi comments to Mrs. Das that the boy is brave for doing so. Mrs. Das then confesses that Bobby is courageous because he is not Mr. Das's son. As Mr. Kapasi listens, shocked, she tells him the history of Bobby's conception.

Mrs. Das's affair with her husband's friend, who had come to stay with the family eight years before, changes her family irrevocably. She has denied her responsibility as a wife and mother not only by cheating on her husband, but by keeping this a secret from him as well as from Bobby,

who does not know his true paternity. Mrs. Das's negligence as a parent is further encapsulated in the fact that while she sleeps with her husband's friend, she ignores her son Ronny, crying in his playpen. She does not resist her husband's friend—making “no protest” to his advances. This description of the affair, therefore, underscores Mrs. Das's guilt and willful collusion in the betrayal of her family.

“For God's sake, stop calling me Mrs. Das. I'm twenty-eight. You probably have children my age.”

“Not quite.” It disturbed Mr. Kapasi to learn that she thought of him as a parent. The feeling he had had toward her, that had made him check his reflection in the rearview mirror as they drove, evaporated a little.

“I told you because of your talents.” She put the packet of puffed rice back into her bag without folding over the top.

“I don't understand,” Mr. Kapasi said.

Related Characters: Mr. Kapasi, Mrs. Das (speaker), Mr. Das, Bobby

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 26-27

Explanation and Analysis


Mr. Kapasi is shocked by Mrs. Das's revelation that Bobby is not Mr. Das's son, and asks her why she has shared this secret with him. In speaking to her, he refers to her as “Mrs. Das.” Mrs. Das's subsequent frustrated reaction at this moniker suggests her resentment at being limited to the roles of wife and mother.

The exchange also encapsulates the extent to which Mr. Kapasi—despite his job as an “interpreter of maladies”—has misinterpreted Mrs. Das. Until this moment, he had fantasized about a romantic relationship developing between them, yet here it becomes clear that Mrs. Das does not view him in the same way that he views her. By pointing out that Mr. Kapasi is old enough to be her father, she shatters his fantasy that he could be her romantic partner. She sees him more as a parent than a potential lover. She clarifies that she is only appealing to him because of his “talents” as an interpreter of maladies: she hopes he can help her deal with the pain of her betrayal. As such, this exchange develops a central theme in the story by pointing to the ways in which people's knowledge of others is often limited to their own fantasies and projections.

When they found him, a little farther down the path under a tree, he was surrounded by a group of monkeys, over a dozen of them, pulling at his T-shirt with their long black fingers. The puffed rice Mrs. Das had spilled was scattered at his feet, raked over by the monkeys' hands. The boy was silent, his body frozen, swift tears running down his startled face. His bare legs were dusty and red with welts from where one of the monkeys struck him repeatedly with the stick he had given it to earlier.

Related Characters: Mr. Das, Mrs. Das, Bobby

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Das confesses her affair to Mr. Kapasi, she leaves the car in anger, insulted that Mr. Kapasi has implied that it is guilt, rather than pain, that she feels. She finds her family preparing to take a photograph, and then realizes that Bobby is missing. They find him down the path, surrounded by monkeys, who are beginning to attack him.

Throughout the story monkeys have been symbolic of potential danger hanging over the family due to the Das parents' negligence toward their children. In this moment, the monkeys are lured to Bobby because of the crumbs of food that Mrs. Das had dropped earlier walking up the path. As such, she is directly (albeit inadvertently) responsible for the danger that Bobby is put in.


On a deeper level, as the boy who is the product of his mother's affair, Bobby has always been the one most affected by his mother's refusal to adhere to her familial responsibilities. As such, it is no coincidence that he is the child who is threatened at the end of the story: the monkeys' attack on him not only points to his mother's negligence in dropping crumbs, but also to the broader pain that Mrs. Das's lies and betrayals will likely cause her son.

When she whipped out the hairbrush, the slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by the breeze, into the trees where the monkeys now sat, solemnly observing the scene below. Mr. Kapasi observed it too, knowing that this was the picture of the Das family he would preserve in his mind forever.

Related Characters: Tina, Ronny, Mr. Das, Bobby, Mrs. Das,

Mr. Kapasi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

After Mr. Kapasi rescues Bobby from the aggressive monkeys, the family gathers around to comfort the child, and Mrs. Das takes out a hairbrush from her handbag to brush his hair.

The loss of the paper with Mr. Kapasi's address in this scene

is symbolic of the tour guide's loss of illusion—by the end of the story, many of his assumptions about the Das family, and his hopes for a relationship with Mrs. Das, have been destroyed. The presence of the monkeys here also points to the lurking danger and tension that continues to haunt the Dases as a result of the secrets and lies that are poisoning their family life. Indeed, the mental “picture” that Mr. Kapasi preserves of the Das parents and children as they gather around Bobby is an image of an unhappy, dysfunctional family. It is also an image of Mr. Kapasi's own exclusion: he is an outsider, watching them from a distance, and will never achieve the intimacy and closeness he had hoped for with Mrs. Das.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

While stopped at a tea stall, Mr. Kapasi observes as Mr. Das and Mrs. Das bicker over who should accompany their young daughter, Tina, to the bathroom. Finally, Mrs. Das acquiesces and exits the car with her daughter, though Mr. Kapasi notices that she does not hold Tina's hand as she does so.

The Das family is on its way to visit the **Sun Temple** in Konarak, India. Mr. Kapasi reflects that he would not normally stop so early on a tour, but Tina had complained almost immediately after he picked the family up from their hotel. The first thing Mr. Kapasi had noticed about Mr. Das and Mrs. Das was how young they look. In addition to Tina, they have two sons, Ronny and Bobby, both of whom have braces. Though they "look Indian," the Dases "dress as foreigners."

While Mr. Kapasi waits with Mr. Das and his sons for Mrs. Das and Tina to return from the restroom, the older boy, Ronny, leaves the car to feed a goat. He ignores his father's protestations not to do so. Mr. Das, who is reading a guide book about India, tells his younger boy, Bobby, to follow his brother, but the younger boy refuses.

Mr. Kapasi, who is 46 years old, makes small talk with Mr. Das as they wait. He learns that both Mr. and Mrs. Das were born in America, not India, and that their parents moved back to India after retiring. The Das family visits them every couple of years.

Tina returns from the restroom, and Mr. Das asks where "Mina" is; Mr. Kapasi is struck that he refers to Mrs. Das by her first name to his daughter. As Mrs. Das returns to the car carrying a bag of puffed rice she purchased from a street vendor, Mr. Kapasi, notes the details of her figure, clothes, and hair.

Lahiri's story begins on a note of conflict. That both Mr. and Mrs. Das are reluctant to accompany their daughter subtly alludes to their selfishness and negligence. That Mrs. Das doesn't bother to hold her daughter's hand also suggests the distance between mother and child.



Mr. and Mrs. Das's apparent youth implicitly raises the question of whether they are mature enough to occupy the role of caretakers. That the family is in India going on a visit to a temple also positions them as tourists. The description of the family's mixed appearance alludes to their bi-cultural identity: they clearly have Indian roots, but they are also deeply tied to America.



The boys' refusal to obey Mr. Das's orders casts doubt over his authority as a father and highlights the issues of miscommunication central to the story; communication in the Das family is hampered not only between husband and wife but also between parents and children. That Mr. Das is reading a guidebook about India further reinforces his and his family's position as outsiders or tourists in their own country of origin.



That Mr. and Mrs. Das were both born in America again highlights the family's bicultural identity—they are Indian by origin but American by culture.



That Mr. Kapasi is struck by the way Mr. Das refers to his wife points to the cultural gulf that exists between Mr. Kapasi, who has lived his entire life in India, and the Americanized family that he chaperones. Mr. Kapasi's detailed observation of Mrs. Das's appealing appearance is significant, because it suggests that he finds her attractive.



Mr. Kapasi continues talking with Mr. Das, who tells him the family lives in New Jersey, and that he is a science teacher who takes his students to the Museum of Natural History every year; he believes this means he has much in common with Mr. Kapasi.

The parallel that Mr. Das draws between himself and Mr. Kapasi—he himself is a kind of ‘tour guide’ in relation to his American students—is ironic. Coming from America, Mr. Das is clearly much more affluent than Mr. Kapasi: he can afford to take his family to India on vacation and to employ Mr. Kapasi as a tour guide. The parallel that he draws, therefore, actually works to highlight the Das family’s comfortable circumstances in contrast to Mr. Kapasi’s.



Mrs. Das appears impatient when she returns to the car. She slouches in the back seat and begins eating her puffed rice without offering to share it with anyone, and the group commences their journey to the **Sun Temple**.

That Mrs. Das fails to share her snack, and appears impatient, again suggests that a distance exists between herself and her family. She does not seem to be enjoying their company, nor the trip, and does not behave in a way that a caring mother and wife would.



The children all become excited when they encounter **monkeys** perched in trees along the road down which Mr. Kapasi drives. One of the monkeys jumps into the middle of the road, forcing Mr. Kapasi to brake suddenly. Another monkey then jumps onto the hood of the car. Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to stop the car so that he can take photos of the monkeys with his **camera**.

The monkeys are a common sight in this part of India, yet the children’s excitement upon encountering them, as well as Mr. Das’s desire to take photos, highlights the fact that the landscape of India is quite alien to the family despite their roots. This reinforces their position as outsiders their country of origin. The monkeys’ leaping in front of and on top of the car is dangerous, forcing Mr. Kapasi to brake; monkeys will signify threat and danger throughout the story.



Mrs. Das takes out nail polish and begins painting her nails. Tina asks her mother to paint her nails as well, but Mrs. Das wants to be left alone, and tells her daughter, “You’re making me mess up.” Excluded from her mother’s activity, Tina turns to playing with her doll instead.

Again, Mrs. Das fails to act as a caring mother by rejecting her daughter’s request. She even blames Tina for making her mess up. Her actions here reinforce the fact that Mrs. Das is preoccupied with herself and puts her own needs and desires above her children’s.



After Mr. Das is finished taking pictures, Mr. Kapasi once again starts the car and the group continues on its way. The middle child, Bobby, sitting up front with Mr. Kapasi and Mr. Das, asks why Mr. Kapasi is driving on the “wrong side” of the car. Mr. Das explains to Mr. Kapasi that in America the driver’s seat is located on the righthand side, which is why Bobby is confused. Mr. Kapasi tells him that he knew this from watching the American soap opera *Dallas*.

Bobby’s confusion over the location of the driver’s seat is yet another moment that highlights the Das family’s cultural distance from India. Having never lived in India, Bobby is surprised to see that cars are different there. That Mr. Kapasi is familiar with American cars, on the other hand, points to the cultural dominance of America: even though Mr. Kapasi has never been to America, he has consumed its culture.



As they make their way towards the temple, Mrs. Das complains about the heat and chides her husband for hiring a car which is not air-conditioned just to save a little money. Mr. Das tells her it's not hot.

Giving in to his penchant for photo-taking, Mr. Das asks Mr. Kapasi to stop the car so he can take a picture with his **camera** of a barefoot man in a turban, sitting atop a cart pulled by bullocks. Both the man and the animals are emaciated.

Mr. Das, while taking photos of the man on the cart, makes small talk with Mr. Kapasi, asking whether he finds his work as a tour guide tiresome. Mr. Kapasi responds that, on the contrary, he enjoys it, and that the **Sun Temple** they are on their way to visit is one of his favorite spots. He mentions that he has a second job working as an interpreter in a doctor's office, translating for patients who do not speak the doctor's language. Mrs. Das is intrigued by Mr. Kapasi's work as an interpreter, which she characterizes as "romantic." She asks him to describe typical situations he encounters at the office, and Mr. Kapasi obliges by telling of a patient who had come in with a pain in his throat. Both Mrs. Das and Mr. Das compliment him on the work, and Mr. Kapasi is particularly flattered by Mrs. Das's comments. He begins to see his work as an interpreter in a new light, taking pride in it.

Mr. Kapasi had only taken the job in the doctor's office to pay for the medical bills of an ill son, who has since passed away. He says he continued with the work after the death of his son to support his family's lifestyle and his wife's demands for material goods, partly because of the guilt he feels over the death of their child.

This is only the second time in the story when the Das parents communicate directly, and again they bicker as they did at in the moment that begins the story. The tense communication between Mr. and Mrs. Das suggests all is not well in their relationship.



Mr. Das's desire to take a photo of what is presumably a common sight in India again positions him as a tourist in relation to his country of origin. It's also striking that the man and the animals are emaciated. This alludes to the deprivation that many in India experience. Simultaneously, it calls attention to Mr. Das's affluence—he is taking a picture of the emaciated man with an expensive device.



That Mr. Kapasi must work two jobs highlights the material gulf that exists between him and the family he chaperones. Unlike Mr. Das, who, on his American teacher's salary, can take his family on vacation to India, Mr. Kapasi must take on more than one job to meet his family's needs. That Mr. Kapasi's second job consists of working as an "interpreter of maladies" in a doctor's office highlights the story's theme of communication and interpretation. Indeed, Mr. Kapasi engages in an act of interpretation here by fixating on, and being flattered by, Mrs. Das's description of his work as "romantic." He seems to interpret her use of this word to indicate that Mrs. Das may have some romantic interest in him.



The emphasis on Mr. Kapasi's financial struggles implicitly highlights the gulf between the Das family's wealth and Mr. Kapasi's own precarious circumstances. The knowledge that his son died, despite Mr. Kapasi's efforts to pay for care, also reveals that Mr. Kapasi has experienced deep tragedy. It is tragedy tinged by guilt, given that Mr. Kapasi has kept his job at the doctor's office to provide a lifestyle for his remaining family, as a way of "making up" for his son's death.



The group stops for lunch at a roadside restaurant, and Mrs. Das invites Mr. Kapasi to join them at the table. The children leave to look at **monkeys** perched in the trees. Mr. Das instructs Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das into a pose for a photograph at the table, telling Mrs. Das to lean closer to Mr. Kapasi. Mr. Kapasi is excited by the closeness to Mrs. Das, noting her appealing scent. He worries that she can smell the perspiration on his skin.

Mrs. Das then asks Mr. Kapasi for his address, so that she can send him copies of the picture. Mr. Kapasi writes his address carefully on the scrap of paper that she gives him. As soon as he hands it to her, however, he worries that he might have miswritten the information. Nonetheless, he fantasizes about the letters that he will exchange with Mrs. Das. He imagines that through these letters they will come to know one another more intimately, confessing their unhappiness in their marriages, and that their friendship will flourish into a romance.

The group reaches the **Sun Temple** at Konarak—a huge sandstone structure in the shape of a pyramid and surrounded by chariots, built in the thirteenth century in dedication to the sun, Mr. Kapasi explains. As the family walks around, Mr. Das takes photos with his **camera** and reads aloud from his guidebook about the site to everyone.

They all look at friezes that decorate the façade of the **temple**, among which are depictions of naked lovers. As he looks up at the images of naked women, Mr. Kapasi realizes that he has never seen his wife naked, even while making love. He admires the bare backs of Mrs. Das's legs as she walks ahead of him. Mr. Kapasi wants to be alone with her, but, noticing that she seems to want to be left alone, he walks ahead to admire statues.

As he poses for the picture with Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi's self-consciousness as well as his sensitivity to her physical presence suggest that his attraction to her is growing.



Mr. Kapasi's anxiety over whether he has written the address correctly underscores how invested he has become in the possibility of maintaining contact with Mrs. Das. His fantasies, meanwhile, point to a propensity for projection on his part. Mrs. Das has only asked for his address to send him photos, yet Mr. Kapasi immediately begins to imagine that a romantic relationship will develop through their correspondence. These fantasies are a projection of his desires, rather than a reflection of Mrs. Das's actions and words.



The Sun Temple is symbolic of the characters' shared Indian heritage. Yet, by virtue of their life in America, the Das family is unfamiliar with the temple and approaches it strictly as tourists. Mr. Kapasi, by contrast, is intimately familiar with the site not only because he is a tour guide but also because it is one of his favorite places. The characters' contrasting relationship to the temple alludes to their different positions in relation to India and its cultural heritage.



The friezes of naked lovers on the temple walls reflect Mr. Kapasi's romantic desires. Indeed, the naked bodies are associated with Mrs. Das's bare legs, making explicit Mr. Kapasi's erotic desire for Mrs. Das. The fact that he cannot associate these naked depictions with his wife, whom he has not seen naked despite their intimate life together, suggests the extent of Mr. Kapasi's disconnection from his wife.



As Mr. Kapasi is admiring a statue, Mrs. Das walks up to him and asks him about it. He explains that the statue represents the setting sun. She answers, “Neat,” and although Mr. Kapasi isn’t quite sure what she means by the word, he takes her response to be positive. Again, Mr. Kapasi fantasizes about the letters that he will exchange with Mrs. Das, thinking that he will explain to her “things about India,” and she would tell him about America in turn. Mr. Kapasi reflects that this would be a fulfillment of his youthful ambition to become an “an interpreter between nations.” Mr. Kapasi is suddenly saddened by the thought of Mrs. Das’s return to the United States. He learns from her that the family will return to America in ten days’ time, and he calculates that he will receive his first letter from Mrs. Das in approximately six weeks.

Back in the car with the Das family, Mr. Kapasi drives them towards their hotel. He dreads not seeing Mrs. Das, or hearing from her, for six weeks. He does not look forward to going home to his wife. Hoping to extend the time with Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi suggests taking a detour to visit monastic dwellings located on hills at Udayagiri and Khadagir. Mr. Das and Mrs. Das agree to the detour, and Mr. Kapasi is relieved.

When they arrive at the monastic dwellings, Mrs. Das stays in the car, saying she is tired. This annoys Mr. Das, who rebukes her for wearing uncomfortable shoes. He wants Mrs. Das to accompany them because he would like to pose the entire family for photos (to be taken by Mr. Kapasi) that he can send to friends for Christmas. Nonetheless, Mrs. Das refuses to leave the car, and so Mr. Das walks off with Ronny, Bobby, and Tina, carrying the latter on his shoulders. Along the path, **monkeys** are perched. They surround Mr. Das and the children, who stop to observe them.

Mr. Kapasi, still in the car with Mrs. Das, tells her that he will join Mr. Das and the children, but she tells him to stay with her. They observe as Bobby passes a stick back and forth with a **monkey**. Watching him, Mr. Kapasi innocently comments that Bobby is a brave boy. In response, Mrs. Das says this is not surprising, as Bobby is in fact not Mr. Das’s son. Trying not to show how stunned he is, Mr. Kapasi dabs a bit of the lotus-oil balm he carries with him on his forehead, as Mrs. Das gauges his reaction.

Mr. Kapasi’s uncertainty over Mrs. Das’s use of the word “Neat” points to the way that cultural distance affects the characters’ communication with one another. In launching into further fantasies about the letters that he will exchange with Mrs. Das, Mr. Kapasi imagines this correspondence will constitute a cultural bridging of the different worlds—India and America—that they inhabit. Mr. Kapasi’s thoughts suggest that he has an idealistic view of the power of words to serve as instruments to bridge cultural and national divides. His sadness over Mrs. Das’s imminent departure, finally, also points to just how infatuated he has become with Mrs. Das: he has only met her a few hours ago, and knows very little about her, and yet already feels deeply attached to her.



Mr. Kapasi’s growing infatuation with Mrs. Das is further reflected in the fact that he can hardly bear the thought of being separated from her, going so far as to come up with an excuse to extend the journey with the family. His fantasies about, and his desire for, some kind of intimate relationship with Mrs. Das have completely taken hold of him.



Mr. and Mrs. Das’s communication is never free of tension, and here again they are presented as in conflict with each another over Mrs. Das’s refusal to leave the car and to pose for the family picture. Mrs. Das’s decision not to accompany her family is another instance where she seems to behave in a cold and disengaged way towards her family. That Mr. Das and the children stop to observe the monkeys again suggests how novel these animals are to the Americanized Das family, unused to the sights and sounds of India.



Mrs. Das’s request that Mr. Kapasi remain with her in the car implicitly sets up the expectation that she wants something from him. This is the moment of intimacy that Mr. Kapasi doubtless had been hoping for. Yet Mrs. Das’s confession that Bobby is not Mr. Das’s son is completely shocking to Mr. Kapasi. He is confronted with knowledge he did not imagine nor expect, and his nervous action of dabbing lotus-oil on his forehead is an expression of his uncertainty over how to proceed.



Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi that she has never told the secret of Bobby's paternity to anyone—he is the first person she has shared the secret with. She then goes on to recount the story of her relationship to Mr. Das, whom she knew since she was a child through her parents, who were good friends with his. She and Mr. Das had once been passionate about each other and had married very young. Soon after giving birth to her first child, Ronny, Mrs. Das found herself overwhelmed with the responsibilities of being a mother, feeling alone and isolated while her husband worked, returning home only to watch television and bounce Ronny on his knee.

Continuing to recount the story of her marriage, Mrs. Das tells Mr. Kapasi that while still a first-time mother, a friend of her husband had come to New Jersey for job interviews and stayed with them. One day, while Mr. Das was at work, his friend received news that he had been offered a job. He made advances on Mrs. Das, who did not resist. She slept with him while Ronny cried in his playpen. Her second son, Bobby was conceived as a result of the affair. Mrs. Das also tells Mr. Kapasi that Mr. Das's friend doesn't know that Bobby is his son, although the families are still in touch.

Mr. Kapasi asks Mrs. Das why she is telling him all this, and she scolds him for calling her Mrs. Das, saying that she is only twenty-eight and that Mr. Kapasi probably has children her own age. Mr. Kapasi is taken aback, realizing that Mrs. Das thinks of him as a parent.

Mrs. Das addresses Mr. Kapasi's confusion over why she is sharing this secret with him. She tells Mr. Kapasi that she was hoping that he would use his talents as an interpreter of maladies to relieve her of the terrible feelings that she has towards her family and herself as a result of her betrayal.

The story Mrs. Das tells is one of disillusionment, and it confirms Mr. Kapasi's earlier suspicions that Mrs. Das is unhappy in her marriage; this story will also result in Mr. Kapasi's disillusionment over the character of Mrs. Das. Although Mrs. Das had once been in love with her husband, the responsibilities of family life clearly burdened her more than they did Mr. Das. Her narrative of the marriage casts Mr. Das as an insensitive husband who failed to notice the toll motherhood was taking on his wife. The fact that Mrs. Das has never shared the secret of Bobby's paternity with anyone also points to the extent of Mrs. Das's negligence. Not only has she betrayed her husband, she continues to betray both her husband and her son by not sharing the truth of Bobby's paternity with them.



Mrs. Das's negligence is further compounded by her description of the affair. She put up no resistance to being seduced by Mr. Das's friend. Furthermore, in indulging in sex with her husband's friend, she neglected her son Ronny by ignoring him as he cried in his playpen. This description, therefore, reinforces the many ways in which Mrs. Das has neglected responsibilities towards her husband and children.



By calling attention to the age difference between them, Mrs. Das shatters Mr. Kapasi's illusion that she views him as a potential romantic partner. In this scene, therefore, Mr. Kapasi's fantasies about Mrs. Das, as well as his assumptions about her thoughts and feelings towards him, begin to fall apart.



Here, it finally becomes clear that Mrs. Das's intentions towards Mr. Kapasi are completely different from what he had imagined. She is not interested in him romantically at all. She is turning to him as a healer, a parent-like figure who might have the power to relieve her of the "malady" of her terrible feelings. It becomes clearer to Mr. Kapasi, and to the reader, that he had completely misinterpreted Mrs. Das's interest in him.



Mr. Kapasi considers what to do, thinking that he should advise Mrs. Das to be honest with Mr. Das, and that perhaps he could preside between them as a mediator. At this juncture, however, he decides it's best to get to "the heart of the matter," and as such he asks her whether it is really pain she feels, or whether it is guilt.

Mrs. Das is outraged by Mr. Kapasi's question. Her expression changes, and he can see that she deems him suddenly worthless. She storms out of the car to find her family. As she walks up the path away from the car, she eats a snack of puffed rice. Crumbs fall to the ground, attracting **monkeys** that leap down from the trees and begin to trail her. She is unaware of this, so Mr. Kapasi leaves the car and picks up a stick to scare away the animals.

Mrs. Das finds the rest of her family and asks them to wait for her to be in a photograph. Mr. Das wants all of them to pose for a family photograph, which Mr. Kapasi is to take.

The group realizes that Bobby, the middle boy, is missing. They begin calling for him, and find him under a tree, terrified, near the crumbs of puffed rice that Mrs. Das has inadvertently dropped on the ground. He is surrounded by **monkeys**, who are pulling at his T-shirt. One of them is hitting his leg with a stick.

Tina, panicking like everyone else as she watches her brother being attacked by the **monkeys**, appeals to her father, and yet Mr. Das seems paralyzed and fumbling in the face of the danger posed to his son. Mrs. Das turns instead to Mr. Kapasi for help, commanding him to do something. Mr. Kapasi shoos away the monkeys and carries Bobby to his parents.

Realizing what Mrs. Das actually wants from him, Mr. Kapasi is forced to completely rethink his engagement with her and her family. Rather than a lover, he can only hope to play the part of mediator or healer to help patch up the broken relationship between Mrs. Das and her husband. His question to her suggests Mrs. Das's need to take responsibility for her actions.



Mrs. Das's outrage points to her own guilt. Her storming out of the car suggests that she is in denial about her negligence towards her family. She is unwilling to confront her guilt and to take responsibility for her actions. Her negligence is even further reinforced by her carelessness in dropping food and the subsequent ominous appearance of the monkeys. Mr. Kapasi's own goodness is reflected in the fact that, despite her insulting treatment of him, he feels compelled to protect Mrs. Das from the animals.



Mrs. Das's insistence on joining a family photograph here is ironic. She has just revealed to Mr. Kapasi that her family life is built on betrayals and lies. As such, the photograph she wants to pose for would presumably reflect an image of a happy, smiling, cohesive family that is merely an illusion.



Bobby's attack is a direct result of Mrs. Das's carelessness: the monkeys were led to him because they were attracted by the crumbs of food that his mother dropped on the path. By associating the monkeys' attack with Mrs. Das's actions, Lahiri suggests the animals as symbols of the danger unleashed on children as a result of the parents' negligence. Bobby, the product of Mrs. Das's secret affair, is notably the child most endangered by his mother's failure to take responsibility for her actions (and Mr. Das's failure to keep a proper eye on his children in her absence).



Mr. Das's paralysis in the face of the danger suggests that it is not only Mrs. Das who is unable to properly care for her children. Her husband, too, seems unable or unwilling to step up for his children, even when they are threatened. It is the stranger, Mr. Kapasi, who must finally come to the boy's aid. This scene further confirms that Mr. and Mrs. Das are immature, and irresponsible, parents.



As Mr. Kapasi carries Bobby away from the **monkeys**, he has an impulse to tell the boy the secret about his paternity, but resists. The boy is terrified and bleeding, and so Mr. Kapasi silently hands him over to Mr. Das and Mrs. Das.

In rescuing Bobby, Mr. Kapasi acts more like a parent than either Mr. or Mrs. Das do. Yet the story is ambiguous over whether Mr. Kapasi feels the urge to share this secret out of vindictiveness (Mrs. Das, after all, has not behaved very kindly towards him), or out of a desire to rescue Bobby from his mother's lies. In choosing not to share the secret, however, the scene suggests that Mr. Kapasi ultimately attempts to act in the boy's interests—after all, Bobby is only a child, and likely too distraught to be confronted with such terrible knowledge in this moment.



When Mr. Kapasi delivers Bobby to the family, they comfort him. Mr. Das cleans the boy's T-shirt and fixes his visor, and Mrs. Das places a bandage on his cut knee. She wants to get away to the hotel immediately, and Mr. Das agrees.

While Mr. and Mrs. Das fuss over Bobby, neither of them seems to recognize the fact that they have both let their son down: Mrs. Das by dropping crumbs of food that led the monkeys to him, and Mr. Das by failing to act to save his son when he saw that he was in danger. Their acts of caring, therefore, are not very meaningful, given that they come too late, and again point to the fact that the parents are unable or unwilling to acknowledge their responsibilities towards their children.



Mrs. Das takes out a hairbrush from her bag to brush Bobby's hair. As she does so, the piece of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address scribbled on it slips out of the bag and is swept away by the wind. Mr. Kapasi is the only one who notices this. His gaze follows the paper as it flutters up to the trees, where the **monkeys** are now perched, looking down at the family. Mr. Kapasi turns his gaze back to the family and thinks that this is the image of them "he would preserve in his mind forever."

The fluttering away of the paper points to the loss of Mr. Kapasi's illusions. His hopes for a romantic relationship with Mrs. Das, as well as his assumptions about her family, have been shattered. The presence of the monkeys is also significant, given that the animals represent danger. While Bobby has been saved from them for the moment, their presence in the trees suggests that the family will continue to be plagued with strife. The image that Mr. Kapasi "preserves" of the Dases also recalls the many photographs that Mr. Das has taken throughout the story. Mr. Das's photographs depict a happy family on vacation, whereas this final image that Mr. Kapasi notes is much darker; it is an image of a family riven by betrayal, guilt, and lurking danger. It is also an image that emphasizes Mr. Kapasi's exclusion—he is an outsider, who can only stand at a distance and observe.





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