

The Elephant Vanishes



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HARUKI MURAKAMI

Haruki Murakami was born in Kyoto, Japan during the post-World War II baby boom. The only child of two Japanese literature professors, Murakami was ironically drawn to European, American, and Russian influences from an early age. Murakami's stories are also rife with eclectic literary and pop culture references—Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Beatles, Franz Kafka, and Duke Ellington, to name a few. He attended Waseda University in Tokyo, where he studied drama. Like other magical realist writers, Murakami's narratives are often strange and unsettling, juxtaposing the mundanity of everyday life with surreal moments that challenge human perception and natural limits. Murakami has written fourteen novels as well as several short story collections, essays, and works of nonfiction. He has attracted a diverse fanbase over his 40-year writing career, receiving worldwide recognition and prestigious literary awards such as the Frank Kafka Prize. His books have been translated into 50 different languages.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Elephant Vanishes" takes place in 1980s suburban Tokyo. Some forty years before the story's setting, World War II had caused widespread destruction throughout the Japan. The cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in particular were almost entirely eradicated by atomic bombs. After the war, Japan (and society in general) was devastated physically, economically, and socially. Post-World War II nations were focused on restoration and rebirth, as phenomena such as the baby boom, urbanization, and global media overtook modern society. The small town in "The Elephant Vanishes" is a post-World War II Japanese society that seems to be missing a cohesive sense of tradition or community as the town is hyper-focused on financial prosperity and urban expansion. The alienation, confusion, and disunity that plagues both the narrator and the town itself is characteristic of a postmodern society still rebuilding itself and searching for meaning in the wake of tragedy.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Murakami's writing is a unique blend of the Japanese literary tradition and global influences such as magical realism, postmodernism, and science fiction. His works often draw from the traditional Japanese "I-Novels," a genre of confessional literature that emerged in the early twentieth century. I-Novels are written from a first-person perspective and aim to honestly portray dark and painful aspects of society. This influence is

particularly apparent in *The Elephant Vanishes* (the collection in which the short story of the same name appears), throughout which Murakami explores difficult themes such as alienation, loss, and destruction from candid first-person perspectives. He also often draws inspiration from Western postmodernist writers such as Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon, with many of his stories featuring unconventional narrative structures or an unreliable narrator. Most notably, Murakami is a contemporary magical realist author, often injecting bizarre surrealism into seemingly normal, everyday settings. This genre draws on more traditional surrealist works such as Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. Magical realism is a diverse global genre that is not tied to any one region, with notable works including *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Elephant Vanishes
- **Where Written:** Japan
- **When Published:** 1991 in *The New Yorker* and 1993 in its eponymous short story collection
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary, postmodernism
- **Genre:** Short story, magical realism
- **Setting:** 1980s suburban Tokyo
- **Climax:** The narrator reveals to the woman at the business party that he was the last person to see the elephant and its keeper on the night before the two vanished.
- **Point of View:** First person singular

EXTRA CREDIT

Peter Cat. Shortly after graduating Waseda University in 1973, Murakami opened a coffeehouse and jazz bar in Tokyo that he ran with his wife Yoko from 1974-1981. He named the bar Peter Cat after his childhood pet.

Ordinary Person. Though Murakami was a lifelong fan of music, art, and literature, he did not begin writing fiction until he was 29 years old. He describes himself as "one of those ordinary people" who was not creative before he started writing.



PLOT SUMMARY

"The Elephant Vanishes" is the story of an elderly zoo elephant who mysteriously vanishes after being taken in by a suburban

Japanese community when the town's zoo closes, as well as this event's lasting effects on the story's narrator. The narrative shifts back in forth in time between the present (post-disappearance) and the past (pre-disappearance).

Before the elephant vanishes, the mayor's initial decision to take ownership of the animal is met with opposition from the townspeople due to financial and safety concerns. After moving into the makeshift elephant house in town, the elephant is largely ignored by the community. The elephant leads a lonely existence **shackled** to a concrete slab, its only solace being the close friendship it shares with the old zookeeper who cares for the animal. The narrator is fascinated by the mysterious bond and system of communication that the elephant and its keeper share, and often peers into the elephant house to observe how the pair interacts in private.

One day, the narrator reads the morning paper and finds that the elephant and keeper have inexplicably vanished from the elephant house without warning. He realizes that he was likely the last person to see the pair before they disappeared, as he had been watching them from outside the elephant house the night before. The narrator becomes obsessed with the disappearance and, due to the lack of evidence suggesting a break-in or an escape, believes that the elephant must have vanished into thin air. This troubling conclusion frustrates the narrator and alienates him from his community, which believes the media's narrative that it was, in fact, an escape. The townspeople soon forget about the elephant, but the narrator remains fixated on the mystifying event.

A few months later, the narrator meets a woman at a business party to whom he confesses his perspective on the elephant's disappearance. He admits that he believes the elephant and keeper vanished, and that he was probably the last one to have seen them. The narrator also reveals a bizarre moment that he witnessed: on the night before the disappearance, he looked into the elephant house and saw that the size difference between the elephant and the keeper had somehow diminished. The narrator recalls feeling an unsettling shift in reality in that moment. The woman is confused and put off by the narrator's strange account, and the two never meet again.

The narrator continues to be consumed by the inexplicable change in size between the elephant and the keeper, as well as by their strange disappearance. Although everyone else seems to have easily forgotten about the case, the narrator feels that his own perceptions can no longer be trusted. A sense of chaotic imbalance has disrupted the natural order and overtaken his sense of normality in the wake of the elephant who vanished.

narrator is a 31-year-old man living in an affluent Tokyo suburb who works for the public relations department of an electrical appliance manufacturer. He has an ongoing interest in the elephant and with the remarkable friendship it shares with its keeper. This interest deepens into an obsession after the narrator becomes the last person to see the animal and its keeper before they mysteriously disappear. The narrator is the only character in the story who witnesses a bizarre shift in the size difference between the elephant and the zookeeper on the night before the disappearance. He concludes that either the elephant shrunk, the keeper grew, or both changed simultaneously. The narrator is subsequently thrown into a state of imbalance by this magical occurrence and is alienated from the townspeople in his belief that the elephant did not escape, but rather vanished completely. The narrator is also fixated on the idea of order in both his personal and professional life, maintaining strict routines (such as waking up at exactly 6:13 and reading the newspaper straight through from beginning to end) and espousing the benefits of unity in design and in life. He is completely possessed by the elephant's disappearance and confesses what he witnessed in the elephant house to a young woman he meets at a business party in hopes of finding a sympathetic ear. But the narrator is only misunderstood, further alienated, and thrown into an internal sense of disarray after their conversation. Unlike the other characters who quickly forget about the vanishing elephant, the narrator is fundamentally and irreparably changed by the strange circumstances of the event.

The Elephant – The titular animal of “The Elephant Vanishes.” The elephant was displaced from its native habitat in East Africa twenty-two years before the story takes place and comes to live at the zoo in a Tokyo suburb. By the 1980s, the elephant is elderly, feeble, and lonely, spending months isolated in the town's abandoned zoo after it closes due to financial problems. The mayor of the town agrees to take ownership of the elephant despite the townspeople's general view of the animal as a financial burden and safety liability, which they refer to as “the elephant problem.” The elephant does not seem to truly belong anywhere and is generally ignored and mistreated by the townspeople. It is kept **shackled** in a repurposed school gymnasium and fed leftover lunch scraps. Though alienated, the elephant has a deep friendship with old the zookeeper, Noboru Watanabe, who looked after the animal for many years at the zoo and continues to live alongside it and care for it at the elephant house. The two bear a striking physical resemblance to each other and share an elusive method of communication in private. The elephant is also greatly admired by the narrator, who often comes to the elephant house to watch the animal and its keeper interact. As the story's title suggests, the elephant mysteriously vanishes along with Watanabe. Beyond the narrator's observation of the size imbalance between the elephant and its keeper on the night before the disappearance and his speculation that the animal vanished (rather than



CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The protagonist of the story, the unnamed

escaped), there is no conclusive evidence of what happened to the elephant.

The Keeper/Noboru Watanabe – An elderly zookeeper who took care of the elephant for many years at the zoo and continues to live with and care for the animal after it is transferred to the town’s makeshift elephant house. Having worked with mammals for decades, he is “abundantly knowledgeable” about elephants and has a “warm sincere personality.” Watanabe vanishes along with the elephant yet is not mentioned in the title; despite this, he is the only character in the story whose full name, Noboru Watanabe, is ever referenced. The zookeeper bears an uncanny resemblance to the decrepit elephant under his care—he possesses the same leathery skin, protruding ears, small eyes, and short, bristly hair. Also like the elephant, the keeper is generally ignored and ostracized by the townspeople. He is a withdrawn, lonely man who, like the narrator, does not form close relationships with other members of the community. The zookeeper’s only close friend is the elephant, with whom he shares a complex system of communication based on taps, commands, and nonverbal cues. Before the elephant and keeper vanish, the narrator is mesmerized by this bond between the two and enjoys watching the warm affection between the pair in private.

The Woman at the Party – An attractive young woman whom the narrator meets at a business party. Like most other characters in the story, the woman is unnamed, only referred to as “her” and “she” by the narrator. The woman is a twenty-six-year-old editor of a women’s magazine and attends an advertising campaign launch party thrown by the narrator’s company to gather information for an article. The narrator and the woman hit it off and retire to the hotel cocktail lounge after the party to continue their conversation. The woman is the only person to whom the narrator confesses his unique perspective on the disappearance of the elephant because she seems to be a good listener and interested in the topic. The woman is confused and unsettled by the narrator’s description of the change in size he witnessed between the elephant and its keeper as well as by the narrator’s conviction that the elephant vanished into thin air. Although the woman only appears briefly in the story and the narrator never sees her again after the night they meet, she is the one who solidifies the narrator’s belief that the shift in his perception caused by the elephant’s disappearance is permanent and will continue to prevent him from deeply connecting with other people.

The Mayor – The mayor of the town in which the story takes place. After the town’s zoo closes and the story’s titular elephant is left abandoned, the mayor agrees that the town will take ownership of the animal in a deal negotiated with the zoo’s former owners and the developers who purchased the zoo’s land. Though the mayor ostensibly cares more for the elephant’s wellbeing than the townspeople (particularly the opposition party who would just as soon have the elephant

ethanized), he is primarily interested in using the homeless elephant as the town’s symbol and projecting an altruistic and politically favorable image.

The Townspeople – The inhabitants of the suburban community where the displaced elephant comes to live. The townspeople are generally opposed to the mayor’s decision for the town to take over the care of the defunct zoo’s elephant. They are indifferent toward the animal and its keeper once they come to live in the town’s makeshift elephant house, prioritizing finances, progress, and urbanization over any concerns about the elephant’s wellbeing. In the aftermath of the elephant and keeper’s disappearance, the narrator feels alienated from the townspeople as he believes the pair vanished, while the townspeople believe the media’s narrative that the elephant escaped or was stolen.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ALIENATION, CONNECTION, AND UNITY

In “The Elephant Vanishes,” Murakami recounts how a Tokyo suburb deals with the improbable disappearance of an old elephant that has been left in the town’s care. Through the narrator—the last person to see the animal before its strange disappearance—as well as the elderly zookeeper and the elephant itself, Murakami spins a story of isolation and meaningful connection. The central conflict in “The Elephant Vanishes” lies in its characters’ inability to form deep bonds with one another. Despite the mayor’s attempt to unite the community around the elephant, the townspeople ultimately ostracize the elephant and its keeper even before they vanish. The narrator’s obsession with the pair’s disappearance isolates him from the outside world and hinders his relationship with his romantic interest. This seemingly contagious sense of alienation that affects various characters throughout story serves to highlight the mystery and intangibility of the genuine unity that the narrator observes between the elephant and its keeper.

The story takes place in a suburb plagued by social unrest and disharmony, as the townspeople are suspicious of the mayor’s political motivations and unaccepting of the elephant and the zookeeper. This distinct lack of unity contrasts with the deep connection shared between the elephant and its keeper. When the town’s zoo closes and the land is sold to a high-rise developer, both neighboring zoos and the townspeople view the elephant as a liability and economic burden. An “opposition

party” rises up to protest the town’s adoption of the elephant, reflecting the underlying social dissonance of the community.

The mayor’s effort to make the elephant into the town’s symbol fails to foster a sense of unity, as the narrator recalls that the empty platitudes (such as a poem dedication) given during the elephant house dedication ceremony are “virtually meaningless.” The elephant, bound by a **shackle** on its ankle, remains listless and indifferent to the townspeople’s contrived displays of appreciation. The narrator’s analysis of the dedication ceremony proves to be accurate, as the town quickly forgets about the elephant and zookeeper, relegating them to a secluded life in the elephant house. The mayor’s attempts to unite the town around the elephant’s presence fail, and the animal and its keeper are left to cultivate a friendship in lieu of the community that shuns them.

The alienation of the elephant and the keeper by the townspeople paradoxically makes them the only two characters in the story to find true companionship, as the pair’s mutual ostracization fosters a connection between them. Their bond reinforces the notion that meaningful relationships are organic and effortless, and that attempting to force unity only results in further alienation. The townspeople generally perceive the elephant and its keeper as old and feeble, and the pair are largely forgotten by the community. The elephant is shackled inside the old school gym and subsists on leftover scraps of school lunches, while the keeper is a “reticent, lonely-looking old man” who the town’s children “never really warmed to.”

In spite of how the town treats the elephant and its keeper, the pair are able to find solace in each other’s company. At one point, the narrator observes that the elephant and keeper are completely in sync and have the ability to communicate nonverbally. The pair are so fully integrated with one another that the narrator even notices uncanny physical similarities between the two, pointing out the large ears and leathery skin that they share.

The narrator finds a spot from which he can see into the elephant house and becomes captivated by their tight-knit relationship. On the night before the disappearance, the narrator looks into the house to see that the physical size difference between the elephant and keeper has inexplicably diminished. The narrator is left to believe that either the elephant shrunk, or the zookeeper grew until the pair were the same size. This seemingly magical event can be interpreted as a physical manifestation of the emotional intimacy between the elephant and its keeper, as their mysterious bond subverts what natural laws and human perception deem possible.

In the aftermath of the elephant and keeper’s vanishing, the narrator’s fixation on their mysterious relationship and the circumstances of their disappearance leads to alienation in his personal life. His inability to find a kindred spirit in his recollection of the event reflects the stark contrast between forced social connection and the true unity that he observed

between the elephant and its keeper. The narrator becomes possessed by the disappearance, saving every article he can find on the event in scrapbooks. He identifies with the alienation that the elephant and keeper faced and becomes isolated in his obsession, as he was likely the sole witness of the private bond they shared and the last one to see the pair before they vanished.

Later, when the narrator meets an attractive, single woman at a business event, he attempts to move beyond their superficial conversation by confiding in her about seeing the diminished size difference between the elephant and the keeper on the night before their disappearance. The narrator regrets this, however, when the woman reacts with confusion and silence. He realizes, “I never should have told her about the elephant. It was not the kind of story you could tell freely to anyone.” This moment of misunderstanding extinguishes the blossoming relationship between the narrator and the woman entirely—the two awkwardly wrap up their conversation, go their separate ways after the party, and never meet again. The narrator’s sense of regret suggests the inherent complexity of human connections and the futility of trying to force depth and trust in social connections.

After this encounter, the narrator realizes that everyone else has forgotten about the elephant and that no one, including himself, will ever fully comprehend his uniquely intimate experience of the event. He is isolated by a lack of understanding, and by his own distrust of his memories and perceptions. Unable to foster a similar sense of intimacy in his own personal life, the narrator is haunted by the unanswerable nature of the elephant’s relationship with the keeper. Murakami uses the alienation of the pair from the town, and later that of the narrator from the world around him, to emphasize the intrinsic value and mysterious nature of the deep camaraderie that the narrator observes between the elephant and its keeper.



ORDER, PERCEPTION, AND IMBALANCE

As in other works of magical realist literature, “The Elephant Vanishes” features surreal situations that seem to disrupt the fundamental natural order. The titular elephant, already a wild animal at odds with its surroundings in a suburb of Tokyo, appears to physically shrink in relation to its keeper just before the two vanish. Witnessing this surreal shift in balance has a profound effect on the narrator, who feels that his own life has been irrevocably disrupted in the wake of the pair’s disappearance. The imbalance of the elephant and its keeper directly parallels the narrator’s internal imbalance, highlighting the conflict between humanity’s gravitation toward order versus the unreliability of perception and reality.

Prior to the elephant and its keeper mysteriously vanishing, the narrator centers his life around routine and order. The narrator

is rigidly tied to his daily rituals, noting that his alarm clock wakes him up at the exact minute of 6:13, and that “I’m one of those people who read the paper from beginning to end, in order.” The narrator’s routines are implied to be an anchor of balance and meaning in a life that is otherwise empty—his career is “not the kind of work that takes a great deal of intelligence,” and he is seemingly alienated from those around him. The narrator is also fixated on the notion of balance within his public relations job, espousing the necessary role of equilibrium and cohesion in modern life. He asserts that “Even the most beautifully designed item dies if it is out of balance with its surroundings.” This conviction reflects an intrinsic human inclination toward order as a way to cope with the tumultuousness of modern life.

The narrator’s artificially constructed sense of stability and dependability is disrupted when he experiences the elephant’s inexplicable shift in size and subsequent disappearance, forcing him to grapple with the tenuous nature of balance and the chaos of reality. The night before the elephant and its keeper disappear, the narrator peers into the elephant house from a nearby cliff and is shocked to see that the elephant has somehow shrunk down to the zookeeper’s size, wondering whether “my eyes were playing tricks on me” or if “town might have got hold a of a new smaller elephant.” But the elephant’s mannerisms are exactly the same, and the narrator can only assume that the elephant has somehow shrunk (or perhaps the keeper grew) despite the absurdity and surrealism of this realization.

Witnessing this moment of imbalance has a profound impact on the narrator, who until this point has been fully routinized into the natural order of his surroundings and usual rhythms of everyday life. He feels that “a different, chilling kind of time was flowing through the elephant house—but nowhere else,” and that the elephant and the keeper willingly “[gave] themselves over to this new order” of reality. The narrator’s life is thrown into imbalance by the incident of the elephant vanishing, as he is forced to grapple with the fact that reality is subjective and memory untrustworthy. His repeated use of the qualifier “probably” when recounting the diminished size difference between the elephant and its keeper suggests the narrator’s self-doubt and reluctance to accept the “new order” of reality that was ushered into being by this physical shift.

Though the rest of the townspeople quickly moves on from the disappearance, the event leaves a lasting sense of disorder and unease that affects the narrator long after the events take place. The imbalance is pronounced enough to take on a contagious quality as the narrator tries to explain his version of the mysterious circumstances to an attractive woman he meets at a business party. The woman is taken aback, telling the narrator that “You were carrying on a perfectly normal conversation [...] until the subject of the elephant came up. Then something funny happened. I can’t understand you

anymore. Something’s wrong.” The woman’s discomfort in the context of their conversation about the elephant mirrors the overwhelming paradigm shift the narrator experiences in the wake of the disappearance. She cannot reconcile the narrator’s seemingly impossible conviction that the elephant and keeper magically vanished with her previously-formed perceptions of him as a potential mate, and their budding relationship is stunted as a result.

On a similar but grander scale, the narrator feels that “things around me have lost their proper balance, though it could be that my perceptions are playing tricks on me.” After the elephant and keeper disappear, he is left adrift in a lingering blur of confusion and instability in which he lives “based on afterimages of memories I retain” from before the event. Reality has shattered the narrator’s dependence on order, and his life has been irreparably unsettled by the inexplicable magic he witnessed in the elephant-house. The randomness of the disappearance and the ease with which the imbalance of the elephant and the keeper disrupts the narrator’s life reflects the fragility of the order and certainty that serve as the framework for human perception. In creating this domino effect of imbalance within the story’s plot, Murakami shatters the façade of stability that people cling to in the wake of the underlying chaotic, entropic nature of the universe.



MODERNITY

The progression toward modernity serves as the catalyst behind the general state of disorder and meaninglessness that abounds in “The Elephant Vanishes.” The story takes place in 1980s suburban Tokyo, where towns were still in the midst of the economic boom and technological advancements that characterized post-WWII societies. The consequences of modernity are evident in the expansion of the story’s town as well as in the public relations career of the narrator. Murakami’s focus on progress, urbanization, and consumerism throughout the story reflects modern life’s tendency to create a sense of meaninglessness both in society and within the individual.

Whereas Japan is a nation that has historically held a strong sense of tradition and group identity, the townspeople in “The Elephant Vanishes” lack a stable sense of community. The increasing modernization of the town and its values lead its people to prioritize economic gain and pragmatic motivations over emotional concerns such as empathy for the elephant and zookeeper. The narrator comments that before the town took ownership of the elephant, an opposition group was starkly opposed to the idea, citing the financial and security costs of housing the animal. He believes that the elephant was only saved from euthanasia because its death would have been “too hard to cover up.”

This prioritization of economic concerns over empathy toward an elderly creature in need indicates a shift in values brought

on by modernization. The zoo in town was forced to close and was bought out by a high-rise developer, suggesting a contemporary mindset that values commodification and expansion over traditional pastimes. The townspeople are concerned with urban development above all else and lack connection with the ethos of their community and the elephant's status as its proposed symbol. The townspeople are also quick to forget about the elephant's disappearance despite the initial hysteria toward the situation. The narrator notices that "people seem to have forgotten that their town once owned an elephant," reflecting the increasingly distracted, unsentimental attitude of modern society.

Modernity's negative impact on human life also appears in the story through the business world. Like the collective community's economic concerns, the narrator is preoccupied with money in terms of how much product he can sell—a lucrative but ultimately unsatisfying pursuit. The narrator openly acknowledges the fact that "things you can't sell don't count for much." This directly parallels the community's attitude toward the elephant, as the animal is largely resented, alienated, and ignored due to its lack of "merit" or lucrative potential. The narrator is also plain about the fact that his distinctively modern public relations career (a relatively new field in the twentieth century) is shallow in nature. After making the empty claim that the world is "pragmatic" in conversation, he admits that you can "play games" with language and manipulate expression in order to sell product. This skepticism toward modern consumeristic culture deepens the narrator's feelings of discontent in his personal life. As in his advertising work, he falls back on superficial platitudes, unable to truly connect with anyone or find meaning in his experiences.

Beyond the corporate sphere of the narrator's career, modernity also influences how the media operates in the wake of the elephant and keeper's disappearance. As Japan became increasingly modernized and less insular during the twentieth century, local and mass media usurped word of mouth as the means by which people acquired information. This context has a direct influence on how the narrator navigates the mystery of the disappearance, as he is socially disconnected from his community and can only hope to glean more information from the speculative secondhand accounts of journalists. Society, as the narrator notes, has become more pragmatic and less emotionally invested over time. As a result, the journalists cover the event superficially and neglect to investigate the surrounding circumstance and deeper meaning behind the disappearance. The narrator admits that he meticulously reads and saves every newspaper article and cartoon about the elephant he can find, but reflects that "despite their enormous volume, the clippings contained not one fat of the kind that I was looking for."

The narrator goes on to remark that reports of the disappearance were "either pointless or off the mark" and that

coverage of the event fizzled out almost entirely after a week. According to the narrator, the newspapers and readers in the town "shove the elephant case into the large category of 'unsolvable mysteries'" that are unimportant and have no impact on society. He reflects that "the earth would continue its monotonous rotations" and that the mundanity of everyday life would continue on as if the event had not taken place. Amidst the fast-paced flurry of modern life, even the seemingly miraculous nature of the elephant's disappearance is largely irrelevant.

This nonchalant coverage and dismissal of the "elephant case" by the media reflects the impact of modernization of the town's values. Whereas the narrator's unique proximity to the elephant and keeper's disappearance causes him to become emotionally invested in the events, the disconnected community fails to unite their interest around the elephant and the story fades into obscurity. Through his cynical portrayal of various intersecting spheres of the community in "The Elephant Vanishes," Murakami examines the challenges of modernity and downfalls of contemporary culture, arguing that the progress and prosperity of modern life have ultimately robbed society of meaning and left individuals discontented and disconnected from one another.



HUMANS VS. ANIMALS

In "The Elephant Vanishes," the titular elephant is a displaced animal who is largely misunderstood and mistreated by the community in which it is forced to integrate. As a captive zoo animal, the elephant has no agency over its life—its whereabouts, housing, diet, and care are all placed under the control of a town that largely regards the elephant as a waste of practical resources. Rather than being treated with respect and proper care, the elephant's primary role for the community is to advance the mayor's political agenda upon its arrival and serve as a brief distraction after it vanishes. The only human to fully understand and care for the elephant is its keeper, who disappears along with it. Murakami contrasts the community's indifference and disdain for the elephant with the zookeeper's deep, loving relationship with the animal in order to criticize humankind's tendency to control and manipulate animals for their own gain.

The elephant's journey from the zoo to being adopted by the town is one that is motivated by political gain rather than genuine concern for the animal. The mayor aims to use the elephant's presence in order to boost the town's reputation, exemplifying the human instinct to exert control over animals for their own benefit. The elephant is taken in by the town under the pretext that its home (the town's zoo) has closed and been taken over by high-rise developers. This reality in and of itself reflects the community's indifference toward animals, as the zoo failed to thrive financially and most of the town is in favor of the urban development usurping it. The elephant

“stayed alone in the decaying zoo for nearly four months with nothing to do—not that it had had anything to do before,” exemplifying the tragedy and emptiness of its life spent in captivity for human entertainment.

Before the elephant’s arrival, the mayor spins its presence into somewhat of a political platform. He argues that the elephant could “become the town’s symbol” and that “the adoption of a homeless elephant was a move that people could look upon favorably.” Despite this attempted exploitation, the townspeople view the elephant as a burden and soon forget about the animal after giving it a cursory welcome at the elephant-house dedication ceremony. After the elephant vanishes, the mystery of the event serves as a short-lived scandal in the town before quickly fading into irrelevancy. Neither the media nor the townspeople show genuine concern for the elephant’s whereabouts and wellbeing, suggesting that its significance in the town was more aligned with that of an inanimate attraction and less with a living creature.

By contrast, the elephant’s relationship with the keeper is one based on mutual respect and a deep valuation of one another. The close friendship that the narrator witnesses between the pair is a stark contrast to how the elephant is treated by outside society, suggesting that humanity’s inclination to either overlook or control animals is anything but natural. From a vantage point on a nearby cliff, the narrator is able to see into the elephant-house and observe the tight-knit bond that the elephant and its creatures share. Both are elderly and ostracized away from the community, with the keeper possessing the same “darkly ruddy, sunburned look” and ears that “stuck out on either side with disturbing prominence” as the elephant. This parallel between the two old creatures positions them as equals.

Despite being housed haphazardly in an appropriated school gymnasium, held captive by a **shackle** bolted to a concrete slab, and fed a meager diet of leftover school lunch scraps, the elephant is well cared for by the zookeeper. Beyond physical similarities, there is a deep understanding between the two—the narrator notes that “you could sense their closeness in every gesture and look.” This close relationship is the antithesis of how the elephant is regarded by the mayor, townspeople, and media—outsiders seemingly only concerned with the positive benefits the animal could reap for them and the entertaining, short-lived drama of its disappearance.

As the story unspools, Murakami uplifts the zookeeper as a role model of sorts, praising his quiet humility, genuine care, and affection toward the elephant, which exemplifies a mutual sense of respect between different species. Murakami juxtaposes this intimate companionship between the elephant and its keeper with the town’s mistreatment and neglect of the elephant in order to demonstrate how the inclination of humanity to control animals is inherently immoral and motivated by political power, financial gain, and entertainment

value.



SYMBOLS

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



THE SHACKLE

Before the elephant vanishes, it is kept in a repurposed school gym that serves as the town’s makeshift elephant house. Whereas zoo animals are typically kept behind a barrier and given a relatively large area of land to roam, the elephant in the story is shackled to a concrete slab inside the elephant house. The narrator notes that the metal cuff is so strong that the elephant could never break free of it no matter how hard it tried. The shackle around the elephant’s ankle symbolizes humanity’s tendency to oppress and exert control over animals. Although the elephant is already held inside a building secured behind a gate, the townspeople’s paranoia over the potential safety risk that the giant animal could pose if it were to escape results in this inhumane treatment of preventing the elephant from simply moving around. In spite of this effort to control the elephant, the shackle is ironically found still locked on the floor of the elephant house after the animal and its keeper vanish—perhaps suggesting the ultimate futility of human beings’ attempts to exert control over animals and the natural world.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Elephant Vanishes: Stories* published in 1994.

The Elephant Vanishes Quotes

●● Without the elephant, something about the place seemed wrong. It looked bigger than it needed to be, blank and empty like some huge dehydrated beast from which the innards had been plucked.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Elephant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

When the narrator first learns of the vanishing elephant, he

is immediately drawn into the bizarre nature of the case and the unsettling atmosphere left behind in the animal's absence. He observes the photograph of the empty elephant house included with the newspaper article about the disappearance, noticing the strange air of blankness and death that seems to have settled over the place. The narrator likens the elephant house to a once-living "beast" (much like the elephant itself), implying that the structure's value and role in the community has been eroded without the presence of the animal it formerly housed. This perceived change in the elephant house is the first of many occurrences that creates a sense of chaotic imbalance for the narrator after the elephant's disappearance.

☞ The longer the elephant problem remained unsolved, the more interest the developer had to pay for nothing. Still, simply killing the thing would have been out of the question. If it had been a spider monkey or a bat, they might have been able to get away with it, but the killing of an elephant would have been too hard to cover up, and if it ever came out afterward, the repercussions would have been tremendous.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Townspeople, The Mayor, The Elephant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator recalls that his community originally took ownership of the elderly elephant because financial hardship forced the town's zoo to close down. Before the mayor made the decision to take in the elephant, there was contentious debate surrounding what should be done with the animal. Nearby zoos, along with many of the townspeople, were opposed to taking the elephant in, citing concerns about the elephant's age, the community's safety, and the financial burden the animal would bring to the town. In referring to this situation as "the elephant problem," the narrator implies that most people were more concerned with expanding the town through infrastructure, residential construction, and other projects than they were with what became of the elephant. He suggests that the real estate developers who purchased the defunct zoo's land would just as soon have euthanized the elephant, if they could have gotten away with it. The cavalier attitude of all parties involved suggests a societal shift in values away from empathy and collectivism, and toward economic

development, urban expansion, and individualism.

☞ On its right rear leg, the elephant wore a solid, heavy-looking steel cuff from which there stretched a thick chain perhaps thirty feet long, and this in turn was securely fastened to a concrete slab. Anyone could see what a sturdy anchor held the beast in place: The elephant could have struggled with all its might for a hundred years and never broken the thing.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Keeper/ Noboru Watanabe, The Townspeople, The Mayor, The Elephant

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

Despite the elephant being held securely inside the elephant house and behind a gate, those overseeing the elephant's accommodations (presumably the mayor, among other town officials) also deem it necessary to keep the animal shackled to a concrete slab inside the building. The elderly elephant had already been displaced from its natural habitat to live in a zoo for many years before the town reluctantly took ownership of it. The animal does not seem to truly belong anywhere or be fully accepted by anyone besides its keeper. The superficial gestures of welcome that the townspeople show upon the elephant's arrival are meaningless to the animal, as its subsequent life in the town is defined by ostracization from society, captivity, and neglect. The image of the elephant shackled and immobile inside the elephant house symbolizes the human tendency to oppress, control, and otherwise devalue animals.

☞ Riddled as it was with such perplexities and labored circumlocutions, the newspaper article as a whole left but one possible conclusion: The elephant had not escaped. It had vanished. Needless to say, however, neither the newspaper nor the police nor the mayor was willing to admit—openly, at least—that the elephant had vanished.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Townspeople, The Mayor, The Elephant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the confusion surrounding the elephant's disappearance, the narrator feels alienated from his community in his unique perspective on the event. He believes that the shackle found on locked on the ground, the lack of elephant tracks, and the elephant house key found in its usual place all suggest that the animal did not escape, nor was it stolen. Rather, based on the evidence (or lack thereof) at hand, the narrator concludes that the animal had no other means of disappearing besides vanishing into thin air. The media, however, is the mediator controlling the narrative of escape or theft that the public chooses to believe. The narrator is at odds with journalists, his fellow townspeople, the police, and the mayor who are unwilling to accept the disruption in the natural order that a vanishing elephant would imply.

☞ It seemed that people were beginning to shove the elephant case into the large category of “unsolvable mysteries.” The disappearance of one old elephant and one old elephant keeper would have no impact on the course of society. [...] Amid the endless surge and ebb of everyday life, interest in a missing elephant could not last forever. And so a number of unremarkable months went by, like a tired army marching past a window.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Keeper/ Noboru Watanabe, The Townspeople, The Elephant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 318

Explanation and Analysis

Whereas the narrator is completely fixated on the elephant, his community does not share his perspective on the situation. Within weeks of the elephant's disappearance, the townspeople begin to forget about the elephant while the narrator remains obsessed with the case. The mystery of the missing elephant and its keeper has disrupted the narrator's life, creating an inner sense of unease and imbalance. He reflects on the “endless surge and ebb” that characterizes modern life with cynicism—the story of the elephant, while deeply significant to him, has come and gone with news cycle's high turnover rate. The narrator feels that

daily life in his community is moving forward at its usual mundane pace while he is left alone, alienated in his insular belief that the elephant and its keeper did not disappear, but rather, vanished.

☞ “The most important point is unity,” I explained. “Even the most beautifully designed item dies if it is out of balance with its surroundings. Unity of design, unity of color, unity of function: This is what today's *kit-chin* needs above all else.”

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Woman at the Party

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, who works in public relations, meets an attractive young woman at an advertising campaign launch party for his company. Though alienated in his personality life, the narrator is drawn to the idea of cohesion and balance in consumer products—he explains to the woman that unity is the most vital aspect of both design and function, and that everything must coincide harmoniously to carry on existing. This assertion is ironic, since the narrator is unable to apply this concept to his own life where he is isolated from those around him and unable to form a deep sense of unity.

☞ “I'm finding this a little hard to grasp,” she said softly. “You were carrying on a perfectly normal conversation with me until a couple of minutes ago—at least until the subject of the elephant came up. Then something funny happened. I can't understand you anymore. Something's wrong. Is it the elephant? Or are my ears playing tricks on me?”

Related Characters: The Woman at the Party (speaker), The Elephant, The Narrator

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 322

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator decides to confide in the woman he meets at the party about the vanishing elephant and the bizarre circumstances surrounding the mystery. Rather than

deepening the connection that he and the woman had begun to build, however, the narrator's story only confuses her and creates a rift in the effortless understanding they had shared throughout the night. This moment throws the woman's perceptions and expectations of the narrator out of balance, paralleling the manner in which the narrator's sense of reality was disrupted by the elephant's disappearance. Much like the alienation of the elephant and the zookeeper seems to bleed into the narrator's life, the isolation and distress felt by the narrator seems to transfer over onto the woman as she struggles to comprehend his implication that the elephant somehow vanished.

What struck me immediately when I saw the elephant and keeper alone together was the obvious liking they had for each other—something they never displayed when they were out before the public. Their affection was evident in every gesture. It almost seemed as if they stored away their emotions during the day, taking care not to let anyone notice them, and took them out at night when they could be alone.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Keeper/ Noboru Watanabe, The Townspeople, The Elephant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 323

Explanation and Analysis

Before the elephant and its keeper disappear, the narrator often sits on a cliffside vantage point outside the elephant house and watches the two elderly creatures interact in private through the vent. The narrator is drawn to the deep companionship that the elephant and its keeper share, as they appear to care for each other immensely and are able to communicate through a complex system of taps, commands, and nonverbal cues. This special friendship between the elephant and the zookeeper contrasts with the ostracization they face from the community. Although the elephant and the keeper are generally mistreated and ignored by the townspeople, they find solace in each other. The narrator, similarly alienated from the townspeople, is mesmerized by the genuine unity he observes between the pair yet cannot seem to replicate in his own personal life.

It was a mysterious sight. Looking through the vent, I had the feeling that a different, chilling kind of time was flowing through the elephant house—but nowhere else. And it seemed to me, too, that the elephant and the keeper were gladly giving themselves over to this new order that was trying to envelop them—or that had already partially succeeded in enveloping them.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Keeper/ Noboru Watanabe, The Woman at the Party, The Elephant

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 325-326

Explanation and Analysis

After the narrator tells the woman he meets at his company party about the vanishing elephant, he decides to confide in her further by revealing additional details surrounding the disappearance. He confesses that he was probably the last person to see the elephant and its keeper before the pair mysteriously vanished, as he had watched them the night before from his usual vantage point on a cliff outside the elephant house. At this point, Murakami inserts a layer of magical realism into the narrative, as the narrator also tells the woman that he witnessed an inexplicable change in size between the elephant and the zookeeper that night. The narrator can only conclude that either the elephant shrunk, the keeper grew, or both happened simultaneously. This bizarre shift in the natural order throws the narrator into a state of chaotic imbalance in which a “new order” seems to envelop the elephant and the keeper. In the aftermath of what he witnessed, the narrator is unable to trust his own memory or perception of reality.

I felt like this a lot after my experience with the vanishing elephant. I would begin to think I wanted to do something, but then I would become incapable of distinguishing between the probable results of doing it and of not doing it. I often get the feeling that things around me have lost their proper balance, though it could be that my perceptions are playing tricks on me. Some kind of balance inside me has broken down since the elephant affair, and maybe that causes external phenomena to strike my eye in a strange way. It's probably something in me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Woman at the Party, The Elephant

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 327

Explanation and Analysis

Already thrown into a state of imbalance by the vanishing elephant, the narrator is further alienated and confused by his interactions with the woman he meets at his company's business party. Confiding in her about the elephant only pushes her away and dampens any potential connection between them. Beyond serving as a fleeting distraction for his community, the disappearance of the elephant and its

keeper has irrevocably shifted the narrator's sense of reality. Having also witnessed a paradigm-shattering change in physical size between the elephant and the zookeeper on the night before the disappearance, the narrator is left questioning the nature of the world around him. He is also made skeptical of his own perception, which he feels may be "playing tricks" on him. This rapid shift into a state of confusion and uncertainty reflects the chaotic, unpredictable nature of reality despite humanity's gravitation toward balance and routine.



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.

THE ELEPHANT VANISHES

The narrator recalls the day he found out that the elephant housed in his town had disappeared. He goes through his typical morning routine of waking up at 6:13 and reading the paper from beginning to end, coming across an article in the regional section with the headline “Elephant Missing in Tokyo Suburb,” detailing the mysterious disappearance of the elephant and its keeper. The narrator remembers the photo included with the article of a policeman inspecting the empty elephant house, noticing the stark emptiness and blankness of the place in the elephant’s absence.

The narrator studies the article meticulously, learning that the elephant’s absence had been noticed the day before (May 18) by men from the school lunch company who delivered leftover scraps for the elephant to eat. The zookeeper who cared for the elephant was also missing, and **the shackle** that had been locked to the elephant’s leg remained lying on the ground of the elephant house. The article reports that the elephant and its keeper had last been seen on May 17 by elementary school students on a field trip, and that there had been no unusual signs leading up to the disappearance.

The narrative shifts to tell the backstory of how the narrator’s town, an affluent suburb in 1980s Tokyo, came to acquire the elephant. When the town’s zoo closes due to financial hardship and the land is sold to a high-rise condo developer, no other zoos would take in the elephant, who is elderly and feeble. This situation creates an “elephant problem” for the town, as the animal stays isolated in the abandoned zoo for four months and prevents the high-rise developer from moving forward with demolition and construction. The mayor negotiates an agreement that the town will take in the elephant at no cost, the developer will provide land to house the elephant, and the zoo’s former owners will pay the elephant keeper’s wages.

The narrator is characterized as a solitary man who abides by strict routines. The steady pace of his life is disrupted when he comes across the newspaper article about the missing elephant. The narrator is immediately struck by the imbalance of the elephant house without the animal inside it, and his preoccupation with the photo indicates that the elephant’s disappearance has fundamentally unsettled something within him.



The vanishing elephant is a mystifying event that captivates both the narrator and the town—no one knows how the elephant escaped, where it went, or what role the zookeeper played in its disappearance. Up until this point, the townspeople had been secure in their ability to control the elephant, symbolized by the shackle that kept the animal chained inside the elephant house. The image of the shackle left on the ground disrupts the hierarchy of humans as superior to animals and adds an additional layer of mystery to the circumstances surrounding the disappearance.



The town is characterized as a place concerned with modernization and expansion above all else—the townspeople who object to “elephant problem” prioritize finances above the elephant’s wellbeing. The reluctance of civilians, the local government, and surrounding zoos to take responsibility for the elephant indicates a modern societal shift toward valuing wealth and prosperity over the wellbeing of living creatures.



In the present, the narrator remembers his ongoing obsession with the “elephant problem,” noting that he kept a scrapbook of newspaper articles and attended town council debates on the subject. Flashing back to the past, an opposition movement rises up among the townspeople in response to the mayor’s decision to take in the elephant, arguing that housing the animal would be expensive, dangerous, and pointless. The townspeople are more concerned with urban expansion and infrastructure improvements than with what becomes of the elephant. The mayor responds that tax revenue from the new high-rise development will offset the cost of caring for the elephant, that the elephant’s age prevents it from posing danger to anyone, and that the elephant can become the town’s symbol. Ultimately, a decision is reached that the town will indeed take ownership of the homeless elephant.

The elementary school’s gym is moved to a cleared plot of land and established as the makeshift elephant house. The narrator recalls the dedication ceremony for the building, including a speech by the mayor, a reading by an elementary school student, and a community sketch contest. He is struck by the meaninglessness of these displays, as the elephant remains indifferent and held captive by **the shackle** chaining its ankle to a concrete slab.

The elderly zookeeper, who bears a striking physical resemblance to the elephant, lives in a small room attached to the elephant house. The keeper is lonely and socially withdrawn, and the two old creatures are generally ignored by the townspeople. The elephant and its keeper subsequently develop a close bond that the narrator regularly visits the elephant house to observe. The elephant and keeper seem to have a complex system of communication that mystifies the narrator—he cannot decipher whether the elephant understands verbal commands, responds to the keeper tapping its leg, or if the pair somehow communicates telepathically.

The narrator admits that he has been fixated on the elephant even before the disappearance, an obsession that alienated him from the townspeople who rejected the animal from the start. The townspeople’s dissent toward the mayor’s proposal to take in the elephant indicates that the town lacks unity or a cohesive identity as a community. They assess the “elephant problem” based on the animal’s merit—what value (or lack thereof) it would bring to the town—rather than its inherent worth as a living creature. The mayor’s decision to take in the elephant is more aligned with pandering to an altruistic image than with genuine concern for the animal.



The narrator’s memories of the dedication ceremony reflect the townspeople’s hypocritical treatment of the animal. Despite their contrived displays of appreciation, the elephant is still captive and has no agency over where or how it lives.



The close friendship between the elephant and its keeper is a stark contrast to the solitude and alienation felt by the narrator in relation to his community. He is drawn to the deep relationship shared between the two old creatures and the juxtaposition between the forced social unity of the town and the genuinely intimate connection between the elephant and the zookeeper.



After the town takes ownership of the elephant, a year passes before the animal and its keeper vanish. The narrator is captivated by the mysterious circumstances and comparatively shallow media coverage of the disappearance. The narrator summarizes three inconsistencies that lead him to believe the elephant vanished, rather than escaped: 1. **the shackle** fastened to the elephant's leg was found in the elephant house still locked with its keys still in their respective locations, 2. there was no plausible route of escape, and 3. there were no elephant tracks. Despite these facts, the rest of the town is under the impression that the elephant was either stolen or escaped on its own. The narrator believes that amid the absurdity and confusion of the situation, the newspaper reporter, mayor, and local police are denying the only plausible conclusion (that the elephant and its keeper vanished into thin air) in attempts to uphold a sense of normalcy.

While the mayor assures the townspeople that the “malicious act” of stealing the elephant will be punished, members of the town's opposition party are skeptical, believing the elephant's disappearance to be a corrupt political maneuver. The narrator briefly considers responding to the police's request for information on the elephant's whereabouts but decides against it, as he does not believe they are even willing to consider the possibility that the elephant simply vanished. The police enlist the help of military troops and the fire department to perform a highly publicized search for the elephant which yields no results.

Meanwhile, the narrator obsessively follows newspaper reports and editorial cartoons about the elephant, filling multiple scrapbooks with clippings. He becomes frustrated with the reports that are all “either pointless or off the mark” and fail to acknowledge the possibility that the elephant vanished. The narrator believes that people are beginning to dismiss the case as unsolvable and forget about the elephant in the midst of their monotonous everyday lives. He visits the elephant house, whose gate is now locked with a heavy chain, and notices the building's early signs of decay and the “air of doom and desolation” that hangs over the place.

The narrator's unique perspective on the elephant's disappearance further distances him from the people around him. He seems to be the only one in his community who is deeply affected and thrown off balance by the event. The narrator is frustrated by the fact that none of the other townspeople are willing to fully acknowledge the circumstances of the disappearance, as all factual evidence only leads to the bizarre conclusion that the elephant vanished. Instead, they rely on the media's narrative that the elephant either escaped or was stolen. Local journalists cover the event with an air of avoidance and denial in the midst of the confusion, reflecting the tendency of modern media and society to examine issues superficially and uphold the status quo rather than critically investigate.



The mayor is characterized as a political figure whose main priority is creating a favorable image. Despite having no success in finding the elephant or solving the case, the mayor continues to uphold a staunch moral stance and encourage public outrage about the perceived theft. The narrator remains isolated in his frustration at how his community is reacting to the elephant's disappearance—he knows he will not be believed if he comes forward with his theory that the elephant and its keeper vanished, rather than escaped.



The narrator's fixation on the elephant grows deeper as the case remains unsolved. His frustration stems from the fact that no one in his community—neither the townspeople, the political leaders, the police, nor the media—sees the event from his perspective. There is nobody to confide in or to validate his conviction that the elephant vanished. The ease with which the townspeople begin to forget the elephant reflects their indifference toward the animal despite the fact that the town controlled every aspect of its existence. The narrator is again disturbed by the sight of the empty elephant house, sensing that the structure seems strange and off-kilter without the animal there.



In late September, about four months after the elephant and keeper vanished, the narrator recalls a misty night during which he feels that the rain is washing away his summer memories. On this night, the narrator (who works in public relations at an electrical appliance manufacturer) meets an attractive young woman (an editor of a women's magazine) at a launch party for his company's new advertising campaign. The narrator is in charge of showing the woman around and explaining the various kitchen appliances. He emphasizes the importance of unity as the fundamental principle that creates a successful kitchen. The narrator and the woman begin to joke with each other and hit it off, chatting over champagne about mutual acquaintances, family, and careers.

The narrator and the woman take a liking to each other, and he invites her to continue their conversation at the hotel cocktail lounge after the party. He again notices the rain outside, and the city lights "sending blurry messages through the mist." The two continue talking about superficial topics until the narrator decides to take the conversation deeper by telling her about the elephant. He believes he may have been looking for a good listener with whom to share his "unique viewing" on the elephant's disappearance. At first the narrator relays only what the media has said about the event, until the woman challenges him on his comment that the disappearance only "probably" could not have been predicted. She finds it difficult to understand him, pointing out that the topic of the elephant has brought about a sense of imbalance and disconnect between the two of them.

The narrator realizes that the woman can sense that there is more to the elephant story than he is telling her. He admits that he is having trouble articulating the strange circumstances of the disappearance but decides to give in and tell her the full story. The narrator reveals that although the public believes that the schoolchildren on their field trip were the last people to see the elephant before it disappeared, he, in fact, was probably the last to see the animal. He had found a vantage point on a cliff from which he could see into the elephant house through a vent opening and enjoyed occasionally visiting this spot to observe the elephant and its keeper. The narrator reflects on the deep friendship the two old creatures shared and how they only seemed to share their affection and warmth for each other in private.

The narrator attempts to distance himself from the jarring sense of chaos he has felt since elephant's disappearance by focusing on his present work obligations. He imagines the confusion surrounding the vanishing elephant begin to fade away with the changing weather. The narrator's career in public relations places him at the center of the modern consumerist landscape that is dominated by superficial aesthetics. Alienated in his personal life, the narrator conceives of unity in terms of how it applies to product design and function rather than to human connection. His attraction to the woman is an attempt to surpass this shallow conception of unity and find a kindred spirit with whom he can connect on a deeper interpersonal level.



The rain outside continues to mirror the narrator's state of mind—scattered and unfocused as he attempts to wash away the "elephant problem" from his memory. The narrator's efforts to forget are futile, however, and he decides to confide in the woman. Rather than deepening the connection between the two, his strange and evasive tone toward the elephant story immediately creates a rift in understanding between the narrator and the woman.



The narrator's revelation that he often watched the elephant and its keeper during their private moments provides further insight into his obsession with the elephant. He is not merely obsessed with the animal's mysterious disappearance, but with the bond that the elephant and zookeeper shared. Although most of his fellow townspeople had no interest in the elephant, the narrator was captivated by the connection between these two creatures—a connection that the narrator is unable to replicate in his own life.



The narrator then reveals the strangest aspect of the disappearance to the woman: on May 17 (the night before the disappearance), he observed a sudden difference in the appearances of the elephant and its keeper. From his perspective, the balance between the two creatures had seemed to change—the physical size difference between them had shrunk. The narrator was at first critical of this magical and seemingly impossible change but can find no other plausible explanation for what he saw. He can only conclude that either the elephant had gotten smaller, the keeper had gotten bigger, or both had changed simultaneously. The narrator recalls feeling a definitive shift in that moment wherein a different sort of reality seemed to envelop the elephant house.

After the narrator recounts these strange events to the woman, an awkward silence falls over the pair as the woman is left confused and speechless. They leave the hotel bar and never see each other again. The narrator considers asking her out to dinner but decides it does not matter either way. He confesses that he often feels this way in the aftermath of the vanishing elephant—that things have lost their “proper balance” and that something inside him has fundamentally shifted after the mysterious size change and disappearance of the elephant and its keeper.

The narrator continues on with his normal life on autopilot, living “based on afterimages of memories I retain” from before his perceived shift in the natural order. He believes that people are searching for unity and balance as they move through the world, and that feigning a pragmatic outlook allows him to be successful. The narrator concludes the story by observing that the media and the townspeople seem to have forgotten about the elephant and its keeper, that the two have vanished completely, and that they are never coming back.

Murakami uses this moment of magical realism to further emphasize the narrator's alienation from those around him. The size change between the elephant and the zookeeper seems bizarre and outlandish to both the reader and the woman to whom the narrator tells his story, widening the gap in their understanding of each other. The disorienting magical moment the narrator describes (in the midst of an otherwise realistic narrative) parallels the sense of internal disarray that he experiences in the wake of the elephant's disappearance.



The combination of the change in the elephant's and zookeeper's sizes and their mysterious disappearance has seemingly subverted the natural order and challenged the narrator's perceptions and sense of reality. Having been misunderstood by the woman at the business party when he told her what he witnessed, the narrator is thrown further into an isolated state in which he feels that he cannot trust himself nor be believed by anyone around him.



The story ends with the narrator fully succumbing to the alienated state of imbalance that has gradually overtaken him since the elephant's disappearance. He continues living his normal life on autopilot as his community forgets about the elephant altogether. This collective apathy suggests a human tendency toward denying the chaotic nature of reality in order to maintain a stable, reliable status quo.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Kunkle, Jenn. "The Elephant Vanishes." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 31 Jan 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kunkle, Jenn. "The Elephant Vanishes." LitCharts LLC, January 31, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-elephant-vanishes>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Elephant Vanishes* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Murakami, Haruki. *The Elephant Vanishes*. Vintage. 1994.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Murakami, Haruki. *The Elephant Vanishes*. New York: Vintage. 1994.