

Deep River Study Guide

Deep River by Shusaku Endo

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Contents

Deep River Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter One, The Case of Isobe.....	4
Chapter Two, The Informational Meeting.....	6
Chapter Three, The Case of Mitsuko.....	7
Chapter Four, The Case of Numada.....	9
Chapter Five, The Case of Kiguchi.....	10
Chapter Six, The City by the River.....	12
Chapter Seven, Goddesses.....	13
Chapter Eight, In Search of What Was Lost.....	15
Chapter Nine, The River.....	17
Chapter Ten, The Case of Ōtsu.....	18
Chapter Eleven, Surely He Hath Borne Our Griefs.....	19
Chapter Twelve, Rebirth.....	20
Chapter Thirteen, He Hath No Form Nor Comeliness.....	21
Characters.....	23
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	36



Plot Summary

In *Deep River*, four Japanese people of different backgrounds and different sorrows converge at the holy Ganges River in India, on their own personal journeys to reconcile themselves with their pasts. Isobe is a taciturn man left desolate by the death of his wife and searching for her reincarnated soul. Kiguchi, a former Japanese soldier who endured torturous hunger and illness in Burma during World War II, mourns the wartime friend who saved his life, but suffered and died because of his guilt. Numada, a children's author whose only true friends have been animals and birds, seeks to repay the help of a myna bird. Mitsuko, an atheistic woman whose life has been without love, seeks her college lover, a failed Catholic priest working among the impoverished. All four find some solace in the Ganges.

As the novel begins, Isobe finds out his wife is dying from cancer. He does not tell her the truth, but as she sickens, she knows she is dying. Right before his wife dies, she tells Isobe that she knows she will be reincarnated and begs him to search for her. Isobe cannot forget Keiko's request and writes to researchers studying reincarnation. He learns of a little girl in India who claims to have been Japanese in a past life. Mitsuko, who nursed Isobe's wife as a volunteer also happens to be on Isobe's tour of India. Mitsuko is divorced, and has lived a loveless life. She has heard that the religious young man she seduced in college, Ōtsu, is in India. Mitsuko visited Ōtsu once before, during her honeymoon in France, when he was studying at a seminary, and they talked about his idea of his "Onion," a God of both suffering and love.

Numada, a children's author, is also on the tour. He has recovered from a near-fatal bout of tuberculosis, and a myna bird was his companion during his illness. The bird died during Numada's last operation, and Numada feels the bird died in his place. Kiguchi, another traveler, was a soldier during World War II in Burma. In Burma, he contracts malaria, and his friend Tsukada refuses to leave him behind. Later, Kiguchi learns that Tsukada ate the flesh of a dead soldier to survive and save his friend. Tsukada drinks himself to death because of his guilt over the act.

The tourists arrive at the River Ganges, where Mitsuko, Isobe, Numada, and Kiguchi all stay behind. Kiguchi is ill, and Mitsuko stays to care for him. Isobe searches for his reincarnated wife, but fails to find her. Instead, he finds only memories of their life together. Numada frees a myna bird, in repayment to the bird who saved him. Kiguchi reads a prayer for dead soldiers over the sacred River Ganges. Mitsuko finds Ōtsu, who is working among the poor and dying Hindus, carrying the impoverished to the Ganges so their ashes can be scattered in the sacred river. The traveler's stay is complicated by the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the following unrest. Ōtsu, who has given his life over to the Onion, sacrifices himself by stopping a group of men from attacking one of the Japanese tourists, and being beaten to near death. As Mitsuko and the other tourists finally leave, she learns that Ōtsu is in critical condition and has taken a turn for the worse.



Chapter One, The Case of Isobe

Chapter One, The Case of Isobe Summary

In Deep River, four Japanese people of different backgrounds and different sorrows converge at the holy Ganges River in India, on their own personal journeys to reconcile themselves with their pasts. Isobe is a taciturn man left desolate by the death of his wife and searching for her reincarnated soul. Kiguchi, a former Japanese soldier who endured torturous hunger and illness in Burma during World War II, mourns the wartime friend who saved his life, but suffered and died because of his guilt. Numada, a children's author whose only true friends have been animals and birds, seeks to repay the help of a myna bird. Mitsuko, an atheistic woman whose life has been without love, seeks her college lover, a failed Catholic priest working among the impoverished. All four find some solace in the Ganges.

Isobe learns that his wife is dying of cancer and has three or four months to live. He lies to her and tells her that she'll recover after four months in the hospital. He promises that when she's well, he'll bring her to a hot springs resort. His wife tells him that she has been talking to the giant, ancient ginko tree beside her window, which told her that life never ends. As he leaves his wife's hospital room, Isobe takes hold of her hand, a display of affection that would normally be too embarrassing for him. As he walks down the corridor, happy couple winning on a game show on the TV seems to mock him. At home, Isobe prevaricates about the prognosis to his wife's mother, who is helping take care of Isobe. When Isobe is alone in the house, it feels empty. A taciturn man, Isobe's unresponsiveness drove away the couple's adopted daughter. Only now that his wife is in the hospital does Isobe begin talking to her.

Isobe's wife Keiko gets worse, and the cancer is painful. The hospital delays giving morphine, hoping to extend her life just a little. Isobe visits her daily, writing haikus to himself about her. Keiko has a dream that Isobe left the stove on, which actually happened the previous night, and Isobe thinks her dreams are an indication of the closeness of death. A divorced young hospital volunteer, Miss Naruse, is helping care for Keiko, and Isobe asks her not to tell his wife that she's dying. Miss Naruse will not say anything but believes Keiko already knows. Isobe also learns Keiko has had an out of body experience. Her death is only a few days away.

Keiko, realizing she is dying, tells Isobe to look through her diary after she's gone. She slips into a coma, but before she dies, she wakes and tells Isobe urgently that she knows she will be reborn and that he must promise to look for her. After she is gone, Isobe goes through the funeral rituals as if in a dream, denying the reality of her death. The Buddhists believe that by 49 days after death, the soul will be reborn, but Isobe has never believed this. He looks through Keiko's diary and finds instructions on running the house and thoughts about her illness, her life in the hospital, and her conversation with the ginko tree about rebirth. Sometimes, Isobe wakes at night, thinking Keiko is beside him in bed.



Isobe travels to Washington D.C. to visit relatives in December, glad to get away. While he is there, he sees that his niece is reading a best-seller by Shirley MacClaine about past lives. Isobe's niece believes in reincarnation, but her husband is a skeptic. At the airport to travel home, Isobe sees the Shirley MacClaine book and another, more scientific, book about reincarnation on sale and buys both. He writes to the researcher at the University of Virginia whose studies are described in the scientific book and receives a letter that none of the children the researcher has investigated might have been his wife in a past life.

Chapter One, The Case of Isobe Analysis

Communication, making a connection with another being, is an important concept in Deep River. Isobe has spent his entire life with his wife, but not communicating with her. He cannot express any love or devotion or passion to her. He expects their relationship to be a quiet partnership and companionship. When he finds out that Keiko is dying, Isobe still holds back his communication by not telling her how he feels. He does not show her (or anyone) the haikus that he writes that express his feelings. Isobe is contained within himself, and he fails to make a connection outside of himself. He only unwinds a small amount, grabbing his dying wife's hand, something that he would never do in normal circumstances. An expression of caring escapes him in the midst of tragedy and stress.

Isobe is lost without his wife after her death. He has never expressed passion to her in life, but after her death, he passionately hopes to reconnect with her in another form. Isobe cannot let go of his wife, in part because he never fulfilled their connection in life. He is driven to try to find her, now that she is out of reach.



Chapter Two, The Informational Meeting

Chapter Two, The Informational Meeting Summary

Isobe sees a presentation on the tour of Buddhist holy sites in India that he will be attending in two weeks. The slideshow depicts the holy Ganges River, along with other sites the tour will visit. The tour guide, Enami, gives the tourists instructions about what to expect, how to avoid illness, how to use the toilets, and about the caste system in India. Afterwards, a man named Numada asks about bird and animal sanctuaries. Another tourist, Kiguchi, asks about the possibility of holding a funeral service for World War II soldiers from both India and Japan. He is surprised to learn there are few Buddhists today in India, mostly from the "untouchable" lowest caste. A tourist asks about Hinduism, and Enami shows slides of fearsome Hindu goddesses. Isobe recognizes the hospital volunteer, Naruse Mitsuko, among the other travelers and speaks to her, mentioning that he thought she was interested in France. Mitsuko says she visited France once, but does not like it. She mentions how everyone seems to have a different interest in visiting India. As Isobe leaves, she thinks of her own past as a student everyone called Moira, and the boy she tormented, Ōtsu.

Chapter Two, The Informational Meeting Analysis

In the second chapter, the characters who will travel to the River Ganges meet at an introduction to the upcoming tour. The River Ganges is also introduced. The Ganges is a holy place for the Hindus, where the devout hope to have their ashes scattered after death. Like the intersection of rivers, considered holy by the Hindus, the novel is an intersection of lives. Mitsuko, Numada, Kiguchi, and Isobe all have their own personal sorrows and reasons for traveling to India. They are part of the flow of humanity, and their lives and sorrows will intersect with the River Ganges in the novel.



Chapter Three, The Case of Mitsuko

Chapter Three, The Case of Mitsuko Summary

In college, some other students try to get Mitsuko to seduce Ōtsu, an awkward and religious student, just as the literary character she's nicknamed after, Moïra, seduces Joseph in the novel. At first, Mitsuko ignores them, but she finds out that he's a Christian who plays the flute and goes to the Kultur Heim chapel every day after class to pray. She goes to the chapel to see if it's true, and when Ōtsu shows up, she invites him to a party. At the party, Mitsuko questions Ōtsu about his religious beliefs, and he confesses that he is unsure of what he believes. She forces him to drink, saying that she'll only stop if he forsakes God. He drinks until he throws up, refusing to abandon God.

Mitsuko is unable to leave Ōtsu alone. She tells him that he must give up God. Deciding she must steal him away from God, she says he can be her boyfriend if he gives up God. As she waits at the chapel to see if he comes or not, Mitsuko reads a passage from the Bible about the Lord taking on suffering. When Ōtsu does not come, she takes him to her room and has sex with him, Mitsuko is detached from sex. She cannot give herself over to passion with any man. After sleeping with Ōtsu for several months, before winter break, she abruptly breaks it off, breaking his heart. Unlike Joseph, who murders Moïra in the book, Ōtsu can only leave, dejected.

Mitsuko eventually marries a conservative businessman named Yano, interested in golf and cars instead of literature and arts. She hears that Ōtsu is studying at a seminary in Lyon, France. Mitsuko insists on going to Paris for her honeymoon, but her husband is soon bored with museums and history. Mitsuko re-reads Thérèse Desqueyroux, the novel she wrote about as her thesis, and compares herself to the title character, dissatisfied with her conventional husband. She decides to visit Les Landes, an area of France from the novel, leaving her husband to visit all the men's clubs for a few days. As she travels, she realizes that the train in the novel never existed, and that it is a metaphor for Thérèse traveling into the darkness of the human heart. Les Landes is uninteresting, and Mitsuko goes to Lyon and looks up Ōtsu. They talk about God, and Mitsuko says the term means nothing to her. Instead, they call God the Onion. Ōtsu is considered heretical by the French priests for his beliefs that other religions are also true and that God uses sin and suffering to good ends. He sees good within evil, and evil within good. Mitsuko returns to her husband in Paris, and they have sex that is meaningless to Mitsuko.

Chapter Three, The Case of Mitsuko Analysis

From Isobe's story, Shusaku Endu moves to Mitsuko's story. The reader already knows Mitsuko as the kind volunteer worker who talked with Keiko while she was in the hospital, dying of cancer. Now, the point of view shifts, and the reader sees the world through Mitsuko's eyes. In her own mind, Mitsuko is missing something. Like Isobe, she



is unable to make a true human connection with another being. She has tried doing volunteer work, but felt like she was going through the motions, an imitation of love instead of real love.

Mitsuko seduces Ōtsu out of a desire to steal him away from God. She is bitter against God, perhaps because of the lack of love in her life. During sex, she is disconnected, seeing only the gross physicality of her lovers, as she merely submits. She feels no passion. As Mitsuko goes through her life, she feels an emptiness in herself. Seeking after Ōtsu is, at least on some level, seeking after God, and seeking after God is seeking after love.



Chapter Four, The Case of Numada

Chapter Four, The Case of Numada Summary

On the tourists' airplane to Delhi, Numada, who writes children's stories with animal characters, thinks of buying his wife perfume. He asks Isobe his opinion on perfumes and learns that Isobe's wife is dead. A honeymoon couple named Sanjōs is also on the tour. Numada grew up in Dalian, Manchuria, an area with a Chinese lower class. Numada's mother hired a Chinese boy, Li, as a houseboy. Numada brings home a puppy, but it whines at night. His father says he must get rid of it. Secretly, Li keeps the dog outside and trains it, and once the dog, Blackie, is trained, Numada's parents let him keep it. Blackie becomes a confidant and friend to Numada. After some coal is stolen from the family, Li is forced to leave under suspicion of theft. During Numada's parents' divorce, Blackie is his only friend, and he imagines conversations with the dog. When his mother takes Numada away to Japan, he is forced to separate from his beloved dog, who becomes the inspiration for his children's stories.

As an adult, a local pet store owner forced a hornbill bird on Numada. The hornbill, called Pierrot-chan by his children, is a bane to his wife but a friend and confidant to Numada. He is forced to give the hornbill up, though, when he goes into the hospital with tuberculosis. After two failed operations, his wife brings him a myna bird in the hospital. Numada can talk with the bird, sharing his fears and suffering. When he goes in for a third, very dangerous, operation, his wife brings the bird to the roof, but forgets about it. By the time she remembers the bird, it has died. Numada feels the bird has given up its life for him.

Chapter Four, The Case of Numada Analysis

Chapter Four tells Numada's story. Numada is a writer of children's stories. Unlike Isobe and Mitsuko, Numada has made a connection and has developed communication with another. However, Numada's connections are with animals, not with human beings. Like Isobe's wife Keiko, who talks with flowers and trees, Numada makes a spiritual connection with animals. As a young boy, he talks to his dog, Blackie, the only being he can confide in. Later, he forms bonds with birds. A connection with nature in the novel seems to be a true spiritual communion with the river of life, not necessarily a lesser connection than one with another human being.

Numada's story also brings up the theme of sacrifice. The myna bird sacrifices its life for Numada's. It is a kind of Christ figure, giving Numada only love and taking all of Numada's burdens onto itself. Numada feels the love, connection, and sacrifice of the bird, a totem of nature and of God. That is why he is India.



Chapter Five, The Case of Kiguchi

Chapter Five, The Case of Kiguchi Summary

On the airplane, Kiguchi sits next to the guide, Enami. Kiguchi mentions that he fought in Burma during the war and Enami remarks that the fighting there was fierce. Kiguchi thinks that Enami cannot know anything about the horror and starvation the soldiers endured. He recalls his trials.

The rain pours down as Kiguchi and his friend Tsukada walk the Highway of Death, starving and malnourished. Fallen soldiers, dead and dying, line the route of retreat, covered in maggots. The starving soldiers, without food for days, gobble down mangos even though they are warned the fruit might be poisoned. Kiguchi falls ill and expects to be left to die in the jungle, but his friend Tsukada won't leave him. Tsukada brings him food he found on a dying soldier. Next, he brings meat, which he says is from a dead cow. Kiguchi is too sick to eat it.

After the war, Kiguchi doesn't talk about his experiences because they're too horrible. He returns to Tokyo. One day, he runs into Tsukada and goes out with him. Tsukada is drinking too much. The two don't mention their experiences. Ten years later, Tsukada writes to him again, asking for a job, and Kiguchi gets him a job in Tokyo. Tsukada is still drinking heavily and ends up in the hospital, with complications from cirrhosis. He becomes attached to a foreign volunteer named Gaston. Meanwhile, he won't stop drinking.

Finally, Tsukada confesses to Kiguchi that the meat he brought Kiguchi in Burma was from a dead Japanese soldier, bought from some other soldiers under the auspices of being lizard meat. Tsukada knew what it was, though, and ate it to stay alive and save Kiguchi. After the war, he met the dead soldier's wife and child, and has been haunted by the child's eyes ever since. Tsukada continues to get worse. When he is dying from hemorrhaging, he calls for Gaston, and tells him what he's done, asking if Gaston's God could forgive that. Gaston tells him the story of climbers trapped in the Andes, whose fatally wounded companions begged them to eat their flesh after death to survive. To Kiguchi, Tsukada looks more peaceful when he dies. Gaston disappears and is not seen at the hospital after Tsukada's death.

Chapter Five, The Case of Kiguchi Analysis

Chapter Five tells the story of the fourth protagonist in the novel, Kiguchi. The themes of sacrifice, suffering, and human connection are strong elements in Kiguchi's story. The Highway of Death is an embodiment of suffering. In the horrors of war, men are left to suffer, rot, and die, with no hope. They are lost in the midst of a cruel nature, not the kind nature that Numada communes with. Kiguchi himself expects to die like a wounded animal when he comes down with malaria. Tsukada's love for Kiguchi is unusual. He



sacrifices himself to save Kiguchi. He does not die, at that time, but through his act of sacrifice, eating the flesh of another soldier so that he can live and care for Kiguchi, he fills his life with guilt. Tsukada takes on suffering and death, literally feeding himself on it. Afterward, the guilt consumes him, and Tsukada drinks himself to death. Only through Gaston, at the end of his life, does he feel that he may find forgiveness.

The act of eating the flesh of the dead can be compared to communion. Tsukada finds life by eating the flesh of the dead, just as in communion Catholics seek to gain eternal life through eating the flesh of Jesus Christ. The soldier who died sacrifices himself for Tsukada, and Tsukada sacrifices himself for Kiguchi.



Chapter Six, The City by the River

Chapter Six, The City by the River Summary

The Japanese tourists arrive at Allahābād on the fourth day of their tour. They take a bus to Vārānasī, where pilgrims come to the Ganges River, to bathe in the water and to die and be scattered as ashes in the flowing waters. On the bus, Mrs. Sanjō can do nothing but complain about the impoverished and ill begging children, the decrepit bus, and the dirtiness of the country. Her husband is a photographer and wants the unique opportunities to take photos in India. Numada enquires about animal and bird sanctuaries. Enami becomes irritated with Sanjō's condescending attitude toward Hinduism and India. As the bus travels through the dark jungle, Isobe thinks of his wife. Mitsuko thinks of Thérèse Desqueyroux's journey into her dark heart, and Kiguchi thinks of his horrible experience in Burma. Mitsuko has heard that Ōtsu is here in Vārānasī, while Mitsuko has learned from the University of Virginia about a young girl who claims to have been Japanese in a previous life.

The tourists arrive at the rather seedy hotel, and Isobe and Mitsuko share some brandy in the garden. Isobe tells her that he is searching for the reincarnated soul of his dead wife. Mitsuko also feels she is searching for something. That night, she takes a sleeping pill then lies awake, looking at pictures of Hindu goddesses in a book. When she finally falls asleep, she is soon woken by a frightening flapping sound, but it turns out to be only loose paper covering a hole in the wall. Awakened, she looks at letters from Ōtsu, who talks about his belief in God, his Onion whose face is visible in many religions, and his conflicts with the Catholic Church over theology. Mitsuko recalls her time in the hospital, where she felt a hypocrite for feigning love. She also recalls meeting with some college friends, and telling them of her divorce. That's when she learned that Ōtsu had come to Vārānasī.

Chapter Six, The City by the River Analysis

The tourists travel to Vārānasī on a bus through a dark forest. Like the train journey Thérèse Desqueyroux takes that Mitsuko learns is metaphorical, since no train runs that route, the trip through the forest is a journey into each character's soul. All of the characters are haunted by their own sorrows on the journey. Numada thinks about the myna bird. Isobe thinks of his wife. Mitsuko thinks of Thérèse Desqueyroux, and Kiguchi thinks of the Highway of Death. The trip to Vārānasī is a pilgrimage to a holy place, and that means that it is also an inward journey, into each character's heart and soul.

The Sanjōs provide a contrast to the other characters. They dislike India, and they are not concerned with their souls. Mrs. Sanjō notoriously complains about the trip and finds everything about India distasteful. Mr. Sanjō is only concerned about his photographs. He looks at India through a camera lens, but he does not see it.



Chapter Seven, Goddesses

Chapter Seven, Goddesses Summary

Isobe sits in his hotel room and wonders about whether he loved his wife, who he thought of during life as a helpmate and supporter, more than a woman. He had two or three affairs during his marriage, including one with a restaurant owner who was Keiko's opposite. He never expected to be so devastated by Keiko's death.

Numada showers and goes down to the restaurant. It is early, and only Enami is there. Numada says that he has sensed the voices of trees in India, and his next children's story will be about trees. Enami says that in the forest they traveled through, British soldiers hung Indians. The others start coming in to the restaurant, and Numada goes out to the garden, where Kiguchi joins him. The Sanjōs ask Numada to take their photo, and Kiguchi complains about the young couple. Enami also comes out of the hotel. A snake charmer has appears, and performs with a cobra, a mongoose, and a two-headed snake.

The tourists go to the Vishvanātha Temple, which is surrounded by small shops. Enami wonders what it would be like to sleep with Mitsuko. After lunch they go to the Nakshar Bhagavatī Temple, Enami's personal favorite site, a sweltering underground cavern. Enami shows the tourists the statues of Hindu goddesses. His favorite is Chāmundā, an emaciated, sick old woman who lives in graveyards, yet still offers up her milk to children.

The tourists go to the Ganges. Mrs. Sanjō stays behind in the bus, as she had at the temple, not wanting to see the river where the cremated remains of the dead are emptied right near where people bathe. Those laid to rest in the river hope to be released from the cycle of reincarnation. At the river, Sanjō starts to take pictures, and Enami warns him that photos of the dead or the crematorium are forbidden. In addition to the crematorium, there is a facility for the dying who have come to die in the river. Ashes are scattered in the waters, and nearby people bathe. The destitute and young children are not cremated. The indigent are buried beneath the river, and young children are set afloat in reed boats. Numada thinks of a fable he wrote, where the dead turn into fishes and live in the sea.

Chapter Seven, Goddesses Analysis

The center of Chapter Seven is the statue of Chāmundā. The temple of the Hindu goddesses is hot and cavernous. Travel into it is, like the bus journey through the forest, representative of traveling into the human soul. Throughout the novel, suffering, cruelty, and violence is shown as a part of the human condition. Suffering cannot be escaped, and each person brings his or her own private, secret suffering into the river of humanity.



Chāmundā represents all the suffering of humanity, and on top of that, the instinct to sacrifice. Chāmundā takes on diseases, hunger, poverty, illness, and suffering of all kinds. She lives in death, in the graveyard. At the same time, she constantly gives of herself, gives despite the suffering. She offers milk to all the children, nurturing those around her. Like Ōtsu, like the Onion, she gives unconditionally, without giving in to the overwhelming vastness of human suffering. The river of humanity that Mitsuko ultimately sees represented in the Ganges is also represented in Chāmundā. Suffering and violence and horror is inseparable from the human condition. The beauty of Chāmundā is that in the midst of the horror, humanity has the capacity for sacrifice and giving.



Chapter Eight, In Search of What Was Lost

Chapter Eight, In Search of What Was Lost Summary

Mitsuko is awakened by her phone ringing. Kiguchi has taken ill, and Mitsuko promises to stay with him while Enami goes or a doctor. Kiguchi is afraid he may have malaria, which he had in the army. Mitsuko comforts him with her imitations of love, like when she worked in the hospital. The doctor comes, takes some blood, and gives Kiguchi a shot. Kiguchi may need to go into the hospital, and Mitsuko offers to stay behind with him for a couple of days. As Mitsuko sits over Kiguchi's feverous form, he calls out Gaston's name in his sleep.

Mitsuko dozes and awakens when the tourists return from the Ganges. She learns that the tourists saw Ōtsu at the river, carrying the bodies of the indigent dead and dying. Mitsuko goes to breakfast and finds that Numada is also staying in the city. Even when the doctors discover that Kiguchi's illness is not serious, Mitsuko still wants to stay in the town. Isobe and the Sanjōs are also staying. After the rest of the tourists leave, Mitsuko and Numada go to the Ganges again, where Mitsuko hopes to see Ōtsu.

Isobe's mind is taken up with everyday memories of his wife and their non-romantic, prosaic interactions. He travels out to the village mentioned in the letter from the University of Virginia, looking for the little girl who might be his wife, reincarnated. Meanwhile, Mitsuko and Numada are at the Ganges, where impoverished children and lepers beg, while the dead are burned. Ōtsu is not there. Mitsuko goes to the Catholic Church, where she is told they take no more responsibility for Ōtsu. Numada, though, learns of a Japanese woman who runs a boarding house and might know of Ōtsu. On their way, Mitsuko and Numada are sidetracked by a wealthy Indian wedding, where Mitsuko is put off by the display of wealth in a land of such poverty and by the superior attitude of the guests. Numada has phoned the Japanese woman, in the meantime. Before heading out to the shady places they've learned Ōtsu frequents, they head back to their hotel for lunch, and on the way, Mitsuko accidentally steps on a man who has collapsed from hunger.

Chapter Eight, In Search of What Was Lost Analysis

Kiguchi's illness brings back to mind his illness during the war. Kiguchi is being forced back into the past, into the sufferings that have driven him to India. Similarly, Mitsuko is put back into her position of hospital volunteer, reenacting her imitations of love. Isobe, too, finds himself forced into confrontation with the past, as he is overwhelmed with memories of his wife. Though Keiko is nowhere to be found physically, she is constantly in Isobe's mind.



The appearance of Ōtsu at the river also brings Mitsuko back into her past. She has wondered to herself whether she really wants to find Ōtsu. She is in a kind of denial, wanting to seek out the something that she feels is missing in her life and yet resisting it. Throughout the novel, people resist seeking out love. Isobe is reluctant to show love to his wife because of embarrassment. Kiguchi's friend does not seek out help and forgiveness during his life, bottling up his secret horrors until his death. The appearance of Ōtsu is like a sign, forcing Mitsuko to continue on to what she is secretly driven to do, to seek out something that she can't quite define.



Chapter Nine, The River

Chapter Nine, The River Summary

When Mitsuko and Numada return to the hotel, Isobe is getting drunk in the dining room. The little girl he was trying to locate has moved. In his desperation, Isobe went to a fortune teller. Isobe is sure he's a fake, but plans to come back and get the supposed address of his reincarnated wife the next day, for a hefty fee, he's sure.

The next day is October 31, and Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, is shot and killed by Sikhs on her security detail. The tourists are concerned about unrest and possible martial law. They know nothing about the Sikhs or the tension between Hindus and Sikhs. Enami phones to tell them to be careful and that the tour will rejoin them the next day. Sanjō is annoyed by the others' caution and wants to go out shopping and taking pictures. Isobe also goes out, to the fortune teller, who gives him a street name where he might find his wife, reincarnated. Numada and Mitsuko go out together again, as well. They stop at a bird shop for Numada to buy a myna. Then, they go to the warehouse to try to locate Ōtsu. Ōtsu hasn't been there yet, and they leave a phone number. As they leave, they see a demonstration in honor of Indira Gandhi, and in the midst of it, Ōtsu finds them. He is staying at a Hindu āshram, which is like a seminary, though he is still a Catholic priest. Ōtsu agrees to come to Mitsuko's hotel garden to talk with her.

Chapter Nine, The River Analysis

Indira Gandhi's death plays an important role in the novel. The demonstrators who show up in grief over Indira's death hold signs that say "Indira is our mother." She, like the Hindu goddess, is a mother figure. She offers healing, reconciliation, and harmony to the disunified people of India. However, the suffering, hatred, and strife of India, and of humanity, are too strong for her to battle against. Indira Gandhi's death is representative of sacrifice and of the impossibility of battling the waves and waves of suffering that overwhelm humanity. Sikhs and Hindus fight and kill each other. The Japanese tourists don't understand the ill-will that has risen up between the two. They have no concept of the religious conflict. From outside, it is a faceless violence, pointless and purposeless.

It is amidst Indira Gandhi's mourners that Mitsuko finds Ōtsu, or rather that Ōtsu finds Mitsuko. Ōtsu and Indira Gandhi represent the same things, the spirit of God and love within the immense suffering of humanity. Ōtsu has continued his philosophy of expanding God to include all humanity and all religions. In contrast to the strife between the Hindus and the Sikhs, both Indira and Ōtsu are unifying forces.



Chapter Ten, The Case of Ōtsu

Chapter Ten, The Case of Ōtsu Summary

At the hotel garden, Ōtsu tells Mitsuko how he wears the clothes of an outcast so he can carry the indigent dying to a facility near the river, and the dead to the crematorium. He believes his Onion would do the same, and resides in Hinduism and Buddhism as well as Christianity. Mitsuko asks Ōtsu if he believes in reincarnation, and Ōtsu talks of how his Onion was killed and brought to life in the hearts of his disciples, whom he still loved even though they betrayed and denied him. He thinks of the Ganges like the love of his Onion, encompassing all. Ōtsu takes his leave of Mitsuko, telling her that he must be up early to continue his task of finding the dead and dying and bringing them to the river.

Isobe has not found his wife, though he has located many girls named Rajini. All were impoverished, begging for food from him. He is not angry with the fortune teller, who is also doing what he must to survive. Isobe buys a bottle of liquor and gets drunk. He witnesses a group of Indians attack and beat a man, a Sikh, in retaliation for the death of Indira Gandhi. Isobe walks through the streets, not caring about the political strife and thinking of his wife. He finds himself at the river. He throws his empty bottle in and calls out to his wife, thinking about how he never showed her love or passion during her life. He thinks about the political and religious strife around him and thinks he could never really believe in anything. The only two people he's ever been truly close to are his mother and his wife. He calls to his wife again, and the river takes away his cry.

Chapter Ten, The Case of Ōtsu Analysis

Ōtsu's carrying of the dead and dying to the River Ganges is compared to Jesus carrying his cross to his death. The cross itself is symbolic of Jesus carrying the sins of humanity. What Ōtsu carries is not identified as sin, though. It is identified as suffering. Suffering is the sin of humanity, caused by the inability of man to live in peace and mutual love. The Onion that Ōtsu believes in is a God that encompasses all suffering and that carries the burdens of others in sacrifice. The choice of an onion to represent God, a word that Ōtsu and Mitsuko choose because the word "God" doesn't mean anything to Mitsuko, is meaningful. An onion has many layers of meaning and is therefore representative of mystery and ambiguity. An onion also is a fruit of sorrow, a cause of tears.

Isobe ultimately fails in his quest to find a physical reincarnation of his wife. He takes his sorrows to the river, joining the flow of human sorrows. He calls to his wife, in death, as he never called to her in life. The river, like the Hindu goddess, like Christ, brings to itself all the sufferings and sorrows of humanity. Isobe is finding a communion with a large river of suffering.



Chapter Eleven, Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs

Chapter Eleven, Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs Summary

Ōtsu returns to the stone house where he occupies a niche in one corner, hardly what could be called a room. He washes himself and then prays. Then he reads a quotation from Mahatma Gandhi, expressing a belief that God is to be found in all religions. The quote resonates with Ōtsu, who believed this even before he read of Gandhi's beliefs. The Catholic priests told him that if he believed that, he should leave the Catholic Church, but Ōtsu could not. He is enthralled by Jesus. Ōtsu falls asleep and dreams of a fellow seminary student. Only in his dreams can Ōtsu argue his position against the others. Jesus, Ōtsu points out, loved the Samaritan. The Hindu he shares a home with rises at three-thirty. Ōtsu gets up at four, washes, and holds his own private mass. He goes out into the streets and finds a collapsed old woman. He gives her water and picks her up to take her to the Ganges. He feels he is imitating Jesus, carrying a cross of human sorrows.

Chapter Eleven, Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs Analysis

Chapter Eleven is a short chapter told from the point of view of Ōtsu. Ōtsu is inarticulate and clumsy. Just as he is socially awkward during his time in college, Ōtsu is awkward at relating his ideas to the other Catholic priests and students. He cannot defend his theology. He can only devote himself to what he sees as the love of Christ, a love that embraces all religions and all peoples. His love extends to every human creature. When Ōtsu picks up the old woman he finds in the street, he is taking on her suffering. He does not know who she is, but he does know that she is human. Because of this, he knows that she carries a load of sorrows. Ōtsu practices sacrifice, imitating Jesus. This sacrifice is an act of love, a way of turning sorrow into love.



Chapter Twelve, Rebirth

Chapter Twelve, Rebirth Summary

Thirty American tourists have arrived at the hotel where the Japanese tour group is staying. Mitsuko is drawn into conversation with an American woman on the bus to the Ganges. Kiguchi remarks to Mitsuko on how, forty years ago during the war, Americans and Japanese were killing each other. Kiguchi has not followed through with his plan to hold a Buddhist service for his fellow soldiers, but at least there is the Ganges. Mitsuko says that the river is deep enough to embrace everyone. As the travelers come to the river, the American asks Mitsuko about her religion, and she says that he has none. At the river, Kiguchi talks to Mitsuko about his war experiences, and his friend's death. Kiguchi has been reading about Buddhism and talks about the concept of good and evil being intertwined. Kiguchi begins to chant a sutra from the Amida Sutra for his friend and the other soldiers who died during the war.

Meanwhile, Numada travels in a taxi along a bumping road. He has the myna bird he bought with him in his cage. To the consternation of the taxi driver, Numada talks to the bird, asking if it remembers their nights together in the past. Numada remembers the myna bird that was such a comfort to him in the hospital during his illness. They arrive at a bird sanctuary, and Numada goes in with the bird. It is deserted. Numada opens up the cage and sets the myna bird free, a repayment to the myna bird that gave its life for Numada.

Chapter Twelve, Rebirth Analysis

Kiguchi resolves his story by reading a prayer over the River Ganges for the dead soldiers, both Indian and Japanese, during the war. Kiguchi chooses India as a place to mourn his fellow soldiers because the Indians were fighting on the opposite side. During the war, the Indians were enemies, as were the Americans. Kiguchi's trip to India is symbolic of the idea that humanity can move past violence, war, and enmity. Kiguchi searches for what Ōtsu desires in religion: unity. Kiguchi's prayer is a prayer for uniting humanity, instead of dividing humanity in strife.

Numada also resolves his story by freeing a myna bird in one of India's nature preserves. The myna bird sacrificed itself for Numada, and Numada feels he must give a gift back to the myna bird. By freeing a different bird, Numada acknowledges a kind of unity of living creatures. On some level, every myna bird is the same, just as on some level, every human being is the same. This is at the core of the idea of reincarnation that recurs throughout the novel. The myna bird Numada frees is symbolically a reincarnation of the bird who sacrificed himself for Numada. Every person is an embodiment of humanity, the river of humanity which contains the souls of the dead.



Chapter Thirteen, He Hath No Form Nor Comeliness

Chapter Thirteen, He Hath No Form Nor Comeliness Summary

The television at the hotel continues to report on Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's death. Isobe is watching it, along with the hotel employees. Sanjō comes downstairs with his camera. He is planning to head to the Ganges to take photos. Isobe warns him about not taking photos of the funerals, especially with tempers running high because of Indira Gandhi's death. Sanjō takes a taxi to the river, rejecting the begging children who greet him. He plans to secretly take a picture of the forbidden ritual to make a name for himself as a photographer. As soon as he pulls out his camera, though, Ōtsu sees him and warns him to stop. Sanjō thinks that he might be able to bribe Ōtsu to help him get a picture.

Mitsuko reads the newspaper, which is full of stories of violence, not only the unrest in India, but also violence in Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq. Even the Onion could not do anything about the violence in the world. Mitsuko looks for Ōtsu around the river, not seeing him. She doesn't even know why she is looking for him. Mitsuko buys a sari to go bathe herself in the river, joining the Hindus with her own prayer, which she feels is a lie, like her loving attitude in the hospital. She is starting to feel, though, that there is a river of humanity, each with their own burden of suffering.

A commotion breaks out by the cremation grounds. A group of Hindus begin running toward an Asian man: Sanjō. Ōtsu steps forward, trying to stop the men from attacking Sanjō. The Hindus beat Ōtsu instead, while Sanjō slips away. Mitsuko runs to Ōtsu, whose neck is twisted. He is carried off to the hospital, on a litter used to carry the dead.

As the Japanese tourists wait for their bus to take them away, Indira Gandhi's funeral is going on. She failed to bring harmony to India. Near the tourists, an impoverished woman is dying, and Sanjō takes her picture. Two nuns come to collect the woman. Sanjō says that it is futile, and Mitsuko asks the nuns why they do this work. One of the nuns says it is all she can believe in. Mitsuko is unsure if she says "this" or "him"—referring to the Onion. Just before they leave, Mitsuko finds that Ōtsu is in critical condition and has taken a turn for the worse.

Chapter Thirteen, He Hath No Form Nor Comeliness Analysis

Sanjō is an unthinking person who does not understand India or respect its traditions. He does not see the reality of the human suffering around him. He doesn't understand



the depths of suffering and sorrow that result in the eruptions of violence following Indira Gandhi's death. He doesn't understand the depths of suffering and sorrow that make the funeral ceremonies at the River Ganges sacred. Though Sanjō is a human being, he has not made a connection with the river of humanity that surrounds him.

Mitsuko, though, through deep contemplation, has discovered the river of humanity. She does not know what it means, but she sees the commonality of suffering that binds people together. She goes to bathe in the sacred river to make a human connection, and to become a part of the picture of the world that is greater than herself. While Sanjō is only concerned with himself, Mitsuko and Ōtsu are concerned with something greater, something unified into a whole that is larger than its parts.

When Ōtsu sacrifices himself for Sanjō, he suffers in the place of another, though Sanjō doesn't understand the significance of the act. Sanjō is a stranger, one who does not care about Ōtsu or about the Onion. This makes Ōtsu's sacrifice even greater. He sacrifices, not for a beloved friend like Kiguchi's fellow soldier, but for a stranger who does not know or appreciate what Ōtsu does. Ōtsu's sacrifice is one of love for humanity, blind in the face of its pointlessness.



Characters

Isobe

During Isobe's younger life, he is a quite man who concentrates on work. He has a wife and an adopted daughter, but he expects his family to silently serve him, and he does not show them outward signs of affection. This drives his adopted daughter away, but his wife seems happy to quietly care for her husband. Isobe has more than one affair, and he does not think of his wife as a woman, a sexual being. Instead, he thinks of marriage as a partnership of convenience in life.

Isobe's world is turned upside down when he finds out his wife is dying of cancer and will only live three or four months. Isobe spends every evening by her bedside in the hospital, and although he does open up enough to hold her hand, something he would otherwise be too embarrassed to do, he cannot bring himself to tell his wife that she's dying. His wife, though, realizes that she will not recover from her illness. Her last words to her husband are that she knows she will be reincarnated, and that he must search for her.

After Keiko's death, Isobe cannot cope with the loss. He cannot envision himself without his wife supporting him, and he realizes that the bond between them was greater than he imagined. He learns of a girl in India who claims to be a reincarnated Japanese person, and he travels to India to try to find his reincarnated wife. However, his quest is a failure. Isobe is consumed with thoughts of his wife, who lives in his mind. Finally, he calls out to his wife at the holy River Ganges, which absorbs his cry.

Naruse Mitsuko

When Mitsuko is a college student, her friends call her Moīra, after a character in a novel who seduces a young man who is too good. Mitsuko meets an awkward young male student named Ōtsu, who is a Christian and who goes to a chapel to pray every day after school. Mitsuko decides that she will pit herself against God and seduce Ōtsu away from the Church. Mitsuko gets Ōtsu to give up praying at the chapel to be with her, and then she dumps him.

Mitsuko later marries a normal, average businessman and believes she will settle down to be a normal housewife. However, she is soon dissatisfied. She feels no passion toward her husband, just as she felt no passion toward Ōtsu. She finds that there is something missing in her soul. During her honeymoon, Mitsuko temporarily leaves her husband in Paris and travels to Lyon to see Ōtsu, who is studying at a seminary. She cannot understand his devotion to God, whom she calls his Onion.

Mitsuko later gets a divorce. She tries volunteering in a hospital to fill the void in her heart, but she only feels like she is mimicking love, creating a hollow imitation of real feeling. Mitsuko learns that Ōtsu is in India, and she travels there seeking him, though



she doesn't know why. Mitsuko begins to feel she understands something that she's been seeking when she meditates on the River Ganges. She sees all the people who travel there as bound together by sorrow, and she sees the river as a vast river of humanity, unified in both suffering and sacrifice.

Kiguchi

Kiguchi is a Japanese veteran of World War II. During the war, he fights in Burma. The campaign he is in is a failure, and Kiguchi must travel to safety down a road known as the Highway of Death. It is littered with the corpses of soldiers, and soldiers who are fallen and dying. Maggots consume the bodies. The soldiers who have not fallen are without food, and many are ill.

Kiguchi comes down with malaria, and he believes that he will be left to die in the jungle like an animal. However, Kiguchi's friend stays behind to care for Kiguchi, and both survive. Kiguchi's friend, however, eats the flesh of a dead soldier so the both can survive, and later drinks himself to death. Kiguchi travels to India to perform a memorial ceremony for the soldiers on both sides of the war who died in Burma. Though he finds that there are few Buddhists in India and therefore he cannot have the Buddhist ceremony he imagines, Kiguchi says a prayer for the dead soldiers at the holy River Ganges.

Numada

Numada is a writer of children's stories with talking animals as characters. As a boy, Numada has a dog named Blackie, whom he shares all his troubles with. Numada's only close connections during his life are with animals, who are the friends and companions that he can confide in. When he is an adult, Numada has a hornbill bird, who is another companion, but he must give up the hornbill when he becomes ill with tuberculosis.

During Numada's serious illness, his wife brings him a myna bird to comfort him. Numada talks to the myna and shares all his troubles. He holds conversations with the bird, which responds with a laughing "ha, ha!" During Numada's final operation, though, his wife forgets about the bird, and it dies. Numada feels like the myna bird has sacrificed his life for him. Numada travels to India to buy a myna bird and set it free in a nature preserve, to repay the bird that he feels died for him in the hospital.

Ôtsu

Ôtsu is a Japanese Catholic priest, but he is rejected by the Catholic Church. Ôtsu cannot give up his ideas, considered heretical by the Catholics. Ôtsu believes that God is big enough to encompass all peoples and religions, and he sees God in Buddhist and Hindu beliefs as well as Christian ones. Ôtsu ends up living in India with a group of Hindu holy men. He finds the dead and dying and transports them to the River Ganges,



the holy site where Hindus hope to have their ashes spread after death. Ōtsu lives a life of selfless sacrifice that Mitsuko finds pointless. He sacrifices himself in imitation of Jesus, carrying the sorrows of others.

Keiko

Keiko is Isobe's wife, who dies of cancer. She has always talked to flowers and plants, and in the hospital, she talks to the ancient ginko tree outside her window. As Keiko dies, she tells Isobe that she knows she will be reincarnated and begs him to search for her.

Enami

Enami is the tour guide who leads the Japanese tour of Buddhist holy sites in India. Enami is bitter toward the tourists, underneath his usually polished exterior. A scholar who is in love with India's culture, Enami resents the narrow-minded tourists who can't understand the culture of India.

Sanjō

Sanjō is a photographer who travels with the Japanese tourists. He is on his honeymoon with his wife. Sanjō is only interested in taking unique photographs that will make a name for himself, and at the end of the novel, he tries to sneak a forbidden photo of the funerals at the River Ganges. Though Sanjō shows no respect for the people Ōtsu has spent his life helping, Ōtsu tries to defend Sanjō and is beaten to near death in his stead.

Mrs. Sanjō

Mrs. Sanjō is one of the Japanese tourists who travel to India. She hates India from the moment she arrives, repulsed by the dirt and poverty. She complains constantly.

Yano

Yano is Mitsuko's husband, whom she soon divorces.

Li

Li is a Chinese houseboy who works for Numada's mother when Numada is young. Li helps Numada train and keep a stray dog. Later, Li is accused of theft and forced to leave.



Tsukada

Tsukada is a wartime buddy of Kiguchi. He stays with Kiguchi in the jungles of Burma when Kiguchi falls sick with malaria. Tsukada eats the flesh of a dead soldier to stay alive so that he can save Kiguchi. After the war, he is overcome with guilt, and he drinks himself to death. As he is dying, he wants to know if God can forgive him for what he's done.

Gaston

Gaston is a volunteer who works at the hospital where Tsukada dies. Gaston is a foreigner, and he believes in God. When Tsukada asks Gaston if his God would forgive Tsukada for eating the flesh of a dead soldier to save himself and his friend, Gaston tells him the story of climbers trapped in the Andes. The dying begged the living to eat their flesh after their deaths, so that they might survive. Tsukada seems to get some comfort from this story. After Tsukada's death, Gaston disappears from the hospital.



Objects/Places

The Ganges

The River Ganges that flows through India is sacred to the Hindus, who travel to the Ganges when they are dying in hopes of being cremated and having their ashes scattered in the sacred river. The characters in the novel converge at the River Ganges, bringing their own sorrows to the sacred place.

Hospitals

Hospitals are important settings in the novel. Keiko, Isobe's wife, spends her last four months of life in a hospital, and Numada spends months in a hospital suffering from tuberculosis. Hospitals bring the characters close to death.

The Ginko Tree

While Keiko is in the hospital, she converses with the ginko tree outside her window. She believes, based on these conversations, that she will be reincarnated.

The Highway of Death

The Highway of Death is the World War II Japanese soldiers' name for the route that Kiguchi travels in Burma, as he and his fellow soldiers retreat. The road is surrounded by dead and dying soldiers, and the retreating soldiers are starving and riddled with disease.

The Onion

The Onion is what Mitsuko and Ōtsu call God, because Mitsuko says that the word "God" means nothing to her.

Paris

Mitsuko goes to Paris for her honeymoon and quickly becomes disenchanted with her husband, who is bored by the history and art of the city.

Lyon

During Mitsuko's honeymoon, already wearied of her husband, Mitsuko travels to Lyon, where she seeks out Ōtsu at the seminary where he is studying to be a priest.



Myna Bird

When Numada is in the hospital with tuberculosis, his wife brings him a myna bird, which is Numada's confidant. However, when Numada is in his final surgery, his wife forgets about the bird, and it dies. Numada believes it has died in his place, and he repays the bird by buying another myna bird in India and setting it free in a nature preserve.

The Kultur Heim

The Kultur Heim is the chapel at Mitsuko's university where Ōtsu goes each day after school to pray. Mitsuko makes Ōtsu promise to stop going to the chapel in exchange for becoming her boyfriend.

Hotel de Paris

The Hotel de Paris is a run-down, second-rate hotel where the travelers stay in Vārānasī.

Blackie

Blackie is Numada's first dog, a confidant to him in his youth.

Pierrot-chan

Pierrot-chan is a hornbill that becomes Numada's friend and confidant as an adult.

Bhagavatī Temple

The Bhagavatī Temple is a cavernous, dank, hot place that contains statues of Hindu goddesses.

The Statue of Chāmundā

The Statue of Chāmundā depicts the goddess, old and bent with human suffering, destroyed by illness. She appears in graveyards, but despite her suffering, she offers milk from her sagging breasts to the children. Chāmundā is a goddess of suffering and of eternal sacrifice in the face of that neverending suffering.



Themes

Unity and Human Connection

Throughout the novel, the characters seek unity and human connection. This is the foundation of love. Isobe seeks a connection with his dead wife, with whom he could never connect with in life. She begs him to seek her out after she has died, and Isobe constantly searches for her. The connection he finds to her comes, not from finding her reincarnated soul in another body, but from finding the memories of her and feeling for her inside his own mind, heart, and soul.

Mitsuko goes through life lacking human connection. She feels no love for any of the men she sleeps with. She tries becoming a volunteer at the hospital, but she does not feel a real connection with the people she tends to. Mitsuko feels like she is just imitating love. Only in India does she feel like she makes a connection with humanity. She sees the unity of humanity in the suffering that is common to all mankind. She sees this suffering as joining together in an all-encompassing river of humanity, represented by the Ganges, where death, suffering, and sacrifice come together.

Ôtsu represents a belief in unity. He believes in unifying all religions and loving all mankind, creating a massive human connection of love. Kiguchi seeks unity by celebrating the fallen soldiers on both sides of the war. He wants to heal the suffering of the Highway of Death through unity. Kiguchi also connects with humanity through the River Ganges. Finally, Numada makes connections with nature. Numada's story broadens unity to something beyond only humanity, encompassing all life. The connections he makes are essential to his life.

Suffering

Suffering is integral to the nature of mankind. In the novel, human suffering is an enormous force, one that seems overwhelming to Mitsuko. Poverty, death, and sorrow cannot be combated. No coin given to any starving child, she realizes, will solve the hunger that runs throughout India's poor. She doesn't understand Numada's desire to give coins to the unending throng of begging children. Nor does she understand Sanjō's callousness in ignoring the same children and sending them harshly away. She doesn't see any way to deal with suffering, because the problem is too large to address and too large to ignore.

The goddess Chāmudā is a goddess of suffering. She takes on all the suffering of humanity, embodying sorrow and death. In Chāmudā, Mitsuko begins to see suffering not as something that can be conquered, but as a backdrop that unifies all human beings. Ôtsu also sees suffering as unavoidable, and he sees some good in suffering. He believes that God turns suffering into something good, taking each situation and making the best of it that's possible.



Of all the characters, perhaps Kiguchi is the closest to suffering. He saw horrors on the Highway of Death that the other characters can hardly imagine. He suffers these horrors in silence, believing that no one can relate to them. Kiguchi also witnessed the suffering of his friend, who sacrificed himself for Kiguchi. Kiguchi is helpless against the aftermath of that sacrifice, and witnesses suffering that is ultimately only alleviated by death and the promise of forgiveness after death.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice is the center of Ōtsu's religion. Jesus Christ, who has Ōtsu in his grasp, is the ultimate figure of sacrifice, giving up his life for mankind's sins. In carrying his own cross, Jesus figuratively carries all of the sufferings of mankind. Ōtsu also carries the sufferings of mankind, literally carrying the dead and dying on his back to the River Ganges. Ōtsu sees something pure and necessary in taking on the suffering of others and in sacrificing yourself, even though Mitsuko sees what Ōtsu does as pointless. Ōtsu will not cure poverty or suffering. His act of sacrifice must be good in and of itself, without creating any tangible benefit.

Kiguchi's wartime friend sacrifices himself for Kiguchi's life, and suffers for it during the rest of his existence, drinking himself to death. Kiguchi's desire to say a prayer for all the fallen soldiers is a response to this sacrifice and suffering. Like Kiguchi, Numada is trying to repay a sacrifice that was made for the sake of his life. Numada feels that the myna bird who was his companion in the hospital sacrificed its life for him, and he repays this sacrifice by setting free another myna bird, a pointless act of kindness, like those that Ōtsu commits.

Isobe's trip is also a kind of sacrifice. Isobe feels the need for redemption because of the fact that he never expressed his love for his wife. He goes on a quest to find his wife, a selfless act that he does in response to her final wish, despite not believing in reincarnation. Isobe's journey is a journey for his wife, and any personal resolution he finds is a side effect of his sacrifice to her memory.



Style

Point of View

Deep River is told from a third person, semi-omniscient point of view that switches between characters as the novel unfolds. Deep River is not the story of one protagonist. Instead, it is the story of multiple people leading separate lives, who all come together at the River Ganges. It includes chapters that tell the stories of each of the main character's lives. The opening of the novel tells Isobe's story, and is told entirely from Isobe's point of view. The reader never sees Keiko's point of view. All that the reader knows of Keiko's inner life is what her husband knows, from sitting at her bedside and from reading her diary. She carries on dialogues with the ginko tree that is outside her window, but the reader is one step removed from these internal scenes. The reader knows Isobe better than anyone in the world, because no one, not even Keiko, is allowed inside Isobe's mind.

Similarly, Mitsuko's inner thoughts and personal story are revealed to the reader from her perspective in the third chapter. The reader initially sees her only from the outside as a hospital volunteer, and her struggles with meaning and human connection are only known to her. The reader sees Kiguchi's life from his perspective, as well. Like Isobe and Mitsuko, Kiguchi has never shared the horrors of war with his family or friends. He has held them inside, and only the reader truly sees the world of sorrow he carries with him. Numada's story, told also from his own perspective, reveals the inner dialogues that he has with animals and reveals to no one. All these stories represent the multitude of lives, filled with a multitude of sorrows, that travel their own separate paths to meet at the River Ganges, the river of humanity.

Setting

The main setting of the novel is the River Ganges, which is symbolic of the unified flow of life, as human beings travel through existence, carrying all their sorrows and suffering. The river is a holy place, and the people who travel there are going on a pilgrimage. Even though the Japanese characters are not Hindu and do not know that their ultimate goal is the spiritual Ganges, they travel there on pilgrimages.

Because the novel is one of pilgrimage, it starts in many different settings, before the characters eventually converge at the Ganges. Because it is a novel of life and death, many of the characters' lives intersect with hospitals. Hospitals are places of illness and death. They are also places of human kindness, where volunteers like Gaston and Mitsuko travel into the lives of the dying, giving them comfort.

Mitsuko travels to France on her honeymoon, and France represents the modern, Western world that Mitsuko feels herself a part of in many ways, and yet isolated from. She seeks out the settings of the novels that she has read and loved, and she wants to



immerse herself in culture and art. However, she finds only a disconnect between herself and her husband. She finds herself isolated and alone, even on her honeymoon. Even in Paris, she starts on a journey to find something vague that she can't identify, and her pilgrimage is one towards Ōtsu.

Language and Meaning

Endo often uses reiteration and returning motifs to carry his themes. At the chapel waiting to see if Ōtsu will come to pray, Mitsuko reads a passage in the Bible. "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him... Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows." Endo reiterates these phrases throughout the novel. To Mitsuko, they represent the many sorrows of mankind that cannot be obliterated, the concept of God as a God of sorrow, and Ōtsu, who sacrifices himself to carry the sorrows of others. Endo even uses these verses as chapter titles, reiterating them to drive home his themes of sorrow and sacrifice.

The name Pierrot is also repeated in the novel. The hornbill belonging to Numada is nicknamed Pierrot, and Mitsuko says that Ōtsu looks like a Pierrot. Pierrot is a stock character from theater, a sad clown. The idea of a Pierrot is another reminder of the infinite sorrow of mankind, and also the pointlessness of trying to combat it with sacrifice. Mitsuko sees Ōtsu as a clown because she sees his sacrifice as futile.

Nature, and especially birds, is also a motif throughout the novel. Nature is used to symbolize traveling into the soul and communing with something higher than one's self. On the other hand, nature is vicious. Kiguchi hears the birds chirping raucously in the forest of death where he suffers in Burma and where he sees himself as dying like an injured bird or insect. The dual aspects of nature, comforting and cruel, reflect the dual nature of life, just like the Hindu goddesses and the River Ganges.

Structure

The novel tracks the stories of four travelers who converge at the holy River Ganges in India. It begins with Isobe's story, after which the idea of the Indian tour of holy places is introduced. Individual travelers are first introduced at a meeting prior to the tour, and the reader sees indications of their separate reasons for traveling to India. Then, in three subsequent chapters, the stories of three of the tourists are told. Mitsuko's story tells of her relationship with Ōtsu. Then, Numada's story tells of his relationships with animals and his illness. Finally, Kiguchi's story tells of his suffering during the war and the guilt and death of his wartime buddy.

After the lives of the four major characters are told, the tour arrives at the River Ganges, where the story will culminate. The travelers are introduced to the goddess Chāmūdā, who represents something similar to the river itself. She is a goddess of sorrows and suffering, and yet she eternally sacrifices to give of herself to the children. Each of the travelers, with their own secret sorrows, relates to the goddess in their own way.



After arriving at the river, the characters seek to finish their stories. Isobe seeks fruitlessly for his wife. Mitsuko finds Ōtsu, but she does not know what she wants to gain by meeting him. Numada buys a myna bird and sets it free, and Kiguchi says a prayer for fallen soldiers over the holy River Ganges. The characters all find some sort of resolution by the river, yet human suffering is never ending.



Quotes

"He was the kind of man who was embarrassed to reveal his own feelings openly in words or on his face, the kind of husband who hoped for a relationship in which his wife would understand him even if he did not utter a word." —Chapter One, The Case of Isobe, page 12

"Even at that time, unlike her school-friends who thought only of the commonplace lives they would be leading in the years ahead, she had wanted to live fully." —Chapter Two, The Informational Meeting, page 33

"Whenever the young men told her she held her liquor well, or that her car was flashy, a feeling something like anger or desolation directed toward herself but inexpressible in words issued forth from the depths of her heart." —Chapter Three, The Case of Mitsuko, page 35

"Just what is it you want? Mitsuko inwardly flung the question at the girl in the same compartment who continued to stare quizzically at her. But it was also the question Mitsuko was posing to herself." —Chapter Three, The Case of Mitsuko, page 57

"Blackie had been the one who understood his sorrow in those days, the only living thing who would listen to his complaints: his companion." —Chapter Four, The Case of Numada, page 73

"Just as a wounded bird or insect would die quietly in this jungle, he too would expire here, and disintegrate and return to the earth: that was how he felt." —Chapter Five, The Case of Kiguchi, page 89

"Nights in India were cooler than she had expected—no, not cooler: lonelier." —Chapter Six, The City by the River, page 114

"He had explained this suffering goddess to his tourists with the claim that he was explaining India to them, but in his own mind he was recalling his own mother, who had raised him through many trials of her own after she was abandoned by her husband." —Chapter Seven, Goddesses, page 140

"She no longer wanted imitations of love. She wanted real love and nothing less." —Chapter Eight, In Search of What Was Lost, page 161

"Yet, at the core of her senseless actions, she vaguely perceived that she yearned for something. A something that would provide her with a sure sense of fulfillment. But she could not fathom what that something might be." —Chapter Nine, The River, page 180

"Revenge and hatred were not limited to the world of politics, but were the same in the realm of religion." —Chapter Ten, The Case of Ōtsu, page 188



"O Lord, Ōtsu offered up a prayer. You carried the cross upon your back and climbed the hill to Golgotha. I now imitate that act." —Chapter Eleven, Surely He Hath Borne Our Grievs, page 193

"Mitsuko shifted her eyes towards the gradually brightening landscape and bared her true feelings. 'It's a deep river, so deep that I feel as though it's not just for the Hindus but for everyone.'" —Chapter Twelve, Rebirth, page 195



Topics for Discussion

Why does Mitsuko feel driven to find Ōtsu?

What does reincarnation mean, ultimately, in the novel, for both the characters and the author?

What does Numada hope to achieve by setting free the myna bird in the nature preserve?

What is the role of sacrifice in the novel? What does sacrifice mean to each of the main characters?

What separates the characters who love India and those who dislike it, like Mrs. Sanjō?

What does Kiguchi hope to gain from his trip to India? Does he achieve it?

What does Isobe gain and lose during his trip to India?