Confessions of a Mask Study Guide

Confessions of a Mask by Yukio Mishima

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Contents

Plot Summary

Confessions of a Mask tells the story of a Japanese boy growing up in the World War II era. The unnamed protagonist struggles with his homosexuality and grows up isolated and consumed with fantasies of death and sadism. He attempts to create the illusion of normalcy by pursuing a relationship with the sister of the young man he's attracted to. Ultimately, the protagonist ends this relationship, realizing that he cannot have romantic feelings for a woman, but he remains unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

As the novel begins, the protagonist is born to an extended suburban family just before the Second World War. His ill health compels his grandmother to provide a sheltered childhood. He spends most of his time alone, reveling in his childhood fantasies of knights and dragons. An unusual child, the boy is fascinated with death, dying, and people who live "tragic lives". He is already showing signs of budding homosexuality. Nevertheless, he feels the pressure to conform, to behave in the prescribed manner appropriate to his sex and gender. When he witnesses a parade trample his family's garden, he finds himself, for the first time, glorying in destruction for its own sake.

With puberty, the boy's urges take on a sexual component. He now gratifies himself with fantasizes about death, dying, and the male form. Upon seeing Reni's painting of the half-naked and dying "Saint Sebastian", the boy experiences a sexual awakening, masturbating for the first time. At his quasi-military school, where boys nevertheless behave like boys, the young protagonist has his first crush on a schoolyard bad-boy named Omi. While the boy succeeds in befriending Omi, the protagonist ultimately decides that he's too jealous of the older boy's strength and virility to allow himself to love Omi. Now hyper aware of his own inadequacies, the boy resolves to become a man.

Driven to be accepted, the boy pretends to be "normal" by emulating the behavior of other children. Meanwhile, the Second World War begins, and so the boy adopts the wave of cynicism sweeping across Japan. His sexual appetites entirely suppressed, the boy looks to fantasy and masturbation for relief.

The boy, now a man, graduates from school and goes on to college, where, despite the constant threat of Allied bombs, he befriends another young man named Kusano. The young man, desperate to convince himself that he is attracted to women, decides that he has a crush on Kusano's younger sister, Sonoko. Meanwhile, the young man's university sends him to work at a factory that builds fighter planes, a very likely target for Allied bombs. Soon after, the young man is drafted, but thanks to a nasty cold and a few creative lies, he is deemed unfit for service. Kusano, however, is not so lucky. During a visit to Kusano's company, the young man kindles a relationship with Sonoko. The young man is pleased as the relationship escalates over the next few days, but he is also disturbed by a mysterious sense of guilt.

The relationship with Sonoko progresses to the point where she expects marriage. The young man, realizing at last that he can't love a woman romantically, breaks it off.

Throwing himself into his studies, the young man's thoughts eventually return to Sonoko. Two years later, he convinces Sonoko to meet with him on a regular basis, just as friends. While this allows him to achieve a certain peace, it soon becomes apparent that he and Sonoko cannot satisfy each other's needs.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Confessions of a Mask tells the story of a Japanese boy growing up in the World War II era. The unnamed protagonist struggles with his homosexuality and grows up isolated, consumed with fantasies of death and sadism. He attempts to create the illusion of normalcy by pursuing a relationship with the sister of the young man he's attracted to. Ultimately, the protagonist ends this relationship, realizing that he cannot have romantic feelings for a woman, but he remains unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

As the novel begins, the narrator is born to a fallen family. His once esteemed grandfather has resigned his post as colonel governor after taking responsibility for the misdeeds of a subordinate. The estate is lost, and so the extended family moves to a rented house in a poorer section of Tokyo. On January 4, 1925, the protagonist and narrator of the story is born. His grandmother, despite being perpetually ill, usurps parental control. The baby's crib is placed beside the grandmother's sickbed. Just before his fourth birthday, the child falls ill and nearly dies. This illness, autointoxication, will prove chronic, plaguing him every month for the rest of his life.

As a very young boy, the narrator claims that he can remember the bath just following his own birth. The adults dismiss the idea, trying to convince the child of the impossibility. When the boy proves stubborn, the grownups, at least in the mind of the narrator, begin to suspect trickery from the youth, wondering if perhaps he is trying to manipulate them into talking about sex. The narrator admits that his memory of sunlight reflecting off the side of the tub is at odds with the fact of his night-time birth, but he nevertheless believes the memory genuine.

The narrator cites his earliest unquestionable memory as being forcibly pulled from the path of an approaching night-soil man. The image of the man resonates with the boy of four, inciting within him some malevolent, elemental desire. The child is drawn to the cut of the man's blue jeans and to what the narrator describes as the "tragic" nature of his occupation. The child transfers this feeling of "tragic lives" to include any menial job performed in the presence of strong odors. The boy feels excluded from such lives, which serves to make them seem all the more alluring.

The four-year-old boy is obsessed with a picture of a mounted knight. He stares at it longingly and with considerable feelings of guilt. The boy imagines that the beautiful, resolute knight will be killed in the very next instant. He is fascinated by ideas of death and dying. The boy's sick nurse, seeing the picture, explains to the boy that the knight is not a man, but rather the female hero Joan of Arc. Hearing this, the boy is repelled and, feeling betrayed, never looks at the picture again.

Yet again, the young boy experiences a sensory-linked memory. Soldiers march past his front gate, smelling of sweat. The odor arouses the boy, but not (as of yet) in a sexual

way. Rather, he is drawn to the tragic life of a soldier, fantasizing about the distant countries they will visit and the ways in which they will die.

The narrator muses about his unyielding, deterministic view of life, seeing all his trials, then and now, as inevitable. He thinks back to his childhood, about the way the world seemed so simple, so all-inclusive. The narrator now understands that social forces have shaped his life. His railing against these forces, he now realizes, has served to tinge his every fantasy with despair.

The narrator relates a long ago dream of adults returning home from a shining city. The adults, their faces concealed behind pigments of city life, communicate with a system of secret signs. The narrative shifts abruptly to a childhood memory of seeing a magic show. The young boy is struck by the grace, poise, and beauty of female magician Tenkatsu. Later, the boy secretly borrows his mother's clothes to dress up as Tenkatsu, to become her. The boy is so overcome by the transformation that he forgets himself, running through the house shouting his joy. The family is ashamed at the sight. The boy cries. When next the boy dresses up as a woman, he does so in secrecy.

The boy loves stories of fantasy, but relates only with the prince, never with the princess. He harbors a special love for any youth who is killed. The heroic prince of one Hungarian fairy tale, however, is particularly frustrating to the boy. Though the prince dies again and again, a magic diamond always revives him unscathed. The boy rejects the prince's habitual resurrection. Instead, he mentally edits the text such that the prince dies in the place of his dragon adversary.

Although the boy is fascinated by the idea of death, he is abnormally afraid of the eventuality of his own death. He suffers from a paranoid delusion that the maid, in retaliation for some misbehavior on his part, will poison him. His grandmother, meanwhile, fearful of the boy's frail health and unwilling to expose him to bad influences, will only allow him to play with a select group of neighborhood girls. Later, when the boy's brother and sister are born, they are allowed a more liberal lifestyle. The boy, however, isn't at all jealous, preferring instead the company of his willful fancies.

At seven, the boy visits his cousins, and he is expected to behave as a member of his sex. Away from the prying of his parents, his grandmother keeps the boy on a shorter leash. Unfortunately, this newfound freedom comes with the unspoken expectation that he behave as a boy. Understanding that being a boy means being a pest to girls, and understanding "warfare" to be a male-appropriate (and female-inappropriate) interest, he conscripts his female cousins into playing a clumsy game of war. While the entire performance is compulsory, the boy nevertheless takes great delight in dying on the field of battle.

The chapter concludes with what the narrator sees as a significant event of his childhood. A parade of firemen, celebrating the Summer Festival, moves past the boy's house. The procession, adorned in masks and carrying poles, hoists a black and gold shrine upon their shoulders. The boy is terrified even as he is entranced. Suddenly the parade changes direction, tromping right through the family's entry garden. The boy

narrowly evades being trampled. Instead, he escapes to the house's upper balcony, where he is horrified and exulted at the willful destruction occurring in the garden below.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The boy seems to have little in the way of male influence. His grandmother is his primary caretaker. All of his playmates are girls. The boy's father is hardly mentioned. His grandfather is often away. The boy's illness, meanwhile (coupled with a grandmother's over-protectiveness), serves to further isolate him from the potentially rowdy world of young boys. This gives the boy little context by which to understand himself or others, leaving him to devise a fantasy world untested by societal expectations.

The boy's memory of his first bath calls into question the narrator's reliability. Can the reader trust someone who claims fact contrary to evidence? Either the time of the boy's birth is in error, or else the memory itself is wrong; sunlight doesn't shine in the middle of the night. The boy's willingness to mentally edit the tale of the Hungarian knight establishes his penchant for artifice. His reaction to hearing the true sex of his mounted knight, meanwhile, shows his preference for fantasy over reality. It's worth remembering that the narrator's memories could be compromised by a child's vivid imagination.

Already an element of shame is growing in the narrative, much of it tied up with notions of sexual preference and gender identity. The boy calls his attraction to the night-soil man malevolent. Meanwhile, he sneaks long peeks at his picture of the mounted knight, fearful that someone will take notice of his attention. There's nothing objectionable about the picture, and yet the intensity of his emotion leaves him feeling in some way inappropriate. This is why he later adopts the role of "boy" around his cousins; because he feels inappropriate. Already the boy has donned the mask.

Smell plays an important role in the narrative, serving as metaphoric link between guilt and desire, desire and nature. The night-soil man, for example, smells of manure. On the surface, this is objectionable. The man stinks. He is, quite literally, dirty. The text, however, also explicitly links the smell to that of the earth, the smell of nature, of life. This suggests that there is something primal about the boy's attraction to the night-soil man, something which transcends the established conventions of society.

The fact of the boy's homosexuality is already apparent to the reader, if not yet to the boy himself. The boy is, as of yet, too young and too isolated to establish any sort of identity, let alone a sexual identity. At this point he is just discovering that most of the world doesn't correspond to what lays in his heart. His first encounter with this dissonance lay in learning the true sex of the mounted knight. The knowledge not only ruins the boy's fantasy, but also afflicts him with a sort of rejection. The relationship he thought he had was revealed to be based on nothing. The knight, as it were, is incapable of returning his affection.

Chapter 2, pages 34-61

Chapter 2, pages 34-61 Summary

The narrator describes his entrance into puberty at the age of twelve, characterizing his penis as a mysterious and confusing new toy. By listening to this "toy's" desire, the boy learns that his attraction to the male form is something more than aesthetic, but rather the first stirrings of a sexual orientation. Suddenly his childhood experiences and fantasies are seen in a new light.

The boy also discovers that his childhood preoccupation with death, too, has taken on a sexual component, as images of death and blood incite arousal. He tries to act upon these feelings by translating suitable male images found in magazines into scenes of bloody crayon gore. The boy then lives in fear that these objectionable drawings, though hidden, will be discovered. While he knows that the drawings should be destroyed, his shame proves unequal to his desire.

The family is divided in two, the boy's parents and grandparents moving out of his birth home and into two separate houses. The boy's father takes this opportunity to reclaim the twelve year old back into the household. The grandmother takes the separation poorly, forcing the boy to promise a weekly visit despite the distance that now separates them. The boy's father is transferred to Osaka, leaving the boy to live with his mother and two younger siblings.

Among the narrator's father's souvenirs, the boy finds a collection of art reproductions. Looking through them, he is struck by Reni's "Saint Sebastian". The sight of a naked man lashed to a tree, beautiful and doomed to die, already wounded by several arrows, proves overpowering for the boy. The narrator briefly intervenes to make a critical analysis of the painting, but admits that such observations would come later. Presently, the boy, without choice or understanding, is compelled to masturbate for the first time. When he again comes to his senses, he regards the resulting mess with a sense of misery. This begins his so called "bad habit" of masturbation.

The narrative takes an abrupt turn here to tell the story of St. Sebastian. A Captain of the Praetorian Guard of Rome, Sebastian was a secret convert to Christianity who used his position to console imprisoned Christians and convert fellow Romans. Once discovered, Sebastian was sentenced to death and executed by a barrage of arrows. A pious widow, however, found Sebastian still alive and somehow managed to nurse him back to health. Sebastian immediately resumed his defiance of the emperor and was finally beaten to death with clubs.

The narrator contemplates the truth behind the myth. He then introduces a short, unfinished paper that he would write many years after first seeing the painting. It is his hope, the narrator explains, that the reader will understand something of the fierce sensuality that was his experience of the piece.

The essay describes a tree sighted through a classroom window. It is a product of artless design, both natural and divine, not unlike music. The essay suggests that the tree is the very same tree from St. Sebastian's martyrdom. It then introduces the character of Sebastian using heroic language, as someone possessed with virtue and excellence. All who see Sebastian can't help but admire him and wonder as to his origins. His allure, the essay suggests, is inextricably tied to his fated death, something which is not be pitied and of which Sebastian was surely aware. The essay concludes with a suggestion that Sebastian was himself invested with divine power.

The boy now enjoys the newfound freedoms of a middle school student, such as wearing long trousers and being able to refer to peers with unadorned surnames. His parents use the boy's health as an excuse to keep him out of the dormitories, but in truth they are concerned that the other boys will prove a bad influence. Nevertheless, while at his quasi-military school the boy abandons the feminine dialect of home life in favor for the crude speech of boyhood.

One day, a schoolmate shares a rumor about another boy named Omi, a troublemaker who was briefly expelled for inappropriate behavior. Rumor has it that Omi has already had sex with several women, and that his penis is very large. The boy's friend suggests that the boy might want to get himself a good feel during the next game of Dirty. Dirty is a school-game whereby one boy surprises another with a grab to the crotch. If the grab is successful, the boy then announces to everyone in earshot that his victim is indeed well-endowed. The idea of grabbing Omi proves very appealing to the boy, even though he himself had long been afraid of the older boy.

Anxious to participate in a before-class snow fight, the boy arrives early to school. There he finds Omi stamping the letters of his name into the snow. Surprisingly, Omi seems glad to see the boy, letting slip for a moment his mask of adolescent indifference. The boy quickly reassesses his idea of the older boy, seeing him not as a hero, but as a lonely boy hiding behind a performance. The boy becomes suddenly timid, but manages to break the silence between them. Omi resumes his insolent act, seeming quietly grateful to the boy for ignoring the crack in his armor. The boy now realizes that he's fallen in love with Omi and fantasizes about seeing him naked.

Chapter 2, pages 34-61 Analysis

The narrator's "toy" metaphor presents sexuality as something external, an object of interest and amusement, but something nevertheless separate from the self. This toy is not an arm, hand, or foot. It is not part of the boy's "body" per se, nor is it entirely subject to the boy's will. Rather, this "toy" is characterized as a daemon, an outside force acting upon the boy, influencing him with promises of pleasure. This plays into the narrator's belief in the deterministic future, suggesting that the boy's fate will not be entirely of his own making.

Since the boy's violent drawings emulate the likeness of actual people, the works amount to a kind of symbolic murder. The boy's willingness to draw despite his feelings

of fear and guilt again speaks of a strong, undeniable compulsion. While the boy is desperate to understand and express the workings of his heart, he also knows that everything he feels is objectionable. Since he fears rejection, this dark yearning only serves to further isolate him from those who might give him love and understanding.

St. Sebastian represents the boy's final perfection of the Hungarian knight. Whereas the knight returns from the dead again and again, Sebastian returns only once, only to die again one final time for the sake of his principles. If deeds are measured by the sacrifices made to achieve them, then the knight makes for a poor hero. He sacrifices nothing. Sebastian, however, though touched by God, is mortal, and thus can surrender his most valuable gift—his very life. It is this appreciation for mortality which lies at the very heart of the boy's obsession with death.

The boy's perception of Omi begins in much the same way as his experiences of either St. Sebastian or the mounted knight. Omi is a romantic, potentially tragic figure whom the boy admires from afar. At best, the boy's regard for Omi begins as one of idolization. Once the mask slips, however, the boy is made aware of the performance of Omi's identity. Further, the boy realizes that he must facilitate Omi's performance by providing a performance of his own. He therefore plays the naïve underclassman to Omi's performance of the cynical bad boy. The fact that both boys obliquely recognize and appreciate the artifice of their respective roles suggests a blossoming intimacy between them.

Chapter 2, pages 61-100

Chapter 2, pages 61-100 Summary

The narrator considers the impressions and associations that define his memory of Omi. He can't imagine that he was the only one who so appreciated the obvious strength and beauty of Omi. The narrator ponders Omi's secret air of superiority, attributing it to a continual frustration of will. The boy imagines that Omi is driven to some purpose, unaware of the vast conspiracy aligned against him. The boy regards Omi as possessed of an unconscious perfection, and fears that he will betray that perfection by behaving in a way contrary to his expectations.

The narrator admits that he has so idealized the memory of Omi that he can no longer attribute to him a single flaw. Rather, Omi has become the narrator's standard of male perfection. For this reason, he is only attracted to large, rough, muscular men who are entirely devoid of intellectualism. The narrator laments that he is incapable of matching the degree of ignorance that he seeks in other men. What's more, the narrator is put off by any man intellectually advanced enough to understand his desires. This leaves the narrator appreciating rough men from afar, lest they ruin their perfection in his eyes.

The narrator recalls a "ceremonial day" from his youth, a day when the whole school must dress in naval-inspired, white-gloved uniforms. Omi and a gang of upperclassmen chase the freshmen away from a popular playground toy, a swinging log. Having usurped the log, Omi begins an impromptu game of king-of-the-hill. The boy watches from a distance at as Omi skillfully defeats all comers.

In a moment of near madness, the boy volunteers to challenge Omi. The two boys struggle atop the log until finally, on the verge of falling, the boy reaches out and grasps Omi's white-gloved hand. The two exchange a seemingly long, meaningful glance. The boy imagines that Omi must surely read in his eyes the truth of his secret love. The two boys then fall off the log together. Omi dusts the boy off and leads him away to class. The boy, though embarrassed at having Omi's arm around his shoulder, is enraptured. The narrator questions whether the feeling then was love, instead suggesting that it might be a sort of innocent animal lust.

The boy, who is often ill and presently suffering from a cold, enters the gym with a nurse's excuse. At the coach's instruction, Omi demonstrates to the assembled students how to use the horizontal bar. Everyone is impressed by his physical prowess as well as the shock of hair growing beneath each of his armpits. The boy, however, even though he is aroused by the sculpted form of the half-naked athlete, finds himself regarding Omi as something of a abomination. Omi's perfection seems to him an affront to all those who need fear illness. Overcome with jealousy, the boy decides that he no longer loves Omi.

The boy resolves to be strong. To this end, he takes to scowling at people, teaching himself to look others in the eye. He swears off love, but nevertheless continues to indulge his "bad habit". The narrator explains that, as a boy, his conscious understanding of romantic love didn't include the sort of feelings that he held for Omi. Rather, his boyish understanding of the concept was limited to thoughts of man, woman, and marriage. It isn't until later, the narrator explains, that he came to understand love as something relevant to his own context.

The boy dreads the idea of growing up, driving him further into his fantasies and causing him to indulge his "bad habit" more frequently. Even so, the boy yearns to resemble the mature virility of Omi, rather than the sickly, pale child that he is. The boy considers that love might be, by its very nature, a desire to become the object of one's affection. In this light, the boy realizes that his jealous too is merely another facet to his love for Omi.

The much anticipated summer vacation arrives, and the boy finds himself unexpectedly bored. His health has always denied him long exposure to the sun, so the boy has never learned to swim; this despite having a romantic attraction to the ocean. As fate would have it, he spends the summer at the beach with his mother, brother and sister.

Looking out across the ocean, the boy is filled with the same feeling of solitude that he once imagined seeing in Omi. Noting that his own armpits have sprouted hair, the boy, finding at last a point of tangency with Omi, is overcome by sexual desire, indulging his "bad habit" there beneath the open sky. Afterward, he is washed clean by a sudden wave, his sin and his seed carried away by the living ocean.

School begins again. A notice announces that Omi has been expelled, but neither the notice nor the teachers will say why. The kids all recount Omi's many sins, the boy alone having nothing bad to say of the fallen tyrant. The boy sees Omi's "evil" as being part of some greater service to a forbidden God. Like St. Sebastian, Omi has, in the boy's mind, been martyred with divine purpose.

The boy falls ill with anemia caused by his chronic autointoxication. The boy rationalizes this anemia as the source of his bloodlust. He then launches into a series of sadistic fantasies involving gladiatorial combat in a Grecian murder theater, finally segueing to a horrific scene in which he imagines killing a classmate and serving him as the main course to a hooded dinner party.

The boy's urges become increasingly difficult to control; his attraction to a teacher causes him to indulge his "bad habit" during class. After class, the boy joins up with a friend whom he has a crush on. The friend asks the boy if he's gone to pay his respects to Katakura, a classmate who recently died of tuberculosis. The boy responds in the affirmative and adds that the Katakura's mother, a young widow, asked him to tell the friend that, since she was now completely alone, she could use some company. The friend responds with embarrassment, which in turn reminds the boy, frustratingly, of their dissimilar sexual preferences. The boy, in a sudden epiphany, realizes that he is

disgusted with himself. He decides then and there that he must mature, must become whatever he is destined to become.

Chapter 2, pages 61-100 Analysis

While the boy still objectifies the focus of his affection, he now does so consciously. He doesn't delude himself into thinking that Omi is truly perfect. The boy instead chooses to indulge the idea of a perfect Omi. If Omi were to suddenly prove himself a sophisticated thinker, a quality the boy does not find attractive, the willful illusion would then be ruined. Unfortunately this attitude makes it impossible for the boy to ever have meaningful romantic relations, as his fear of disappointment keeps him from making close attachments to anyone he finds attractive.

The encounter on the log represents a traditionally male form of intimacy: brotherhood through conflict. This reminds the reader that, while the object of affection is male, the intimacy here is not that of a woman for a man. The encounter intimates that so called "male bonding" might also serve the purpose of homoerotic relations between males.

While Omi may be stronger, faster and healthier than the boy, the trial of the log brings the two together as equals. The mad impulse that drives the boy to face Omi is the very stuff of heroism. It speaks of a self-denying passion, not unlike one of the boy's fantasy knights who takes the field with doom foretold. What the boy lacks in strength he compensates for with raw guts. In this way, the boy earns Omi's respect.

The boy's jealousy comes from poor esteem. He doesn't value himself, nor does he value others who are similar to himself. Intelligent, bookish types turn him off. Rather, the boy values only those qualities he does not possess, qualities he feels that he cannot possess: strength, dexterity, health. Omi is, in this sense, a symbol of the boy's shortcomings. The boy's rejection of Omi at this point demonstrates a maturing self-awareness as he begins to take an interest not only in what others have to offer him, but also in what he has to offer others.

The boy's inability to legitimize his own love for Omi shows the extent to which he has internalized society's assumptions regarding love and gender roles. He feels alienated from his own emotions, aware on some level that he differs from everyone else, but unable to truly grasp the significance of that difference. This leaves the boy filled with guilt and self-loathing at his inability to simply be normal.

The boy grows emotionally through his experience of others, chiefly Omi. Omi has, in the boy's mind, become a beacon for his journey into adolescence. In seeking to become like Omi, the boy finds himself embracing his own maturity. He transforms his appreciation for the older boy into an appreciation for his own physical self. Omi's armpit becomes his own armpit. In attempting to channel Omi's sadness, meanwhile, the boy cultivates the social skill of empathy. With Omi gone at the start of the new term, the boy now has the opportunity to define himself more on his own terms.

The boy's preoccupation with death flares up after his diagnosis of anemia. This suggests that the boy's sadistic impulses are linked to his own feelings of inadequacy. The fantasies this time are more elaborate and feature the boy himself as both murderer and cannibal. It's no coincidence that his fantasy self chooses an athlete as his victim. The sickly boy yearns for a narrative where he is strong, where he is the victor. Devouring the athlete is the ultimate conquest, as it represents an assimilation of the victim's strength.

Chapter 3, pages 101-126

Chapter 3, pages 101-126 Summary

The boy is convinced that life is nothing more than play, and that, since he is likely to die young, he can get by without ever showing his true face. The narrator reveals that the boy has cheated his way through life, learning to provide stolen answers to questions he doesn't understand. This quickly puts the cheater out of his depth, as all future life lessons are based on the lessons never learned.

The boy does his best to emulate heterosexuality when in the presence of his classmates, but comes off as wanton and crude. The narrator suggests that the boy's advanced self-awareness has less to do with maturity and more to do with necessity. Most boys, argues the narrator, being typical for their sex and age, don't need to carefully articulate their identities. Seeing that his crude comments have excited his classmates, the boy is awash with a sense of superiority.

To dispel the idea that the narrator is offering a revisionist version of his former self, he shares a passage written by himself at age fifteen. Within, the boy he was describes a practice of self-deceit by which he fools everyone, even himself, into thinking that he is happy. The narrator observes that it is a common failing of childhood to think that making a hero of a demon will satisfy the demon.

The boy knows little about sex, save for what he's gleaned from his peers and their pornography. Being bashful, he turns to fictional characters in an attempt to understand how a boy his age should think and behave. The boy feels that his peers are likely no different from himself, despite his same-sex preference. He is, however, painfully aware that he doesn't react to the same stimuli as the other boys. The boy, therefore, learns to mimic his friends' responses by observing their behavior.

The boy considers that his lack of interest in women might be due to laziness. He searches his memory for significant encounters with women, but finds only two. The boy recalls admiring a second cousin, Sumiko, whose overbite he found appealing. She once laid her head in his lap, and while the boy was honored by the gesture, he didn't find it all sexually enticing. Another girl, a regular on his school bus, had an air of disinterest that the boy found fascinating, so fascinating that he wondered if maybe this was love he was feeling. It was not the girl, however, but the young, male bus driver which aroused the boy's sexual passions. The narrator admits that, at fifteen, he had yet to discover the relationship between sex and love. They were still, in his mind, two separate concepts.

War breaks out, and with it a wave of stoicism sweeps the country. The boy's school, already military-oriented, insists upon absurdly frequent drills. The students, now convinced that their lives will soon be cut short, take up drinking and smoking. The boy follows suit, if only in pretense. Excited by the idea of the war, he thinks of the man he

will become and the fame he will surely win. Rather than volunteering as special cadet, he decides to wait for conscription into the general military.

Now the boy is well on his way to becoming a man, and he discovers that his sexual tastes are expanding. In addition to the usual young toughs, he is now also attracted to graceful boys younger than himself. In particular, the boy has a fondness for a sixteen-year-old named Yakumo, whose half-naked form he appreciates every fourth week as he leads morning calisthenics. During swimming lessons, the boy has a chance to speak to Yakumo but is too ashamed of his own sickly frame to muster the courage.

Chapter 3, pages 101-126 Analysis

The boy's adolescence is quite atypical. Whereas most teenagers use this time for exploration and self-discovery, he is chiefly concerned with giving an impression of normalcy. This is the mask alluded to in the title. While the boy does have a strong sense of self and of his own inner workings, he has yet to assert his individuality in a social context. Since there appears to be no societal niche able to accommodate him, he must painfully contort his soul for the sake of acceptance.

The boy's delusions are fueled by the internalization of social norms. He knows that boys are attracted to girls, and so it is he, not society, that is wrong. He has, without realizing it, agreed to a set of definitions which effectively annihilates his identity as a homosexual. The persistence of his unorthodox desires, therefore, put him forever at odds with what he "knows" to be normal. This begets guilt, which in turn begets shame. For fear of discovery, he must wear a mask of societal artifice.

Without a means of self-exploration, the boy's development is stunted. He doesn't see a connection between sex and love because he's never truly experienced either. His understanding of both terms is based on the societal norms of a largely heterosexual culture. Meanwhile, his adolescent hormones rage within, pushing him to contemplate acts considered deviant to the public.

The boy's culture is anything but liberal. The reader is often reminded that Japan is at war. The school itself is a boot camp in miniature, the boys sporting uniforms and shaved heads. Even the school's motto "Be Simple and Manly" evokes ideas which seem, on the surface at least, to be contrary to homosexuality. This is a world of obliged conformity. With this in mind, it's easy to understand why the boy would choose to hide his true self behind a mask.

Like many teenagers, the boy is ashamed of his body. His poor health has left him skinny and pale. He in no way resembles his own standards of beauty, and so the boy thinks himself unworthy of anyone whom he might find attractive. So self-conscious is the boy that he can't even bring himself to talk to Yakumo. When one considers how few gays there are, let alone ones which are openly gay, the boy's shyness takes on a tragic air. The odds do indeed seem against him ever finding love.

Chapter 3, pages 126-153

Chapter 3, pages 126-153 Summary

In September of 1944, the boy, now a man, graduates from school and goes on to college. He doesn't mind that his father insists that he major in law as he expects to be called to war soon, where he will surely die. Though fearful of the constant air raid sirens as well as the potentiality of his own demise, the young man also looks forward to dying, seeing it as an escape from the constant burden of duty to which he has always felt unequal. In the meanwhile, he befriends another young man named Kusano.

Emulating the virility of boys such as Omi, the young man tries to convince himself that he is attracted to women. He performs the role of the typical lovesick male, but finds the exercise fatiguing and unfulfilling. His mind often wanders, against his will, to his more typical fantasies. He finally decides that he can love a woman without desiring her, rationalizing his calm attitude toward the topic as evidence of his advanced maturity. While visiting his friend Kusano, the young man is moved at hearing the clumsy, yet endearing, piano playing of Kusano's seventeen-year-old sister.

The university students are all sent to work in a factory that produces war-time airplanes. The young man, while too frail to perform anything more than a clerical job, is nevertheless deemed healthy enough for general recruitment. He can be drafted any day now. Working in the factory, the young man is struck by the macabre, almost mystical efficiency of a factory dedicated to ending human life. Air raid sirens are common, sending the factory workers scrambling through an emergency routine which concludes with everyone taking cover in a series of makeshift caves.

The young man is drafted, but just before he answers the summons he comes down with a nasty cold. Though miserable, the young man takes everything in stride. He reasons that this is how things are supposed to be; this is his destiny. The military doctors, hearing the wheezing in his chest and noting his medical history (which includes a few lies told on the young man's part) mistakenly conclude that he has contracted tuberculosis. He is deemed unfit for service and is sent home.

On the train bound for home, the young man imagines that he and his entire family are killed in an air raid. The idea, which he sees as a perverse marriage between death and mundanity, disgusts him. Instead he imagines that he'd rather die spontaneously, without warning, and due to his own stupidity. Considering this, he is puzzled by his elation at being relieved of military service. The young man finally, and with considerable difficulty, admits to himself that he never wanted to die after all. Indeed, his desire to go to war was fueled by the romantic, foolish notion that he alone could never die.

The university students are to be transferred to another factory. The scheduled lectures are postponed due to Allied raids, granting the students a month-long vacation at the

height of the war. The boy accepts an invitation from Kusano's family to visit his friend's regiment on March 10th, and so drops by Kusano's house to make arrangements. There he is introduced to Sonoko, Kusano's sister, the girl whose awkward piano playing he'd heard one year before.

On the morning of March 9, the young man waits for Kusano's family at the train station. Sonoko arrives with her two younger sisters in tow. The young man is struck by the girl's beauty, feeling purified by her presence. The narrator pauses here to insist that, despite all seeming contradictions elsewhere in the text, the feelings he has toward Sonoko are genuine. The fundamental difference between this emotion and false emotions of this past, he explains, is that now his elation is accompanied with remorse.

For the first time, the young man finds himself feeling bashful around a member of the opposite sex. He feels unworthy of her. He is also afflicted with a deep, unexplainable grief that he recognizes as no part of his usual masquerade. Boarding the train with Sonoko, he is tangibly aware of a moment's respite. He imagines that Sonoko feels the same. The young man and Sonoko sit opposite one another, separated from the rest of the party by the back of a time-worn seat.

Mr. Ohba, an acquaintance whom they chance upon while boarding the train, dominates the conversation. While he talks of war, of military manliness, and of the necessity of women needing the help of a man, the narrator characterizes his gossipy nature as "womanish". Sonoko is amused by Mr. Ohba, exchanging the occasional smile with the young man.

Sonoko's mother deposits Sonoko's two sisters near Sonoko and the young man, asking that they keep an eye on them. The young man passes a note to Sonoko, commenting on how careful her mother is being. Sonoko blushes. The two sisters are at first curious about the note, but quickly grow bored as Sonoko and the young man converse. The sisters try to return to their original seats, but Sonoko's mother insists that they return to sit with their older sister.

Later, at an inn, the young man shares a room with Mr. Ohba, who, now that he is away from the women, expresses his opposition to the war. Once Mr. Ohba is asleep, the young man obsesses over how falsely he has behaved toward Sonoko. He wonders how he'd feel if she had been a boy, or had he been normal. The young man suspects that his act has become so integral to his being that he is indeed what he pretends to be. Then he wonders if maybe this suspicion is just his way of rationalizing away the possibility of actually loving a woman. Just as he begins to drift off to sleep, the air raid alarm sounds.

Chapter 3, pages 126-153 Analysis

The young man enters adulthood still thinking like a child, leaving his life decisions in the hands of others. Not only does his father select his major, but, despite the inevitability of draft, the young man makes no effort to take charge of his future military

service. He wants to die, but only because of the near crushing weight of adult responsibility. Surrendering himself to fate is the young man's way of prolonging childhood. His desire to die is, in essence, a desire to return to a time without consequences.

The boy, now a man, still has no means of expressing his sexuality and can't bring himself to face the frustrating truth. The young man is playing a role which he doesn't fully understand, one defined by other people's perceptions of him. He can never be certain whether or not he will betray himself through his actions. The safest choice, therefore, is to surrender his will to others; to let they who define him also guide him.

The young man's boyhood concepts of death and heroism are confounded by the reality of war. In the real world of 1944 Japan, there is a disconnect between the killer and the killed. Entire families are arbitrarily wiped out in Allied bombing raids, unheroically and having never having seen their attacker. Meanwhile, factory workers contribute to the construction of death machines, but with no malice or bloodlust in their hearts. Death here is not the sexy, romantic fairy tale of boyhood reading. Rather, it is a cold and distant thing, utterly devoid of its expected passion.

Lying to the military doctor marks the young man's first significant life decision. Faced with the reality of war and of death, he finds an alternative to this bitter fate. In so doing, he becomes consciously aware of something that he has likely known, on some level, all along: He doesn't want to die. The process of acceptance is difficult for the young man, because the implications are staggering. Whereas before he was confident that he could maintain his masquerade for the remainder of his short life, now he must eventually face the consequences of his true self.

The young man's affection for Sonoko is understandable. To him, she represents normalcy, acceptance, the possibility of true love. His remorse comes with the realization that he can't truly return her affection. Undoubtedly, he admires her and does potentially harbor for her a platonic love, but he is starting to realize that sex and love are related, and that while his feelings for Sonoko are genuine, they are also incomparable to romantic love.

Much of the language here is couched in terms of apology. The young man is tangentially aware that he flirts with tragedy, and yet he is also sincerely confused in his emotions. At last he feels something which bears a resemblance to what he's supposed to feel, and yet there is also an unexpected level of complexity. When the narrator declares his affection for Sonoko, he explicitly worries about his credibility. This voice from the future suggests guilt over an unpleasant outcome. There is sense here that the narrator needs the reader to understand, and in understanding, to absolve.

Chapter 3, pages 153-183

Chapter 3, pages 153-183 Summary

The group rises at 6:00 in the morning to prepare for their visitation. Sonoko's little sisters tease her for having slept through the air raid alarm, jokingly accusing her of having drowned out the alarm with the sound of her snoring. While the young man delights in the domestic sound of the sisters' quarreling, it also reawakens the peculiar anguish that he associates somehow with Sonoko. His thoughts turn to the war, and specifically the air raids. The young man decides that he wouldn't care if his family were killed while he was away. He rationalizes such thoughts as typical considering the state of the world.

As the group walks to the visitation site, the young man offers to carry Sonoko's bag. The gesture is designed both to endear himself to Sonoko and to embarrass her, thus enhancing the degree of intimacy that they share. The ruse is successful. Sonoko remains at the young man's side, conversing with him pleasantly. The young man, meanwhile, begins having pangs of conscience.

The visitation begins. Finally shaking Kusano's hand, the young man is shocked at how calloused it has become. Kusano makes light of it, but the young man is frightened by his friend's weathered hands. Fearing that Kusano will see beyond his mask, the young man's mind immediately turns to Sonoko. He decides that she will serve as his armor against Kusano's scrutiny. One way or the other, the young man decides, he must love her.

Oblivious to the young man's fear and guilt, Kusano comments on the reddening of the sky near the location of the recent air raid. He reminds his grandmother that she and the rest of the family should evacuate, insisting that he won't get a good night's sleep until they do. The grandmother agrees.

The train ride home is depressing, with everyone missing the loved ones whom they've left behind. At the outskirts of Tokyo they encounter refugees from the previous night's air raid; both sides of the track are lined with the injured, dead, and dying. In spite of these horrors, the young man is elated. In these wrecked lives he sees evidence of man's most primal nature. As they are stripped bare of social niceties, these people fight for their very lives, for one another, and against one another.

While the young man is so overcome with emotion that he wants to shout, the narrator regrets that he then lacked the wisdom necessary to understand the greater significance of the event, particularly with regard to how it might apply to his own human truth. As a protective gesture, the young man puts his arm around Sonoko's waist. The narrator suggests that the nature of the gesture might have proven that love holds no meaning for him, but if it did, the lesson was soon forgotten. The young man returns home to find his family unharmed.

A few days later, the young man visits Sonoko's home to lend her a few books. The two regard each other shyly. While not in love, the young man feels comfortable around Sonoko, as if he can at last let his guard down. He suggests that their time on Earth might be short, that bombs might fall on the two of them right then and there. Sonoko loves the idea, but reveals that she soon will evacuate with the rest of her family. The young man is hurt by the news, now seeing the present as pointless and happiness itself as something fleeting.

The young man feels relieved of the obligation of having to love Sonoko, but some time later, as he emerges from a shelter following a raid warning, he again feels as though he might be in love with her. The renewed affection comes paired with the now-familiar feeling of grief. Against his better judgment, he visits Sonoko once more. Flushed with emotion, she gives the young man a heavy envelope, which she asks that he read later. Soon after, on the train bound for home, the young man reads the first love letter of his life, and is enchanted.

Arriving home, the young man is seized with a fit of self-loathing. He berates himself for not taking the initiative with Sonoko and about his general inexperience in love and in life. A persistent voice within nags him with questions. Is it love? Can he even love a woman? The voice reminds him that it is men, not women, whom the young man finds attractive. The voice describes, in gory detail, one of the young man's murderous fantasies, berating him afterward for ever pretending to speak on matters such as love. The voice flippantly suggests that he share his aberrant tastes with Sonoko. The young man drowns in confusion and self-doubt.

Spring has returned to Japan. The young man has resumed his studies at the university. To blend in with his undraftable schoolmates, he pretends to have a heart problem. Lectures are soon suspended yet again and the students are sent to work at a naval arsenal. The young man works part time in a library and the rest of the time he digs evacuation tunnels with a group of young Formosan laborers. The young man maintains a letter correspondence with Sonoko which grows bolder by the day. The distance between he and Sonoko gives the young man an illusion normalcy. He is free. He is happy. There is a rumor that the enemy might soon land upon the nearby beach and overrun the arsenal. The young man again finds himself looking forward to death.

Chapter 3, pages 153-183 Analysis

Kusano serves as a literary foil to the protagonist. While Kusano cannot sleep at night for fear that his family might be killed in an air raid, the young man is not only indifferent to the well-being of his family, but also indifferent to his own indifference. During the brief visitation, Kusano marginalizes his own suffering, laughing off his calloused hands. Instead his concern is focused on friends and family. The young man, meanwhile, is selfish, seeing things only as they impact him personally. When Sonoko announces that she is to evacuate with her family, for example, the young man is hurt rather than relieved.

During the visit, the young man's treatment of Sonoko borders on the sociopathic. Rather than relating to her in a true and meaningful way, he instead manipulates the girl, managing her behavior to his own benefit. His willingness to regard Sonoko as "armor" clearly shows that he doesn't have her best interests in mind. His first concerns lay in maintaining his disguise. Sonoko is, in this respect, the most convincing disguise of all. She is to be the girlfriend that legitimizes the young man's normalcy to the world.

While the young man's admiration of Sonoko is comparable to his worship of St. Sebastian or Omi, the character of that appreciation is fundamentally different. The young man does not desire the lovesick Sonoko. He admires her, perhaps even worships her, but she is not his preferred sex. Like the young man's other idols, however, Sonoko's excellence makes her fit for sacrifice. The difference is that Sonoko does not consciously choose her martyrdom, which in turn makes her less a "hero" and more a victim.

Deceit and deception come naturally to the young man. He has been hiding for so long that the lies come almost automatically. When he returns to school, the only one among them who isn't critically ill, he lies about having a heart condition. He is ashamed at having lied about his symptoms, ashamed at having dodged the draft. All of this is piled atop the shame of his sexuality. Every lie told, meanwhile, only serves to heighten his shame, and with it, his fear of being exposed, creating an endless cycle.

Denial is the young man's only defense against himself. He rationalizes everything he thinks and feels, allowing himself to believe that perhaps he does love Sonoko. The young man convinces himself that love and sex are unrelated, that his bloodthirsty fantasies are normal, and that his indifference toward his family is to be expected. He doesn't wish to think of himself as fearful, petty, or selfish, and so he explains it all away. The returning guilt, however, along with his need to rationalize it, indicates that the young man does indeed know right from wrong.

Beneath the twisted knots of self-deception, the young man realizes that he is incapable of returning Sonoko's love. There is a sense, even now, that he might find the courage to spare Sonoko her inevitable heartbreak. Conversely, if the young man continues to deceive her, if he uses Sonoko for his own ends, one can argue that his continued guilt indicates that he has full knowledge of his own wrongdoing.

The young man is happiest when he imagines that his actions are without consequence. He finds it easier to court and seduce Sonoko by letter precisely because she isn't there to hold him accountable for whatever he says. In Sonoko's absence, the words are no more real than one of the young man's fantasies. This too is why he again looks forward to death. A man without a future has no fear of tomorrow.

Chapter 3, pages 183-218

Chapter 3, pages 183-218 Summary

Home on leave, the young man finds himself bedridden with tonsillitis. He is visited by a young woman named Chieko, a distant relation who, despite being recently widowed, seems unusually cheerful. As the young man lies feverish in the bed, Chieko suddenly and unexpectedly kisses him on the mouth. He accepts her advances, appreciating at last his first kiss with a woman.

Even as the young man kisses Chieko, he finds himself thinking of Sonoko. The next day, speaking to Sonoko on the telephone, he cancels their scheduled rendezvous, insisting that he must immediately return to the arsenal. The young man has begun to think of Chieko's kisses as something "ugly", reasoning that it must be due to his love for Sonoko. The narrator reveals, however, that he was just using Sonoko as an excuse. In truth, the kisses seemed wrong because the young man derived no pleasure from the experience. Presented with further evidence of his homosexuality, the young man, without realizing it, feels cold toward Sonoko.

Returning to the arsenal, the train is stopped by an air raid siren. Groping in the darkness for his luggage, the young man is distressed to learn that Sonoko's photograph, along with all of his possessions, has been stolen. The superstitious young man is suddenly taken by the desire to see Sonoko. The train is evacuated and all the passengers take cover in specially prepared caves dug near the line. The sky over Tokyo is crimson, flashing with the light of distant explosions. People cheer as flaming aircraft falls from the sky, heedless of whether it is friend or foe.

Instead of continuing to the arsenal, at first light the young man returns home on foot, making his way past fires, debris, and still-smoldering wreckage. In his section of town only his family's neighborhood remains intact. He finds his family in good spirits as they celebrate their survival by eating bean jelly.

Later that day, the young man is teased by his sixteen-year-old sister. She knows that her brother is in love and wants to know when he'll marry. He is wracked with guilt at the thought of children and marriage. He had since willed himself to forget the possibility, rationalizing marriage as too fragile a thing in the midst of a war. In truth, he is secretly afraid of the idea. Again the desire to see Sonoko stirs within the young man, a feeling he characterizes as the urge to play with fire.

The young man receives several invitations to visit Sonoko and her family, but he doesn't want to stay with her family. He'd rather stay in a hotel, where he and Sonoko can be alone and where he will, he imagines, finally succumb to heterosexual desire and truly love Sonoko. Unfortunately, the war effort has tied up every hotel in the area. Having no alternative, the young man finally consents to stay with Sonoko's family. He is

determined that, this time, he will kiss Sonoko. The thought of doing so, however, makes him feel like a thief.

Though the protagonist imagines that Sonoko's family must think him unworthy of her, the young man does his best to make a good impression, making a point of socializing and helping out where he can. He and Sonoko engage in subtle flirtations all the while. The young man, intoxicated by the girl's obvious desire for him, feels as though happiness might be in reach. Even so, he finds the possibility strangely melancholy. The young man sees himself as poised on the abyss that is Sonoko.

Determined to get a kiss, the young man joins Sonoko on a bicycle ride. He plans out the entire process ahead of time, deciding in advance everything he'll say and do leading up to the kiss. The young man thinks of it as having nothing to do with love or desire, but merely as the proper playing of a role. When the moment comes, his lips upon hers, he feels nothing. Sonoko, meanwhile, is too embarrassed to notice the look of sadness in her boyfriend's eyes.

On the verge of panic, the young man compensates with an outward show of cheerfulness. Comparing this attitude with Sonoko's deep absent-mindedness, the family draws the obvious conclusion. The young man admires Sonoko's maidenly beauty, looking more radiant now than ever, even as he admits to himself that has no right to hold such a lovely spirit. Suddenly realizing that the family is busily pondering his and Sonoko's future, the young man is struck with terror.

Returning to the same spot near the golf course, the young man again kisses Sonoko. This time it seems to him like a kiss that a brother gives a sister. Sonoko wonders aloud when she'll see him again. The young man says it depends on whether or not the Americans make their landing near the arsenal. He imagines with a superstitious certainty that he will die as part of a sacrificial student army against the American invaders. Sonoko intimates that the young man should propose marriage when next they meet. He pretends not to understand at first, but then flippantly promises using "locked fingers", a tradition for sealing a promise made between children. The young man likens his fear of marriage to a child who is afraid of the dark.

Later that night, Sonoko begs the young man to stay one more day. Lying, he insists that the factory is too strict to allow a longer visit and that truancy might land him in military prison. This deceit fills him with the happiness of one who has narrowly escaped great danger, but the young man tells himself that it is the power to tantalize Sonoko that truly pleases him. The narrator admits, however, that self-deception was his last refuge. The young man contemplates that everything is over even as Sonoko and her family believes that everything is beginning.

Sonoko asks the young man if he will return without fail. He replies noncommittally, suggesting that he might die. At that, the young man is disgusted with himself. Intellectually, he wishes that he might have said something more encouraging, but his emotions pull him an opposite direction. Though his entire life he has aspired to be a manly, passionate person, he can't feign a passion which is so contrary to his true

emotions. Seeing how he must appear, which is so contrary to how he feels inside, the young man is overcome by self-loathing. Confidently, Sonoko assures him that not harm will come to him. The young man is impressed and maddened by her naiveté.

The young man boards the train, anxious to be away. Catching one last sight of Sonoko waving goodbye, he is again wracked with guilt and grief. The young man realizes, suddenly, that he's lost the will to live, and seriously contemplates suicide for the first time in his life. Later he dismisses the idea, reasoning that the war will afford him ample opportunities to die.

When the protagonist is once more at the arsenal, the letter correspondence with Sonoko resumes. Absurdly, the young man finds himself feeling jealous of her love for him. Nevertheless, as he reads her romantic notions, he at last realizes that his love for Sonoko obligates him to escape from her. The young man continues the correspondence with a neutral tone, neither building up Sonoko's hopes nor dashing them. When she mentions that she will visit Kusano, the young man agrees to join her.

The young man, in stark contrast to his last meeting with Sonoko's family, is calm and humorless. The family takes the attitude as sincerity of purpose. Kusano, politic as always, tells the young man that he will soon be receiving an important letter from him. A week later, at his family's house, he reads Kusano's letter. Kusano, on behalf of his sister and the rest of his family, wants to know the young man's intentions with regard to Sonoko. The young man is stunned to realize that, even in war, human matters still gravitate to things such as love and marriage. He tries to convince himself that he's quite clever. Having seduced Sonoko, he will now escape without consequence.

The young man needs a plausible explanation for quitting his relationship with Sonoko. He calls his mother in from the garden. He explains the letter and the situation to which it pertains, doing his best to couch it undesirable terms. When the young man's mother doesn't immediately protest the marriage, he confesses that he doesn't love Sonoko. She advises him to come clean and break it off, but, as a panicked afterthought, clumsily inquires as to whether or he's had sex with Sonoko. When the young man responds in the negative, his mother is relieved and embarrassed. The next morning, again anxious and unhappy, he mails his intentions to Kusano.

The Allied air raids begin targeting smaller cities and towns. Talk of surrender becomes common and accepted. The young man falls ill, deliriously muttering Sonoko's name in his sleep. When he wakes, he learns of the destruction of Hiroshima. The citizens respond to the tragedy with an exaggerated cheerfulness that the young man finds maddening. One day a cluster of Allied planes fly overhead, depositing leaflets on the cities below. Japan has surrendered. The news fills the young man with dread, as now he must face the reality of existing in a normal human society.

Chapter 3, pages 183-218 Analysis

The importance that the young man places on kissing stems from his desire to be normal. The encounter with Chieko therefore represents a critical moment in his development. Though he is driven to the kiss and determined to continue once it has begun, the experience leaves him cold. It was the young man's hope that something would trigger inside of him, that he would at last understand what it feels to be a normal, heterosexual man. His failure to achieve this normalcy sets the context for his later kiss with Sonoko.

The young man's panic at losing Sonoko's photo parallels his fear of losing Sonoko herself. While not capable of returning her love in kind, his fondness for Sonoko is genuine. Unfortunately, the young man's feelings for her are confused by what she represents. To the young man, Sonoko represents love, normalcy, and the everyday happiness which seems to come effortlessly to others. Every step that he takes away from Sonoko is a step away from hope. Without her, he feels, he will never know the peace of mind that others take for granted.

Sexual preference aside, the young man isn't prepared for marriage, let alone fatherhood. He's learned to live by rote, performing as a member of society without truly understanding the role. His relationships are based on lies and false assumptions. He has spent so much time behind a mask that the young man is a mystery even to himself. It is therefore apt that he describes his fear of marriage as like a child's fear of the dark, as he himself is a child, ignorant of the world and fearful of the unknown. When the young man promises to marry Sonoko with a "finger lock" it is indeed a child's promise.

Living a lie means living in paranoia. The young man's fear is almost habitual, keeping him always in the mental state of a cornered animal, which, in turn, serves to isolate him further. While he is drawn to Sonoko as a function of hope, he is not similarly drawn to Sonoko's family. The young man fears their scrutiny. Even Kusano, a loyal and patient friend, is a source of fear for the young man. Only when alone with Sonoko does he feel safe and relaxed. She represents his refuge in a world of fear and consequence.

To follow the play metaphor, the young man is comfortable only so long as he's on the script. When things progress as expected, all is well. As the young man soon discovers, however, life is prone to change and upheaval. People make expectations. People judge and interpret. Whatever he does with Sonoko affects Sonoko's family, and so Sonoko's family takes an interest in the young man. Situations arise which would carry the young man into unscripted territory. In such situations the young man's first instinct is to retreat.

The young man's greatest moment comes in finally admitting to himself that his love for Sonoko compels him to let her go. In accepting this fact, the young man demonstrates finally that he is capable of love by placing someone else's well-being ahead of his own. This also presents him as a tragic character, since it also means that he must abandon

the hope which has lately sustained him. This is apparent in the way his hands shake as he delivers the fateful letter that will end his and Sonoko's relationship.

Considering all that the young man must overcome, his breakup with Sonoko takes considerable courage. Still, his behavior is childish. The young man's first instinct is to enlist his mother for an excuse, much like a child feigning illness to get out of school. When he does break up with Sonoko, he doesn't do so in person, nor does he offer her the explanation she is owed. Rather, like a coward, he breaks up by proxy, using her brother and a handwritten letter. Everything he does is designed to minimize the impact of his consequence.

For most of the young man's life, Japan has been at war. This is the context in which he constructed his identity. His understanding of the world, such as it is, has always considered war as a universal truth of life. With the world changing, his camouflage, he fears, might fail to serve its function. Like a moth born in winter, the young man fears that white wings will stand out against the green of spring. In other words, he won't know how to behave in this new context.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

While the war is over, people still seem unwilling to embrace the future. The young man's sister dies, and the protagonist's reaction proves at last to himself that he is capable of genuine human emotion. Soon after, Sonoko is, much to the young man's relief, wed. He pretends to himself that he is pleased, trying to construe the whole thing as some sort of victory. The narrator, however, confesses arrogance at accepting credit for things which he has little control over, hinting that one day the young man will pay for his impertinence.

The young man passes a year in vague optimism, immersing himself in law studies. He moves invisibly through the world, taking notice of no one and nothing, feeling neither alive nor dead. With the war behind him, the young man's urge to die has vanished entirely. By chance, he happens one day upon a passage within a book translated from French which causes him some unease. It reads: "The measure of a woman's power is the degree of suffering with which she can punish her lover".

A college friend, with a similarly frail build, guesses that the young man is still a virgin. He confides, with a mixture of superiority and self-contempt, that he's been visiting brothels. The friend offers to take the young man along next time, to show him the ropes. The young man is non-committal but suggests that he might be interested. Inside, however, he is annoyed, wishing that he could experience the feelings he is often credited as having.

The young man tries fantasizing about women in an attempt to modify his sexual tastes. The effort proves exhausting and produces only marginal success. He calls his friend to arrange a brothel visit. The friend is delighted. The young man is hopeful, if for no other reason than to finally be rid of the title "virgin" at the age of twenty-two. The visit is planned for the day of his twenty-second birthday.

Exchanging quips with his friend, the young man presents an outward appearance of bravado. They take a streetcar to the red light district of a poor neighborhood. Everything is gloom and desperation. Seeing the prostitutes beneath the purple and red lights, the young man feels no desire. The friend selects two girls, taking the prettier one for himself when the young man expresses no preference. Alone with the girl, the young man discovers a type of agony comprised of numbness. Ten minutes later, there is no doubt of his incapacity. The young man's knees shake with shame.

The narrator has finally named his chronic illness, and the young man feels some relief. He and his friend never discuss the incident. Weeks later, the young man and his friend, along with another fellow named T, discuss Proust. T refers to Proust as a sodomite. Playing dumb, and fearful that they might suspect his true nature, the young man, his voice quivering, asks the meaning of the word sodomite. T gives the definition, surprised

at the young man's ignorance. The friend, meanwhile, either suspicious or embarrassed, won't look the young man in the face. After his guests depart, the young man sobs to himself, until finally he surrenders to the comfort of his brutal blood visions.

Seeking a diversion, the young man begins dropping in on a local party scene, where the people are friendly and approachable. They drink, dance, and play games until the early hours of the morning. One evening, during a game, the young man notices that a girl's skirt has ridden up past her thighs. Rather than look away, as modesty demands, he finds himself staring right at her as if she were an object. Once he realizes what he's doing, he is struck by the painful realization of his own inhumanity.

The protagonist throws himself into studying for the civil service exams, and he again succeeds in distracting himself from himself. Gradually, the sense of failure returns as his thoughts turn to his lack of potency. He finds himself driven to prove his potency but, considering his unusual desire, sees no context in which this would be possible. The dissonance builds into a gnawing fatigue that leaves him edgy, bedraggled, and spiritually empty.

One day the young man thinks he sees Sonoko on a crowded streetcar. He is mistaken, but the idea of seeing her fills him with a flood of emotion. Suddenly, he feels exactly as he did upon seeing her so long ago on March ninth, complete with the piercing sense of sorrow. The young man is excited, but also perplexed by the idea that he could still love Sonoko, or even that he could love a woman at all. The memory of Sonoko returns full force, plunging the young man into agony.

By happenstance, the young man encounters Sonoko one day while running an errand. Their meeting seems perfectly natural, even anticipated. The two make small talk for a moment, discussing which novels Sonoko has read. Sonoko bids the young man farewell, indicating her house just up the street. Before she leaves, he asks her if she ever visits her family. She replies in the affirmative, and says that she plans to visit them on Saturday. As she departs, it occurs to the young man that Sonoko has forgiven him. He finds her magnanimity vaguely insulting, but thinks a fresh insult from her might serve to alleviate the pain.

The following Saturday, the young man pays a visit to Kusano. Once again, he hears the sound of Sonoko playing the piano; this time, however, the playing is not at all clumsy, but full of grace and beauty. The young man reflects on how Kusano has never once mentioned his refusal of Sonoko. He wants to know that Sonoko has experienced some suffering corresponding to his own. Sonoko soon joins them, and the three happily gossip together. When Kusano's mother calls him away, Sonoko and the young man are left alone together just as they had been two years before.

Sonoko soon turns the conversation to the topic of her failed relationship with the protagonist. With some anger, she expresses her confusion at being suddenly dumped. Did he dislike her? The young man is momentarily gratified by evidence of her pain, but the pleasure soon sours when he realizes that his own heart is still not free of her. The young man suggests that the world is more complicated than Sonoko realizes and that

it's not always possible for two people to get married. He repeats the arguments that he included in his letter to Kusano. He was too young, still in school, and everything was too sudden. The young man also points out that while he was hesitating, Sonoko hurried off to marry someone else.

Sonoko claims no regrets. Her husband loves her, and she is happy. She admits, however, that sometimes she wonders what might have been, and then she gets very upset. During such times her husband is compassionate, treating her as gently as a child. Pouting, Sonoko complains that, in this other life, the life that might have been, she imagines that he hates her. The young man asks to meet with her again, privately. Sonoko is dubious, expressing concern for her marriage and reputation. He suggests that she's taking things too seriously, playing down the desperation in his own heart. Kusano returns, ending the conversation. The young man puzzles over the persistence of his platonic affection for Sonoko, seeing it as absurd.

Since the night with the prostitute, the young man has avoided women. With summer's approach, however, his sexual urges grow. He indulges his "bad habit" several times a day. He reads theories of Hirschfield which describe the phenomena of "inversion", an early understanding of homosexual behavior as naturally occurring. Intellectual understanding, however, does little to sate the young man's sexual appetite. He reasons that his soul belongs to Sonoko, who represents to him a love for normalcy itself, even as his body belongs to his deviant sexual appetites.

Sonoko and the young man arrange to meet several times over the following year. Each meeting is short, innocent and devoid of drama. Even when apart, the young man thinks of Sonoko and how their regular meetings, shallow though they are, grant him a tranquil sort of happiness. He understands that such undefined simplicity will not stand in the adult world, and that there is something immoral about what he is doing. The young man likens their continued relationship to an act of faith; it exists only so long as they believe it exists.

One day, the conversation deviates from the usual small talk. Sonoko doesn't understand why she and the protagonist keep meeting and worries as to where it might be going. The young man argues that there's nothing wrong with two friends meeting. She acknowledges that he has behaved honorably, and that they have nothing to be ashamed of, but she still worries for the future. Sonoko admits that she's so plagued with guilt that she plans to soon be baptized. She seems on the verge of confessing something when the young man clumsily spills a vase across the table. The two quit their now wet table for the streets outside.

With thirty minutes left in Sonoko and the protagonist's scheduled time together, the young man impulsive suggests that Sonoko accompany him to a nearby a dance hall. The place proves crowded and stifling hot, and the young man immediately regrets bringing Sonoko to such an obvious dive. With little heart, they push their way through the sweating masses and out the rear archway, where they take a seat outside beneath the beating sun. Uncomfortable, the young man's eyes wander over the crowd, finally settling on a small group crowded around a nearby table. He finds himself aroused by

the muscled toughs among them. Unable to take his eyes off them, he completely forgets that Sonoko is even there, instead slipping into one of his blood fantasies.

Sonoko wakes the young man from his reverie, reminding him that they have only five minutes left. He is suddenly torn between heart, mind, and body. Abashed, the young man apologizes for dragging her to such a place. Sonoko smiles with a modest mischief and asks the young man, in a roundabout way, whether or not he is still a virgin. The young says that he is not; he lost his virginity last spring. When Sonoko asks with whom, the young man begs her not to continue the line of questioning. His naked tone startles Sonoko. The two get up to leave. The young man spares one more glance at the nearby table, only to find that the young toughs have gone.

Chapter 4 Analysis

With the war ended and the protagonist's relationship dissolved, the young man's responsibilities are diminished. With these responsibilities goes his urge to die, death being his great escape from the burden of adulthood. The young man's schooling provides him a suitable distraction, a ready-made context in which to lose himself. As a student, he need only do what a student does, and if he goes too far with his studies, people see him as a dedicated scholar. It is, however, just another mask.

Unfortunately, the young man can't escape his internalization of society's expectations. At his age most men have lost their virginity. There is a sense here that the young man has missed out on a rite of passage, that because he is still a virgin, he is also less of a man. This exemplifies how the identity of "an adult" is defined, in part, by sexuality. Since the young man can't have heterosexual sex, he is denied, at least in his own mind, complete adulthood.

The encounter with the prostitute represents the limit of the young man's disguise. He can fool others, and even sometimes himself, but faced with the reality of having sex with a woman, he must confront his own stark reality—one which separates him from his immediate world. While the young man does find evidence of homosexuality in philosophy, art, and literature, he continually finds it shunned and rejected among those in his proximity. This necessarily launches him back into his blood fantasies, which allow him to indulge his desires as well as redirect his mounting self-hatred.

The young man's relapse into loving Sonoko is a direct backlash of his failure with the prostitute. Determined to prove his manhood, he is again visited by his old hope; the possibility of heterosexual love. Note, however, that this hope returns with the same sense of sorrow as before, indicating that, on some level, the young man knows that it's pointless, even potentially tragic.

Sonoko's ability to play the piano demonstrates that she's grown up. The young man's preoccupation with Sonoko, on the other hand, perhaps suggests that he is developmentally stuck, unable to move on. His ready excuses to Sonoko indicate that he isn't yet ready to pursue an open, honest friendship with Sonoko. The young man's

regard for Sonoko continues to be that of an ideal, rather than that of a friend or loved one.

Sonoko's concern, as well as her aborted confession, suggests that she's still in love with the young man. The young man, however, while he does gain a sense of peace from being near her, shows little real consideration for Sonoko. Their brief, infrequent meetings provide the young man with a feeling of normalcy, a taste of heterosexuality, but for Sonoko they mean something quite different, something very serious. The fact that Sonoko is so easily eclipsed by the young man's attraction to a group of nearby boys demonstrates that the two couldn't be more out of sync.

The story concludes with the young man's problems yet unsolved. He's still gay, still hidden and still indulging, seemingly against his will, in sadistic fantasies. There is a sense here, at the end, that it can be no other way. Trapped between society and his own urges, the young man is left with few choices. Unless he can find a way to express his forbidden innermost self, he will be forced to deny his every desire.

The completion of the young man's arc, however, is the narrator himself. In this sense, the novel is the long delayed expression of the protagonist's identity, or his "coming out of the closet". This is most apparent in chapter three, when the narrator worries that he will lose Kusano's friendship to the truth he is then about to reveal. This suggests that, while the protagonist's struggles may continue, he is, at last, unmasked.

Characters

The Boy/Young Man/Narrator

The story's protagonist and narrator is unnamed. The novel follows his life from childhood to young adulthood. As a young child, he spends much of his time alone, preoccupied with his own fantasies. The boy's early playmates are few and are comprised primarily of girls. As he ages, he soon becomes aware of his own homosexuality as well as his penchant for sadism.

As an adolescent, the boy often finds himself fantasizing about death and murder. Often these fantasies involve young, muscular men, warriors, who kill or who are killed in battle. These fantasies, being both bloody and homoerotic, cause the boy to experience considerable guilt. The boy finds it very difficult to express his inner self, objectionable as it is, and so he presents a false face to society. He makes pretense at normality.

As a young man, very little has changed, but the charade proves more difficult to maintain. The young man, in a bid to achieve normalcy, convinces himself that he is in love with a young woman named Sonoko. His conscience, however, coupled with a fear of total self-denial, convinces him not to seek marriage. Though he reunites with Sonoko, it proves little more than an awkward friendship.

Throughout the novel, the narrator often interjects from some point in time beyond the scope of the story. He foreshadows future story events and sometimes offers apologies, explanations, and insights on behalf of his young self. There is a sense that the narrator is older, wiser, and more self-aware, but is perhaps no closer to achieving inner peace. The book, however, represents the unmasking of the protagonist, suggesting that he has at last formed an identity beneath and beyond the mask.

Sonoko

Sonoko is Kusano's younger sister and, in the latter half of the novel, the protagonist's girlfriend. She is shy, demure, and an avid reader. There is also a sense that Sonoko is, beneath the surface, playful and mischievous; she is amused by small, harmless indiscretions. When she is first introduced, she is learning to the play the piano. By the end of the story she has become a skillful pianist.

Undoubtedly, Sonoko falls in love with the protagonist and continues to harbor feelings for him beyond the story's conclusion. Generally, she expresses her emotions in subtle ways, implying rather than stating, suggesting rather than asserting. This gives the protagonist ample room to play ignorant, which allows the façade to continue.

Sonoko is often marginalized, even by herself. The protagonist idealizes her to such an extent that he can't associate her with anything base or unpleasant. When Kusano learns of the protagonist's reasons for dumping Sonoko, he doesn't even convey this

information to her. She has to hear the reasons from the protagonist himself, years later. The protagonist, meanwhile, tells Sonoko that he values her ignorance. Sonoko, oblivious to the implication of what she is saying, boasts that her husband treats her with the compassion due a child.

Mother

Outside of occasional mentions, the young man's mother is largely absent from the story. She is, however, instrumental in his decision to break up with Sonoko.

Father

Although the protagonist's father is occasionally referred to, he seldom appears in the story. He is characterized as ineffectual and unable to make a decision.

Grandfather

A former colonel governor, the young man's grandfather resigned his post after accepting responsibility for the misdeeds of a subordinate. The narrator describes him as having a foolish trust in human beings. He is prone to travel, always following the bait of conmen and grifters.

Grandmother

Born of an old family, the young man's grandmother is narrow-minded, indomitable, and accustomed to an extravagant lifestyle. She resents her husband for his foolish ways. Grandmother suffers from sharp, shooting pains in her head which are aggravated by the slightest noise.

Neighborhood Girls

As a child, the narrator is only allowed to play with a group of neighborhood girls chosen by his grandmother.

Narrator's Brother and Sister

The narrator has a younger brother and sister. When they are born, the children are allowed more freedom. The narrator's sister dies when he is still a young man, and his emotional reaction to her death is welcome proof that he can experience normal emotions.

Narrator's Cousins

The narrator's first contact with boys and their behaviors is when he visits his male cousins.

Omi

Omi, an older boy, is the troublemaker of the school and the protagonist's childhood crush. Despite the school's pro-military, pro-masculine stance, Omi rebelliously takes to wearing ostentatious clothing. His willfulness inspires the younger grades to rebel as well. He nevertheless treats the other boys with contempt and derision. He is eventually expelled from the school for unstated reasons.

Yakumo

Yakumo is a sixteen-year-old boy at the narrator's military school. The narrator finds himself attracted to Yakumo, who is younger than the narrator.

Kusano

Kusano is Sonoko's older brother and the protagonist's best friend. He is characterized as gentle, friendly, and thoughtful. At one point in the story, Kusano serves as foil to the protagonist. While Kusano cannot sleep at night for fear that his family might be killed in an air raid, the protagonist is not only indifferent to the well-being of his family, but also indifferent to his own indifference.

Mr. Ohba

Mr. Ohba is a family friend to several of the characters. He is a banker who, though he is opposed to the war, makes a public face of support for the war.

Chieko

Chieko is a distant relation of the narrator's who has recently been widowed. She makes sexual advances toward the narrator.

Narrator's College Friend

A college friend of the narrator's convinces him to visit a brothel to lose his virginity. The narrator is unable to have sex with the prostitute.

T

A friend of the narrator and of the narrator's college friend, T explains the meaning of the word "sodomite" during a discussion of Proust.

Objects/Places

Picture of the Knight

As a child, the protagonist is obsessed with a picture of a mounted knight until he learns that the knight is in fact a woman, Joan of Arc. The boy is then repulsed. The picture represents the protagonist's latent desires. His repulsion foreshadows his later inability to love Sonoko.

Reni's

"Saint Sebastian" is the picture of Saint Sebastian's execution. It represents the protagonist's sexual awakening, particularly in that it embodies both the muscular male form that the protagonist prefers, as well as the hint of ennobled suffering which appeals to his sadistic impulses.

School

The protagonist attends the school until age eighteen. Because of the war, it is somewhat paramilitary in nature. Students have shaved heads, wear uniforms, and are expected to behave in a manly fashion. The school serves as a microcosm for the world, demonstrating the ways in which identity is forced upon the individual.

Leather Gloves

Omi touches leather gloves to the protagonist's face. They represent the protagonist's first intimate contact with another male and the beginning of his fondness for Omi.

White Gloves

Omi wears white gloves during the king-of-the-hill battle on the log. The protagonist grabs Omi's gloved hand, forcing both of them to fall. The white gloves represent the protagonist's desire to prove himself Omi's equal.

The Log

The protagonist competes with Omi in a game of king-of-the-hill on a log.

The Beach

The protagonist spends the summer at the beach with his family. The beach represents his natural impulses, wild and unyielding.

Factory

The protagonist works in a factory while in college. It represents the mindless social contract that pushes individuals to behave in a way that is contrary to their best interests.

Brothel

The protagonist visits a brothel at the urging of a college friend. It represents his greatest fear: the knowledge that he cannot be normal.

House of an Old Friend

Parties are often held at the house of an old friend. The protagonist attends these events to distract himself from his troubles. The party represents the world in which he participates but is also apart from.

Dance Hall

The protagonist convinces Sonoko to enter a dance hall. Being unbearably hot and seedy, but also passionate, it represents the internal self that the protagonist would keep hidden.

Themes

Identity

As the title implies, much of the story is concerned with the ways in which a person presents or conceals identity. The true identity of the protagonist is of a sort that his culture would find objectionable, and so he adopts a persona (or mask) that will afford him a degree of acceptance. Since he lacks many of the inherent qualities of "normal" individuals, the protagonist learns by rote how to mimic these qualities by observing his peers. By suppressing his own impulses and pretending to have "normal" impulses, he is able to infiltrate the world of normalcy.

The protagonist's public identity, however, is a mere performance. It lacks substance. While the protagonist understands the requirements of his role, he knows little of the character he plays. He behaves, almost mechanically, as society expects, without necessarily seeing the underlying reasons for his adopted behavior. The protagonist therefore comes to understand behavior in functional terms, as something observable, quantifiable, even manageable. Eventually, the protagonist learns to use his knowledge of behavior to sociopathically manage the behavior of others, namely Sonoko.

The author presents identity as a struggle between internal and external forces. An individual who differs too greatly from society will soon find himself ostracized and alone. Conversely, an individual who constantly hides himself from society will find limited opportunity for personal growth and fulfillment. Confessions of a Mask is the story of one such imbalance, as the protagonist's self is eclipsed by the collective other and its expectations.

Nature versus Nurture

Throughout the text, the protagonist's sexuality is explicitly paired with sights, sounds and (particularly) scents of nature. His sadistic impulses, meanwhile, paired with his death obsession, call to mind ideas of the Darwinian struggle for survival, of life feeding on death. In this light, the protagonist's compulsions take on an animal quality, suggesting that they are not so much mental aberrations as they are primal holdovers of the human animal. While society may dub him unnatural, abnormal, or deviant, these drives are inherent to the protagonist. They exist as part of his nature.

In pairing the protagonist's inner self to these ideas of nature, the narrator is attempting to legitimize himself to the reader. He is asserting that he is not a monster, as some would perhaps believe, but rather a perfectly normal human being, albeit with uncommon characteristics. This marriage between himself and nature serves to absolve the protagonist of blame. The logic is that the protagonist didn't choose to be this way, and so none can fault him for being what he is. It's interesting to note, however, that

while the protagonist does indulge in flights of morbid fantasy, he never acts on any of them. This demonstrates the degree to which the human animal can deny itself.

Free Will

Since the protagonist spends much of his time immersed in a role, it can be argued that he spends more time following the metaphorical script and less time making decisions for himself. In his role of normalcy his choices are limited to only those that society finds acceptable. He may not, for example, have intimate relations with another man. Such behavior falls outside the bounds of society's expectation. To make such a choice, the choice to indulge his individual desire, would compromise his carefully constructed persona, and so his path is defined as tracks for a train.

The trouble, of course, is that the protagonist doesn't have a clear understanding of the path. His vantage point is that of someone on the outside looking in. He observes how people behave, but doesn't always understand why. This leaves him precious little room for improvisation. The protagonist can only undertake those actions which he knows won't compromise his persona. This means he must err on the side of conservatism and stick to familiar territory.

The question then is whether or not the protagonist had any choice but to surrender himself to the will of the mask. Certainly he could come clean and admit his homosexuality, but considering his time and place this would be uncomfortable at best, disastrous at worst. As for his other secret, few would understand or accept a sadist, even supposing he were non-practicing. Ultimately, the protagonist chooses to sacrifice most of his free will for the sake of acceptance and, arguably, for the sake of self-preservation.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from a first person perspective. The narrator is an older, wiser version of the protagonist himself, ostensibly relating past events from his own life. Most of the narrative is rooted in the "now" of the protagonist, focusing on the story as if it were unfolding in the present. The reader does, however, get the occasional glimpse of the future when the narrator interjects to provide commentary or explanation.

The narrator isn't invasive, but the reader would be hard pressed to ignore so tangible a voice. There is a sense throughout the story that the narrator is presenting a case before the reader. While perhaps wiser than his younger self, his prose suggests that he is still afflicted with a lingering sense of guilt. There is a pervasive sense that he desperately needs to be understood and judged in the correct context.

Some of the story elements, particular those pertaining to the protagonist's penchant for self-deception, suggest that perhaps the narrator is himself unreliable. This is all but admitted at a few points, particularly with regard to the narrator's memory of his first bath, which couldn't possibly have occurred as he remembers. Another example is his memory of Omi, whom the narrator confesses he can't recall objectively. There is a sense, however, that the narrator wants to be rid of the mask, and to tell truth as best he is able.

Setting

The story is set in Japan before, during, and after the Second World War. Although there isn't much in the way of actual combat in the story, war colors every aspect of the narrative. During much of the tale, air raids are a part of daily life. A sudden, arbitrary death to bombing is a very real possibility for the citizens of war-time Japan. Schools train children as soldiers-in-miniature and, even before the war, children are taught to think of military service, even war-time service, as inevitable. As the war drags on, Japan's citizens become increasingly cynical.

The narrative moves back and forth between institutions and domestic life. The protagonist attends a paramilitary school until the age of eighteen, but often returns to his parents' home in the suburbs of Tokyo. He eventually leaves for university, but the school puts him and his classmates to work in a factory dedicated to building fighter planes. In general, domestic suburbia represents a place of comfort and familiarity for the protagonist, whereas institutions prove dehumanizing. Nevertheless, the protagonist sometimes finds the context he craves in being a student

While the text contains many vivid descriptions, locations are not typically very detailed. This is especially true of static locales, such as a bedroom, where the author will

provide little or no description. Dynamic areas, however, such as a beach of crashing waves, or a crowded dance floor, are usually poetically rendered.

Language and Meaning

The pervading tone of the narrative is intellectual, with the primary focus on the inner life of the protagonist, what he thinks and feels. Actions, undertaken or not, are secondary to the thoughts that precede and follow them. This gives one a sense that much of what matters to the protagonist is unable to find expression. Since the protagonist doesn't have the option to share or manifest his desires, the choices left him in the real world produce less than gratifying results. In this case, therefore, the protagonist's true self is less the sum of his deeds and more the sum of his feelings.

Even descriptions, rather than being objective or informative, instead mirror the inner life of the protagonist. When he is particularly moved, for good or ill, the tone can rapidly shift from intellectual to passionate. Instantly descriptions become detailed and romanticized. The protagonist's blood fantasies are fiery, communicated in a high, poetic language tinged with self-loathing. Even the red-light district, which grips the protagonist with a fear of inadequacy, is vivid in its lurid coloration.

Shame is a big part of the protagonist's inner life, and, as such, it seeps into every part of the narrative. Even when it outwardly seems that the protagonist is rational and collected, the narrator, from his future vantage point, will reveal the inner workings of guilt and self-deception that play beneath the surface. Even when it isn't explicitly shown, the reader can recognize the protagonist's insecurity and self-hatred in the narrator's off-hand remarks and in the vehement way that the protagonist rationalizes his behavior.

Structure

The novel is broken up into four uneven chapters, with chapter three alone comprising nearly half the book. The first chapter focuses on the events of the protagonist's early childhood, concluding with the destruction of his family's garden. The second chapter chronicles the protagonist's entrance into puberty and the trials thereof, concluding with his acceptance of his approaching adulthood. Chapter three follows the protagonist through the remainder of high school and into college, as well as his courtship of Sonoko. Chapter four is concerned primarily with the emptiness that follows in the wake of dumping Sonoko. Chapters one, two, and four seem to begin and end logically, but chapter three seems to go through several transitions at which chapter breaks might have been made.

Structurally, the content is split more or less evenly between scenes and monologue. The narrator sets up an event with relevant discussion, establishing the mood and context of the protagonist. The event is then related, albeit with continued running commentary from the narrator throughout. Afterward, the narrator will perform a sort of debriefing, assisting the reader in the scene's digestion and providing some context to

the overarching narrative. This "sandwiching" of external with internal has the effect of making time seem disjointed, but it also serves to keep the reader invested in the inner life of the protagonist.

Quotes

"I had been handed what might be called a full menu of all the troubles in my life while still too young to read it." Chap. 1, p. 15

"I preferred by far to be by myself reading a book, playing with building blocks, indulging in my willful fantasies, or drawing pictures." Chap. 1, p. 25

"It seemed to me that since it was I, even if actually struck by a bullet, there would surely be no pain. . ." Chap. 1, p. 28

"Time and time again I looked from the stains on my own white gloves to those on Omi's. . ." Chap. 2, p. 71

"For me love was nothing but a dialogue of little riddles, with no answers given." Chap. 2, p. 72

"I believed optimistically that once the performance was finished the curtain would fall and the audience would never see the actor without his makeup." Chap. 3, p. 101

"Thus it came about that we were given a month's vacation at the height of the war. It was like being given a gift of damp fireworks." Chap. 3, p. 140

"I was a person who could not help becoming serious whenever I let my guard down, but I was not afraid to do so before her." Chap. 3, p. 164

"'In the air enemy planes, on the ground law—humph!' I laughed scornfully. 'Is this what you mean by glory in the heavens and peace on Earth?'" Chap. 3, p. 180

"So far as the spectacle seen from this distance was concerned, it seemed to make no essential difference whether the falling plane was ours or our enemy's. Such is the nature of war. . ." Chap. 3, p. 189

"The measure of a woman's power is the degree of suffering with which she can punish her lover." Chap. 4, p. 221

"There was not a day in which I did not think of Sonoko, and each time we met I experienced a tranquil happiness." Chap. 4, p. 242

Topics for Discussion

Why does the protagonist remain unnamed? What does this say about his character?

Compare the protagonist's feelings toward Sonoko to his feelings toward the male characters he is attracted to.

How might the story be different if the protagonist had decided to marry Sonoko?

The story ends without a clear resolution. Why does the author choose to end the novel this way?

Why does the protagonist so often yearn for death?

Is the protagonist in control of his own life? Why or why not?

Are the protagonist's urges "natural?" Why or why not?

In what way does the war-time setting contribute the tone of the story?

What is the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist (his past self)?