

Passage Three: From Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*

This poignant episode actually comprises the opening chapter of Golden's novel and is plot-wise somewhat divorced from the subsequent content of the book. In these paragraphs, the narrator recollects several things from her childhood—her seaside home, the physical features of her mother, and the seeming lethargy and despondency of her father. Though she innocuously attributes this to his age, she eventually discovers, in a poignant final epiphany, the real reason for his sorrow—the premature death of his previous family.

In the opening paragraph, the speaker focuses almost exclusively on the ramshackle house in which she lived as a child, a “tipsy house” (line 2) that had been slanted backwards by the continual assault of the ocean winds to which it stood nakedly exposed. Her childhood innocence is evidenced by the myth she contrives as to why the house is so slanted. As she charmingly relates,

As a child it seemed to me as if the ocean had caught a terrible cold, because it was always wheezing and there would be spells where it let out a huge sneeze—which is to say there was a burst of wind with a tremendous spray. I decided our tiny house must have been offended by the ocean sneezing in its face from time to time, and took to leaning back because it wanted to get out of the way (lines 4-12).

This imaginative explanation is balanced by her subsequent observation that the house would likely have collapsed had her father not propped it up with a timber from a wrecked fishing boat, a buttress that “made the house look like a tipsy old man leaning on his crutch” (lines 14-15).

The speaker then shifts her attention from the house itself to her “lopsided life” (line 17) inside it. Her choice of adjective was derived, no doubt, from the similarity she bears toward her mother and the difference between her and her father. The speaker recalls how her mother

said it was because we were made just the same, she and I—and it was true we both had the same peculiar eyes of a sort you almost never see in Japan. Instead of being dark brown like everyone else's, my mother's eyes were a translucent gray, and mine are just the same (lines 19-24).

Unlike the fortune-teller who told her mother that her eyes were pale “because of too much water in her personality” (line 29), the speaker believed, when she was very young, that “someone had poked a hole in her [mother's] eyes and all the ink had drained out” (lines 26-27). This, coupled with her further invention of the ocean's terrible cold, reveals the speaker's deft skill at anecdotal explanation, as well as her perceptive recognition of even the smallest details. Her subsequent observation as to how her mother's mismatched features “gave the impression of a delicate picture with much too heavy a frame” (lines 34-35) are further evidence of this talent.

The passage then shifts from the differences between parent and child to the differences between wife and husband. The speaker's comment that, "My mother always said she'd married my father because she had too much water in her personality and he had too much wood in his" (lines 39-41), introduces an ethnic symbolism by which the speaker is able to account for her parents' marriage. According to the speaker, her mother and father were complete opposites—"Water flows from place to place quickly and always finds a crack to spill through. Wood, on the other hand, holds fast to the earth" (lines 43-46)—and, as such, would seem to complement each other. The diction, however, suggests otherwise. First, the adverb "too much" implies excess, implying that their compatibility was somehow faulty. Second, the speaker's observation that "[her] father was more at ease on the sea than anywhere else..." (lines 48-49) hints at a measure of domestic discomfort. Moreover, the father's behavior (sitting alone, mending a fishing net in a darkened room) and demeanor (taciturn, with a heavily creased and careworn face) suggest that he is troubled by some unvoiced care.

This concern becomes evident in the final paragraph, when the speaker asks her father "Daddy, why are you so old?" (line 68). Though his barely raised eyebrows, described by the speaker as "little sagging umbrellas" (lines 69-70), coupled with his monosyllabic "I don't know" (lines 71-72), reveal little, her mother's dark look reveals to the speaker that she would soon learn the secret of her father's sadness. This epiphany takes place the following day, when the speaker is taken by her mother to the village graveyard. As she solemnly recalls,

She led me to three graves in the corner, with three white marker posts much taller than I was. They had stern-looking black characters written top to bottom on them, but I hadn't attended the school in our village long enough to know where one ended and the next began. My mother pointed to them and said, "Natsu, wife of Sakamoto Minoru." Sakamoto Minoru was the name of my father. "Died age twenty-four in the nineteenth year of Meiji," and to the next one, which was identical except for the name, Masao, and the age, which was three (lines 77-88).

There the speaker learns that the reason her father's face looks "more like a tree that had nests of birds in all the branches" (lines 62-63) was the premature death of his first wife and their two children. Much as in James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the epiphany is a powerful and moving thing, and the speaker is compelled to return to the graveyard again. There she reveals her new wisdom—that "sadness was a very heavy thing" (line 92), so heavy in fact that she imagines her weight has increased and that "those graves were pulling [her] down toward them" (lines 94-95). The speaker's epiphany, however, goes far beyond the mere discovery of the source of her father's sorrow. Rather, she now has a sense of the indecipherable mystery of death and, in the foreboding nature of the final lines, of perhaps her own bleak future.

30. The speaker's primary intention is to describe a(n) **(E) poignant epiphany**.

Though much of the passage concerns itself with descriptions of the speaker's mother and house, all of these are subservient to the final paragraph in which the speaker learns the reason for her father's inexplicable sadness: the deaths of his first wife and their two children.

31. The speaker frequently endeavors to explain curious things about her family and house through **(C) humorous anecdotes**.

As was noted in the general explication, the speaker attempts to explain the declivity of the house (in reality, brought about by the powerful ocean breeze) by creating a humorous myth about the ocean's catching a cold (lines 4-12). She also attempts to explain her mother's translucent gray eyes by suggesting "someone had poked a hole in [them] and all the ink had drained out" (lines 25-27).

32. In the course of the passage, the speaker uses figurative language to describe all of the following EXCEPT **(E) the graveyard**.

The speaker personifies the ocean and describes her house's precarious slant as looking "like a tipsy old man leaning on his crutch" (lines 14-15), confirming (A) (and B). Her mother's features are said to give "the impression of a delicate picture with much too heavy a frame" (lines 34-35), while her father's face is said to look "like a tree that had nests of birds in all the branches" (lines 62-63). These uses of simile and implied metaphor validate choices (C) and (D). The speaker does not use figurative language to describe the graveyard.

33. The speaker likely refers to her dwelling as a "tipsy house" (line 2) because of its **(E) oblique orientation due to the elements**.

Again, this is consistent with the general explication, as well as the explanations to several earlier questions. The strong ocean wind has pushed the house backwards to such a degree that the speaker's father has to support it with an old spar.

34. In contrasting her mother and father, the speaker accents the difference in their **(B) temperament**.

Though this is definitively established in lines 39-41, "My mother always said she'd married my father because she had too much water in her personality and he had too much wood in his," the description of the two individuals—the mother pale-eyed, lovely and maternal, the father taciturn, sea-smelling, and withdrawn—also suggests the difference in their temperaments.

35. The speaker uses the elements of water and wood to account for which of the following? **(E) her parents' ironically compatible natures**.

As was suggested earlier, the speaker's mother and father were complete opposites—"Water flows from place to place quickly and always finds a crack to spill through. Wood, on the other hand, holds fast to the earth" (lines 43-45)—and, as such, they would seem to complement each other in an ironic way.

36. That the speaker's father has wood in him might plausibly explain his **(C) difficulty accepting his family's decease.**

As was suggested by the explanation of the previous question, wood, the element representing her father's nature, "holds fast to the earth" (lines 45-46). The father's despondency, the un verbalized sadness which manifests itself in his heavily creased face, his deliberate mannerisms, and his withdrawn way, could very well reflect his difficulty accepting the untimely death of his loved ones. The mother's taking the speaker to the cemetery as a means of explaining this sadness also seems to support this.

37. The antecedent of the pronoun "it" in line 64 is **(C) "face" (line 61).**

The speaker notes how her father's "face was heavily creased, and into each crease he had tucked away some worry or other, so that it wasn't really his own face any longer, but more like a tree that had nests of birds in all the branches" (lines 59-63). It is this face that he must "struggle constantly to manage" (lines 63-64).

38. The father's response to his daughter's query in line 68 is most likely prompted by **(D) his inability to fathom his family's premature deaths.**

Her father's monosyllabic "I don't know" (lines 71-72), coupled with his umbrella-like sagging eyebrows and his heavily creased face, suggest that (D) is the only response.

39. Which of the following details is LEAST significant in portraying the deep nature of the father's paralyzing sorrow? **(D) her mother's forbidding look at her question.**

The father's deliberate mannerisms, so deliberate that the speaker states "You could run outside and drain a bath in the time it took him to rearrange his features" (lines 57-59), the eyebrows that were like "sagging umbrellas" (line 70), and his creased and careworn face" are all physical manifestations of the father's deep sorrow. Similarly, the three gravestones, which mark the premature passing of his family, also convey the reason for his sadness. This supports choices (A), (B), (C) and (E). The mother's forbidding look, on the other hand, is more of an admonition to the speaker not to continue her line of questioning. It is only upon visiting the cemetery that the speaker is able to make the connection between her father's behavior and the personal tragedy that befell him.

40. The speaker uses simile to describe each of the following EXCEPT **(B) her mother's facial features.**

The house looks "like a tipsy old man leaning on his crutch" (lines 14-15); the father smelled "like the sea even after he had bathed" (lines 50-51); and the father's face is "like a tree that had nests of birds in all the branches" (lines 62-63). The speaker's fatalistic sentiment is manifest in her observation in the graveyard that her "body weighed twice what it had only a moment earlier, as if those graves were pulling [her] down toward them" (lines 93-95). This validates choices (A), (C), (D) and (E). Simile is not used to describe her mother's face.

41. The simile which closes the passage may be said to do which of the following?

- I. Establish the speaker's affinity with her father's suffering.
- II. Reveal the speaker's disappointment upon discovering her father's previous marriage
- III. Foreshadow, perhaps, the speaker's own unhappiness.

(D) I and III.

Clearly, the speaker feels the “pull” of the graves and learns that “sadness was a very heavy thing” (line 92). This supports I. At the same time, the very personal feel of the final line, the fact that the speaker feels herself being pulled underground, lends a certain credence to III. II, however, is not supported by the passage.