

# Culture-Bound Differences in Text Interpretation of K. Ishiguro's 'Family Supper' – A Comparative Cross-Cultural Survey Research

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**Abstract:** In an increasingly globalized world, literature serves as a powerful medium for cultural exploration and understanding. The works of renowned authors often transcend geographical boundaries, yet the interpretations of their narratives can vary significantly across different cultures. The main objective of the article is to explore the impact of cultural background on literary text interpretation, taking a post-structuralist approach to sense-making practices in different cultures. The text chosen for interpretation was Kazuo Ishiguro's "A Family Supper," – a short story which exposes broken, strained relationships between adult children and parents. Though tension dominates the communication between the father and the son throughout the whole story, the reasons for it are not completely unequivocal to the reader. The study investigates how multiple interpretations of their communication in specific excerpts from the story can be determined by cultural differences in values, traditions, and judgments. The research employs a qualitative approach for data analysis, involving questionnaires with three sets of questions. The first set included demographic questions, while the second one aimed to reveal the cultural traditions and values of the respondents. The third set consisted of open-ended items, with respondents asked to interpret specific parts of the texts. The researcher's task was to identify correlating patterns between the text interpretation and respondents' cultural backgrounds, including their absence. The study unravels systematic differences in how readers from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with and understand the same text. These differences manifest in two major patterns, corresponding to two geographical regions of respondents' origin: the first pattern encompasses Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine, while the second one pertains to Middle Asian countries. Differences within the in-group and similarities across the out-group were also identified. However, their frequency was too low to assert any specific regularity.

**Keywords:** Text, Interpretation, Pattern, Culture, Cultural Values

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## 1. Introduction

The question about what a text means has inspired many theories in different research fields. First, it was mainly a prerogative of literary studies where text was supposed to have only one meaning, and this meaning was determined by the author. All other interpretations deviant from this customary or even privileged decoding were not consistent with the author's intentions and wrong. According to this approach, the reader was just a passive consumer of a pre-determined meaning.

Other influential theories about text interpretation emerged at the intersection of sociology, cultural and literal studies.

One of them – a structuralist approach – argued that text could have several meanings, of which some were more favourable or 'preferred' while the rest were contrary to good sense. However, soon enough, the notion of a foregrounded meaning was challenged by new literary and cultural studies projects with a focus on the audience.

Consequently, the reader gained the status of an active producer of the meaning. The text was recognised as a subject to multiple interpretations, none of which were presented as dominant. It was then that a post-structuralist approach appeared on the scene with its strong criticism of traditional text-centred analysis.

Along with this development, the role of culture in text

meaning production became more apparent. The notion of the cultural nature of text interpretation has been widely exploited in cultural studies in an attempt to gather information about the impact of our origins and our belonging to a particular cultural group on the meanings we produce.

This qualitative study aims to investigate how meanings are formed in different cultural contexts, assuming that 'meanings are generated not by individuals but by collectives. Thus, the idea of culture refers to shared meanings' [1] (p. 60).

The research will involve the participation of 106 young people – BA Vistula University students (Warsaw) of diverse cultural backgrounds. The focus will be on students' understanding of the parts of the text dealing with core cultural values: family and family relationships. The text offered for reading and interpretation is the short story 'A Family Supper' by Kazuo Ishiguro. It fully fits the claimed research purpose since it reveals different aspects of family relationships, traditions, and rituals.

### **1.1. Culture as a Human Collectivity and Its Boundaries**

As the given research stresses the cultural nature of differences in text interpretation, it is essential to define the meaning of the culture the paper rests upon. Thus, Hofstede, when defining the notion of culture, uses the analogy of a computer programmed in a certain way [9]. Culture is understood as a set of patterns we acquire from early childhood – patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting – so-called 'mental programs'. These programmes are shared at least partly by people who belong to the same human collective or social environment where they were acquired [9, 10].

So, what are these 'collectives'? Modern research tends to establish rather flexible or vague boundaries: starting from territorial or national 'cultural-bearing units' [12], moving to geographical locations (regions), then to race, gender, age, religion, work or occupation, hobby and so on until the group, no matter how big it is, is reduced to one member with their own culture. In terms of sense-making practices, it is true – there are no two people who are absolutely identical in their interpretations of reality, experiences, or in how they see the world. However, our interpretations of different elements of 'material reality (text)' [9] do overlap, which allows us to distinguish different groups or categories, for example, national or regional cultures.

According to Geert Hofstede, these overlapping elements are sets of these common mental programs that constitute our culture. As almost everyone belongs to several different groups and categories simultaneously, we inevitably uphold elements from several mental programs or 'different levels of culture', as suggested by Hofstede [9, 10]. One of the levels is 'a national level according to one's country (or countries, for people who migrated during their lifetimes)' [10] (p. 18).

The research follows Hofstede's approach when national culture refers to a political and historical formation with the legal status of citizenship or an affiliation with a certain

country or geographical region, regardless of one's citizenship status. Thus, it is mainly about territorial criterion where the culture of a country, state or geographical region is meant but not necessarily a nation which is another level of culture.

An important precautionary remark must precede further analysis. The research does not approach the notion of national culture as a stable and homogeneous category of millions of identical people inhabiting a particular country or geographical region. Any national culture includes diverse social groups (ethnicity, race, gender, age, etc.) with different practices and perceptions of the world. The assumption is rather about the availability of certain elements (values, traditions) shared by diverse social groups within the boundaries of one country or geographical region, which includes several countries.

So, the major question is what these elements are. What forces allow a diversity of ethnical, racial, gender and many others to form a cultural unity? Geert Hofstede, in his seminal work *Culture's Consequences* [9], defined these forces as cultural patterns of countries. The key construct in the pattern, as well as the one maintaining its stability, is the value system shared by the majority of a country's or state's population. These societal norms shape and maintain such basic institutions as the family, education and political systems, legislation, architecture and so on [9] (p. 11-12).

The research will focus on the family as one of the core social institutions whose structure and functions are determined by the value system of a particular country. The reason for collecting data at this level (national culture) is not to introduce new boundaries between the cultures or, even worse – reinforce stereotypes but to promote their uniqueness.

### **1.2. Text Interpretation as a Culturally Determined Sense-Making Practice**

Text interpretation is a sense-making activity which occurs '*in the encounter of the text, context and reader*' [2] (p. 33). This is the essence of the post-structuralist approach to textual analysis, which comes a long way from first author-centred and then text-centred views on text meaning to reader-centred. Thus, it focuses on interpretations of texts made by people who read them. The main goal of this methodology is to gather information about how people belonging to different cultures make sense of the world through the way they make sense of texts.

From a post-structuralist perspective, a text can have multiple meanings produced by different readers: 'The way in which members of different cultures make sense of a text will vary just as much as the way in which they make sense of the world around them' [12] (p. 63). According to this approach, interpretations reflect how people see and experience reality. Following on from Derrida, there is no fixed correct or preferred interpretation; there are no right or wrong, true or false interpretations; they are different just the way sense-making practices of different cultures are.

Thus, the reader is free from the dictatorship of the preferred meaning produced by the author or those read into

texts by critics. There is no single text with a single possible meaning. Instead, 'Meaning requires the active involvement of readers and the cultural competencies they bring to bear on the text-image. It is the readers of texts who temporary "fix" meaning for particular purposes' [1] (p. 92).

When interpreting a text, readers bring their individuality: experience, knowledge, and cultural background. This leads us to another aspect of text interpretation practice which is its cultural dependence. We produce meaning out of a text through the lenses of culture: 'Interpretation of texts depends on readers' cultural repertoire and knowledge of social codes. These are differentially distributed among the lines of class, gender, nationality, etc.' [1] (p. 92).

Different cultures make sense of reality in different ways. These sense-making practices are theories of reality ordering the world around us. As readers, we understand the text and produce meanings out of it not according to some inherent natural order of things in the world but according to the theories of reality developed at different cultural levels. The focus of the given study is the analysis of national culture's contribution to text perception: 'Analysis of how a text means is, therefore, analysis of how the world means, how ideas and institutions mean' [6] (p. 29). As previously discussed, one of the central institutions at the level of national culture is the family.

The given approach to the text study focuses on the relationships between text, reader and their cultural background in meaning construal. Meanings are not innate; they are neither embedded in a text nor are they assigned by their authors. They are produced by readers who rely on their understanding of the world in the process of meaning construal. The way people perceive reality is different in different cultures, and these differences occur at all levels, from general assumptions to the foundations of our thinking about this reality. This fact strongly supports the idea of text interpretation and cultural co-dependence.

## 2. Core Cultural Values in 'A Family Supper' by Kazuo Ishiguro

The text chosen for interpretation analysis is the short story 'A Family Supper' by Kazuo Ishiguro. The story fully fits the project since it reveals different perspectives on core cultural values: family, traditions, and rituals. 'A Family Supper' depicts one dinner of a Japanese family where two generations meet: the father and his children (daughter Kikuko and his son). Having spent two years in California, the son (who remains nameless throughout the story) is with his family for the first time after a long absence. However, the family reunion is not that of a happy, exciting, long-awaited homecoming of a beloved child. Instead, it brings a painful experience for all of them when the event is haunted by bitter reproaches, defeated expectations, veiled accusations, and misunderstandings.

The strained relationships are determined by a generational conflict, which is a leading theme of the story. The reader

observes the clash between the traditional cultural values of the older generation and the new values fostered by their children. Thus, the significance of family roles, dignity, loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice, and traditions which the father fiercely upholds seem to be neglected by his children. The father is unable to accept the son's disobedience, his seeming disrespect of traditional values, or the disappointment and suffering it brought to him and his wife. With her later death (assumed suicide), he cannot withstand the son's betrayal of the country he defended in the war (leaving for the USA). Kikuko, on the other hand, does not protest openly. However, she is reluctant to conform to the role of women as defined by traditional Japanese society: she has a boyfriend, smokes and is planning to leave with her boyfriend for the USA. She conceals her true desires, plans, life, and her true self from her father.

Though the conflict is evident in the story, the circumstances leading to it can be subject to multiple interpretations. The research explores how different the reception of the text can be and to what extent the differences can be determined by the cultural background or, otherwise, how culture can influence our interpretation of a text.

## 3. An Empirical Study of the Culture-Bound Differences in Text Interpretation

### 3.1. Research Design and Methodology

The study is a cross-cultural comparison limited to certain geographical areas. Its purpose is to determine how the existing family values in different cultures can shape our understanding of the text.

The study followed a qualitative research design. A questionnaire was used to collect data on prevailing family traditions in children's upbringings, family roles, and relationships in different countries. It was also a tool to explore how respondents from different countries interpret the same text and identify shared interpretational patterns. Multiple choice answers were compared and quantified to reveal existing cultural conventions of family. The received open-ended responses were thoroughly analysed to reveal countries' interpretation patterns and establish connections between the prevailing family traditions and understanding of the text. The effectiveness and reliability of the method were tested at the preliminary stage of the research by a pilot study.

### 3.2. Description of Sample and Procedure

The study was conducted at Vistula University of Warsaw. One hundred six participants of the project included BA, full-time and half-time students of the department of English philology from different years. The university is a very popular educational destination for people from various countries. Thus the recruitment procedure did not pose any difficulties.

The students were asked to read the short story 'A Family

Dinner' by Kazuo Ishiguro a few days before they received the questionnaire. Due to COVID restrictions, our university completely transitioned to online learning. The questionnaire was prepared in the Forms application; thus, the students worked online during one of their practical English classes.

### 3.3. Empirical Data Collection – The Questionnaire Outline

The data were collected through the questionnaire, which contained three categories of questions:

The first set covered demographic questions defining the participants' age, educational background, country and cultural belonging. The information about the participants' age and education was essential to eliminate any possible impact of the generation gap and education differences on their text interpretations.

The second set introduces questions aimed at revealing basic family traditions: family roles, child rearing styles, attitudes to older generations, family structure, and so on. These were single and multi-select multiple choice questions, some of which foresaw 'other' options. The significance of this set of questions for the data analysis cannot be overlooked since the interpretation questions further in the questionnaire deal mainly with different family traditions and values.

The third set of questions were interpretation questions about those parts of the story directly connected to the

abovementioned family traditions.

### 3.4. Research Findings and Analysis

#### 3.4.1. Demographic Questions

An analysis of the data yielded from the student responses revealed findings within the areas of the research purpose. The first set of questions indicated a cultural diversity of the respondents, while their ages and educational backgrounds turned out to be very similar.

Thus, the respondents were representatives of Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus on the one hand, and Uzbekistan, The Kyrgyz Republic, Tadjikistan, and Azerbaijan (the region of Central Asia countries) on the other hand. As the data revealed, the vast majority of respondents were high school graduates. The age of the sample also proved to be rather homogeneous –18-25 years old. This age range is also beneficial for the study since the main character of the short story is assumingly in the same age group. Thus, the family relationships issue raised in the text is still relevant for the readers.

#### 3.4.2. National Cultures and Prevailing Family Values

The second set of questions begins with an open-ended request for the respondent to describe their national culture. The collected data are selectively presented in the table below:

*Table 1. Prevailing family values in different cultural groups.*

Central Asia	Poland	Ukraine	Belarus
1) nomad legacy	1) family gatherings		
2) generous hospitality	2) religion		
3) priority of family	3) traditions (family, food celebrations, music)	1) history	1) people (strong, hard-working, tolerant)
4) respect for parents	4) hospitality	2) wars for freedom	2) traditions (celebrations, food)
5) respect for the elderly	5) people (kind, open)	3) celebrations	3) history
6) religion	6) politics, protests	4) traditions (family)	
7) traditions (traditional festivals, games, dwellings, craftsmanship)	7) history		

The table presents the most frequently repeated elements in the descriptions of national cultures. This is when we can observe the first regularities in the participating cultural groups. The answers received from the representatives of Central Asia countries were very similar. Thus, they go under one region. When describing the culture of their belonging, the respondents from this region were mainly appealing to the nomad legacy, priority of family, family obligation values, and respect to parents.

Family is also an important aspect of culture for respondents from Poland; however, it does not dominate their descriptions. Thus, we can see, among other elements of national culture, people, politics, and religion. Descriptions received from Belarusian respondents were very brief, with a few constantly repeated elements.

A very interesting case is the data from Ukrainian respondents who described their culture in terms of history, wars for independence, and suffering. However, the answers received during the pilot study formed a different picture – very similar to those of Polish and Belarusian respondents.

However, what is of note is that the pilot project was carried out before February 24th – before the war erupted. I believe that what we are witnessing now is a unique process of a new national identity formation.

The next part of the survey (questions 5-9) proved certain regularities in perceptions of family relationships in the respondents' national cultures. Speaking about the culture of Central Asian countries, very similar responses assuming an overwhelming dominance of conservative traditions were received. Thus, the family model is an extended one, including three generations. The pivotal role is assigned to either a father or the eldest family member. The study also proved that the upbringing style and relationships with children (at any age) are rather authoritarian and based on obedience and the honouring of parents, prioritising their demands: parents decide, and children abide.

In contrast, family traditions in Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine prioritise independence, individuation, and personal preferences. The family model is mainly a nuclear one with two generations living together. Parents share authority and

responsibilities equally. Children are brought up with more freedom to make their own decisions and with subsequent responsibility for them. They leave their parents' homes regardless of their marital status. The time to leave is determined mostly by age or job availability.

The responses in this part of the questionnaire clearly showed different tendencies for the two geographical regions: Eastern European Countries (Belarus, Poland, Ukraine) and Central Asian countries (Uzbekistan, The Kyrgyz Republic, Tadjikistan, and Azerbaijan). It certainly extends the borders of a culture group from a country to a geographical region when people belonging to several national (country) groups share core cultural elements: family values.

### 3.4.3. Realisation of Meaning Potentials in Different Cultural Contexts

Another precautionary remark, which will open the interpretation of data analysis, is that the ultimate goal of the research is to establish differences in text perception but never to pass any judgements. The study closely follows the main tenets of the post-structuralist approach, where no interpretation is rated as better or worse, right or wrong.

Thus, the third set of questions (10-15) was aimed at exploring the sense-making practices of different cultures in order to establish interpretation patterns specific for a particular group. However, analysis of interpretations is itself a process of meaning production, which might be very subjective and dependent on the interpreter's individuality, just as any other sense-making practice. Thus, the questions were formulated in such a way that eliminates any bias in their interpretation. These are straightforward questions asking mainly for an individual assessment of the different aspects of the family relationships presented in the short story. The answers helped to reveal a correlation between the cultural background of the reader and the meanings they produce out of a text.

The questions are presented precisely as they appeared in the questionnaire. Due to the limitations, the paper presents several selected answers to confirm the consistency of the claimed patterns.

*Question 10. How can you describe the main character's (the son) attitude to his parents? Why?*

Starting with the very first question, certain tendencies in the interpretation patterns among the respondents can be noticed. Thus, the analysis again revealed apparent similarities in the answers provided by the students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan. We can trace condemnation and disapproval in the answers, emphasising the lack of care and concern ('indifference') for the family.

All the examples in the paper are direct quotations reproduced exactly as they appear in the original complete with punctuation, spelling or grammar mistakes. Since the participation in the project was anonymous, the only information available about the authors of the answers is the country of their origin. This information appears in a parenthesis after the terminal punctuation or word which

closes the citation.

*'In my opinion the son attitude to his parents not so good because in the text he said that he found out about his mother's death after that he returned to his city 2 years later' (Uzbekistan).*

*I think he was totally indifferent to his parents. He came back to Japan only after two years of his mother's death. And within these two years he did not get interested in how and in which circumstances her mother died, how his father went on living without his wife. (Azerbaijan)*

*Even he could not recognize her mother in the photo that was the same ghost (an old woman in white kimano) he saw near their house. He did not see her mother's last days and therefore did not know how she looked like before her death. It shows he was somehow indifferent last years to his parents compared to his sister (Kazakhstan).*

The following examples of interpretations are more of moral lectures preaching to children reciprocity for their upbringing. The respondents expressed strong condemnation of the son's attitude to his parents when no proper, expected, or even demanded respect and care were provided to the parents:

*'as long as the child's parents are alive, they should always be respected and shown the pleasure of their parents' labor' (Tadjikistan).*

*Any kind of son or children must respect their parents still they die from the life, and we are responsible for their health even though old it doesn't matter because they are our parents as well as we should care for them. (Uzbekistan)*

Respondents from Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland presented quite different interpretation patterns. We can hardly trace any devotion or piety to parents in their answers. On the contrary, the emphasis was put on poor relationships rather than the son's improper behaviour or attitude to parent(s) as in the previous pattern. The father was described as the one responsible for the rift between them:

*I can conclude that the main character's attitude towards his parents was quite unwelcoming. We can trace this reading the text.... They even couldn't start a simple conversation. The father's appearance makes his son frightened. So, this gap is a real problem for forging strong bonds in the family. And at the same it is the first obstacle which suppresses a general understanding and closeness within the family. Also we can see that the boy answers father's questions very shortly, abruptly and in a formal style not giving any further details. He mostly listens to his father. And he doesn't really reveal any of his secret to the dad. (Ukraine)*

*...they barely talk, which is a sign of a poor relationship between them. I think his parents might made some bad choices which worsened their bond with their son and due to that he is not that willing to keep in touch with them that much (Poland).*

Moreover, many students from Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus perceived the son's attitude toward his father as respectful, though still his independence and right to his own

opinion appeared in many interpretations:

*'While the main character doesn't always agree with his parents and can't understand their way of thinking, he is still respectful towards them.'* (Poland)

*'His attitude towards his parents can be described as respectful, but at the same time he feels his own opinion and character.'* (Ukraine)

The interpretations of the parts of the text dealing with the son's attitude to his parent(s) did show certain tendencies; however, we cannot claim any absolute unanimity. It speaks in favour of the idea expressed at the beginning of the paper – there is no single cultural group made up of identical people, but there are some cultural elements that the majority of a group's representatives share.

*Question 11. What can you assume about the main character's (the son) upbringing style? Why?*

The parenting style was defined as strict and rigid by a greater number of respondents from Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus:

*'I assume that main character's parents were strict and not affectionate.'* (Ukraine)

*'The main character's upbringing style was mostly strict, focused on gaining success and honoring tradition. He wasn't close with his parents.'* (Poland)

*'The upbringing style was strict and the parents weren't happy with their son's decisions and behavior.'* (Belarus)

The students from Central Asian countries displayed quite a different understanding of the parenting style. The vast majority of students followed the father's resentment about not having brought up his child 'correctly': *'Perhaps I should have been a more attentive father.'*; or Kikuko's: *'She (mother) always used to say to me how it was then-fault, hers and Father's, for not bringing you up correctly. She used to tell me how much more careful they'd been with me, and that's why I was so good'* [10] (p. 438). The fault in the upbringing led to the fatal consequences: the son's improper behaviour, disrespect, disobedience and just his being a bad son:

*'Perhaps his parents gave him every opportunity, did not limit him in anything to make him happy. but they didn't invest in him the values of the family and the understanding that no personal relationships or other matters can stand above relatives (Kazakhstan).*

*'the parent should always monitor the child because it is very important and it determines the future of the child' (Uzbekistan).*

*'According to what the sister and father say in the story, the son was not given attention and was not raised carefully.'* (Kazakhstan/Turkey)

Thus, the students seem to perceive the main character's upbringing as poor not due to the evident lack of affection, closeness, and love (evident for the researcher) but the other way around – there was too much of it. Many answers give the impression that more strictness, more control, and discipline were expected from the parents to bring the son up correctly.

The question about the upbringing style did not receive that rich diversity in interpretations. There were only two

distinct patterns traced, which are, assumingly, determined by the family values of the respondents' cultures. Authoritarian upbringing, obedience to parents, and priority of their interests dominate in Central Asia family culture, which can be inferred from the answers (see the examples above). The radical difference in the interpretation pattern of the second group can also arise from the respondents' cultural backgrounds. According to the descriptions, the family values cherish individuality, independence, and equal authority of adult members, which is reflected in the interpretations.

*Question 12. How would you describe Kikuko's behaviour and attitude toward her father? Why?*

Just following the established pattern, the vast majority of students coming from Central Asia countries described Kikuko's attitude toward her father as full of respect and concern. She is perceived as a polite, obedient and loyal daughter taking care of her father. She is very often juxtaposed to her brother in the answers: *'Much better than her brother'*, *'Unlike her brother...'*, etc.

*'I think she was more devoted to her family compared to her brother. She brought up with much love, care and according to Japanese traditions. Her attitude to her parents consisted of respect, attentiveness.'* (Azerbaijan)

*'Unlike her brother, she treated her parents better, she is polite to her father and based on the text, she was in a close relationship with her mother. as for her father, she respected him.'* (Kyrgyzstan)

*I liked Kikuko's character, because she is respectful towards her father, she should have been quite close to her father then the main character because she understands her father better her brother. This could be seen when Kikuko brought the photo and hanged to the wall back. (Uzbekistan)*

The fact that she was smoking when the father could not see her was not omitted (though having a boyfriend and planning to escape were mentioned) however, no one qualified it as hypocrisy. On the contrary, the respondents found Kikuko's attitude so appealing that they were offering justifications for this apparent in their cultural misbehaviour:

*...He is depressed and it is difficult to experience the loss. And in this regard, not enough attention is paid to her behavior. She smokes and rereads her father quite often, but at the same time I want to note that when she is with her father, she is often silent. It looks like she's trying so hard to support the loss of her father with her silence. (Kazakhstan)*

*'Also, she hid smoking from her father, that's probably awkward and unacceptable for a woman to smoke in their tradition.'* (Azerbaijan)

The answers from Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine give us a different picture. They mention the lack of trust and openness, while Kikuko's behaviour is perceived as deceitful to gain the father's approval and favour.

*'It seemed like her father had a dry relationship with her and she wouldn't trust him to talk about everything. You can see that the father is strict.'* (Poland)

*'Respectful, submissive, also she behaves reservedly in the presence of her father and tries to please him with her behavior.'* (Belarus)

*'She was very uptight around her father and she did everything he asked her to do. By that action, she gains his trust.'* (Ukraine)

Fear appears in many answers when it comes to Kikuko's attitude to her father:

*'She is also afraid of the father and she keeps her all secrets away from him (She is dying to smoke but can't because she is afraid of what the father will think of her).'* (Ukraine)

Just as in the previous examples, the answers comply with the information about family values presented in the second part of the questionnaire (questions 4-9). At this point, similarities in sense-making practices of different national groups become undoubtful. Two distinct interpretation patterns emerge from the analysed answers. Thus, the same family values are shared, not only at the level of national culture but regional as well: Central Asia countries and Eastern Europe countries of Belarus, Poland and Belarus.

*Question 13. What does the father insinuate about his wife's (main character's mother) death in the following extract? What is your opinion about this (the father's) assumption?*

*'I hadn't meant to tell you this, but perhaps it's best if I do. It's my belief that your mother's death was no accident. She had many worries. And some disappointments'* [10] (p. 437).

The interpretation pattern established for Central Asian countries clearly pointed at the son's blame for this death – his mother committed suicide because of the 'worries and many disappointments' in him.

*'Perhaps he thought that she committed suicide because of the long absence of her son and his hatred for them. And her father thought that she might blame him, and she couldn't be around him anymore.'* (Kyrgyzstan)

*'In my point of view, the father hinted at that, she had disappointments at bringing up the son. Also, she had a kind of feeling "SELF-REPROACH", which is more dangerous than any illness.'* (Uzbekistan)

*'He insinuated that her mother's death wasn't an accident but suicide because of she has been suffering from 'many worries and some dissapintments' during a long time. Maybe it was fear 'of losing their children by leaving home.'* (Uzbekistan)

As far as the interpretations of the respondents from Belarus, Poland, and Ukraine are concerned, there was a wide variety of ideas which did not lead to any particular model in this case: he was more optimistic, he wanted to relieve the son's pain, he loved her so much and could not believe that she had died, and so on. There was only one interpretation where the son was blamed for his mother's death:

*What he wanted to insinuate was that the main character's mother was disappointed in the man their son had grown up to be. She might be also disappointed that her upbringing style failed and she was worried about him but*

*also about her daughter that she will be the same.* (Poland)

This question proved to be an interpretation challenge for the latter group of respondents, as many students left this question unanswered. Following the family values and relationships described earlier in the research, an adult child's decision to leave their country and be totally independent from their parents is not unusual in the respondents' cultures. We can assume that this is the reason why the responses varied so greatly that there was no discernable pattern, as well as the reason why some students could not provide any interpretation of this part of the text at all.

As far as the Central Asian group of respondents is concerned, it can be supposed that their cultural background [13] convinces them that this act is a betrayal of family and family values. Consequently, this way of thinking is traced in their answers, forming a strong interpretation tendency.

*Question 14. How can you interpret the son's failure to recognize his mother in the photograph as in the following:*

Then my eyes caught something at the back of the room. At first, I continued eating, then my hands became still. The others noticed and looked at me. I went on gazing into the darkness past my father's shoulder.

*'Who is that? In that photograph there?'*

*'Which photograph?'* My father turned slightly, trying to follow my gaze.

*'The lowest one. The old woman in the white kimono.'*

My father put down his chopsticks. He looked first at the photograph, then at me.

*"Your mother."* His voice had become very hard. *"Can't you recognize your own mother?"*

[10] (p. 438).

In the majority of interpretations provided by the respondents from Central Asian countries, we can see strong disapproval of the son's failure to recognize his mother. It is assumed that the son did not care about his parents, and he simply forgot how his mother looked.

*In my opinion, it was totally his indifference to his parents. He was apart (not only phisically but also spiritually) from his family that he could not recognize his mother. Also, he did not see his mother in last two years that caused not to recognize her.* (Azerbaijan)

*'In my opinion, because of his not living with his family so far he could not recognize his mother. He was somehow indifferent to his family compared to his sister.'* (Tajikistan)

*'Perhaps he really didn't care about his parents and it was a sign for his father and sister that he didn't care about them.'* (Kyrgyzstan)

In this case, as with the previous question, the responses from Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Polish students hardly displayed any steady tendency. Thus, according to some interpretations, the failure to recognize his own mother in the picture was caused by the darkness in the room:

*'It was so dark that's why he didn't recognize her.'* (Belarus)

Another popular explanation suggested that the main character had been away from home for a very long time, his

mother had changed and looked older, and he simply could not recognize her face. However, this interpretation did not contain any traces of condemnation:

*He was abroad for so long that he even forgot what his mother looked like. He blamed it on the lighting in the room. He left the country and was not visiting his parents so he did not know how his mother had been changing over time.* (Poland)

*'In my opinion, the long separation from his family and the difficulties of a new life made him forget what his mother looks like.'* (Ukraine)

Other interpretations posited that the son was scared as the picture reminded him of a ghost he had previously seen in the garden:

*This must have been a weird feeling for him, because just a few minutes earlier he was joking to his sister about seeing a ghost that looked exactly like his mother in this picture. He probably got a little bit scared. Maybe he realized he actually did see his mother's ghost outside the house earlier.* (Poland)

Thus, we can assume that the cultural context of the readers reveals itself in the many interpretations of the son's failure to recognize his mother in the picture. It is criticized and understood as 'indifference' or lack of care by the students whose culture prioritizes parental roles, respect, and obedience even in adult children's life. No disapproval was inferred from the answers of Ukrainian, Polish, or Belarusian students whose national cultures are oriented toward different family values.

*Question 15. What can you infer about the parents' attitude to their son's (the main character) leaving home for California? Why? Do you think such a reaction was justified? Why?*

The last question did not receive any surprising answers which could have refuted the research hypothesis about culturally bound interpretation patterns. Thus, an overwhelming majority of respondents from Central Asian countries showed a similar tendency when producing meanings out of the text. The pattern is assumingly determined by the family values, roles, and traditions prevailing in their culture: extended families and children who do not typically leave their parents' homes, let alone the country, while parents, on the other hand, expect their children to stay with them:

*'In general, i think that every parent wants to see their children nearby and they worry about them and constantly want them to be near.'* (Kyrgyzstan)

*'The suggestion that the narrator's decision to move to America deeply hurt his parents is confirmed later, when the father explains that the mother did not understand the narrator's choices in life.'* (Kazakhstan)

*'Both parents desperately wanted their son come back to Japan. Probably the father purposely emphasized it also as his wife's wish in order to impact to his son's decision to stay in Japan.'* (Azerbaijan)

Quite a different pattern was observed among the respondents from Belarus, Ukraine, and Poland. There was

no sign of rebuke for the son's leaving his family, which is also in line with the answers provided in the second set of questions. Expression of one's own will and independence are the guiding principles for adult children and their relationships with their parents, which can be seen in the majority of interpretations. The respondents recognized the parents', especially the father's, dissatisfaction with their son's conduct; however, the interpretations of this reaction were very different. The majority of respondents wrote about the son's right to choose and live his own life:

*'They for sure were opposed to it. We can assume that from constant questions from his father about him going back to California.'* (Poland)

*I think they didnt like the idea of him moving to California, but it was not really their decision so they could either accept it or not, and that's it. He was a grown man that could have done whatever he wanted to.* (Belarus)

*We can conclude that Japanese traditions were very important for the parents of the main character. They were more important than the welfare of their child. Their attitude was very selfish. Parents had no right to restrict their son in this way. He himself should decide about his future. The trip to California opened up new opportunities for him to develop.'* (Poland)

*'They thought of it as their failure and were dissapointed by him. I don't think it was justified. I belive everyone should have a choice about how to live their lifes.'* (Poland)

There were quite a few answers expressing understanding of the parents' negative reaction to their son's leaving the family:

*The father, despite the fact that he knows that the son will leave, still hopes that the son will stay there with him in this large, empty house. The parents probably would like their son to live close to them and to see him, not that he would live so far away and visit them once in a while, it is understandable.* (Ukraine)

Many interpretations focused on disapproval of the father's behaviour:

*In my opinion, they knew how he wanted to leave, most of all his father and it made him nervous that he was not as submissive as his daughter, he knew that his son was resolute and would not let his father play with his life.* (Poland)

## 4. Conclusion

The given research was aimed at determining regularities in text interpretation and establishing a correlation between these regularities and national cultures.

The data analysis did reveal variations in text perception, both between and within the countries and between and within the two geographical regions covered in this study. As mentioned, the research did not intend to prove unanimity in answers among all the representatives of a particular country. However, certain prevailing interpretation patterns of familial relationships in the story were expected across national cultures, and an analysis of the collected data showed such



patterns.

Consequently, two distinct interpretation tendencies were traced for two regions: Central Asian countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, Tajikistan) and Eastern European countries (Belarus, Poland, Ukraine). What is notable is the fact that the text interpretations received from Central Asian countries displayed a stronger tendency toward more homogeneous answers. This similarity in text perception can be explained by the closeness of their national cultures, which is also evident in their answers to questions 4-9. The responses from the other region displayed a wider variety in interpretations, though a prevailing interpretive pattern could still be traced in their answers.

Moreover, the revealed patterns comply with the information provided by the respondents regarding fundamental family values and traditions in their cultures (questions 5-9). Multi-generational families where grandparents, parents, and children live in one household are typical for Central Asian countries. Thus, children do not usually leave their parents' home but stay there even when they have a family of their own. 'Respect for the elderly' is one of the fundamental values in Central Asian families, which has even been added, among other places, to the preamble of the Kyrgyzstan constitution [3]. Patriarchal traditions are still strong, and the equality of parents is suppressed by the authority of the father or the oldest male in the family. Authority, in this case, refers to 'a culturally established pattern of behaviour entailing clearly demarcated roles that need to be performed and acted out in front of others (...)'. [4] (p. 320) The discovered text interpretation patterns mirror these aspects of family relationships as well as decisiveness of parents' decisions and their interests, rigid rules, high demandingness as well as obedience of children, and at any age.

Independence, self-reliance, individuation, more decision-making power, and responsibility for one's own decisions are the values promoted in traditionally nuclear families, according to the data received from Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian participants. These childrearing practices and family relationships are significantly different from those presented by the respondents from the first group.

At this point, it is crucial to reiterate the precautionary remark given at the beginning of the paper. The research has never aimed at passing judgement, evaluating, or attaching labels; it is to describe specific features of one of the core elements in any culture – family, and explore the impact of these features on text perception. As in the previously discussed group, family values are reflected in the interpretation pattern established for the group of respondents from Belarus, Poland and Ukraine.

National culture does matter in sense-making practices. We all belong simultaneously to many different cultures, which makes each of us unique. However, we all, people of various cultures and from different societies, share many things. The sameness and differences are apparent even in the results of this small study.

No matter how trivial the statement can be, the understanding of this fact nowadays is important as ever, its

recognition should be a crucial part of everyday thinking. The sameness is certainly an advantage which facilitates our co-existence, but our differences must never impede peaceful life; they should only encourage tolerance, mutual respect and understanding.

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