An Artist of the Floating World Study Guide

An Artist of the Floating World by Kazuo Ishiguro

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BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

An Artist of the Floating World is a novel by British-Japanese author Kazuo Ishiguro. It was published in 1986 and shortlisted the same year for the Booker Prize. The novel also won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award the year it came out.

Masuji Ono is a retired artist who has earned a high degree of prestige with his art. When negotiations over his daughter's marriage falter though, he has to confront the possibility that his actions as a nationalist propagandist for the government during the war might have undermined his status. Masuji Ono sets about visiting the artists he worked with, and he even tries to set things right with one artist, Kuroda, who was arrested because of Masuji Ono's doubts about his loyalty. When Masuji Ono concludes his actions were wrong and lamentable, he nevertheless finds his family wants to get back to a prosperous, normal life. They would rather believe in his prestige, without considering the questionable nature of his involvement in the war.

Masuji Ono lives in a house that once belonged to a prominent artist; he won the house in an 'auction of prestige' with other bidders for the property. But Masuji Ono's retirement is marred by the difficulty he is having in marrying off his younger daughter, Noriko. A year ago, a family had abruptly backed out of the marriage negotiations and while Masuji Ono thinks the family pulled out because of their lower status, his daughters wonder whether there is something in his background that pushed the family away.

This begins a slow and deliberate inquiry into Masuji Ono's past, and the reader learns Masuji Ono was once an artist of the 'floating world' of geishas and drink and romance and entertainment. As Japan became more and more nationalist in the 1930s, he turned from art to nationalist propaganda, and became a prominent leader of the artists calling for Japanese nationalism and imperial expansion.

In the post-war years, where many houses and even whole neighborhoods are devastated by bombing, this is no longer a popular position to take. Masuji Ono's son-in-law violates propriety by expressing frustration with the older generation, who sent the young men off to die, and lived safely through the war. There is even talk of the leaders who have since committed suicide, as a way to apologize for their role in the disastrous war.

As Masuji Ono follows his conscience back into the past, in flashbacks and in visits to old comrades, he eventually sees his role in the national disaster. During a formal dinner with another suitor's family, he announces he is willing to accept the fact his art may have had a bad influence.

This is not the end of the novel, though, for Masuji Ono still has old scores to settle, and Ishiguro still has material to work with. Masuji Ono is rebuffed when he goes to visit the house of one of his former students—his most promising student—who had been arrested during the war. Masuji Ono himself had reported this artist's questionable

loyalties, but imprisonment has injured the man, and he is not willing to reconcile with Masuji Ono. When Masuji Ono speaks with his daughter about his role in the war, she refuses to acknowledge any question about his virtues, and insists on remembering only his prestige.

It is only with an old colleague that Masuji Ono finds a real sympathy and understanding. Matsuda had initiated Masuji Ono into the nationalist movement, and now, as older men, they agree about their role in the war. But even though they regret their actions, they know they acted in good faith at the time, and because they have found some forgiveness and understanding, they are able to find some redemption in the fact they had at least tried something rare and difficult, instead of just playing it safe, like many of the artists with whom they worked.

Chapter 1, October 1948, Part 1

Summary

Masuji Ono says he is not as wealthy as the appearance of his house would suggest, but the Sugimura family, the previous owners, solicited a low bid from him—and a few others—in what they called an “auction of prestige”. The most prestigious applicant would get the house at the reduced amount the family named. Masuji Ono says he won the auction, but he sounds surprised at his own success, and the new high esteem in which he is held.

Years later, after the war, one of the sisters comes to visit Masuji Ono at the house, and he shows her the damage from the war, describing in detail the gardens her father had built with exquisite artistry.

Masuji Ono has two daughters, Setsuko, who is married, with a son, Ichiro, and Noriko, who is not married. They come to visit him in the house, which is still being rebuilt.

Masuji Ono recalls the visit from his two daughters. In a slow and subtle narration, he recalls his daughters saying he is much gentler now than he was in their childhood. Ichiro, his grandson, runs through the house while Masuji Ono and his daughters talk. Masuji Ono tries to get Ichiro to settle down by offering to paint with him, and then to take him to the ‘prehistoric monster’ movie.

Between trying to calm Ichiro, Masuji Ono, Noriko and Setsuko talk about Noriko’s ongoing marriage negotiations. A year ago, a suitor from the Miyake family had pulled out abruptly, with the explanation he was not of sufficient status to marry into Masuji Ono’s family. Masuji Ono is content with this explanation, but the daughters seem to believe there is another explanation, relating to some scandal Masuji Ono is not talking about.

Masuji Ono says he is lax in considering the matter of status, although he seems to be highly conscious of class distinctions between people.

Masuji Ono describes an episode when he was drinking with a friend of his, Shintaro, at Mrs. Kawakami’s bar. Mrs. Shintaro suggested Mrs. Kawakami should send her young relative to Masuji Ono to be recommended. A recommendation from Masuji Ono would carry weight, he said, and so gave Masuji Ono an indication of his status. Masuji Ono had helped Shintaro’s brother, and Shintaro owed him a debt of gratitude, almost slavishly devoting himself to earning Masuji Ono’s approval. Shintaro, Masuji Ono says, is unaffected by the cynicism that has been prevalent since the war.

Masuji Ono recalls the time before the war, when the area around Mrs. Kawakami’s bar hosted many other drinking establishments. Masuji Ono says he used to gather with his colleagues and friends at the Migi-Hidari. He says he surprised his rigidly class-conscious peers by suggesting influence status can creep up on someone who works

busily, not pursuing these ends in themselves, but for the satisfaction of performing his tasks to the best of his ability." (p. 24).

Recalling Setsuko's visit from a month ago, Masuji Ono describes finding Ichiro playing loudly in his house. He is pretending to be the Lone Ranger, and his play is rude and disruptive for Masuji Ono, who tries to corral the boy with a drawing exercise. Ichiro asks Masuji Ono if he has retired because Japan lost the war, but Masuji Ono only laughs at him.

Masuji Ono gets Ichiro to pay attention by promising to take him to the 'prehistoric monster' movie, but it turns out since Setsuko and Noriko had made plans for the day they expect to go. Ichiro and Ono wonder whether the movie will be too scary for Setsuko and Noriko, and there is a friendly masculine banter between them, that discredits the women's feelings about things. When Masuji Ono hears Ichiro's play is mimicking English, Setsuko says some people believe it is most appropriate to believe in American heroes now.

When Noriko decides to go to visit Mrs. Watanabe alone with Ichiro—Setsuko says she will stay at home with her father. Setsuko uses the occasion to talk with him about the negotiations that fell apart last year with the Miyakes.

The occasion of finding Setsuko in the formal reception room makes Masuji Ono recall when he was a child having sat in the reception room with his father, who would meet with him and talk business. Masuji Ono was too young to understand much, but he followed what he could. He came to loathe the meetings, though, and recalls a time when his father inquired about his artistic work. Masuji Ono's father wanted to protect him against the sloth and decadence of an artistic lifestyle, although Masuji Ono said he wanted to distinguish himself with his art. Masuji Ono's father burnt a number of his paintings, but this only increased Masuji Ono's determination to be a painter.

Analysis

Masuji Ono is extremely circumspect about his status; this seems to be very Japanese, on one hand, but the reader also gets the sense that it might be because of things he is not allowing himself to see. The novel proceeds slowly and portrays subtle differences between Masuji Ono and his daughters. Some of this difference stems from their different generations—the younger generation trying to forget the war and move on, and the older generation trying to live with their guilt or complicity in the war efforts.

This difference becomes most pressing in terms of the Miyakes' having pulled out of the marriage negotiations—Masuji Ono's daughters seem to believe this had something to do with his patriotic paintings. Masuji Ono's belief—that it was a matter of unequal stature—shows him using old ideals to explain new phenomena.

Vocabulary

Hesitation, visible, moderate, exaggerated, sternly, credentials, negotiating, imposing, hostility, corridor, tarpaulin, veranda, receptacles, domesticated, fearsome, inconsiderable, persisted, inconceivable, cynicism, protégés, interminably, solemn, inadvertent, formative, grave (tone).

Chapter 1, October 1948, Part 2

Summary

Noriko says she ran into Jiro Miyakes, whose family had withdrawn from marriage negotiations last year, and this makes Masuji Ono nervous about his daughter's shamelessness in talking openly with Miyake about her new negotiations, which are not really as far along as she might believe. Masuji Ono says he had run into Mr. Miyake shortly before the negotiations broke off, and he wondered whether seeing Miyake at the low-class place of employment made him so self-conscious the family withdrew.

During that meeting, though, Miyake told Masuji Ono the president of his company had committed suicide out of guilt for his actions during the war. Miyake says the president's death gave everyone relief, and a path toward the future. Miyake says the refusal to take responsibility is "the greatest cowardice of all" (p. 56). and this is the phrase Ono's son-in-law Suichi uses to describe his anger on the occasion of the burial of Masuji Ono's son Kenji's ashes.

Masuji Ono sees Suichi's anger as a breach of good manners, and recalls his horror when he heard a dull-witted man who had sung patriotic songs during the war was beaten for singing the same songs after the war.

Returning to his trip to the Arakawa district, Masuji Ono says he had acquired enough status that Yamagata, who ran the Migi-Hidari, had asked him to petition the authorities to permit the expansion of the bar. Masuji Ono wrote a letter claiming the expansion would allow the bar to reflect the strong new Japan, and it was built with patriotic décor. Masuji Ono apparently saw himself and the artists who would frequent the Migi-Hidari as warriors fighting against decadence and western influence.

Masuji Ono lived in Furukawa and visited the Migi-Hidari when he was an artist working for the Takeda firm. For Takeda, he churned out paintings of courtesans for export, as the paintings seemed highly Japanese. Working for Takeda, Masuji Ono met the Tortoise, a fellow painter renowned for his slow pace, and high-quality work. Masuji Ono defended Tortoise from the others' jeers, and he says his status as a productive worker had given him an authority that protected Tortoise.

Masuji Ono recalls having asked Tortoise to join him when he decided to leave Takeda for Seiji Moriyama, who was a true artist. Masuji Ono wanted to rise above the kind of art he was making at Takeda's. Masuji Ono saw himself as the spearhead of a new movement in Japanese culture. Masuji Ono says even now, when he drinks at Mrs. Kawakami's, Mrs. Kawakami says "everyone always looked up to [Masuji Ono} as the natural leader around here" (p. 76). She hopes he can bring the old crowd back, and recreate the old days, now that the war is over.

Masuji Ono says he saw Kuroda only once since the war; he was haggard, and looked older. But Masuji Ono turns his attention to the Saito family, which was inquiring about marriage with Noriko. The Saitos are a family of high status, and Masuji Ono has known Mr. Saito for years. The two men encounter each other on the tram on the way to take Ichiro to see the prehistoric monster film. Mr. Saito says he has run into Kuroda, who is applying for a teaching job at a school where Saito is an advisor.

Masuji Ono changes the topic to describe his trip to the movies with Ichiro. Ichiro hides his eyes throughout the film, but speaks critically of the monster, which looks made-up, he says. Discussing the film over dinner with his grandson and daughters, Masuji Ono talks about having seen Mr. Saito. After dinner, Setsuko urges her father to talk to Kuroda and his old colleagues before Mr. Saito's detectives find them, in order to prevent any misunderstandings like with the Miyakes.

Masuji Ono's trip to Arakawa takes him to Chishu Matsuda's house. Masuji Ono says he met Matsuda at Moriyama's studio. Matsuda was a member of the Okada-Shingen society, a nationalist organization in Japan before the war. Matsuda solicited Masuji Ono with flattery into joining the Okada-Shingen society.

In the present, Masuji Ono finds Matsuda wasted and in ill health. They talk about the old times, and Matsuda apologizes for having missed his wife Michiko's funeral in 1945. Ultimately, he brings Masuji Ono to confess he is uncomfortable about what Mr. Saito's investigators might find when they inquire into his past. Matsuda refers Masuji Ono to Kuroda, and Masuji Ono turns pale at Kuroda's name.

Analysis

As Masuji Ono travels to Arakawa, he recalls the old times, and his leadership among the other artists. His protection of Tortoise seems veritably virtuous, although there is an ominous note when he offers to include Tortoise in the brave new world he will be making at Moriyama's studio. Masuji Ono is proud of having contributed to the development of the nationalistic Migi-Hidari as a meeting place, and he and Mrs. Kawakami obviously have some nostalgia for the days when everyone would meet and drink and argue together.

Masuji Ono's visit brings him to Matsuda, who is in ill health. Masuji Ono is concerned about what Mr. Saito's detectives will find—he does not want his friends praising work that should be forgotten. When Matsuda refers Masuji Ono to Kuroda, Masuji Ono turns pale, and the reader has to wonder what kind of threat Kuroda poses to Masuji Ono's conscience—and to Noriko's marriage negotiations.

Vocabulary

Verge, perspective, periodicals, cowardice, ceremony, communists, assurances, malnutrition, culprits, maliciousness, regressive, fixated, mimicking, terminus,

disembarking, decadent, incompatible, unflinchingly, commission, earnestness, timidity, lofty, intervention, episode, manifestation.

Chapter 2, April 1949

Summary

Masuji Ono says ruins used to be commonplace in Japan, but now they are being replaced by clusters of houses. Mrs. Kawakami sold out to a corporation. She told Masuji Ono he was her only dependable customer left.

Masuji Ono says he has not seen Shintaro since an episode last winter, at his house, when Masuji Ono was surprised to learn Shintaro had applied for a teaching position without consulting him. He had been Shintaro's teacher, but Shintaro only asked him to write to the application committee "to dissociate him from Masuji Ono's influence" (p. 103). Masuji Ono says he did not answer Shintaro in the end, he merely turned his back until Shintaro left without any dignity.

Masuji Ono says he can explain his actions with Shintaro in light of Noriko's miai, or wedding negotiation supper. In a scene before this supper, Noriko is critical of his gardening: she accuses him of ruining the bushes. "You have to take into account where the younger shoots are dominant" she tells him. (p. 106).

This criticism tempts Masuji Ono to tell Noriko just that very day he had been to visit Kuroda, to try and settle their differences from the past. Kuroda was not at home, but Enchi, his protégé, was staying in his house, and he invited Masuji Ono in, and made conversation. Enchi assumed that Masuji Ono was from the Cordon Society, but when he finds out who Masuji Ono is, he says Kuroda will not want to see him, and he invites him to write instead of trying to visit.

It appears Masuji Ono recommended Kuroda be investigated—Masuji Ono suspected his loyalty. The police arrested him, searched his house, and destroyed his paintings.

At the miai, Noriko's responses are wooden and monosyllabic, and Mr. Saito's younger son is openly hostile to Masuji Ono, reiterating the tension between generations. He is upset about the protestors who are being beaten. Mr. Saito argues it is best for Japan to follow the American example of democracy, where people can speak their minds openly, and the American democratic model seems to have won some authority relative to the older, more traditional Japanese social structure.

When Mr. Saito mentions his son is studying with Kuroda, Masuji Ono, inspired, perhaps, by too much drink, says he knows his actions in the war can be seen as wrong, and he is not proud of them. He says he understands people see his influence as harmful, and he is willing to accept such a view as correct. Masuji Ono says this turns the miai into a successful evening.

Discussing Shintaro and the other painters with Mrs. Kawakami in her bar, Masuji Ono says that Shintaro stayed out of the war, and lost only two weeks work to the hostilities.

Masuji Ono says it is perhaps best the pleasure district which existed in the Arakawa neighborhood no longer exists.

Analysis

Masuji Ono's admission that he regrets his past activities comes a little early for the conclusion—there is still a lot of the book to go, so this climax is just an introduction to the true heart of the novel. The reader has been waiting to see how he will handle this question, and now it is clear, but the consequences of his confession remain to be seen. The past may well have faded into the past, but Masuji Ono's ways of looking at things—his art and the fragility of art in a political world still have to find a place in the new world run by Mr. Saito's son Matsuo and Masuji Ono's son-in-law Suichi.

There is a small circle of people to whom the past is personal, though, and not merely a big impersonal question. For Masuji Ono, it is Matsuda and Kuroda and Shintaro who personify the moral questions of the past, and Kuroda's refusal to have anything to do with Masuji Ono is a personal loss for Masuji Ono at a time when he is trying to settle old scores.

Vocabulary

Conscience, throngs, guarantor, suitably, exaggerate, reassured, dithering, trivial, substantial, shirk, unsympathetic, prospect, prospective, venue, insinuations, splendid, ashamed, credentials, tatami, dilapidated, resolved, distinctly, acquaintance, sulking, conciliatory.

Chapter 3, November 1949

Summary

Masuji Ono says he first met Mr. Saito sixteen years ago (i.e. in 1933, when Japanese nationalism and expansionism were first gearing up, and Masuji Ono was coming to prominence for his nationalist paintings). This is important because Masuji Ono's daughters insist Mr. Saito did not know him until the present time, and they say he did not know of Masuji Ono's nationalist art.

Stepping away from the discussion of when he met Mr. Saito, Masuji Ono says Kawabe park is the most satisfying of the city's parks—it was meant to embody Japanese culture when Sugimura designed it in the 1920s.

Masuji Ono recalls his time working with Moriyama in the pleasure district, painting the floating world with its temporary pleasures evaporate in the morning. He says the seven years he worked under Moriyama were the most crucial to his career. Masuji Ono says as nationalist tensions rose, there began to be hostility in the studio with students taking sides and accusing each other of treason against the nation or against Moriyama's artistic style. One student, Sasaki, was banished for his traitorous work, and Masuji Ono says Tortoise was slow to catch on to Moriyama's methods of using western techniques instead of traditional techniques to represent the pleasure district women.

Masuji Ono recalls one instance when Moriyama finds him in an outbuilding, and Masuji Ono confesses his doubts about the value of the paintings they were making. Moriyama hears Masuji Ono's point of view, and he says he believes his paintings are 'fatally flawed.' He says "the finest, most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within those pleasure houses after dark." (p. 150) Moriyama says he does not doubt the value of his work—but he cannot capture the fleeting beauty of the night-time world. He will not be convinced, however, that he has wasted his time.

Switching back to the present, Masuji Ono offers to give Ichiro a taste of sake, since he had allowed his own son to taste sake for the first time at about Ichiro's age. Ichiro asks Masuji Ono about a Mr. Naguchi who committed suicide as a form of apology for his war activities. There has been some suggestion Masuji Ono might resemble Mr. Naguchi, but when Ichiro asks, Masuji Ono disavows any similarity in their guilt.

In conversation with Masuji Ono, his father-in-law, Taro Saito says one of his colleagues has been nicknamed Tortoise, and Masuji Ono says there must be a Tortoise in every group of workers. He says Tortoise had friends who worked as slowly as he did, and this group nicknamed Masuji Ono and the other prolific painters 'the engineers' of their relentless productivity.

Masuji Ono describes the scene that took place when Tortoise asks to see the special painting he has been working on. It is one of his first nationalist scenes, and Tortoise is

horrified by the change of topicsto politics. Masuji Ono recalls having gone for a walk with Matsuda, who had gotten him to see the squalor of the shantytowns, and the human potential wasted by corrupt politicians and bureaucrats. Matsuda convinced Masuji Ono to accept the fact his paintings were not contributing anything to society. This walk and conversation with Matsuda turn Masuji Ono away from the art of the floating world to the art of the physical world of people and suffering and political power.

When Moriyama finds out about Masuji Ono's new political views, he confiscates Masuji Ono's paintings, and when Masuji Ono asks him what had happened, he confesses to having taken them himself. When Masuji Ono refuses to renounce his new work, Moriyama expels him from the studio, with the insulting comment perhaps he will be able to find work illustrating magazines and comic books.

This scene makes Masuji Ono think about another scene, a year before the war, when he visits Kuroda's house and discovers the police had arrested him. The smell of burning coming from the house is from Kuroda's paintings being burned by the police. Masuji Ono feels like things have gotten out of hand, but he himself had recommended the police investigate Kuroda's loyalty.

When Masuji Ono finally returns to the dinner with Setsuko and Noriko and Ichiro, Setsuko says she thinks it is a bad idea for Ichiro to have sake, and she convinces her father not to let Ichiro try sake just yet.

Around the dinner table, the adults say Japan is experiencing the first optimism since the war, and the American industrialism and democracy are leading the way forward. Masuji Ono makes a point of telling Taro Saito he first met his father long ago, before the war. By saying this, he hopes to emphasize to Setsuko he is not alone in feeling some responsibility for actions during the war—and his actions took place within the context of a society that celebrated his work. Even Mr. Saito himself had been impressed.

When Masuji Ono talks openly about his concerns with Setsuko, she disavows any knowledge her father had exercised his talents on paintings and propaganda that now look morally questionable. She urges him to let the past be the past. Even when he tells her he too "was a man of influence, who used his influence toward a disastrous end", she says "Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking." (p. 193).

Analysis

With the question of Masuji Ono's sense of responsibility settled in the previous chapter, this chapter takes up the question of how the people around him will react, and the question of whether Masuji Ono knew Mr. Saito becomes an issue—Setsuko claims Mr. Saito did not know of him until the present wedding negotiations, but Masuji Ono is certain they knew each other in the past, when Masuji Ono was working for the war effort.

Much of this chapter is recollection, as Masuji Ono goes back in time to the studio where he worked with Moriyama, and discovered the political aspect of Japan's culture. Matsuda showed it to him, and he was rapidly converted from the decadence of the floating world to the power and necessity of the political world.

By this point, Masuji Ono has already confessed his regrets, but it is interesting his own daughter and son-in-law refuse to hear his self-recriminations. They refuse to acknowledge Mr. Saito knew Masuji Ono sixteen years earlier, and Masuji Ono has to reassure himself by telling the story of having met Mr. Saito on the street. It is clearly a sign virtue has not resulted from the post-war culture, but the pendulum has merely swung back the other way, and the 'floating world' is now the daily life in which people want to forget the war.

Vocabulary

Vivid, inscribed, negotiations, irritated, autumn, spacious, abandoned, site, eccentric, emphasis, mediocre, loomed, mannerisms, resemblances, inflections, moldering, latticework, oblivious, arbitrary, arrogant, distressed, exasperated, extensively, actuality, respective.

Chapter 4, June 1950

Summary

The chapter opens with news of Matsuda's death reaching Masuji Ono, and Masuji Ono recalls his last visit to Matsuda. Matsuda, in failing health himself, admits neither one of them had had a sufficiently wide vision at the time.

Masuji Ono says he had tried his utmost—and that he may have devoted himself to the wrong cause, in the end—but nevertheless he had given of himself, and lived to regret it. The regret itself, he says, is an experience, and has its value. While artists like Tortoise and Shintaro might plod away following other teachers' examples, he himself is proud of having lived his life, even if that meant making the wrong decisions.

Masuji Ono says when he received the Shigeta Foundation Award in 1938, "the feeling of deep triumph and fulfillment which the award should have brought was curiously missing." (p. 202). He says Moriyama was ultimately treated as unpatriotic for his efforts to bring European influences into Japanese art, and he had to illustrate popular magazines to make money. Masuji Ono says he was only ultimately fulfilled when he was on his way to visit Moriyama after the war. He sits down on a ridge where he can see Moriyama's villa, and feels contentment for having exerted himself, having risked things of value, and having gained something from the experience.

The quality Masuji Ono gained is not named, but it can be assumed he is talking about experience itself, the knowledge life has been lived, and now he knows the price of things, and the reality of effort, as well as the reality of regret. "The likes of the Tortoise—the likes of Shintaro—they may plod on, competent and inoffensive, but their kind… do not know what it is to risk everything in the endeavor to rise above the mediocre." (p. 204).

The book closes with Masuji Ono crossing the Bridge of Hesitation into the old pleasure district, which as been rebuilt substantially, and is no longer recognizable. He says the nation has exerted itself, and "has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well." (p. 206).

Analysis

In closing this complex novel, Masuji Ono says even though he regrets his actions, he has nevertheless made an effort, and exerted himself to rise above the mediocre. He consigns the Tortoise and Shintaro to the circles of people who will plod on in competence, without rising into excellence. Moriyama, who had exiled him for his new style of political art, had ended up illustrating popular magazines himself, when his art was judged too radical for incorporating western elements.

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Vocabulary

Receiving, exercise, re-establishing, impulse, excitement, reception, acquaintances, unaided, mutual, encouragement, sheer, obliged, contribution, disillusioned, composed, manifesto, unduly, misfortune, preferable, prevaricate, colleagues, endeavors, ascertain, prestigious, kerchief.

Characters

Masuji Ono

Masuji Ono is a famous painter who once feverishly supported the war effort. He thought there was strength and a strong identity in supporting the war and the nationalist cause, by advocating the rights and obligations of the strong. This support is seen through the lens of Masuji Ono's daughter's marriage negotiations: it seems a negotiation fell apart once a previous year, and now his younger daughter Noriko is twenty-six, and in danger of remaining unmarried. The daughters are afraid his past is an obstacle to potential suitors, and over the course of the novel, Masuji Ono sets about discovering his guilt and complicity. When he ultimately takes responsibility for his support of the war, he dkiscovers his daughters and others are quite willing to forget it.

Akira Sugimura

Sugimura is the previous owner of the house Masuji Ono lives in, with its beautiful gardens. Sugimora's family had contacted Masuji Ono and asked him to participate in an 'auction of prestige', to see who would be able to buy the house. Sugimura was a landscape architect who had designed the Kawabe Park, which was supposed to be a Japanese cultural center, but the project ran into financial difficulties.

Noriko

Noriko is Masuji Ono's younger daughter. After one marriage negotiation fell apart at the last minute, she succeeds in marrying Tao Saito, and by the end of the novel, she is pregnant. Noriko and her sister are both critical of Masuji Ono for meddling in their affairs—they treat him as a bother, and do not want to be troubled by the question of his guilt or regret about the war.

Setsuko

Setsuko is approaching her thirties, and Masuji Ono says that she is flowering, with a small child, Ichiro. She does not always agree with her father, but she is generally diplomatic about disagreeing with him. She and her sister both talk down to Masuji Ono, on account of his retirement: they say he is a bother and all he does is mope around all day.

Suichi

Suichi is Setsuko's husband, and while the reader does not meet him during the novel, his opinions are present throughout. Suichi is critical of Masuji Ono's generation for

sending young men to fight and die, while they themselves stayed home and now get back to work after the war. Suichi seems to feel people in Masuji Ono's generation should be so ashamed of themselves they would commit suicide. Apparently Suichi himself suffered a great deal in Manchuria during the war.

Ichiro

Ichiro is an unruly child who lives in the city with his mother Setsuko. He runs around Masuji Ono's house and flops on his back kicking his legs when he does not get his way, but his bad manners are generally well tolerated. Ichiro enjoys playing after the western fashion; he pretends he is the Lone Ranger.

The Miyake family

This is the family that pulled out of marriage negotiations with Masuji Ono's daughter Noriko. Masuji Ono understands there was a difference of prestige between the two families, but the daughters seem to believet the Miyake's declined because of some shameful thing in Masuji Ono's background.

Mrs. Kawakami

Mrs. Kawakami is the hostess of the Migi-Hidari, where Masuji Ono and his friends drank before the war. She hopes the old days can be rejuvenated, but ultimately sells out to a developer.

Sachiko

Sachiko was Masuji Ono's wife, who was killed during the war in 1945, in an attack that did not harm many other people.

Yasunari Nakahara (the Tortoise)

The Tortoise is a colleague of Masuji Ono's. His nickname comes from his slow and deliberate style of painting. In the end Masuji Ono and other painters are nicknamed the "engineers" for blasting out paintings efficiently. The Tortoise is the only painter Masuji Ono says could paint an honest self-portrait.

Shintaro

Shintaro is a friend of Masuji Ono's, and he looks up to Masuji Ono, as someone of high status. Masuji Ono once helped Shintaro's brother get a job, and Shintaro was

demonstrably grateful. Masuji Ono says Shintaro was not affected by the cynicism of the times after the war.

Matsuda

Matsuda is a friend of Masuji Ono's. He was a member of the Okada-Shingen society, and he was the one who introduced Masuji Ono to the nationalism that would make him so guilty later in life. Toward the end of the novel, Masuji Ono visits Matsuda to ask him to be discreet about his past, if Mr. Saito's detectives come to ask about it, and the men recall their pasts affectionately, even though they regret their roles in the war.

Kuroda

Kuroda was the "most gifted" of Masuji Ono's pupils. (p. 74). Masuji Ono had artistic differences with him, and had him investigated by the police. The police arrested him and treated him roughly, which caused Kuroda to hold a grudge against Masuji Ono, who had visited his house, trying to set things straight.

Sasaki

Sasaki was one of the painters working under Moriyama. He began to introduce foreign elements into his paintings, and was expelled from Moriyama's studio. He was known as 'the Traitor' ever afterward.

Objects/Places

Midi-Higari

This is the nationalist drinking establishment in the pleasure district where Masuji Ono and his colleagues would gather and drink and discuss art and life and culture.

Mrs. Kawakami's

This is the only bar standing in the pleasure district where Masuji Ono and his fellow painters spent their time. Now (after the war) the bar is in a bombed out neighborhood, and Masuji Ono says he feels like he is in an outpost of civilization when he drinks there.

Bridge of Hesitation

This is a bridge leading into the pleasure district where Masuji Ono and his artist friends spent their time. It was on this bridge that men would hesitate, thinking about going back to their wives, before spending a night seeking pleasure and entertainment.

Arakawa District

This is the neighborhood outside the city where Masuji Ono visits for an escape from the devastation of the war. This is where the Migi-Hidari was situated, and Masuji Ono says he used to live in Furukawa, and the Migi-Hidari was close at hand, so he frequented the place.

Furukawa District

This was a shabby neighborhood when Masuji Ono says he lived there. Its shoddiness is an excuse for his having gone to the Arakawa district as often as he did.

Takeda Firm

This is the firm Masuji Ono worked for when he was training to be an artist. He would turn out paintings of geishas and scenes that evoked Japanese culture, in an attempt to export the proud culture stirring awake in Japan.

Kawabe Park

This is one of the most beautiful parks in the city, in Masuji Ono's opinion. It was designed by Sugimura, although it was not finished. It was meant to embody Japanese culture, but the cultural centers were never built, just the landscaping was accomplished before financial problems stopped the project.

'Complacency'

This is a painting that started Masuji Ono's political career. It portrays a scene Masuji Ono had seen with Matsuda: children crouching over some dead thing in the shanty town. In the painting, the children have assumed kendo poses, and the painting contains the slogan, "the young are ready to fight for their dignity.'

Themes

The Men Guilty for World War II are Still Walking Free

There is a keen sense of generational tension between Suichi and Kuroda and the younger generation—even Masuji Ono's daughters—and Masuji Ono and Matsuda and theirs. There is an expectation that the parties guilty of bringing Japan into World War II were guilty of betraying their younger compatriots, and sending them off to disaster and death. Mr. Miyake had told Masuji Ono the president of his company had committed suicide in order to apologize to the families his decisions affected. Late in the novel, Masuji Ono says he has not considered taking this step, and his daughter assures him he should not have. But the implication is there nonetheless, that the good men died in battle, and the instigators stayed alive, like cowards, in safety.

In fact, the book takes a surprising but subtle turn in the end, when Masuji Ono confesses his discomfort with his own actions, and his daughter tells him she is bewildered by his speech, and does not see any reason for him to make it. It seems the entire society wants to forget the war and embrace Western prosperity. The consciences of the men involved in the war are their own responsibility.

Manners as Against Ethics

When the Miyake family pulls back from marriage negotiations, Masuji Ono can only conclude it was a difference of status causing the withdrawal. It is only much later that he considers the possibility his discussion with Mr. Miyake about the President of Mr. Miyake's company committing suicide, that he thinks it might have to do with his conduct during the war.

Time and again, Masuji Ono understands the manners or lack of manners in the people around him as an indication of his own status. There is apparently a way people are supposed to speak and conduct themselves in the presence of superiors, and Masuji Ono is scrupulous in observing propriety. There are moments when it seems Masuji Ono is standing up for principle—as when he defends Tortoise—but it turns out he is only on the way to bigger ethical problems by joining a firm that is part of the new nationalist movement in Japan.

Masuji Ono's good manners keep him from seeing his status as questionable, because the people around him are still so deferential, it takes him a lot of deliberation to see the criticism in others' words, and in the suicides of other leaders of Japanese nationalism.

The Inheritance of Culture

Masuji Ono takes great pride—and shows great humility—in stating the words he remembers saying might not have been his own words, but the words of his teachers or

parents. He sees his son in Setsuko's son, and admires the transmission of culture from one generation to another. He shows an old man's concern for bringing the old days back, and for keeping the old ways alive.

Set opposite this are the new American democratic ways embodied by Ichiro, who acts out his part in imaginary Lone Ranger dramas, and Suichi and Matsuo, who embody the new democratic ways introduced by the Americans. This is a meritocratic culture, where everyone can speak their mind, and the old hierarchies are no longer as valuable as they were. The question of Masuji Ono's art in the midst of this tension is an open one. He had thought his art should embody—even predict—the greatness becoming visible in Japanese culture. He thought he was perfecting something, but the novel being set after the war, the failure of what he believed is a foregone conclusion.

Most disturbing to Masuji Ono is the fact his own family has chosen to forget his role in the war, to the extent they chide him for having harped on it at the miai with the Saito family. This deliberate forgetting is probably helpful for those who did not have the war on their consciences—and who want to get on with their lives and return to prosperity—but for someone like Masuji Ono, who is conscientious and sensitive, the forgetting is hard to project.

Decadence as Against Responsibility

The floating world is the world of forgetting and pleasure, and it only exists at night, although the job of the artist, as Masuji Ono sees it, is to recreate that world by capturing it in paint. For the years Masuji Ono lived in the floating world, spending time with courtesans in the bars and painting the ephemeral pleasures in the traditional styles. But as he swung against the decadence of this lifestyle, and embraced the notion of the nationalist spirit in Japan—his art began to embody political themes, and he worked to bring about something he thought would be great, a flowering of something deeper than mere night-time pleasure.

In the end, however, it is Masuji Ono's family members and community who want to live in the floating world—not the pleasure district floating world, but the floating world of forgetfulness and consumer comforts and prosperity. Masuji Ono works hard and dutifully to articulate his feelings about his own role in the war effort, but when he admits his guilt, and his wrongness, his confession is dismissed as curious and out of place. The others do not want to hear it, but he finds some satisfaction in living in the daylight world of actions and responsibilities. By even midway through the novel, he is no longer trying to escape anything.

Style

Point of View

An Artist of the Floating World is told from the perspective of Masuji Ono, an older man and father of two surviving daughters, and one son who died during the war. He is a master painter and craftsman, but he had used his art for political purposes during the war, and he is surrounded by people who are evaluating the question of whether he ought to take responsibility in some way for having led the nation into the disastrous war. This is not overt, not by any means—Masuji Ono talks primarily about his grandson Ichiro, and the marriage arrangements for his second daughter, Noriko. He is punctilious in his observation of customs and propriety in his dealings with people, and he is always surprised when other people do not behave well. Nevertheless, he is able to admit his mistakes and forgive himself for his ignorance and zeal, even if the people around him do not really understand his sentiments fully.

Setting

An Artist of the Floating World is set in Japan in 1948, 1949, and 1950, when Masuji Ono is concerned with negotiating his second daughter's marriage. There are numerous flashbacks, however, to Masuji Ono's earlier career as an artist, when he was studying under Takeda, and then left Takeda's studio to work with Moriyama. Masuji Ono visits the Arakawa district, which had been the pleasure district before the war. In the present, it is a bombed-out neighborhood, which is being rebuilt on industrial standards. Mrs. Kawakami's bar is exists in the present and the past, and it is a landmark by which the vitality, destruction, and rebuilding of the neighborhood is measured against her establishment.

A good deal of the book takes place in Masuji Ono's house, and is concerned with minor details and conversations that ultimately reveal the latent regrets and tensions about Masuji Ono's work during the war, and its effects in the after-war period. The gardens, in particular, of each house are important in terms of measuring the tastefulness and art of the owner, and the houses are almost universally in bad shape after the war and the bombings.

Language and Meaning

An Artist of the Floating World is narrated in straightforward language that is nonetheless influenced by Japanese culture. The dialogue between characters is exceedingly formal and deferential, even the conversations between father and daughter. The level of self-abasement and humility is unusual to a western ear, and it demonstrates the respect the Japanese for status and for authority. There is an almost ritualistic aspect to much of this conversation, as people with authority will always receive compliments from inferiors, who will not recognize any praise in turn.

Masuji Ono says several times he cannot be sure that the words he recalls were the exact words he used at the time, but they might have been words he acquired from his masters along the way, and he seems to take pride in repeating the kinds of language his teachers had used. Nevertheless, his language is meticulous and conscientious, as he tries to figure out people's motives, and his own. Ishiguro uses a roundabout method for this—Masuji Ono only rarely states things directly—but the reader gets to see the blind spots in Masuji Ono's vision and surgery, and this is where a good deal of the emotional power of the book resides, in these gaps which shift and close as the book goes on.

Structure

An Artist of the Floating World takes place in the present moment set in 1948-1950, with gaps of six months to a year between chapters. During this time, Masuji Ono negotiates with the Saito family to marry his daughter to Taro Saito, and he visits his old colleagues, Mrs. Kawakami, Kuroda, and Matsuda.

Much of the book takes place in flashbacks, and indeed, Masuji Ono swings back and forth fairly fluidly between past and present, as his memories take him back to things he has to explain, or things that help him explain things in the present. In the past, the timeline emerging over the course of his flashbacks begins with his working for Takeda as a young man, and then leaving Takeda's employ to work under Moriyama's instruction. He grows discontented with what he perceives as the decadence of life in Moriyama's circles, and discovers the influence of Matsuda and the Okada-Shingen society, which is trying to promote a vision of a new nationalism for Japan, which will return Japan to the Japanese and banish the bureaucrats and politicians and investors who have made Japan a poor country. In the present moment, Masuji Ono comes to terms with this past, but the past is presented in only rough sequence, depending on what triggers Masuji Ono to recall it.

Quotes

I was very lax in considering the matter of status, it simply not being my instinct to concern myself with such things.

They all listened solemnly as I recounted my view on how influence status can creep up on someone who works busily, not pursuing these ends in themselves, but for the satisfaction of performing his tasks to the best of his ability.

If it wasn't to do with me, then I wonder what it could have been to make them pull out like that. It seemed to me that there was something unnaturally deliberate in the way my daughter uttered these words.

The world seems to have gone mad. Every day there seems to be a report of someone else killing himself in apology. Tell me, Mr. Miyake, don't you find it all a great waste? After all, if your country is at war, you do all you can in support, there's no shame in that. What need is there to apologize by death?

These are the men who led the country astray, sir. Surely it's only right that they should acknowledge responsibility. It's a cowardice that these men refuse to admit to their mistakes. And when those mistakes were made on behalf of the whole country, why then it must be the greatest cowardice of all.

Brave young men die for stupid causes and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility.

There are now those who would condemn the likes of you and me for the very things we were once proud to have achieved. And I suppose this is why you're worried, Masuji Ono. You think perhaps I will praise you for things perhaps best forgotten.

Democracy is a fine thing, but it doesn't mean citizens have a right to run riot whenever they disagree with something. In this respect, we Japanese have been shown to be like children. We've yet to learn how to handle the responsibility of democracy.

There are some who believe my career to have been a negative influence. An influence now best erased and forgotten. I am not unaware of this viewpoint. Mr. Kuroda, I would think, is one who would hold it…I am now quite prepared to accept the validity of such an opinion…All I can say is that at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good fro my fellow countrymen. But as you see, I am not now afraid to admit I was mistaken.

It is by no means desirable that one be always instructing and pronouncing to one's pupils; there are situations when it is preferable to remain silent so as to allow them the chance to debate and ponder.

We lived throughout those years almost entirely in accordance with his values and lifestyle, and this entailed spending much time exploring the city's 'floating world'—the

nighttime world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the backdrop for all our paintings.

The likes of the Tortoise—the likes of Shintaro—they may plod on, competent and inoffensive, but their kind…do not know what it is to risk everything in the endeavor to rise above the mediocre.

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Make a timeline of the events described in the book. The chapters are organized chronologically—what role does chronologically have to play in the development of the novel? How else does time progress (or seem to stand still)? How does Ishiguro use time in An Artist of the Floating World?

Topic 2

What is the difference between Masuji Ono's generation and his children's generation? What similarities unite them in spite of their differences? What issues divide them? What traditions unite them? How does the difference between generations change over the course of the novel?

Topic 3

Compare and contrast Japanese and American culture in An Artist of the Floating World. What is associated with either culture? Who is aligned with either culture? How does the difference between the two cultures define the moral landscape for the novel? How does Masuji Ono make a place for himself in this landscape?

Topic 4

What is the nature of Japanese culture, as Kazuo Ishiguro defines it in An Artist of the Floating World? What values, what habits, what customs does Ishiguro treat as essentially Japanese? Is there a difference between Ishiguro's and Masuji Ono's idea of what constitutes Japanese culture? Where do you see this in the text?

Topic 5

Is Masuji Ono someone who should consider committing suicide to atone for his actions before and during the war? What reasons argue for this? What reasons argue against it? How does Masuji Ono, and how do his daughters and son-in-law answer this question?