

Mrs. Sen's



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Lahiri was born in London, England to Bengali parents, but her family moved to the United States when she was young and settled in Kingstown, Rhode Island. She used her family nickname, Jhumpa, at school because it was easier for her teachers to pronounce. Lahiri received a BA in English literature from Barnard College in 1989 and went on to earn three master's degrees and a doctorate from Boston University. While in graduate school in the 1990s, she began to write short stories, some of which were published in her debut collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (which contains "Mrs. Sen's") in 1999. The collection won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Lahiri went on to publish the novel *The Namesake* (2006), the short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), and the novel *The Lowland* (2013), which was nominated for both the National Book Award and the Man Booker Prize. Her writing tends to focus on the experiences of Indian American immigrants. Lahiri is currently the director of Princeton University's Program in Creative Writing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although the setting of "Mrs. Sen's" isn't clearly specified, it likely takes place in the U.S. in the 1990s. In the 20th century, the number of Indian people immigrating to North America increased significantly. The U.S.'s Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 overturned a policy that discriminated against immigrants from non-Northwestern European countries, which led to an increase in emigration from Southern and Eastern Europe and Asia. Later, the Immigration Act of 1990 increased the number of permanent work-based visas available. By the time "Mrs. Sen's" was published in 1999, the number of Indian immigrants in the U.S. was more than double what it had been in 1965. Many Indian immigrants (like the Sens in "Mrs. Sen's" and others featured in many of Lahiri's other stories) tend to be highly educated people who migrate to the United States to access jobs in fields like medicine and post-secondary education. Lahiri's stories often focus on Indian immigrants' experiences as they struggle to assimilate and navigate their identities in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lahiri has cited authors William Trevor (*After Rain*), Richard Yates (*Revolutionary Road*), Alice Munro (*Dear Life*), and Mavis Gallant (*Paris Stories*) as important influences on her work. All of these writers are known for their mastery of the short story,

the genre for which Lahiri herself is acclaimed. Lahiri has also acknowledged the influence of 19th-century authors on her writing, including Leo Tolstoy (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*), Thomas Hardy (*Far from the Madding Crowd*), James Joyce ("The Sisters"), and Anton Chekhov ("The Lady With the Dog"). Other short story collections similar to *Interpreter of Maladies*, in which "Mrs. Sen's" appears, include *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan and *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout. Both were written by female authors who, like Lahiri, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for their work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Mrs. Sen's
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** A small beach town in the United States
- **Climax:** Mrs. Sen gets into an accident with Eliot in the car.
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Italian Lessons. In addition to her stories written in English, Lahiri has published several books in Italian, including *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*), which chronicles her love of Italian and how she learned the language. She has also translated two books from Italian to English and edited *The Penguin Classics Book of Italian Short Stories*.



PLOT SUMMARY

Eleven-year-old Eliot has been going to his new babysitter, Mrs. Sen's, house after school for nearly a month. His mother found Mrs. Sen through an advertisement outside the local supermarket. She hired her even though Eliot has to go to Mrs. Sen's apartment for her to watch him—Mrs. Sen can't come to their house because she doesn't know how to **drive**.

Eliot and his mother go to meet Mr. and Mrs. Sen's at their shabby university apartment (Mr. Sen is a math professor). Mrs. Sen wears a sari and traditional Indian makeup, and she and Mr. Sen take off their shoes and wear flip-flops indoors. Eliot's mother interviews Mrs. Sen about her experience as a babysitter. She's concerned that Mrs. Sen can't drive, because Eliot's mother works 50 miles away and his father doesn't live nearby. Mr. Sen assures Eliot's mother that he's teaching Mrs.

Sen, and that she'll have her license by December. Mrs. Sen also explains that they had a chauffeur when they lived in India.

Eliot enjoys going to Mrs. Sen's—the beach house where he lives is cold and lonely in the fall, whereas the Sens' apartment is warm. He especially likes to watch Mrs. Sen chop up **vegetables** for dinner. One evening, she tells Eliot that when she lived in India, she would prepare food with a community of women for celebrations—but in the U.S., she's lonely. When Eliot's mother comes to pick him up, Mrs. Sen hides all evidence of food preparation. Eliot's mother seems uncomfortable in the apartment, and she tries to refuse the food that Mrs. Sen offers her. When she and Eliot get home, she always drinks wine and orders pizza for dinner.

Every afternoon, Mrs. Sen arrives early to wait for Eliot at the bus stop. She practices driving each day with Eliot in the car. She's nervous and distracted while driving, and she's too afraid to drive on the main road with other cars.

One day, Mrs. Sen is very happy when she gets a letter from home. She tells Eliot that her sister has had a baby girl, and she seems disappointed that the child will be three years old by the time she meets her. She asks Eliot if he misses his mother each day, but he's never thought to miss her.

Mrs. Sen is also happy when she gets fresh fish, because she can incorporate it into traditional Indian dishes. She likes to reserve fish at a market near the beach, which Mr. Sen picks up for her. One day, though, Mr. Sen tells Mrs. Sen that he won't have time to get the fish anymore because he needs to hold office hours. Mrs. Sen is upset, and she confides in Eliot about how unhappy she is in America. Her family thinks that she must be happy and rich here, but she isn't. Later that evening, Mr. Sen relents and drives Mrs. Sen and Eliot to get the fish.

In November, Mrs. Sen stops cooking and won't practice driving; Eliot notices that she's also unusually quiet and forgetful. One day, she plays Eliot a tape of her family's voices and tells him that her grandfather died over the weekend.

A week later, Mrs. Sen starts cooking again. Mr. Sen takes Eliot and Mrs. Sen to the seaside one evening, where they buy a lot of fish and eat at a restaurant. Mr. Sen makes Mrs. Sen drive back, but she panics when she has to drive with other cars and pulls off the road. She stops driving after that.

Soon after this, Mrs. Sen and Eliot take the bus to the fish market. On the way there, they chat about what Eliot will do when his mother is elderly. On the way back, a woman complains to the bus driver about the smell of the fish.

Another day, Mrs. Sen decides to drive to the market with Eliot in the car—but she gets into an accident almost immediately, hitting a telephone pole. She and Eliot aren't hurt badly, but the car's fender needs to be straightened. When Mr. Sen takes them back to the apartment, Mrs. Sen goes to her room and doesn't come out when Eliot's mother arrives. Mr. Sen reimburses Eliot's mother for the month's babysitting fee and

apologizes on his wife's behalf. Eliot stops going to Mrs. Sen's after that, and his mother admits that she's relieved. She gives Eliot a key to the house, and from then on, he spends his afternoons alone.



CHARACTERS

Eliot – Eliot, the protagonist of the story, is an 11-year-old boy who lives with his single, working mother in a small beach town. His father lives far away, and he seemingly has no other relatives who live nearby. Eliot's mother is usually away at work, and she and Eliot seem to have few connections. Eliot has had several different babysitters to watch him after school, and his mother hires a new sitter, Mrs. Sen, at the beginning of the story. There are a lot of cultural differences between Mrs. Sen and Eliot—Mrs. Sen and her husband, Mr. Sen, recently immigrated from India—but they develop a pleasant relationship over time. Eliot enjoys watching Mrs. Sen prepare traditional Indian **food** for dinner, and he often accompanies her when she practices **driving** or goes to the local fish market. Eliot is an observant, insightful child; on several occasions, Mrs. Sen confides in him about how lonely and unhappy she is in the U.S. Through Eliot's responses and private thoughts, it becomes clear that he's lonely as well: his mother doesn't seem to have much time for him, and Eliot has noticed how isolated they are from their neighbors. Despite the time he spends with Mrs. Sen, though, they never grow close enough to alleviate their mutual loneliness. At the end of the story, Mrs. Sen gets into an accident with Eliot in the car—and although they aren't badly hurt, this incident prompts Eliot's mother to fire Mrs. Sen as Eliot's babysitter. Instead, she gives Eliot a key to their house, and he spends even more time alone. The outcome, in which Eliot and Mrs. Sen both end up isolated, implies that they will continue to be lonely in the future—and that perhaps loneliness is a natural and inescapable aspect of the human condition.

Mrs. Sen – Mrs. Sen is an Indian woman who recently immigrated from Calcutta to the U.S. with her husband, Mr. Sen, so that he could take a job teaching math at an American university. She babysits 11-year-old Eliot at her apartment after school, since she can't **drive** to his house. Mr. Sen has been trying to teach her to drive, but it makes her nervous—and since driving symbolizes American culture's emphasis on independence within the story, this implies that Mrs. Sen is afraid of becoming even more isolated than she already is. Mrs. Sen is terribly homesick for the extended family and close-knit community she left behind in India—she has no social connections in America and seems to feel underappreciated by her husband. She spends most of her time alone, performing domestic tasks, and tries to connect with her culture and family back in India by reading letters from her relatives and **cooking** traditional meals. But these foreign

foods, and other culture differences like the Indian saris and traditional makeup that Mrs. Sen wears, alienate her from Americans like Eliot's mother. And although Mrs. Sen seems to enjoy spending time with Eliot and confides in him about how lonely and unhappy she is, the two never grow particularly close. At the end of the story, Mrs. Sen gets into an accident with Eliot in the car, which loses her the job as his babysitter. It's implied that Mrs. Sen gives up on driving after this, an outcome that symbolizes her inability to assimilate or overcome her loneliness and homesickness.

Eliot's Mother – Eliot's mother is a single mom to her 11-year-old son, Eliot, and spends a lot of time at work. She hires babysitters, like Mrs. Sen, to care for him after school, and she's often too tired to do much with Eliot on her rare days off. She has no family in the area, and Eliot's father lives thousands of miles away, so she is solely responsible for her son. Eliot's mother also isn't in a romantic relationship—Eliot only remembers one man who spent the night in her bedroom, and the man never came back again. Throughout the story, Eliot's mother is uncomfortable with Mrs. Sen's foreignness (Mr. and Mrs. Sen are from India) and her inability to **drive**. She tries to refuse the **food** that Mrs. Sen always offers her when she comes to pick Eliot up in the evenings, making Mrs. Sen feel alienated and self-conscious about her status as a new immigrant. Besides these culture differences, Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother are also embody very different gender roles: Mrs. Sen is a housewife, while Eliot's mother is a career woman. The two women do seem to have one thing in common: their loneliness and dissatisfaction with their lives. But despite this, they're never able to bridge the gap between them and become friends. When Mrs. Sen gets into an accident with Eliot in the car at the end of the story, Eliot's mother fires her—and she admits that she's relieved Eliot will no longer be going to the Sens' apartment.

Mr. Sen – Mr. Sen is Mrs. Sen's husband; the couple recently emigrated from their home country of India to the U.S. so that Mr. Sen could teach math at an American university. Mr. Sen doesn't play a particularly active role in the story—he's often busy with meetings and office hours, so doesn't spend much time at home with Mrs. Sen while she's babysitting Eliot. He and his wife seem disconnected, and Mrs. Sen clearly feels underappreciated by him. Mr. Sen encourages Mrs. Sen to learn to **drive** throughout the story, as this would allow her to become more independent. When Mrs. Sen ends up getting into an accident with Eliot in the car, Mr. Sen reimburses Eliot's mother for that month's babysitting fee and apologizes on his wife's behalf.

TERMS

Sari – A sari is a traditional garment worn by Indian women. It consists of a long piece of fabric that's wrapped around the

waist and draped over the shoulder. **Mrs. Sen** has a closet full of brightly colored and patterned saris, and she wears a different one each day.



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.



ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

"Mrs. Sen's" depicts a relationship between two lonely and isolated people: Mrs. Sen (a woman who has immigrated to the U.S. from India for her husband's job) and Eliot, the American boy she cares for after school. Outside of each other, Eliot and Mrs. Sen lack community and connection. Mrs. Sen knows few people in America; her husband Mr. Sen works constantly, and the only other person she speaks to regularly is the man who sells her **fish**. As the only child of a single mother with a demanding job, Eliot also seems to be without friends or family. Although Eliot and Mrs. Sen enjoy each other's company as a respite from isolation, the two never grow close in the months they spend together—and in the end, they part ways forever. By showing Mrs. Sen and Eliot failing to diminish each other's isolation, the story suggests that loneliness is a natural condition from which a person can never expect relief.

Throughout the story, Lahiri emphasizes the characters' near-total isolation. Aside from each other, Eliot and Mrs. Sen are connected to almost nobody. Eliot has his mother, but she works long hours, and Mrs. Sen has Mr. Sen, who is likewise rarely home. Both Mr. Sen and Eliot's mother seem emotionally distant. Beyond their personal lives, Eliot and Mrs. Sen lack community where they live—and with the tourist season over, their seaside town is mostly empty. Lahiri repeatedly emphasizes how isolating this is: the bus has few passengers, many stores are closed for winter, and all of the children have left the beach where Eliot lives. The only sense of community exists among people with whom Eliot and Mrs. Sen have no connection, such as college students and elderly residents of nursing homes. Mrs. Sen contrasts the loneliness of America with the community she had in Calcutta. She describes Indian women preparing food together and talking late into the night. In America, she finds it difficult to sleep "in so much silence."

While Eliot and Mrs. Sen's friendship somewhat relieves their loneliness, they never become close, indicating that their isolation is entrenched. Eliot and Mrs. Sen enjoy spending time together while she's looking after him. Eliot finds his mother's beach house cold, and the beach is "barren and dull to play on

alone.” He’s glad to go to Mrs. Sen’s warm apartment, where he enjoys watching her cut vegetables and talking with her. Mrs. Sen also likes having Eliot as a companion, and she looks forward to seeing him each weekday. When she picks Eliot up from his bus stop, he always senses that she’s “been waiting for some time, as if eager to greet a person she hadn’t seen in years.” Despite these indications that Mrs. Sen and Eliot enjoy their companionship, they never fully connect with or understand each other. Eliot notices that Mrs. Sen is lonely and misses home, but he doesn’t talk about it with her. When Mrs. Sen asks him, “Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?” he says, “They might call you [...] But they might complain that you were making too much noise.” This is typical of his interactions with Mrs. Sen: her anguish is clear, but Eliot lacks the emotional maturity to respond to it. Likewise, Mrs. Sen intuitively senses Eliot’s loneliness—at one point, she asks him, “Do you miss your mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?”—but they never discuss his feelings or needs. Even though they see each other every day, Eliot and Mrs. Sen never connect enough to completely alleviate their mutual loneliness.

Throughout the story, Lahiri indicates that the future will be just as lonely as the present for Eliot and Mrs. Sen. Mrs. Sen believes that loneliness and separation are the conditions that she and Eliot must live in permanently. She thinks that Eliot’s isolated upbringing is preparing him for this future in a way that her social, community-filled childhood failed to prepare her. She tells him that “when I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be.” The story implies that neither Eliot nor Mrs. Sen will have a more connected community or family in the future. Mrs. Sen forecasts a lonely end for Eliot when she asks if he would ever put his mother in a nursing home. Eliot replies that he might, but that he’d visit her every day. Mrs. Sen denies this possibility: “You say that now, but you will see [...] you will miss one day, and another, and then she will have to drag herself onto a bus just to get herself a bag of lozenges.” This prediction indicates that Mrs. Sen thinks that distance and practicalities prevent people from connecting in the long term—and, because of this, loneliness is often permanent. It is, perhaps, an unavoidable aspect of the human experience, particularly in insular American towns like the one where the story is set (as opposed to the Sens’ more community-oriented culture in India).

Throughout the story, Mrs. Sen’s isolation is reinforced by her inability to **drive**. She’s afraid of driving with other cars on the road, and her lack of mobility means that she can’t connect with the outside world. The story concludes with her first attempt to drive by herself, during which she gets into a minor accident with Eliot in the car. Her failure at driving is emblematic of her inability to reach out to others and function socially in the U.S.; Lahiri implies that Mrs. Sen won’t drive again, which means that

she’ll never be able to form connections. And after the accident, Eliot stops going to Mrs. Sen’s and spends his afternoons alone instead. The severing of Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s relationship at the end of the story predicts their lonely futures, leaving them in the isolation—which Lahiri suggests is ultimately inescapable.



ASSIMILATION AND FOREIGNNESS

Throughout “Mrs. Sen’s,” the Sens struggle to assimilate to American culture after they emigrate from India to the U.S. for Mr. Sen’s job as a professor in a small college town. The couple’s life in the United States is different than they or their family in India expected it to be: while Mrs. Sen’s family assumes that living in the U.S. automatically guarantees happiness and a lavish lifestyle, the Sens’ standard of living is actually lower in the U.S. than it was in India. Mrs. Sen also has trouble connecting with others in the community, partly because Americans (like the mother of Eliot, the young boy Mrs. Sen babysits) make her feel foreign rather than accepted. These challenges make it difficult for the Sens to assimilate to American culture, showing that the American Dream that many immigrants pursue when they move to the U.S. is largely illusory.

While Mrs. Sen’s relatives back in India assume that the Sens are wealthy simply because they live in the U.S., the Sens actually have a lower standard of living than they did in India. Mrs. Sen can’t tell her family about her life in the U.S. because she knows they expect it to be glamorous and happy in a way it hasn’t turned out to be. She tells Eliot that “they think I live the life of a queen [...] They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace.” In reality, the Sens live in a shabby university apartment. When Eliot and his mother come to meet Mrs. Sen and see the apartment, Eliot’s mother asks if all of the Sens’ wealth is in India. In response, Mrs. Sen “look[s] around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not,” and says, “Everything is there.” Eliot’s mother’s rude comment suggests that contrary to their family’s expectations, the Sens live a modest lifestyle that well-off Americans look down upon. Furthermore, Mrs. Sen’s response implies that she left “everything” that matters to her—namely, her loved ones and cultural traditions—behind in India. The dejected way she looks at her surroundings and replies to Eliot’s mother speaks to her dissatisfaction with her lifestyle and economic circumstances in the United States. The difference in the Sens’ economic situation since they immigrated is further evidenced by the issues Mrs. Sen has with transportation. In India, the Sens were well-off enough to have a chauffeur—but now, Mrs. Sen has to either learn to **drive** (which frightens her) or take the bus, and she finds it difficult to get around. The dramatic change in lifestyle, from having a chauffeur to being reliant on public transportation, indicates that life in the U.S. isn’t what the Sens imagined it

would be.

In addition to having fewer luxuries, the Sens (especially Mrs. Sen) struggle to become a part of their new community. This is partly because Americans like Eliot's mother treat Mrs. Sen as foreign rather than accepting her. Before she moved, Mrs. Sen lived in a tight-knit community in India. She tells Eliot how she spent time with her family and a community of women in India: on the nights her mother invited other women to help them **cook** for celebrations, it was "impossible to fall asleep [...] listening to their chatter." In the U.S., on the other hand, she "cannot some times sleep in so much silence." Here, unlike in India, she has no friends and no easy way to connect with others. In her few interactions with Americans, Mrs. Sen is treated as foreign rather than welcomed and accepted. Eliot's mother is an example of this: when she comes to pick Eliot up from Mrs. Sen's apartment, "she tended to hover on the far side of the door frame, calling to Eliot to put on his sneakers and gather his things." Mrs. Sen invites her in and serves her traditional Indian food, but Eliot's mother resists this hospitality and tells Eliot that she doesn't like Mrs. Sen's food (the implication being that it tastes foreign). Eliot's mother's rejection of Mrs. Sen is indicative of the exclusionary way Americans tend to treat immigrants more generally.

As a result of these difficulties, Mrs. Sen is unable to assimilate to American culture, and she eventually gives up. Mrs. Sen is only happy when she can connect with the culture and community she has left behind in India, because she finds life in America difficult and alienating. Eliot notices that only two things make Mrs. Sen happy: a letter from home or a whole fish, the latter of which allows her to make the food she ate in India. Mrs. Sen's need to connect with home shows her inability to assimilate and make a new life and community for herself. At the end of the story, Mrs. Sen seems to have given up on assimilation entirely. She gets into a minor car accident, and this failure at driving—an essential skill in her new culture that she did not need in India—causes her to completely retreat from the world. She loses her job taking care of Eliot (because she was driving without a license with him in the car), and with it, her only connection to other people in her current environment. After the accident, Mrs. Sen retreats to her bedroom and shuts the door, symbolically giving up on making any connection with the country where she now lives.

In the end, the Sens are worse off than they were in India: their class status has fallen, they're alienated from their new community, and Mrs. Sen is unable to function in the way that American society expects her to. Their immigrant experience is implied to be a common one, and it directly contradicts the message of the American Dream: that the U.S. is a land of opportunity for everyone who lives there.



FEMININITY, GENDER ROLES, AND CULTURE

"Mrs. Sen's" depicts the relationship between 11-year-old Eliot, his mother, and Mrs. Sen, the woman Eliot's mother hires to babysit Eliot while she's at work. The two women play very different domestic roles: Mrs. Sen does more traditionally feminine tasks like **cooking**, while Eliot's mother fulfills the role of breadwinner outside the home and has little time for these duties. Eliot's mother is like many American women, in that she raises her son without familial support and works outside the home. Mrs. Sen, by contrast, only recently emigrated from India, where family and community support are more central to the culture. In the U.S., however, Mrs. Sen plays the role of a typical American housewife, and she does her domestic tasks alone; both she and Eliot's mother feel disconnected from others and unhappy with their roles. Through its depiction of Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother, the story suggests that both of these versions of femininity—that of the modern career woman and that of the housewife—are equally restrictive, isolating, and unfulfilling. Instead, a lifestyle that focuses on family and community is more conducive to happiness.

From the beginning, it's clear that Eliot's mother is worn out and emotionally disconnected, despite embodying an American ideal of the woman who "has it all" with both a career and family. Eliot's mother takes care of Eliot and supports him financially without help from family or Eliot's father, who lives far away. Instead, she pays Mrs. Sen to take care of Eliot after school. She doesn't seem to have any friends to help, either. When her neighbors have a party she isn't invited, and eventually "she looked up their number in the phone book and asked them to keep it down," which suggest she doesn't know her neighbors and hasn't made connections in her community. Furthermore, despite being each other's only connections, Eliot and his mother aren't close—largely because she has to spend so much time at work. Mrs. Sen finds this sad, saying to Eliot, "You must miss her. When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed." But Eliot and his mother are accustomed to separation, both emotional and physical. That Mrs. Sen can't **drive** is unimaginable to Eliot's mother, because she works "in an office fifty miles north, and [Eliot's] father, the last she had heard, lived two thousand miles west." In the rare moments when they are together, Eliot's mother is usually so exhausted from work that they don't spend much quality time together. When she gets home from work, Eliot's mother usually orders pizza for dinner rather than cooking and leaves him to put away the leftovers while she smokes a cigarette. This exhaustion shows how wearing it is for Eliot's mother to do the overwhelming job of raising a child on her own—it prevents her from fully enjoying her life or having meaningful relationships.

As a housewife, Mrs. Sen occupies a completely different role

than Eliot's mother—but she, too, is overwhelmed, unhappy, and isolated. Mrs. Sen spends most of her time completing domestic tasks alone, or with only Eliot for company. She has no connections in the United States other than her husband, but she spends little time with Mr. Sen because he works long hours as a professor. Mrs. Sen seems to feel undervalued by him: when Mr. Sen says that he won't go to the market to buy fish for her, she says, "Tell me, Eliot. Is it too much to ask?" Mrs. Sen dislikes the isolation of being a housewife in the U.S., but Mr. Sen and Eliot's mother both expect Mrs. Sen to take on more independence by learning to drive. Mrs. Sen, however, has no desire to drive anywhere by herself—she merely wonders, "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?" Mrs. Sen clearly wants to return to her old life, where she could rely on her family and community to help her.

While Mrs. Sen is unhappy as a socially isolated and undervalued housewife in the United States, she found doing similar domestic tasks in India much more fulfilling because she was part of a community—and this, the story implies, is the ideal way to live. Mrs. Sen often tells Eliot stories about her home in India and how connected she was to people there. She tells him that in India, if you "raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements." In addition, when the Sens lived in India, Mrs. Sen was able to cook with other women, rather than alone. At home, she tells Eliot, "all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night." Working communally and having connections made Mrs. Sen happy. In the U.S., however she must work without the help of a community, much like Eliot's mother.

The only happy role for women presented in the story is the one that Mrs. Sen had in India, when she performed domestic duties communally with other women rather than in isolation. As such, the story suggests that Mrs. Sen's former lifestyle in India—a version of femininity that's very different from both the American career woman or the American housewife—is a more natural and fulfilling way to live.



SYMBOLS

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



FOOD AND COOKING

For Mrs. Sen, the act of cooking traditional Indian food represents her homesickness and her inability to assimilate into American culture. Mrs. Sen is constantly cooking while she babysits Eliot: she cuts vegetables for dinner,

makes snacks for Eliot, and insists that Eliot's mother eat when she comes to pick him up (despite her reluctance to eat foreign food). Mrs. Sen puts a lot of effort into preparing traditional Indian meals, because it's important to her to keep this connection to her home country and the extended family she left behind when she and Mr. Sen immigrated to the U.S. She tells Eliot that whenever there's a celebration in her neighborhood in India, her "mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night." For Mrs. Sen, cooking is a symbolic connection to this community- and family-oriented culture that she misses.

The food that Mrs. Sen cooks sets her apart from the Americans around her and represents her reluctance to assimilate. While her food is as fascinating as it is alien to Eliot, it makes others (like his mother) uncomfortable. Eliot's mother doesn't like the Indian food that Mrs. Sen insists she eat ("a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah"). Her dislike of the food belies a discomfort with Mrs. Sen's foreignness in general: when she picks Eliot up in the evenings, she hovers outside the Sens' apartment, trying to avoid entering. Another time, a woman on the bus complains about the smell of the fish that Mrs. Sen and Eliot are bring home from the market, which makes Mrs. Sen feel ashamed. The foreign food that Mrs. Sen prepares symbolizes of her cultural difference—and her struggle to make Indian food in America (as well as the negative reactions that Americans have to it) represents her inability to assimilate into her new cultural environment.



DRIVING

Driving symbolizes American culture's emphasis on independence—something that Mrs. Sen is afraid of and doesn't want to accept. Mrs. Sen's inability to drive is an issue, since it means she can't drive to Eliot's house to babysit him. Eliot's mother is uncomfortable with this, but Mr. Sen reassures her that she'll learn by December. Eliot's mother, a single mom, is the epitome of an independent American woman. So to her, Mrs. Sen's inability to drive herself around represents a lack of independence and agency—things that the story implies are necessary to function properly in American society.

Mr. Sen wants his wife to learn to drive so that she can be independent of him and do errands without his help. But the Sens led a much more communal and family-oriented lifestyle in India (they even had a chauffeur to drive Mrs. Sen around)—a way of life that Mrs. Sen misses dearly as a new immigrant. She is afraid whenever she practices driving, which indicates her disinterest in the isolation and independence that driving alone

represents. Mrs. Sen would rather return to the close-knit community she had in India, where she wasn't required to spend so much time alone. When Eliot suggests that driving might make her life better, because she can go wherever she wants, she asks, "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?" The lonely Mrs. Sen would rather return to her life in India than gain the independence needed to live in America.

After many anxiety-ridden practice sessions, Mrs. Sen finally works up the courage to drive on the open road with Eliot in the car. But she gets into an accident almost immediately, which results in her losing her job as Eliot's babysitter. It's implied that she gives up on driving after this, which suggests that she's also given up on trying to assimilate and mold herself into the independent person that American society expects her to be.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt edition of *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999.

Mrs. Sen's Quotes

☞ "At home, you know, we have a driver."



"You mean a chauffeur?"


Mrs. Sen glanced at Mr. Sen, who nodded.

Eliot's mother nodded, too, looking around the room. "And that's all...in India?"

"Yes," Mrs. Sen replied. The mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. "Everything is there."

Related Characters: Eliot's Mother, Mrs. Sen (speaker), Mr. Sen, Eliot

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

After Eliot's mother decides to hire Mrs. Sen as Eliot's new babysitter, she and Eliot go to meet the Sens at their home. They live in a small, shabby university apartment (because Mr. Sen is a professor)—so when Mrs. Sen casually mentions

that they had a chauffeur when they lived in India, Eliot's mother is surprised. The contrast between the Sens' affluence in India and their modest lifestyle as new immigrants in the U.S. begins to poke holes in the commonly held "American Dream" narrative—the idea that living in the U.S. automatically guarantees better educational and economic opportunities for immigrants. It seems that the Sens' socioeconomic status has actually diminished, the opposite outcome from what they were hoping for when they left India for a better life in the U.S.



Beyond what's said aloud, the body language in this passage is also important. Eliot's mother looks around the apartment as if judging it, implying that she's looking down on the Sens' shabby apartment as well as their cultural differences. (Just prior to this, it's stated that Mrs. Sen is wearing a traditional Indian sari and makeup, and that she and Mr. Sen remove their shoes and wear flip-flops in the house). In response to this, Mrs. Sen's body language—smoothing her sari and looking around the room—reads as self-conscious, as though Eliot's mother's tone has made her feel embarrassed of her foreignness. With this, the story implies that Americans like Eliot's mother tend to judge immigrants for their differences rather than welcoming and accepting them. This makes people like the Sens feel self-conscious and alienated, creating more social barriers to assimilation and making the American Dream ideal even more difficult to achieve.

Finally, Mrs. Sen's comment that "Everything is there" makes it clear that she feels like she left "everything" behind in India: her family, her culture, and her happiness. Now, she's afraid of learning to drive, even though (in most U.S. cities) it's difficult to function and participate in society without this skill. It's later revealed that the Sens' way of life in India was very communal and family-oriented in nature. Thus, Mrs. Sen likely sees driving as a symbol of independence that she doesn't want to adopt, since more independence means distancing herself even further from the community-oriented lifestyle that she misses.

☞ "Whenever there is a wedding in the family," she told Eliot one day, "or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night." [...] "It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter." She paused to look at a pine tree framed by the living room window. "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot some times sleep in so much silence."

Related Characters: Mrs. Sen (speaker), Mr. Sen, Eliot's Mother, Eliot

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

While Mrs. Sen babysits Eliot each evening after school, she prepares elaborate dinners for herself and Mr. Sen. One evening, while she's cutting vegetables with a traditional Indian knife, she tells Eliot about how she and the other women in her neighborhood in India would prepare food together before celebrations.

Mrs. Sen's description of life in India is a stark contrast to her experience as an immigrant in the U.S., where she's socially isolated. This is partly because she doesn't know how to drive, and partly because Americans like Eliot's mother are unwelcoming and judgmental of her. Mrs. Sen is clearly nostalgic for her way of life in India, where the culture seems to be much more centered around family and community. For Mrs. Sen, food is an important symbol of her old life, as preparing traditional dishes is one of the few aspects of her culture that she's able to replicate in her new country. But now, she only has Eliot and Mr. Sen to cook for, highlighting how lonely she is in the U.S., where she "cannot some times sleep in so much silence."

This quote also characterizes Mrs. Sen as a foil (opposite) of Eliot's mother. Whereas Eliot's mother is a single mom and career woman who works far from home, Mrs. Sen fits the stereotype of the American housewife whose role is to clean and cook for her husband. Importantly, though, both women are lonely and unfulfilled: elsewhere in the story, it's implied that Eliot's mother lacks any close relationships. And here, Mrs. Sen outright admits that she finds American life oppressively quiet and isolating. This suggests that neither of these stereotypically feminine roles—career woman or housewife—are particularly satisfying. Instead, Mrs. Sen's fondness for Indian culture implies that this non-Western way of life (women completing their domestic duties communally) is a preferable alternative to any of the roles that American women are typically expected to fill.

“Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?”

"Mrs. Sen, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I am only asking if someone would come."

Eliot shrugged. "Maybe."

"At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind, and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements." [...]

"They might call you," Eliot said eventually to Mrs. Sen. "But they might complain that you were making too much noise."

Related Characters: Eliot, Mrs. Sen (speaker), Eliot's Mother

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 117

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Sen tells Eliot about the tight-knit community she had in India, she asks him if anyone would come to help her if she screamed in her apartment. She is clearly missing the family and community that she left behind in her home country, and she feels so socially isolated as a new immigrant that she wonders if anyone would even hear her if she called for help. She reflects on how easy it was to get the attention of others in India, even though not everyone had a telephone. That she wonders if anyone would even come if she screamed "at the top of [her] lungs" shows how intense Mrs. Sen's loneliness and social isolation is in America.

In the U.S., Mrs. Sen has been unable to form a community or assimilate, partly because she's been rejected by Americans like Eliot's mother, who are uncomfortable with her foreignness. Mrs. Sen says that all you had to do to get help in India was "just raise your voice a bit"—but in America, even the ongoing hospitality she has shown Eliot's mother is not enough to forge a connection between the two women.


Eliot's response indicates that he and his mother are similarly alone. He thinks of a party his neighbors had, which he and his mother weren't invited to. This implies that his mother isn't a part of the community of people who attended the party, even though it was next door; her only interaction with the neighbors was to call them and ask them to quiet down. Eliot's isolation is such that he believes this is the natural response to a scream: not to "come to share the news, to help with arrangements" but to "complain that you were making too much noise." Whereas Mrs. Sen


previously said that she finds it hard to sleep in the U.S. because it's too quiet, Eliot's mother seemingly *wants* to be distanced and insulated from other people. Like Mrs. Sen, Eliot and his mother are isolated—but Eliot and his mother don't seem to have any experience with a supportive community like the one Mrs. Sen describes, so it's possible that they don't even know what they're missing.

Furthermore, one of the reasons why Eliot's mother doesn't build a community or make friends with her neighbors is simply because she doesn't have time, as she's almost always working. Mrs. Sen, on the other hand, cannot build relationships because she is socially isolated in her role as a housewife who spends her days cooking and cleaning by herself. Though these two roles, career woman and housewife, are different, they're both typical of American culture's emphasis on individualism and solitary work. That Mrs. Sen had a community in India but not here in the U.S. shows how isolating American women's roles are compared to those of women in India, who perform domestic tasks communally rather than working alone.

☞ It gave [Eliot] a little shock to see his mother all of a sudden, in the transparent stockings and shoulder-padded suits she wore to her job, peering into the corners of Mrs. Sen's apartment. She tended to hover on the far side of the door frame, calling to Eliot to put on his sneakers and gather his things, but Mrs. Sen would not allow it. Each evening she insisted that his mother sit on the sofa, where she was served something to eat: a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah. "Really, Mrs. Sen. I take a late lunch. You shouldn't go to so much trouble."

Related Characters: Eliot's Mother (speaker), Eliot, Mrs. Sen

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

When Eliot's mother picks him up at the Sens' apartment, her outfit stands out to him. She's wearing the "transparent stockings and shoulder-padded suits she [wears] to her job," which set her apart from Mrs. Sen (who wears traditional Indian saris and vibrant makeup). Having spent so much

time with Mrs. Sen, Eliot begins to see his mother's strait-laced appearance as foreign in the context of the Sens' apartment—much like Eliot's mother sees Mrs. Sen as foreign. As a working woman, Eliot's mother's role is essentially opposite to that of Mrs. Sen's role as a housewife. The two women are from entirely different worlds, and Eliot's mother's conservative appearance particularly sets her apart from the colorful Indian culture that the Mrs. Sen keeps alive in their home.

Whenever Eliot's mother picks Eliot up from the Sens' apartment, Mrs. Sen insists that Eliot's mother come into the apartment and eat something ("a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halvah"). But Eliot's mother resists this: she makes the excuse that she had a late lunch, which Eliot knows isn't true. Mrs. Sen feels very lonely and socially isolated in the U.S., and her hospitality indicates a desire to connect with Eliot's mother on some level, even just through politeness. But Eliot's mother isn't open to this—she's put off by the traditional Indian dishes that Mrs. Sen insists on serving her, which represents how she's put off by Mrs. Sen's foreignness in general. And, as a result, she hinders Mrs. Sen's efforts to forge social connections in her new country.



Furthermore, the traditional dishes that Mrs. Sen makes and tries to serve Eliot's mother symbolize her Indian identity more generally, and this food sets her apart from the Americans around her. Thus, Eliot's mother's rejection of the food likely makes Mrs. Sen feel like her entire identity and culture are something to be ashamed of. Mrs. Sen seemingly has little motivation to assimilate into American culture—she's clearly homesick, and cooking is one of the few ways she's able to maintain a connection to the culture and extended family she left behind. Americans like Eliot's mother are uncomfortable with Mrs. Sen openly expressing her Indian identity in this way, which makes her transition to American life as a new immigrant even more difficult.


☞ "Mr. Sen says that once I receive my license, everything will improve. What do you think, Eliot? Will things improve?"

"You could go places," Eliot suggested. "You could go anywhere."

"Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?"

Related Characters: Eliot, Mrs. Sen (speaker), Mr. Sen, Eliot's Mother

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

One day, while Mrs. Sen is practicing driving with Eliot in the car, she asks Eliot if things will improve if she gets her driver's license. While Eliot takes her question literally, Mrs. Sen actually seems to be expressing her doubt that driving will make it any easier for her to assimilate and be happy in the U.S. She doesn't see any benefit in the increased independence that driving offers, nor does she want to further assimilate to American culture by driving the way American women (like Eliot's mother) do. In Mrs. Sen's view, becoming more independent in this way is scary rather than exciting, because acclimating to the U.S.'s individualistic culture will only further distance her from the community-oriented Indian culture that she misses. Mrs. Sen isn't interested in going anywhere by herself—she only wants to be reunited with her extended family in Calcutta.

The way Mrs. Sen asks Eliot how long it would take to drive to Calcutta—"Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?"—speaks to how defeated she feels. She is, of course, aware that she can't get back to India by car, and in fact has no clear way of getting home at all. Mr. Sen is often busy with work, and the couple has no plans to return to India anytime soon. Instead, Mrs. Sen is stuck in her lonely life as a new immigrant struggling to acclimate to American culture; she can neither return home nor adapt to her new environment. Driving is an important part of assimilating, since it's a skill that's necessary to navigate most American cities. But to Mrs. Sen, driving on the road with other cars—and, by extension, the assimilation that driving represents—is as impossible as driving all the way to Calcutta.

“My sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face.” She put away the letter, then placed a hand on Eliot's head. “Do you miss your mother, Eliot, these afternoons with me?”

The thought had never occurred to him.


“You must miss her. When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed.”

“I see her at night.”

“When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far. You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be.”

Related Characters: Eliot, Mrs. Sen (speaker), Eliot's Mother, Mr. Sen

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 122-123

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Sen has this conversation with Eliot after she receives a letter with the news that her sister (who still lives in India) has had a baby girl. Letters from home are one of the few things that Eliot notices makes Mrs. Sen happy—she wants to remain as connected to India and to her extended family as possible, so a letter containing news from home is precious to her.

However, the contents of the letter are also bittersweet for Mrs. Sen. She understands that she won't meet her new niece for several years, and that her niece wouldn't recognize her if they “[sat] side by side on a train.” This reminds Mrs. Sen of her distance from her family, and the fact that their lives are moving forward without her while her life in the United States is at a standstill. She's unable to assimilate because she feels rejected by Americans and is afraid of learning life skills like driving, but she can't reconnect with her family either. Far from living the American Dream, Mrs. Sen is isolated and unhappy, and she's living in reduced financial circumstances compared to her old lifestyle in India. It's hard for her to cope with the knowledge that her relatives are making progress in their lives back in India while she is stuck in the U.S., all alone except for her husband.


Mrs. Sen knows that Eliot also spends time away from his family, since he's away from his mother most of the day—but

Eliot isn't upset by his separation from his mother in the way that Mrs. Sen is saddened by her disconnection from her family. Mrs. Sen tells Eliot that he's wise, because he "already taste[s] the way things must be." With this statement, she suggests that isolation is a condition that everyone is fated to live under—at least in America, where she has experienced so much loneliness.

“Send pictures,’ they write. ‘Send pictures of your new life.’ What picture can I send?” She sat, exhausted, on the edge of the bed, where there was now barely room for her. “They think I live the life of a queen, Eliot.” She looked around the blank walls of the room. “They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace.”

Related Characters: Mrs. Sen (speaker), Mr. Sen, Eliot

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis



Mrs. Sen says this to Eliot after Mr. Sen refuses to go to the market to buy fish for her. Mrs. Sen is distraught: the fish allows her to make the traditional dishes she ate in India, and cooking is very important in helping her maintain her connection to her home country. Without the ability to cook Indian food, she's suddenly forced to contend with how dissatisfied she is with her life in the United States. She shows Eliot all of the beautiful saris she brought to America with her, clothes that are suited for a very different life than her current lifestyle as a socially isolated housewife.

When Mr. and Mrs. Sen came to America, their relatives assumed that they'd be achieving the American Dream of success and opportunity. However, the Sens' actual experience of life in the U.S. is very different than this image: instead of the palace that her family believes she lives in, Mrs. Sen lives in a shabby apartment. And instead of living "the life of a queen," she's lonely and unhappy. She has nothing to send her family pictures of, because she has no friends in America, and she has yet to find a way to engage with life in her new town. But even if Mrs. Sen was able to better assimilate and find a community, she would never be able to send photos that live up to her family's expectation of what an American life is like, because their perception is so different from how it is in practice.

●● In November came a series of days when Mrs. Sen refused to practice driving. The blade never emerged from the cupboard, newspapers were not spread on the floor. She did not call the fish store, nor did she thaw chicken.

Related Characters: Mr. Sen, Eliot's Mother, Eliot, Mrs. Sen

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Sen stops cooking and driving for several days because she received a letter from her family with the news that her grandfather died. After Eliot notices how upset Mrs. Sen seems, Mrs. Sen plays him a tape of her family members' voices and shares the news about her grandfather. In the tape, Mrs. Sen's relatives sing and recite poetry, and her mother recounts the events of the last day the Sens spent in India. This tape is a crystallization of the moment in time before Mr. and Mrs. Sen left India, a time and place that Mrs. Sen wishes she could return to. Her grandfather's death has proven that time has continued to pass since she has left—more than just the death itself, Mrs. Sen is mourning her disconnection from her family.

In response to her grandfather's death, Mrs. Sen completely stops the two activities that she spends most of her time doing: cooking and learning to drive. Cooking represents a connection to her family and her culture, which she temporarily gives up on now that her family's life has so clearly changed without her there. "The blade never emerged from the cupboard," meaning that Mrs. Sen has stopped using her traditional Indian knife—which represents a figurative disconnection from her culture. Driving, on the other hand, symbolizes a process of assimilation and gaining independence in the U.S., which Mrs. Sen has likewise given up on. In this way, Mrs. Sen is stuck between two worlds: she doesn't want to move forward and leave her old life behind, but her ability to connect to her family has also been disrupted.



“Eliot,” Mrs. Sen asked him while they were sitting on the bus, “will you put your mother in a nursing home when she is old?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But I would visit every day.”

“You say that now, but you will see, when you are a man your life will be in places you cannot know now.” She counted on her fingers: “You will have a wife, and children of your own, and they will want to be driven to different places at the same time. No matter how kind they are, one day they will complain about visiting your mother, and you will get tired of it too, Eliot. You will miss one day, and another, and then she will have to drag herself onto a bus just to get herself a bag of lozenges.”

Related Characters: Eliot, Mrs. Sen (speaker), Mr. Sen, Eliot’s Mother

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis


On their way to pick up fish at the market, Mrs. Sen and Eliot see elderly nursing home residents riding the bus. Her comment to Eliot that “when you are a man your life will be in places you cannot know” is rooted in her own dissatisfaction and loneliness in her marriage. Mrs. Sen has chosen to take the bus because she doesn’t want to ask her husband, Mr. Sen, for help getting to the market. He’s gotten busier with work lately, and he doesn’t seem to empathize with his wife’s struggles with driving—or, by extension, the assimilation into American culture that driving represents. Mr. Sen also fails to grasp the full importance of fish to Mrs. Sen: cooking fish in traditional dishes is one of the only ways she can connect with the Indian culture she misses. Mrs. Sen wants to avoid feeling misunderstood by her husband, so she takes the bus to avoid involving him altogether.



Mrs. Sen seems to see herself in the old ladies on the bus: she, like them, feels lonely without anyone to help her. She believes that one day, Eliot will become like her husband, a man whose life is “in places [he cannot know]” and who no longer has time for his family. Mrs. Sen doesn’t think that Eliot will be able to keep his promise of visiting his mother every day in a nursing home, which speaks to her pessimism about sustaining community in the United States. She has become isolated and lonely in a way she never expected

when she was still in India, telling Eliot, “you say that now, but you will see.” Mrs. Sen has found that building or maintaining a community in the United States is much harder than she would have expected as a child in India, and she thinks that Eliot will discover the same difficulties as an adult.

After taking off her slippers and putting them on the book case, Mrs. Sen put away the blade that was still on the living room floor and threw the eggplant pieces and the newspapers into the garbage pail. [...] Then she went into her bedroom and shut the door.

Related Characters: Eliot, Mrs. Sen

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the story, Mrs. Sen tries to drive herself and Eliot to the market by herself to buy the fish she needs to cook Indian dishes. However, she crashes the car almost immediately, and this accident represents her final failure to adapt to her environment as a new immigrant in the U.S. Throughout the story, learning to drive has symbolized assimilation into American culture, since driving (and the individualism and self-sufficiency it represents) is crucial to functioning in most U.S. cities. Mrs. Sen’s ongoing fear of driving has represented her fear of accepting this independence and losing her Indian identity to become more American. Thus, the fact that her only attempt to drive on her own ends in failure implies that any future attempts to assimilate will fail as well.

Distraught upon returning home after the accident, Mrs. Sen “put away the blade that was still on the living room floor and threw the eggplant pieces and the newspapers into the garbage pail,” giving up on creating the traditional Indian meal she was in the process of making. Discarding these ingredients suggests that, in addition to Mrs. Sen being unwilling and unable to assimilate to American culture, she’s given up on connecting to her Indian culture as well. Indeed, her final action in the story, shutting herself in her bedroom, symbolizes a more general resignation to a lonely, unsatisfying life in the U.S.



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.

MRS. SEN'S

The year before Eliot started going to Mrs. Sen's after school, a college student looked after him until she eventually graduated and moved away. Then, an older woman named Mrs. Linden took over—until Eliot's mother discovered that she was drinking on the job. After this, Eliot's mother finds Mrs. Sen's advertisement on a bulletin board at the supermarket: "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home." When she calls Mrs. Sen, Eliot's mother explains that Eliot is 11 and that he just needs an adult present in case of an emergency. She tells Mrs. Sen that the previous babysitters came to their house—but Mrs. Sen can't, because she doesn't know how to **drive**.

Eliot and his mother go to meet Mr. and Mrs. Sen at their university apartment, which is clean but old and shabby, with mismatched carpet squares and furniture wrapped in protective plastic. The Sens both take off their shoes inside and wear flip flops around the house. Mrs. Sen introduces Mr. Sen by saying that he teaches mathematics at the university, "as if they were only distantly acquainted." Eliot admires Mrs. Sen's sari and traditional Indian makeup, and he thinks that his mother's conservative outfit looks out of place in the apartment.

Eliot's string of babysitters over the past year clues readers into the fact that Eliot's mother is likely a working woman who isn't available to take care of Eliot after school. Notably, Eliot is babysat by strangers (and not particularly trustworthy ones, judging by the woman who drank while looking after him) rather than relatives or family friends. This hints that Eliot and his mother may be isolated from their extended family, and that they perhaps struggle to find people with whom they can form close, trusting relationships. Meanwhile, Mrs. Sen's description of herself as a "Professor's wife, responsible and kind" immediately characterizes her as someone who centers her identity around her role as a housewife—and someone who may be able to give Eliot the maternal care that his other babysitters (and perhaps his own mother) have failed to provide him with. Mrs. Sen's inability to drive, however, subtly hints that she may struggle with isolation and loneliness as well.



Mrs. Sen's traditional Indian dress and makeup are clues that the Sens have only recently immigrated to the U.S. and haven't fully assimilated into American culture. Mrs. Sen's appearance, combined with the fact that the Sens wear flip-flops in the house, are small but significant cultural differences that set them apart from Americans like Eliot and his mother. Eliot doesn't seem to mind this—he admires Mrs. Sen's appearance and thinks that his mother is the one who looks odd in her typical American work clothes. The Sens' small, shabby university apartment indicates that they aren't particularly well-off, which begins to challenge the common notion that people who immigrate to North America are automatically met with prosperity and opportunity. Furthermore, the way Mrs. Sen introduces Mr. Sen—"as if they were only distantly acquainted"—hints that she does indeed feel lonely and isolated in her new life in the U.S., even though she has her husband.



Mrs. Sen repeatedly offers Eliot's mother some **biscuits**, but she refuses each time. She asks Mrs. Sen questions about her babysitting experience and how long she's lived in this country. Above all, she's concerned that Mrs. Sen can't **drive**, since Eliot's mother works 50 miles north and his father lives 2,000 miles away. Mr. Sen assures Eliot's mother that he's teaching Mrs. Sen, and that she should have her license by December. Mrs. Sen explains that they had a chauffeur when they lived in India. Looking around the modest apartment, Eliot's mother seems skeptical of this.

In Indian and other non-Western cultures, offering guests food is a common show of hospitality—and it's generally considered rude for the guest not to accept, even if they aren't hungry. With this in mind, Eliot's mother's refusal of the biscuits likely makes Mrs. Sen feel embarrassed, alienated, and perhaps even a bit offended. This immediately starts Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother's relationship off on the wrong foot, and the divide between them widens as it becomes clear that they two women lead entirely different lifestyles. Mrs. Sen is a housewife, while Eliot's mother is a single mom who works miles away from home. Both women, though, seem to have loneliness in common: Mrs. Sen's inability to drive isolates her in the apartment, and Eliot's mother doesn't seem to have any close friends or family members she can depend on to watch Eliot. Meanwhile, the fact that the Sens could afford a chauffeur in India indicates that their socioeconomic status has actually diminished since they immigrated to the U.S. Their downward trajectory doesn't align with the stereotypical "American Dream" narrative that promises immigrants boundless opportunity and success.



Eliot doesn't mind going to Mrs. Sen's after school. The beach house that he and his mother live in is cold this time of year, and the beach is empty now that tourist season is over—there's no one for him to play with. The Sens' apartment, in contrast, is warm. Eliot likes watching Mrs. Sen chop up **vegetables** for dinner each evening, but she never lets him help. She uses a traditional Indian blade to prepare the food. One day, Mrs. Sen tells Eliot how her mother would have all the women in her neighborhood cook together before celebrations—during those times, it would be so loud that it was hard to sleep. Here, Mrs. Sen finds it hard to sleep in silence.

Eliot and his mother are clearly isolated at home, particularly when tourist season ends in the beach town where they live. The cold temperature in their apartment more figuratively represents the lack of familial warmth between Eliot and his mother. The Sens' apartment, on the other hand, is both literally and figuratively warm, as Mrs. Sen's presence offers Elliot the companionship and care that seems to be missing from his home life. But Mrs. Sen is also isolated: she likely uses a traditional Indian blade to prepare food because it reminds her of the community-oriented life in India that she misses. Just as Eliot feels lonely in his cold beach house, Mrs. Sen feels lonely in the U.S., where she seemingly has no extended family or community to support her. Mrs. Sen's use of an Indian knife also hints at her lack of desire to assimilate into American culture—she would rather keep small traditions from her home country alive than change her ways to seem more American.



On another day, Mrs. Sen asks Eliot if anyone would come to help her if she screamed. She says that in India, people would always come to help or celebrate if a neighbor made a noise of joy or distress, even though not everyone had telephones. This makes Eliot think of a time when his neighbors had a Labor Day party (which he and his mother weren't invited to). This was one of the rare days his mother had off work, but they did chores all day rather than going anywhere. That evening, his mother had called the neighbors during their party and asked them to quiet down. Presently, Eliot tells Mrs. Sen that someone might call, but it might just be to complain that she was making too much noise.

Mrs. Sen always hides all the evidence of her **food** preparation before Eliot's mother comes to pick him up, which makes Eliot feel like they are disobeying a rule. When Eliot's mother arrives, she hovers outside and tries to avoid coming in, but Mrs. Sen won't allow this. She always serves Eliot's mother traditional Indian food, but Eliot's mother never eats much and says that she had a late lunch, which Eliot knows isn't true. (She's told Eliot that she doesn't like the taste of Mrs. Sen's food.) When they get home, she immediately drinks wine and eats bread and cheese. Then, she orders Eliot pizza for dinner and leaves him to clean up while she smokes a cigarette.

Mrs. Sen's uncertainty about whether anyone would come if she screamed in the apartment suggests that she's worried about her lack of community in the U.S. compared to the close-knit neighborhood where she lived in India. She clearly feels lonely and isolated in her new life, as she's not even sure that her American neighbors would care if she were in trouble. Eliot's thoughts in response to this show that he's isolated as well, which begins to suggest that loneliness is a common (and perhaps even inevitable) part of the human condition. His comment that someone might call if Mrs. Sen screamed, but just to tell her that she's making too much noise, indicates that he thinks of his neighbors the same way—both he and Mrs. Sen lack a supportive network of people to look out for them. In addition to feeling alienated from his community, Eliot also lacks quality time and deep connection with his mother, his only close family member. His mother is so exhausted from work that she has little energy she has left to spend on Eliot, which implies that her role as a single mother is more draining than it is empowering.



Mrs. Sen likely feels the need to hide her food preparation from Eliot's mother because the way she cooks (cutting food on the floor with a traditional Indian blade) is a marker of her foreignness as a new immigrant. Mrs. Sen does try to offer Eliot's mother food, however, perhaps in an attempt to plant the seeds of friendship. But Eliot's mother rejects Mrs. Sen's hospitality and offerings—and given that Mrs. Sen's traditional dishes are central to Mrs. Sen's identity as an Indian woman, Eliot's mother's refusal to eat is a rejection of Mrs. Sen's foreignness as a whole. Whereas Mrs. Sen puts a lot of work into making elaborate meals and snacks, Eliot's mother has no energy left to cook after work. There's clearly a large gap between Mrs. Sen's role as a housewife and Eliot's mother's role as a working woman, but it doesn't seem like either of them are particularly happy or fulfilled.



Every afternoon, Mrs. Sen waits for Eliot at the bus stop—she seems to arrive early, and she always brings Eliot a **snack**. Mrs. Sen then practices **driving** with Eliot in the car for 20 minutes. She says that she feels strange leaving Eliot alone in the apartment, but Eliot knows that she takes him along because she's afraid to drive alone. She says that Mr. Sen tells her “everything will improve” once she gets her license, and she asks Eliot if he thinks so too. Eliot points out that she'd be able to go places, but Mrs. Sen is only interested in going to Calcutta.

Driving practice makes Mrs. Sen nervous: she makes slow circles around the apartment complex and continuously gets distracted by pedestrians or birds in the road. Eliot tries to explain how to turn onto the main road with other cars, but she's too afraid. He thinks how easy it looks when his mother drives. Seeing the other cars makes Mrs. Sen's hands shake, and her English falters as she says, “Everyone, this people, too much in their world.”

Eliot learns that two things make Mrs. Sen happy: the first is receiving letters from home. She has Eliot check the mail while she waits with great anticipation, and when Eliot finds a letter one day, she hugs him. When they get back to the apartment, Mrs. Sen quickly reads the letter and calls Mr. Sen to tell him what it says. She's too excited to stay in the apartment, so she takes Eliot to the university to walk around campus.

The way Mrs. Sen waits for Eliot and eagerly greets him with a snack shows she has a certain amount of affection for him. Eliot seems to be the only person she interacts with besides her husband, and she values his company. Indeed, Eliot's presence is seemingly the only thing that gives her the courage to practice driving. Driving alone, the way Eliot's mother commutes to work, is an important marker of independence—and given how common it is for Americans to drive their own cars everywhere they go, driving is symbolic of the U.S.'s individualistic culture. Mrs. Sen's dislike of the exercise thus indicates her lack of desire to assimilate into American culture and gain independence by driving. Mr. Sen wants her to learn, believing that “everything will improve” for her when she can drive, because she will be able to get around independently. This is an essential part of life in most American cities, but Mrs. Sen says that she would only want to drive to Calcutta. She doesn't want to move forward with life in the U.S., like her husband wants her to—she'd rather return home to India, where having a close-knit community meant that she didn't need to be so independent.



Eliot notices that Mrs. Sen's driving anxiety is very different from how his mother reacts to driving: for Eliot's mother, driving is an easy and mundane task that she does to sustain her independent lifestyle. Mrs. Sen, on the other hand, has never needed to drive on her own before, and she finds it very frightening. The way her English falters as she says, “Everyone, this people, too much in their world,” shows that the difficulty of driving is so intense for her that she can hardly speak to Eliot. The entire situation is “too much” for her—in part because being surrounded by so many strangers in their cars compounds her sense of social alienation as a new immigrant. Her lapse in English and her struggle to drive both indicate that she's having a difficult time assimilating into American life, which requires immigrants to adapt to many changes at once.



Mrs. Sen's excitement at getting a letter from home shows how much she values her connection to her family in India. It makes her almost giddy with joy, and she wants to share her excitement with Eliot. To do this, she hugs Eliot and calls her husband—her only social connections in the U.S. That she only has two people to share exciting news with shows how isolated she has become in her new home.



Mrs. Sen repeatedly takes the letter out of her purse, rereading it and sighing to herself. Finally, she tells Eliot that her sister has had a baby girl, and that she thinks the child will three years old by the time she meets her—she and her niece will be strangers. She asks Eliot if he misses his mother in the afternoons, but it's never occurred to him to miss her. Mrs. Sen tells Eliot that he's wiser than she was at his age, because he already knows that he'll be separated from family one day.

It disturbs Mrs. Sen that she won't know her niece for years, because her family is changing while she's away, and she is becoming even more distanced from them and from her culture in India. Staying in the United States and fully assimilating comes with a loss: Mrs. Sen will no longer be there for her family's important life events. Eliot, by contrast, isn't particularly close with his mother and doesn't miss her when she's at work. This perhaps suggests that it's typical for people in the U.S., where the culture is very different from India, to be disconnected from their families—even when they live near each other. Indeed, when Mrs. Sen says that Eliot is wiser than she was at his age, she's making a pessimistic statement about family relationships. She believes that life inevitably forces people to distance themselves from their families, and that Eliot has already adapted to this reality.



The second thing that makes Mrs. Sen happy is a whole **fish** from the seaside. One evening, she tells Eliot's mother that she finds it hard to get the fresh fish she likes in American supermarkets, so she gets it from a fish market instead. She wants the fish because she ate it twice a day when she was growing up in Calcutta. Every few days, Mrs. Sen calls the fish market to ask if there's fresh fish—and if there is, she sends Mr. Sen to get it.

Again, Mrs. Sen's desire to make food from her home country is a way for her to connect to her old life in India. Her intense commitment to acquiring the fish shows that this is one of the most important things in her life—she is willing to put a great deal of time and effort into getting it. However, she has to send Mr. Sen to pick up the fish because she isn't able to drive to get it on her own, which again speaks to her lack of independence. Eliot's mother, for instance, wouldn't need to ask for help to get something she wanted, but Mrs. Sen does. She has not yet adjusted to life in the U.S., which largely requires people to get what they need entirely on their own.



One day, Mr. Sen tells Mrs. Sen that he can't go to get the **fish** anymore because he needs to hold office hours for his students. Mrs. Sen cooks chicken instead for a few days—but soon, the market calls and tells her that they have fresh fish available for her. She calls Mr. Sen to go get it, but he refuses. Mrs. Sen is very upset, and she asks Eliot if it's too much to ask of Mrs. Sen.

Mr. Sen refusing to drive Mrs. Sen to the market shows the disconnect in their relationship. Mr. Sen is busy with his job as a professor, and he doesn't seem to understand how important the fish is to his wife—which indicates that he's also overlooking her general struggle to assimilate and find community in the U.S. Mrs. Sen's question to Eliot—whether she's asking too much of her husband—implies that she feels undervalued by Mr. Sen, given everything she does for him as a housewife. Mrs. Sen isn't just upset because she can't get the fish, but also because she doesn't feel like her husband understands or appreciates her.



Mrs. Sen then takes Eliot into her bedroom and shows him all the saris she has never worn in the U.S. and tells him that her family thinks she lives “the life of a queen” simply because she lives in America. Eventually, Mr. Sen calls back and agrees to take Mrs. Sen and Eliot to the **fish** market; he tries to get Mrs. Sen to **drive** there, but she refuses.

By showing Eliot the unworn saris, Mrs. Sen emphasizes how lonely and alienated she feels in the U.S., where she doesn't feel comfortable wearing traditional Indian garments in public. Her life in the U.S. has not turned out the way she expected: her financial circumstances are worse in here than they were in India, which contradicts the common narrative that immigrants to the U.S. are guaranteed opportunity and success. Although Mr. Sen eventually agrees to take Mrs. Sen to get the fish she needs, he still demonstrates a misunderstanding of his wife's feelings when he tries to get her to drive there. He doesn't show much empathy about how difficult and frightening driving is for her, and he's frustrated by her refusal to practice. And given that driving symbolizes acclimation to American culture, Mr. Sen's frustration about this represents his more general frustration with Mrs. Sen's refusal to assimilate.



Mr. Sen takes the same roads that Eliot's mother does when she **drives** them home in the evenings, but the usual route seems unfamiliar in the Sens' car. When they arrive at the **fish** market, Mr. Sen waits in the car and tells Mrs. Sen and Eliot to hurry. Inside the store, Mrs. Sen chats and laughs with the man behind the counter; she asks him to confirm that the fish is fresh and requests that he leave the heads on. Later that evening, back at the apartment, Mrs. Sen carefully cuts the fish and divides it up to get three meals out of it.

The usual routes that Eliot's mother takes seem unfamiliar in the Sens' car, which speaks to how different everything seems to Eliot when he's with the Sens. Mr. and Mrs. Sen, as foreigners, behave differently and see the world differently than Eliot's mother, and Eliot senses that difference when he is with them. Mr. Sen's urging Mrs. Sen to hurry shows once again that he doesn't understand how important the fish is to her. The careful and deliberate way Mrs. Sen buys and prepares the fish speaks to how much value she places on the task as a means of connecting with the culture that she's homesick for.



In November, Mrs. Sen refuses to **cook** or practice **driving** for several days. She silently prepares Eliot peanut butter on crackers and then sits reading old letters from a shoebox. Eliot's mother notices and asks Eliot if she's been different lately. Eliot says that he hasn't noticed a change, even though he has: Mrs. Sen paces the apartment, turns on the TV but doesn't watch it, and makes herself tea that she doesn't drink.

Cooking Indian food is one of Mrs. Sen's favorite pastimes, and it's the main way she connects to her family and culture—so her refusal to cook makes it clear that she has given up on functioning as she normally does. She has become very sad for some reason, but Eliot doesn't yet know what it is—and he doesn't feel comfortable asking Mrs. Sen, which perhaps suggests that the two of them haven't grown all that close despite being each other's only company. Still, Eliot refuses to tell his mother about the changes he notices in Mrs. Sen, which is both a show of loyalty to her and evidence of his disconnection from his mother.



One day, Mrs. Sen plays a tape of her family's voices for Eliot—it's a recording of her relatives narrating things that happened in their village on the day that she and Mr. Sen left. She tells Eliot that she received a letter over the weekend telling her that her grandfather had died.

For Mrs. Sen, the news that her grandfather has died is another sign that she's been cut off from her family and home country. Her family members' lives have continued to develop and change without her, and she can't get back the time she's lost with them while she's been in the U.S. She listens to the tape of her relatives' voices because it's essentially frozen in time, making it seem as though nothing has changed since the day the Sens left home. In reality, though, events like her grandfather's death make Mrs. Sen feel farther and farther away from her family and her community in India.



Mrs. Sen starts **cooking** again a week later. One evening, as she's preparing dinner, Mr. Sen calls and takes her and Eliot to the seaside. Mrs. Sen dresses up, and they buy a lot of fish from the market and eat at a seafood restaurant. When they're done eating, they walk on the beach and take pictures together using the camera that Mrs. Sen brought along. Then, Mr. Sen insists that Mrs. Sen **drive** home, despite her objections. She drives for a while but panics and pulls over when there are too many other cars on the road.

Mrs. Sen's renewed interest in cooking suggests that she's beginning to recover from the shock of her grandfather's death. The moment of happiness and connection between Mr. and Mrs. Sen and Eliot at the seaside shows their potential to have a relationship and relieve each other's loneliness—but they never really connect with each other on a deep level. This sense of disconnect is illustrated when Mr. Sen forces Mrs. Sen to drive home and doesn't understand that she's too afraid to do so—a conflict that puts a damper on an otherwise enjoyable evening. Furthermore, Mrs. Sen's failure at driving more broadly symbolizes her failure to assimilate and claim her independence in the way Mr. Sen wants her to.



Mrs. Sen stops **driving** after this—when she wants **fish**, she avoids calling Mr. Sen and takes the bus instead. The bus stops at the university and at a nursing home; one day, Mrs. Sen and Eliot see some elderly women from the nursing home going to buy lozenges. Mrs. Sen asks Eliot if he'd put his mother in a nursing home, and he says that he might, but that he'd visit every day. Mrs. Sen tells Eliot that he'll get busy with his own life, and eventually his mother will be like these women and have to take the bus to get lozenges.

Mrs. Sen taking the bus also symbolizes her refusal to assimilate and become more independent by learning to drive. She avoids calling Mr. Sen to take her to the market, which makes it clear that she has given up on him understanding her struggle with driving (and, by extension, her struggle to assimilate); she doesn't want to disappoint him again by failing. Her discussion of nursing homes with Eliot is yet another indicator that her isolation from her family and alienation from her husband deeply trouble her. She thinks that Eliot will never be able to keep his mother from being alone in the end, because he will get busy—just like Mrs. Sen feels lonely because her husband has gotten busier with his work. This attitude is rather pessimistic, as it suggests that Mrs. Sen isn't hopeful that she'll ever be able to overcome her own social isolation. And in telling Eliot that his mother will become like the old ladies taking the bus to get lozenges, she implies that loneliness is inevitable for everyone.



Mrs. Sen and Eliot ride the bus to the market, pick up **fish**, and then take the bus home. A woman on the bus complains to the bus driver about the smell of the fish. The driver asks Mrs. Sen what's in her bag, which startles her, and he asks if she speaks English. When she tells him that she has a fish, he asks Eliot to open the window.

The woman and the bus driver are uncomfortable with Mrs. Sen's foreignness—they react to the smell of her food and ask if she speaks English because her behavior seems strange and unfamiliar to them. This scene illustrates the difficulty of assimilating to the U.S., as many people are unwilling to tolerate immigrants like Mrs. Sen, who often look and act differently from people who grew up in American culture.



The next time the **fish** market calls, Mrs. Sen calls Mr. Sen to ask him to **drive** them to the market, but he doesn't answer. She keeps trying to reach him, and when he still doesn't answer, she decides to drive herself and Eliot there. But when Mrs. Sen tries to exit the apartment complex, she turns into oncoming traffic and has to swerve out of the way. A horn from a passing car startles her so much that she hits a telephone pole. A police officer soon arrives at the scene of the accident, but Mrs. Sen doesn't have a driver's license to show him, so she just tells him that Mr. Sen teaches at the university. Mrs. Sen and Eliot aren't badly hurt (Mrs. Sen has a cut lip and Eliot's ribs are sore), and the car isn't seriously damaged.

Mrs. Sen's inability to contact her husband, despite making multiple efforts to reach him, shows how unavailable (both practically and emotionally) he is when she needs him. Mrs. Sen realizes that she will need to act independently in order to get the fish she needs to make traditional Indian dishes—but she fails to drive properly, showing that she has yet to achieve the independence that's second nature to American women like Eliot's mother. Mrs. Sen's car accident represents her final failure to assimilate, as this major step she takes to step outside of her comfort zone only ends in trauma and disappointment.



Mr. Sen picks Mrs. Sen and Eliot up. When they get back to the apartment, Mrs. Sen throws away the food she was preparing for dinner. She makes Eliot a snack and turns on the TV for him, and then she goes to her room and shuts the door. When Eliot's mother arrives, Mrs. Sen doesn't come out to speak to her. Instead, Mr. Sen reimburses Eliot's mother for the month's babysitting fee and apologizes on his wife's behalf. He says that she's resting, but Eliot hears Mrs. Sen crying.

After the car accident, it's implied that Mrs. Sen is giving up on trying to assimilate or connect with others in America. She goes into her room and shuts the door to avoid talking to Eliot's mother, indicating that she has stopped trying entirely. Rather than Mrs. Sen acting independently on her own behalf, Mr. Sen interacts with Eliot's mother for her, making the decision that Eliot won't come to the Sens anymore. Eliot was Mrs. Sen's only companion, and their time together is ending on a rather traumatic and abrupt note, which implies that Mrs. Sen doesn't have much hope of making social connections in the future.



This is the last day that Eliot spends with Mrs. Sen. On the way home that evening, Eliot's mother tells him that she's relieved he won't be going back to the Sens' anymore. Instead of hiring a new babysitter, she gives Eliot a key to the house and tells him to call the neighbors if there's an emergency. The first day that Eliot stays home alone after school, his mother calls to make sure he's okay. Gazing out the kitchen window at the dreary ocean waves, Eliot tells her that he's fine.

Eliot's mother admits she's relieved that she doesn't have to deal with Mrs. Sen anymore, which speaks to her ongoing rejection of Mrs. Sen and discomfort with her foreignness. She doesn't seem to recognize or care that she likely played a role in Mrs. Sen's fear of independence and assimilation, which fed into her driving anxiety. Eliot's mother was judgmental and cold to Mrs. Sen from the start, which has likely made Mrs. Sen even more hesitant to try to connect with other people and adapt to American culture. Meanwhile, Eliot gets a key to the house rather than a new babysitter, which socially isolates him even further. He and Mrs. Sen have been fond of each other throughout the story—but ultimately, they failed to connect on a deeper level, and it's unlikely that they'll ever see each other again. In the end, they're both alone, without even each other for company. That the story ends with Eliot and Mrs. Sen's mutual isolation suggests that loneliness is a central and inescapable part of the human experience.





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