Fountains in the Rain Study Guide

Fountains in the Rain by Yukio Mishima

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Introduction

"More than two decades after his death," writes Susan J. Napier in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "Mishima Yukio is arguably still the most famous writer modern Japan has produced." Mishima's admirers point to "the brilliance of his style, the power of his imagination, and the fascination and variety of his themes. . . all of which are in marked contrast to much of postwar Japanese fiction." Mishima's work is probably better known to English-speaking readers than any other Japanese writer's work.

Several collections of Mishima's short stories were translated while he was still alive, but in 1989 seven stories that had never before been translated were collected in *Acts of Worship*. In reviewing this volume, Roy Starrs wrote, "This present sampling . . . will provide a tantalizing glimpse for the Western reader of some of these still undiscovered riches. For in no art did Mishima perform better than in the art of the short story. In fact, he achieved the kind of mature mastery, even perfection, in his short stories that always seems to elude him in his novels."

Despite such kudos and despite inclusion in anthologies and college syllabi, Mishima's "Fountains in the Rain" has elicited little critical attention in English. Its most in-depth analysis comes from Mishima's translator, John Bester, who wrote the preface to *Acts of Worship*. "Fountains in the Rain," with a hero so like many of Mishima's male characters, invites further investigation.

Author Biography

Yukio Mishima was born as Hiroka Kimitake in Tokyo, Japan, in 1925. His ancestors were of the upper samurai class, and his grandmother encouraged his interest in Kabuki theater and in the notion of an aristocratic past. Mishima attended an elite school, but his early literary inclinations were not encouraged at his school, which emphasized physical activity over intellectual activity, and Mishima was often made to feel like an outsider by his classmates. Mishima began writing stories in middle school. When he was sixteen, his first piece of short fiction, "Hanazakari no mori" ("The Forest in Full Flower") was published in nationalist literary magazine. It quickly sold out its first edition. It focuses on the narrator's aristocratic ancestors. Mishima's teachers encouraged his involvement with the Nihon Romanha, a group of Japanese romantics who insisted on the uniqueness of the Japanese people and their history and culture. Mishima avoided military service in World War II because he was misdiagnosed as having tuberculosis.

In 1947 Mishima received his law degree from Tokyo University. He took a position with the Finance Ministry but resigned less than a year later in order to devote himself full-time to his writing. In 1948 his first novel, *Tozoku* was published. Soon thereafter he was invited to join the group that published a literary magazine. In 1949 the autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Mask* was published, and it became a best seller and established Mishima's reputation as an important voice in Japanese fiction.

In 1952 Mishima traveled abroad, which inspired his next writings. Throughout the decade he continued to publish novels, essays, No (also known as "Noh") plays, and stories. His work also began to be translated into other languages for foreign readers.

By the early 1960s, some people thought that Mishima had passed the peak of his literary career, but he became more of a public figure than ever. In 1967 he spent a month training with the Self Defense Forces, and the following year, he formed a private army called the Shield Society. It was sworn to defend the emperor. By the late 1960s, Mishima had become increasingly consumed by the desire to revive the traditional values and morals of Japan's imperialistic past. He believed that his country was being corrupted by Westernization. His subsequent works, which include novels, short stories, and an essay collection, reflect this political belief as well as his belief in self-sacrifice in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment. His final tetrology, *The Sea of Fertility*, was published in monthly installments from 1965 until the day of Mishima's death in 1970. He believed that this tetrology was the product of all he had learned as a writer. He told friends that when he finished, there would be nothing left for him to do but kill himself.

On November 25, 1970, Mishima and members of the Shield Society took over headquarters of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in Tokyo in what he called an attempted "Showa Restoration."After unsuccessfully trying to get the soldiers to listen to him, Mishima committed seppuku, or the ritual suicide of the samurai warrior.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a young man and a young woman walking through the rain. The girl, Masako, is crying incessantly. The boy, Akio, has recently broken off their relationship while they were having tea. Akio had pursued the relationship only in order to break up with her. Once he did so, however, Masako began to cry. She cried soundlessly, with the tears gushing forth in a continuous flow. Akio assumed that the tears would stop, but when they didn't, Akio felt self-conscious under the curious stares of the tea room's other patrons. Abruptly, Akio stood up to leave, but Masako followed him because she had no umbrella. Now the pair find themselves wandering through the streets.

Akio decides to head toward a public garden that has three fountains. He thinks that by bringing Masako's tears and the fountains together, she will stop crying. He thinks that Masako will surely see that her tears—which all go to waste—cannot compete with the fountain, and this will make her stop crying. Akio feels elated by his decision.

The pair walk in silence through the empty streets. Akio thinks that Masako is waiting for him to say something about their relationship. Out of pride, he will not speak.

When they reach the garden, they are alone. Akio and Masako sit down, but Akio becomes angry, though he does not know why. He is no longer amused or happy. In his anger, Akio runs toward the fountains. Masako follows him. She asks where he is going. Akio replies by telling her to look at the fountains and points out that her tears are no match for them. The pair turns to look at the fountains, but it is Akio who becomes entranced by them. Fascinated, he intently watches the jets of water rushing upward into the sky. He thinks about the futility of the column of water to reach the sky, though it seems to be trying hard to do so. He raises his gaze to the sky and gets rain in his eye.

Immediately, the image of the fountains is gone from his mind. Suddenly, the fountains represent only endless, pointless repetition. He forgets his former elation and also his former anger. He starts walking.

Masako falls into step beside him and asks where he is going. He tells her that it is his business. "I told you quite plainly," he says, but she asks what it was that he thinks he told her. He looks at her in horror and repeats what he had said about breaking up. In a completely normal tone of voice, she responds that she had not heard him. In shock, he asks her why she started crying if she had not heard what he said. She says that there was no reason, that the tears just came. Akio gets furious and wants to shout at her. He opens his mouth but sneezes instead. He thinks that if he is not careful, he will get a cold.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Akio is a young man who has just ended a relationship with his girlfriend, Masako. This is the first time he has initiated a breakup and it is a moment he has long anticipated. Now, as he and the young girl walk in the rain, he thinks about the scene that has just transpired and the events leading up to it.

Akio had initiated and endured the relationship for the simple purpose of being able to break up with Masako. As he thought about how the scene might unfold, he imagined he would feel strong – almost heroic – when the moment finally came. Instead, he is surprised to find that the words almost stick in his throat and he fears that Masako did not hear him. His fears are alleviated when, almost instantly, she begins to cry.

Because they are in a crowded tea shop in the Marunouchi Building, it is not possible to hear Masako crying. Even so, her tears flow freely and soon enough, the people seated around them notice. Akio assumes that she will soon stop crying, but when she does not, Akio grows increasingly uncomfortable and soon, gets up to leave.

As he heads outside, Akio becomes aware that Masako has followed him. Realizing that she has no umbrella, he feels obligated to share his. As he does, he is reminded of the way in which old people continue to stay together long after they have stopped feeling anything for each other. They walk in silence and Akio wonders how and where he can finally rid himself of the crying Masako.

They continue to walk and Akio is stricken with a random thought: do fountains continue to work even when it is raining? As he ponders this question, he realizes that there is a physical similarity between the fountains and Masako's tears as well as one profound difference: the water in the fountain is recycled and reused while Masako's tears fall and are wasted. Hoping that Masako will realize that her tears are being wasted, Akio takes her to a public garden where there are three fountains.

The pair walks in silence. Akio notices that between the rain and Masako's tears, he feels hopelessly wet. They enter the garden and he finds a spot to sit that will slightly shelter them from the rain. Masako is still crying uncontrollably and almost appears as though she is in some sort of trance. Even so, Akio senses that she is waiting for him to speak and so, out of principle, he remains silent.

From where he sits, Akio can see the three fountains: two small and one large. Because it is raining, their sound is muted and from a distance, the spray from the fountains resembles curved glass tubes. As it is not yet lunchtime, there is no one else in the garden. As he sits watching the fountains, Akio becomes increasingly angry, although he is at a loss to explain why. He cannot totally blame Masako for his foul mood, since he knows that he can easily walk away from her; rather, he believes his anger is the

result of the combination of the rain, Masako's tears and the grey sky. Suddenly overwhelmed with the desire to make sure Masako sees the fountains, he jumps up and runs toward them. Masako follows him and as they both stop directly in front of the fountains, she asks him where he is going. Masako replies by telling her that she can cry as much as she would like, but she will never be a match for the fountains.

The couple stands in silence for several minutes watching the fountains. As they watch, it is almost impossible to tell that it is still raining. Although his original intention was for Masako to see the fountains, Akio finds that he is totally mesmerized. As he watches the water makes its upward ascent, he finds himself fascinated at the way in which the water seems to replace itself perpetually. Momentarily breaking his stare to look upward, he finds that it is raining.

The falling rain makes Akio forget about the fountains, about his anger and about his elation with breaking up with Masako. Feeling empty, he begins to walk away from the fountains, only to find that Masako has once again followed him.

When Masako asks Akio where he is going, he replies that his actions were no longer of concern to her. When she questions him, Akio reminds her that they have ended their relationship. When Masako says she did not hear Akio say that he wanted to break up, Akio is puzzled and asks why she was crying. Masako very calmly replies that she does not know – that "the tears just came."

Akio again becomes angry and wants to shout at her. Instead, he sneezes and thinks to himself that if he is not careful, he will catch a cold.

Analysis

"Fountains in the Rain" is a short story by Yukio Mishima that appears in the collection *Acts of Worship*. One of the most striking characteristics of this story is the fact that while it is told in the third person, it is also solely through the point of view of Akio. As a result, with the exception of Akio's intermittent commentaries, the reader is not given the opportunity to gain much insight into Masako's character.

The central themes in this story are maturity and control. As the story begins, Akio has just broken up with his girlfriend, an action he believes to be an important rite of passage into manhood. The author tells us that Akio initiated the relationship with the sole intention of ending it, because he "longed just once to pronounce with his own lips, with due authority, like the edict of a king: 'It's time to break it off!'" His belief that taking this step will put him in the company of the "most manly of men" tells us that Akio is likely no more than a boy himself.

Akio's youth is hinted at in other portions of the story as well. In fact, in the story's very first sentence, he is referred to as "a boy," a description that is repeated several times. Another hint is provided later in the story when his face is described as "almost beardless."

We also see how Akio struggles to maintain his control, a characteristic common among young men. After informing Masako that he wishes to end their relationship, he becomes so unnerved by her tears that he fears his "newfound sense of maturity" will be threatened. As Masako continues to cry, he nearly becomes overwhelmed with the desire to shake her. Later, when they are in the garden, he gives in "to a simple desire to hurt." The fact that Akio cannot maintain self-control tells us that he is likely quite immature. Even the wide range of emotions that Akio seems to exhibit during the short period of time in which the story takes place serve to provide an indication that he is not yet in control of himself.

The use of water in the story is also significant. Water appears in three forms: the rain, the fountains and in Masako's tears. We see that the water has a profound effect on Akio's mood; Masako's tears anger him, the rain depresses him and the fountains elate him. Recall that as he stands looking at the fountains, Akio in awe of their power. The fountains represent the control and maturity that he is seeking; their ability to replenish themselves as they grow in height is something that Akio has not yet been able to achieve.

Even as the story ends, Akio still is not in control of himself. Wishing to yell in frustration at Masako, he sneezes instead, illustrating just how little control he has over his actions. Yet, we realize that there is still time for him to mature and grow.

Characters

Akio

Akio is the main character of the story. He has set out this afternoon to break up with his girlfriend, whom he claims to have previously wooed simply in order to be able to break up with her. Akio desperately needs to control Masako because he senses his inability to control himself. His lack of self-control is exhibited through his fascination with the fountains; he had come to the fountains to humiliate Masako and ended up surprising himself. At the end, he seems to acknowledge how viewing the fountains arouses a sexuality that he had earlier denied. By the end of the story, Akio's ineffectual manner of controlling himself and any situation in which he finds himself is apparent. He reverts back to the boy he once was, willing to accept the mundaneness of life.

Masako

Masako is Akio's girlfriend. She is a student. She seems to react badly to the news of the breakup, but it turns out that she was simply crying for no reason at all. When she does learn what Akio has to say, she is unaffected and unimpressed by his news. She also does not let go of his umbrella, which may indicate her unwillingness to break up.

Themes

Love

Although love is not what Akio feels for Masako, it is still a theme in the story since Akio used the promise of love to woo Masako. He did so only in order to form a relationship with her so he could break up with her. Akio has no emotional ties to Masako, but he believes she has them to him, which is what he attributes her tears to. At the end of the story, however, he discovers that Masako is not in love with him either. She responds to his words calmly and reasonably and appears to be affected very little by the ending of the love affair.

Sexuality

A strong current of sexuality runs through the story. Akio clearly believes that sleeping with Masako will make her love him and will reinforce his claims of love for her. Thus Akio shows that he equates sex and love, even though he acknowledges to himself that he does not love Masako. Akio also takes pride in his ability to control his sexuality, falsely seeing himself as "free from the dominance of desire." When faced with the fountains, however, the truth emerges: Akio is fascinated by the rushing water, which takes on ambiguous sexual symbolism under his gaze.

Deception

The art of deception is critical to the success of Akio's scheme, but he is not good at it. He pretends to love Masako, but he does not; and he believes that he has made Masako fall in love with him, but she does not love him. Not only does he deceive himself by repressing feelings of sexual desire, he also deceives himself by focusing his sexual energy on women, though he is, in fact, also aroused by images suggesting male sexuality. Throughout most of the story, Akio exists in some state of selfdeception. At the end, however, he does think one purely natural thought, yet it is quite mundane: "If I'm not careful I'm going to get a cold." Such an ending demonstrates the great depth to which Akio's deception has drawn him as well as the grandiosity that he finds in this false way of looking at life.

Emotional Transformation

Akio experiences many different emotions throughout the course of this brief story. When he first sits down in the tea room with Masako, he is feeling great anticipation and excitement at breaking off their relationship. He thinks this action will bring him greater maturity. When Masako does not stop crying, however, he begins to feel embarrassed. He wants to get away from her, but he is thwarted in this desire, for she has no umbrella and he must let her share his. When he settles on the plan of bringing her to the

fountains, Akio feels elated. He thinks it is a joke on Masako, and he wants to humiliate her. When they arrive at the fountains, however, Akio feels unaccountably angry. He no longer draws pleasure from his plan. He tries to escape from Masako, and he runs toward the fountains, but she follows. Next Akio becomes fascinated with the movement of the water. After that moment passes, however, Akio falls into a state best characterized by a certain vacancy. He wanders away with no thought of Masako. That is when he discovers that she never even heard him breaking up with her, and he is left in a state of shock.

Control and Self-Control

Above all else, Akio values self-control. He prefers to think of himself as a young man who has self-control, but his actions show otherwise. In order to make himself feel like he does have control over himself, Akio tries to assert control over others; it is for this that he wanted to break up with a woman. The elements of the story—first, Akio's insistence on what a hard person he is, even beyond the boundaries of sexual desire, and later, Akio's fascination with the fountains—clearly show that Akio has very little control over himself. Masako's reaction to the news of the end of relationship also shows that Akio's actions have little effect—thus little control—on her.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third-person point of view. Everything that happens in the story is filtered through Akio. The reader only learns his thoughts and ideas. Because Akio is so unperceptive and so uninterested in Masako, the reader learns very little about her. The only indications of what she is thinking come through her brief opportunities for dialogue and the few times that Akio describes what she is doing. For instance, in her most important moment, Masako responds to the news (redelivered) that Akio is breaking up with her: "Really? Did you say that? I didn't hear you," she says in a "normal" voice. This moment undercuts all the feelings that Akio has been going through and turns the joke— both of them, in fact: wooing Masako in order to break up with her and making her confront the fountain—on himself.

Symbolism

The fountains are the story's primary symbols. They are described in sexual terms. The main columns of the fountains, which "shot upward from the center of each basin," are phallic symbols representing the male genitalia. The basins that surround the fountains, with their "radiating curves" are representative of the female genitalia. Akio's fascination with the fountains belies his stated indifference to sex. His ambivalence is further revealed to be in sexual orientation as well. He first describes the columns of water but then claims to be "less taken" with them than with the surrounding waters. Watching all the water's "untiring rushing," Akio goes into a sexual reverie, "being taken over by the water, carried away on its rushing, cast far away." That reverie continues when the big central column captures his attention. He sees within the column the water rushing upward. Unlike the male genitalia, however, this phallus experiences a "kind of perpetual replenishment." Despite this, the column will be "frustrated." However, the column has something that Akio wants: "unwaning power."

Setting

The story is set in Tokyo, even though the location is not named. By not labeling the city, Mishima shows that this story could take place anywhere, and, indeed, in nearly any culture.

The anonymous setting is also important because it underscores Akio's isolation in relation to himself and to others. In the tea house, the setting is amid overwhelming noise and bustling activity. The sounds produced inside the tea house—the customers' voices, the clattering dishes, the cash register— "clashed with each other all the more violently . . . to create a single, mind-fuddling commotion." These sounds□and this emotion□reflect Akio's feelings at the moment. He is overwrought and excited by his ending of the relationship, yet he is not as at ease with his actions as he would like to

be. The setting is also important because the noise created in the tea house provides the reason that Masako doesn't hear Akio's words.

When the pair leave the tea room, the setting changes. Outside, Masako follows Akio "silently"; he himself walks "in silence." The sidewalks are empty; thus at this moment Akio and Masako exist in complete isolation. When they reach the garden, "not a soul" is around, but "beyond the garden, there was a constant procession of wet truck hoods and bus roofs in red, white, or yellow." Akio is aware that the world goes on, but at this moment he is not part of it.

Historical Context

The Japanese Economy

After World War II, Japan made a rapid and impressive economic recovery. Many factors contributed to the country's success. Instead of concentrating on producing inexpensive textiles sold to other Asian countries, Japan began to produce advanced technology for a world market. Japan's workforce was skilled and highly motivated. The government also cooperated and supported industry.

By 1960 Japan had become the fifth-largest among the world's market economies; by 1968 it was second only to the United States. Also by the middle of the decade, Japan was exporting more goods to the United States than it was importing. While a brief depression took place mid-decade, between 1965 and 1970, the economy saw an average growth of over eleven percent per year.

Society and Wealth

The distribution of individual income moved toward greater equality in the 1960s. Post-war land and labor reforms and the dissolution of the *zaibatsu* (a Japanese conglomerate or cartel) all worked to bring this greater equality in income distribution. During this period, Japan, among all the advanced industrialized nations, became the country with the most equal income distribution. Indeed, nearly ninety percent of Japanese felt that they enjoyed a middleclass standard of living. Along with this rise of middle-class consciousness came a rise in school and university enrollment, personal savings, desire for home ownership, and the purchase of consumer goods, such as televisions.

Japanese Lifestyle

The Japanese population did see some downsides to the economic growth. The Japanese worked longer hours than workers holding similar jobs in Western countries. The cost of living in Japan was also much higher than it was in other industrialized nations.

Rapid industrialization and population growth emerged as a major issue in Japan in the 1960s. In the early 1960s, many rural residents began to migrate to the cities. Urban areas grew overcrowded. Space and housing were scarce, and prices began to rise dramatically in the 1960s. In the six largest cities, the price index for urban land increased more than twenty times between 1955 and 1970.

As thousands of people flocked to the cities, rural municipalities sought ways to increase their tax base and revenue. To this effect, they encouraged industries, through monetary incentives, to move into their areas. Rural Japan thus underwent a period of

industrialization. Pollution became commonplace, and the government took no measures to prevent it. By the mid-1960s, citizens had begun to form grassroots organizations to put a stop to potentially deadly polluting of the environment.

The U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty

The United States organized the reconstruction of the Japanese government after Japan's surrender in World War II and maintained military troops there as provided by the U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty. In 1960, however, Japan and the United States sought to revise the treaty. Some of the terms were changed, and the objective of economic cooperation between the two countries was added. Political leftists were opposed to the treaty on the grounds that Japan, which would continue to allow the United States to maintain military bases in Japan, would be forced to follow whatever military action the United States might want to take in Asia. The administration of Prime Minister Nobusuke Kishi, however, supported the amended treaty in order to appease American wishes. In his desire to ratify the treaty when U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower visited the following month, Japan's prime minister pushed the treaty through without consulting the opposition parties. Tens of thousands of students and workers joined in protest, and rioting broke out in the streets. Eisenhower cancelled his visit because his security could not be assured. The prime minister flew to Washington, where the treaty was ratified. Upon his return, Kishi resigned.

Critical Overview

Since childhood, Mishima was drawn to the history and cultural traditions of Japan. As a young writer, he became acquainted with the Japanese romantics, a group of writers and intellectuals who rejected literary modernism—including the genres of naturalism and realism—and advocated the reading of Japanese classics. Mishima supported their literary theories, for example, expressing a decided disinterest in realistic, banal dialogue. Mishima's early stories and his first novel demonstrate elements typical of this school of literature, such as beautiful young lovers who die a romantic death, and the sea. Such elements would be seen again in Mishima's later works but more often as ironic symbols. Mishima's early work also lacked his later renowned contemporary social vision, drawing more deeply on Japan's past.

With his second novel, *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), Mishima first raised some of the themes that he would continue to explore over the next few decades, such as homosexuality, explicit sexuality, and societal hypocrisy. Short stories, such as those included in *Death in Midsummer*, also explore Mishima's preoccupation with death as well as the traditional character of Japan and the loss of Japanese tradition. Critics have characterized Mishima's work from the 1950s as nihilistic, a school of writing that was popular in post-War Japan.

In the 1960s, however, Mishima turned to the exploration of political and philosophical themes. The story "Patriotism," perhaps Mishima's most well-known work, is based on a 1936 rebellion in which a group of young officers attempt to restore the emperor. Culminating in the ritual suicide of a married couple, the story alludes to Mishima's belief in the interconnectedness of love and death. Mishima's glorification of the emperor is also first noted in this work, as is his personal obsession with violent and beautiful death.

Throughout the decade, Mishima was growing increasingly unhappy with contemporary Japan. He saw the country becoming more and more corrupt as a result of Westernization and wanted a return to more traditional values. In the last four years of his life, Mishima focused all of his creative efforts on his tetralogy, *The Sea of Fertility*, in which he attempted to sum up his philosophy of life and his view of the history of modern Japan. The day its final installment appeared, Mishima committed suicide.

The story "Fountains in the Rain" was not available to English-speaking audiences until almost two decades after Mishima's death and close to thirty years after the story was first published in Japan. *Acts of Worship* included seven stories that spanned Mishima's career. There has been very little criticism in English on the story; the variety of opinion on it demonstrates the fact that no main consensus exists. John Bester, Mishima's translator who introduced *Acts of Worship*, referred to it as a "slight, humorous account of a tiff between a very ordinary young man and his girl." Roy Starrs, who reviewed the collection for *The Journal of Asian Studies*, called it a "cynical study" about a "heartless but stupid young man's attempts to ditch his girlfriend." Paul Anderer, a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*, wrote that Akio "whips himself into a romantic frenzy, not his

girlfriend—which would be a banal and predictable romance—but for the chance to walk out on her."

In their discussion of the collection as a whole, however, many critics touched upon certain themes common to much of Mishima's work, such as male dominance. J. M. Ditsky pointed out in *Choice*, "If there is a striking common theme running through all seven stories, it is the attempt of the male ego to control its environment—including, of course, other persons."

Today, Mishima still enjoys a secure reputation, and many critics believe him to be the finest writer of modern Japan. Due to the spectacular nature of his death, however, many people tend to focus on that instead of his body of work. They are intertwined.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses Akio's efforts to prove his self-control.

Yukio Mishima became a rising star in the Japanese literary field when he was only in his mid-twenties, and he remains today one of that country's most internationally renowned contemporary writers. Susan J. Napier writes in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that Mishima is a "writer who has helped mold the Western imagination of Japan at the same time as one who continues to haunt the contemporary Japanese mind." Aside from his numerous writings, Mishima achieved notoriety for his ritual suicide, performed while still at the pinnacle of his career.

Stories like "Patriotrism" glorify traditional aspects of Japanese society, such as imperialism and the nobility of the samurai. In contrast to such works dealing with abstract social ideals, a story like "Fountains in the Rain," which was not made accessible to the English-speaking public until 1989, has often been called a story about the end of a love affair. Indeed, its most in-depth commentary comes from John Bester, Mishima's translator. In his preface to the 1989 collection, *Acts of Worship*, Bester writes,

The ability to organize a small form is very evident in 'Fountains in the Rain.' A slight, humorous account of a tiff between a very ordinary young man and his girl, it skillfully portrays the instability, lack of confi- dence, and above all the self-centeredness that often characterize youth. With great skill, the imagery set forth in the title is worked into the fabric of the story; in a central set piece of description, the fountains reveal themselves as a symbol of the shifting impulses— ambition, aggression, sexuality—to which the hero is prey, and which are liable at any moment to be negated by the monotony of everyday life—the rain—and its obligations. The girl is barely sketched in, but the suggestion of a firmer grasp of immediate realities provides a good foil to the boy's instability.

Though readers may disagree with such simplistic reductions of "Fountains in the Rain," many of Bester's points hold up. The story is rich in imagery, the boy does rebel against the obligations of everyday life, the boy is extremely self centered— but the boy is hardly a "very ordinary young man." The character Akio actually obliquely references Mishima's aesthetic beliefs in the celebration of rigidity and self-control, as well as the necessity for it, which are far from aspects of the average person.

Akio, the main character of the story, has previously set himself the task of making a young woman fall in love with him simply so he can end the relationship. He apparently has accomplished this goal, for as the story begins he has recently told Masako that they must break up, which was "something he had long dreamed of" doing. The impetus for this action, though not explicated by the young man, is Akio's desire to demonstrate control over another human. As indicated by the grandiosity of his description of what he

imagined would happen, Akio believes himself to hold Masako in his thrall: "'It's time to break it off!' Those words, the mere enunciation of which would be enough to rend the sky asunder. . . . That phrase, more heroic, more glorious than any other in the world." Akio further ascribes the ability to manipulate a woman as something belonging to only "the most manly of men."

His need to prove that he can achieve this "height of masculinity" stems from Akio's insecurity. As hinted at early in the story and again indicated closer to its end, Akio fears losing control of himself. His subconscious recognizes this truth, and he takes great pains to shore up his self-image. He seeks to strengthen himself by gaining control of others. He assigns personality traits to himself that he would like to possess; for instance, he maintains that his nature is "cut-and-dried," a blatant misrepresentation. Akio's nature is actually quite mutable—simply note the myriad emotions that he undergoes throughout the course of the afternoon— and beyond his ability to control. Even the moment of his greatest triumph—breaking off with Masako— is undercut by his weakness. Instead of speaking firmly and forcefully, he had spoken "with such a deplorable lack of clarity, with a rattling noise in the throat." His fear is evident, yet he continues and thus accomplishes this "splendid achievement." Evincing such power over another human draws Akio to what he calls a "newfound sense of maturity."

Akio feels oppressed by Masako's tears, for they represent his inability to shake her free. Despite his claims at being able to simply end the relationship, he feels an obligation to her. Even after he tells her his news, he still spends the afternoon with her, for it is raining and Masako has no umbrella of her own. The sense of freedom he had hoped to achieve through his actions cannot come as long as she is crying. He feels "absolute frustration . . . at the rain, the tears, the leaden sky that hung like a barrier before him." Angry at the usurpation of his superiority, "the boy gave in to a simple desire to hurt."

Bringing Masako into confrontation with the fountains only ends in Akio's fascination with the fountains. He even finds greater truths there, though he hides them from himself, unwilling to face what they reveal about him. His wonderment as he gazes at the fountains reveals a sublimated sexual desire for both men and women. Akio had earlier denied any true sexuality, claiming "that he had made love to Masako" even though he "had always been free from the dominance of desire," but his perception of the fountains utterly disproves that claim. The columns with water that "shot upward" and "spouted vertically and undisturbed" represent the male sexual organ, while the "jets from the big central fountain" with the "untiring rushing" arcs of water represent the female sexual organ.

Although Akio begins his contemplation by focusing on the columns, he still is "less taken with three main columns of water than with the water that shot out in radiating curves all around." At this point, he forces himself to be drawn to the representation of a woman's sexuality. As he watches the arcs of water surrounding the columns, his mind is "taken over by the water, carried away on its rushing, cast far away. . . ." Akio's rapture can be likened to one that would emerge from a sexual encounter. He feels the same way, however, while watching the central column. He is fascinated by the "furious

speed" of the water climbing within it, "steadily filling a slender cycle of space from base to summit, replacing each moment what had been lost the moment before, in a kind of perpetual replenishment." Here Akio describes his fantasy of the ultimate, ongoing orgasm. Although he seems to take pleasure in this idea, as he has done previously, he counters what he has said by adding, "It was plain that at heaven's height it would be finally frustrated; yet the unwaning power that supported unceasing failure was magnificent." Here Akio unconsciously expresses his own image of himself as a sexually frustrated creature, yet one who longs to achieve true fulfillment.

As abruptly as Akio falls into this sexual reverie, he is brought out of it: "suddenly, fountains in the rain seemed to represent no more than the endless repetition of a stupid and pointless process." With this perception, Akio again denies his sexuality, casting himself back into that person he claimed to be at the beginning of the story—one who has complete control over himself. The reader, however, knows this to be untrue. Not only does Akio have true sexual desires, he has them for men as well as women. His subconscious understanding of this is demonstrated when he starts to walk away from the fountains, having completely forgotten Masako; she is no longer important to his maintenance of the belief that he can control others, for he knows that he cannot even control himself.

The story further exposes Akio as he discovers that Masako never even heard his words breaking up with her. She was crying for no special reason; the "tears just came." The shock of learning the truth is so great that Akio is "[A]lmost bowled over." When he speaks to her again, he has reverted back to the unsure self who first met Masako at the tea house. He stammers out a reply that is desperate in its attempt to regain the upper hand: "he wanted to shout something at her," but he is foiled again in this effort as "at the crucial moment" he let forth an "enormous sneeze." Akio thinks, "If I'm not careful I'm going to get a cold." As the story's final sentence, it sums up Akio's release of his whole fantasy of controlling himself and others, at least for the moment. His acceptance of himself as a fallible human, even a mundane one at that instant, shows the utter failure of his plan toward Masako and his plan to shore up his own ego.

Source: Rena Korb, Critical Essay on "Fountains in the Rain," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Piano is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Bowling Green State University. In the following essay, she explores the vain and egocentric attempt of a young man to achieve manhood by intentionally seducing and abandoning a young woman in "Fountains in the Rain."

Written in 1963, the short story "Fountains in the Rain" by Japanese writer Yukio Mishima reveals the calculated intentions of a young man who breaks up with the woman he is dating because "it was something he had long dreamed of." His motivation for the breakup is not that he no longer loves or desires her, but that he thinks his action will bring him a maturity that he has not yet experienced. Although the young man Akio claims that breaking up with Masako will usher in an elevated stage of emotional and mental development, in fact, it does not. Ironically, the situation engenders not confidence but doubt when the breakup does not go as planned. Despite his initial feelings of intense relief and pleasure, eventually Akio finds himself bereft, confronting feelings of inadequacy, aggression, frustrated passion, and doubt at the core of his being as he realizes the emptiness and futility of his gesture. The heroic, manly act that Akio imagines will initiate him into manhood is actually a desperately shallow and irresponsible one that has no meaning or relevance either to Masako, the young woman whom Akio intends to hurt, or himself. Throughout the story, Mishima uses point of view, imagery, irony, and setting to evoke Akio's imaginative yet futile attempt at achieving manhood.

Told from a third person point of view, "Fountains in the Rain" focuses primarily on the internal reactions of Akio to his breakup with Masako in a teahouse in Tokyo. From this point of view, the reader gains an understanding of Akio as a selfabsorbed and naïve young man who thinks that becoming a man depends on carrying out certain kinds of acts that establish one's authority and credibility. In this case, it is breaking up with a girl. From the very beginning of the story, Akio's selfcenteredness is apparent as he drags Masako along the streets of Tokyo, recounting in his mind what he has just done. Mishima's use of an extended flash back as an organizing structure reveals the depth of Akio's self-absorption as well as his self-congratulatory amazement that he has gotten the reaction he wanted from Masako: she is crying uncontrollably.

. . . he marveled at the peppermint freshness of mind with which he contemplated the phenomenon. This was precisely what he had planned, worked to encompass and brought to reality: a splendid achievement, though admittedly somewhat mechanical.

By intentionally breaking up with Masako—a woman whom, it can be argued, he still loves—and seeing her cry, Akio imagines that his action will change his very being from that of a boy to a man: "Under his own steam, Akio had crossed the pass over the mountains that he'd gazed at for so long in the distance." Yet Akio's initial confidence quickly wears thin as Masako's profuse weeping thwarts Akio's plan. It is because of Masako's crying that Akio goes to the fountains in the park where he eventually confronts the myth of masculinity that he has dreamed up.

Although Masako is presented to the reader only through Akio's eyes, she has a central role in the story in terms of how she affects and undermines Akio's vision of achieving manhood. As the translator of *Acts of Worship*, John Bester remarks, "The girl is barely sketched in, but the suggestion of a firmer grasp of immediate realities provides a good foil to the boy's instability." It seems that the more Akio attempts to emotionally detach himself from Masako, the more he is overwhelmed by what he thinks is her reaction to the break up. "The abundance of Masako's tears was a genuine cause for astonishment. Not for a moment did their volume diminish." Her capacity for crying and its effect on the people in the teahouse who looked at them "with stares of a kind calculated to disturb Akio's newfound sense of maturity" lead him to take drastic and cruel measures. But what starts out to be a cruel joke, bringing Masako to the fountains in the park to confront a mightier force than her own tears, only ends up backfiring.

. . . the only trouble was the absolute frustration he felt at the rain, the tears, the leaden sky that hung like a barrier before him. They pressed down on him on all sides, reducing his freedom to a kind of damp rag.

Because of the oppressive setting, Akio finds he can no longer maintain the elation he felt moments before when telling Masako that he wanted to break it off. Everything he tries to do to regain that preliminary feeling falls to the wayside. Masako seems impervious to anything he does, which leads the reader to believe that Akio is creating an image of himself that exists only in his imagination. For example, Akio prides himself on particular behaviors that reveal his newfound restraint and maturity such as "being cut-and-dried about things. Yes: to be cut-and-dried . . . suited Akio's nature. . . ."; however, in actuality he is quick to anger and acts childishly toward Masako. His unpredictable manner contrasts sharply to Masako's, whose crying is as constant as the pouring rain and the fountains. Thus Masako, though a dimly outlined figure in the story, serves as a steady emotional gauge compared to the flighty, self-absorbed, and emotionally unstable Akio.

Despite the story being told from Akio's point of view, readers are not provided with many direct statements about what motivates the roiling emotions he experiences. Akio is obviously dissatisfied, disaffected, and peevish, yet the reader is not told why. Instead, Mishima subtly evokes Akio's dissatisfaction with himself and his life through the use of specific images such as the fountain, Masako's tears, and the evocative rainy, monochromatic Tokyo setting. In an interview in the *Paris Review* with Donald Keene, translator and professor of Japanese literature, Mishima notes that "the methods of description followed by some Western novelists seems unnecessarily detailed to Japanese readers, who are accustomed to make the intuitive leap necessary to understand a haiku." Therefore, the concise images Mishima uses are often a key to the underlying meaning of his stories. Moreover, the spare yet monumental details he provides allow readers to fill in the blanks so as to fully comprehend the story's emotional complexity. As a testimony to the compact beauty of Mishima's images and his powerful evocation of atmosphere, translator John Bestler, in his introduction to *Acts of Worship: Seven Stories*, writes that in "Fountains in the Rain" "the imagery set forth in the title is worked into the fabric of the story."

In particular, water, as found in the girl's tears, the pouring rain, and the fountains, becomes an overriding trope that connects the boy's emotional world to the external world around him. For example, the fountains that Akio becomes transfixed by in the park are contrasted with the steady downpour of a Tokyo summer day as well as Masako's tears that at times seem to be just as powerful a force on Akio's psyche. Although Akio appears dismissive of Masako's tears, in fact he is deeply affected by her emotional outpouring. At first, he seems pleased by her reaction, yet this quickly turns to dismay and anger as he contemplates the situation. "What with the rain and the tears, Akio felt as if his whole body was getting wet." The wetness begins to drag him down, diminishing his feelings of power and success at dumping Masako. Moreover, Masako's tears are so powerful that Akio at first gleefully and then later angrily equates them with the fountains that which never cease, even in the rain. "A human being was scarcely a match for a reflex fountain; almost certainly, she'd give up and stop crying." Ironically, Masako's tears continue to flow while Akio's attention is drawn to the fountains.

Mesmerized by the fountains, Akio's dreams of achieving manhood are at first elevated by observing the fountains' power and then dashed to the ground. In his confrontation with the fountains, Akio realizes that he cannot take action except through his imagination. At first his fixation with the fountains seems to temporarily soothe his dismay and frustration over the situation with Masako, as he attempts to restore his masculinity by perceiving the fountains as what John Bester claims in his introduction to *Acts of Worship*, "a symbol of the shifting impulses—ambition, aggression, sexuality—to which the hero is prey. . . ." The water spouting forth from the fountains reveals an omnipotent force, both sexual and emotional, that the young man identifies with as he contemplates its ability to rejuvenate itself; ". . . the unwaning power that supported unceasing failure was magnificent." Yet unlike the fountain, Akio cannot continually replenish his feelings of confidence. He is too fickle and unreliable, too young and self-absorbed. Rather than living life, Akio seems doomed to dream about it. This becomes most clear when he realizes that the fountains he previously found so powerful and fascinating are suddenly "no more than the endless repetition of a stupid and pointless process." Akio suffers from a lack of self that is too easily influenced by his environment, such as the dull rain that not only permeates his clothes and shoes but also his consciousness.

Finally, the rain, another powerful image Mishima uses to evoke certain feelings in Akio, seems to bring Akio to his senses, making him realize how futile his plan was to break up with Masako. His act is diminished by the rain's utter pervasiveness, its banality and everydayness. As he contemplates the intensity of the rain as it hits various surfaces such as city roofs and hotels, Akio realizes that he has not done anything spectacular in breaking up with Masako; his life, in fact, is quite ordinary. "From the rain's point of view, his cheeks and the dirty concrete roof were quite identical." This insight causes him to lose interest in the fountains as well as Masako. Mishima's use of irony at the end of the story reveals how delusional Akio is when he discovers to his dismay that Masako is not crying because of Akio's words; she is crying for no special reason. At this point, Akio is so undone by the overwhelming banality of his life as reflected in the rainy, dull atmosphere of contemporary Tokyo that the anger he feels at Masako's statement comes out as a sneeze. Akio's vision of manhood, what he has imagined achieving

throughout the story, is no longer a pressing issue as he contemplates the possibility of getting a cold from standing in the rain. Although this last line reveals Akio's limitations, both emotionally and physically, to become the man he desires, the sneeze also makes him aware that he is part of his surroundings and not outside of it.

There is much to criticize about the character of Akio, who appears desperately self-centered and irresponsible, yet, despite Akio's representation as a callow, self-absorbed youth, his imaginative flights of fancy touch on a feature of Mishima's work that is common in some of his novels: the role of the artist in contemporary Japanese society. In her book *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in the Fiction of Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo*, Susan Napier suggests that Mishima's fiction often depicts characters who are unlikable and egocentric, yet their willful denial of reality "is also allied to a more positive figure, the artist, for the visions of these violent youthful protagonists have a creative function equivalent to the artist." Viewed in this way, Akio can be seen as an artist who attempts to effect change in the monotonous urban environment through acts of imagination. Unfortunately, these flights of fancy may serve momentarily to alleviate the artist's frustration at the world, but they do not change his or her environment. As an artist figure, Akio is completely divorced from the world of things; thus his imaginative capabilities isolate rather than connect him to the external world. This is seen most acutely in the discussion between Masako and Akio where he realizes that Masako's crying has nothing to do with his actions. Similar to Akio, Masako also is engrossed in her own imaginative world, one that has little to do with external reality, or even with Akio. However, having said that, the ending of the story holds out a shred of hope in terms of transcending such a monotonous existence in its image of the blooming crimson azalea bushes that Akio notices. These bushes may hint at possibilities for creating a world more colorful and vibrant than the one in which both Akio and Masako currently live.

Source: Doreen Piano, Critical Essay on "Fountains in the Rain," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and is a copyeditor and published writer. In this essay, she looks at Mishima's concepts of the disparity in power between the natural and the mechanical world as portrayed in his story.

Akio, the protagonist in Mishima's short story "Fountains in the Rain," is a very calculating young man. He has contrived a plan much like an engineer might plot the dimensions of a proposed building. But there is a major flaw in Akio's calculations, a blind spot brought on by his own obsessions. Akio has failed to see the difference between the mathematical precision of the mechanical world and the emotional ambiguity of nature.

Most of Mishima's protagonists are "anti-heroes, physically or psychologically wounded," states Philip Shabecoff for the *New York Times*. They are "tormented by obsessions with beauty or sex or mutilation and martyrdom." Shabecoff describes Mishima as being "fascinated by blood and pain and terror." Somewhere in these elements, the reader will be able to find Akio, a not too likeable character who has been somehow psychologically wounded and has become obsessed with wanting to inflict pain. The target of his obsession is his girl friend, Masako. What emotions trigger his obsession are not clear. However, what is clear is that he has plotted his way through this relationship with a very clear purpose. And that purpose is met when Akio sees the pain in Masako's tears. But these characteristics or quirks in Akio's personality only color the story. They pull the reader in, make the reader want to stay long enough to find out where Akio's obsessions will take him. The real story lies somewhere underneath Akio's obsessions—in that place where there is at least a hint of recognition that life is not quite as mechanical as Akio had originally thought.

Akio starts out very confidently. He has been scheming for what appears to be an extended period of time. He has "pretended to love" Masako, and with his false love he has "undermined her defenses." He believes himself to be the actor, the director, and the producer of his own show. He has even written what he anticipates to be the entire script for his little drama, which will include only six words: "It's time to break it off!" Having spoken his solitary line, he waits for a pre-calculated response: an affirmation from Masako that she has heard him. So far, so good. Masako delivers her reaction "in a flash, like chewing gum ejected from a vending machine." Everything appears to be running smoothly, just like a well-oiled and meticulously maintained machine.

Out of Masako's eyes, which were "no longer eyes," rush streams of tears that are "expressing nothing." Of course this is Akio's slanted take on the events. He sees the tears as a plumber sees a leak in a pipe. Masako's tears are merely "waters." His play is still on course. "This was precisely what he had planned." It was a "splendid achievement, though admittedly somewhat mechanical." Akio rejoices in this event. He has divorced himself from feeling, from the "dominance of desire." What power he has created, like a mechanic who has built an automobile and for the first time has placed the key into the ignition and turned it. Akio hears the equivalent of the sound of that car's

engine as he watches his own creation, Masako, cry. After months of faking a relationship with this woman, faking an emotional connection with her, Akio exclaims that "this was reality!"

Unfortunately, immediately following this statement, Akio sees the first sign of trouble. Masako is crying far longer than he had anticipated. It is also at this moment that Akio notices the color red, the color of passion and emotions. It is a color noticed in passing —"the collar of a red blouse showed at the neck of the [Masako's] coat." It is only a brief encounter with the color, barely noticed, but it is coupled with the words "a tremendous force" in her hands, making the encounter a bit more signifi- cant. On first reading, the mention of this color appears unimportant, just as it might have appeared inconsequential to Akio when he first notices it. Only later does this color blossom, and it does so at the further expense of Akio's carefully planned calculations. Maybe emotions are not as mechanical as Akio had anticipated. The color red at this point is located on Masako's body. Are these Masako's emotions, or are they Akio's emotions for her?

Akio tries to shake this small glimpse, this tiny reminder that he might be acting less than mechanically in reference to his relationship with Masako. He needs to get back to his preconceived scheme, his script, his unemotional stance. He watches Masako, listening to her breath, then compares her cries to the "wheeze of new shoes." Later he refers to her as a "tearbag," and "unwanted baggage." When he accidentally bumps against her under the umbrella, Masako's raincoat has the feel of "a reptile." These are the ways that Akio keeps his distance from Masako, turning her into some inanimate object or, at best, turning her into a coldblooded snake.

Akio reminds himself that he must remain remote and unfeeling, and he focuses on his sudden urge to take Masako to the water fountain. He believes that it is for Masako's sake that the fountain must be seen, dismissing his own initial curiosity that made him think of the fountains in the first place. He will show Masako that those emotional tears that are streaming down her face are no match for the clever, mechanical fountain. After all, the mechanical fountain reuses its waters, whereas Masako's "tears all ran to waste." The mechanical fountain is utilitarian and efficient. In comparison, Masako would see that her own tears (and presumably all the emotions behind them) are useless. "A human being was scarcely a match for a reflex fountain."

It is at this point in the story that another flaw appears in Akio's overall plan. The reader is given a glimpse of a slight deterioration in Akio's effort to remain aloof, to maintain his original contention that his calculated drama will unfold mechanically. "What with the rain and the tears, Akio felt as if his whole body was getting wet." This is the first mention of Akio's feelings. Not only is he feeling drenched by the rain but Masako's tears are also starting to get to him. And coincidentally, it is at this moment in the story that Akio sees the color red, again. This time it is the "red chairs of a hotel dining room, dimly visible. . . ." It is also at this point in the story that things begin to look different from the way Akio had once imagined they would. For instance, the rain looks like "fine white dew" in Masako's hair. The water spouts of the fountain look like "curved glass tubes." Something is changing inside of Akio, but he's not sure what it is.

A flurry of colors follow. There is a brilliant green in the shrubs and the multiple colors of the cars and trucks in the distant traffic; and it is at this point that Akio senses an anger building up inside of him. He is filled with an "obscure sense of dissatisfaction," which he cannot totally blame on Masako's crying. There is something bigger here. Something is tearing away at his scheme. That slick vending machine metaphor that the narrator used to mark the beginning of Masako's tears at the start of this story is suddenly out of order. The dysfunction of Akio's mechanical metaphor is causing him frustration. He senses a barrier that reduces "his freedom to a kind of damp rag." In other words, he is losing control. His calculated scheme is going awry.

To regain his power as the director and creator of his plan, Akio has a craving to cause new pain. And how does he propose to do this? His concentration seems to be slipping. The only idea that he comes up with falls short of the sharpness of his original plan that caused Masako to cry. But it's better than nothing. If he can't inflict pain, he can at least try to make Masako more miserable. He will get her to run out into the rain, again, and get even wetter. This will also force her to take an even closer and fuller view of the water fountain. So he runs, knowing that Masako will follow. This renews his confidence, renews his sense of being in control. Akio is still trying to engineer his plot. He is still trying to prove that his relationship with Masako is mechanically based. When he runs, Masako does follow.

However, there is another turn in the story at this point. Although Masako runs to Akio, when she gets there, she takes a "firm grip" of the umbrella. This is the first time that Masako has played an active role in this little calculated play of Akio's. It is also the first time she speaks. Akio is caught off guard with Masako's question: "Where are you going?" she asks. Akio had not planned other lines past his initial statement that had set this story in motion. And yet in spite of himself, he finds himself speaking "effortlessly." He responds to her with nothing really new, only pointing out once again that Masako's tears are "no match" for the waters of the fountains. But what is new is that the narrator describes the couple at this point as displaying a change in body language: "And the two of them tilted the umbrella and, freed from the need to keep their eyes on each other, stared for awhile at the three fountains. . . ." This is the first time in the story that Akio and Masako act in unison. They have come together and for the moment have stopped reacting to Akio's scheme that has been attempting to pull them apart. It is also at this point that the narrator points out that the water of the fountains and the water of the rain are "almost indistinguishable." They, too, have come together.

Once again, the narrator points out that things are not what they seem. The mechanical drone of the traffic and the mechanical noise of the fountain weave "so closely into the surrounding air" that the couple appears to be "enclosed in perfect silence." The water at the top of the fountain is "almost too powdery-looking for real water," and the water around the lip of the basin becomes "white manes." These visions, these things that are not what they seem, disturb Akio. His thoughts are being "taken over by the water. . . ." To his surprise, the fountains that he had wanted to teach Masako a lesson, were now teaching him.

As Akio stands near the fountain, staring up at the highest point of the water flow, he realizes that the fountain will never reach its goal of "heaven's height." It is at this point that his gaze is "lifted higher." When he tilts his face fully to the rain, he becomes fascinated with the natural world, and the image of the fountain fades from his thoughts. "Quite suddenly, fountains in the rain seemed to represent no more than the endless repetition of a stupid and pointless process." With this realization, Akio not only forgets the fountain, he forgets his anger, his frustration, and all his silly, calculated schemes.

With Akio walking "aimlessly" and Masako "keeping a firm hold on the handle of the umbrella," the story moves closer to an end. But not before Masako denies that she ever heard Akio's dramatically rehearsed words: "It's time to break it off!" All that planning and scheming; all the false emotions; the setting of the traps: Akio is horrified that his carefully engineered calculations have been totally obliterated by Masako's denial, just as all traces of Masako's tears have been washed away from her face by the rain. He stammers a bit and then restates his famous line, but he says them with weakened sentiments. He even adds a questioning tone to them: "I told you a while back, didn't I— that we'd better split up."

Things are changing fast, and they are changing in ways that Akio had not calculated. Masako is not playing out her role as he had planned. But it is not only Masako who has surprised him; it appears that Akio's own calculating mind has turned on him. Just as Akio finishes his last words to Masako, he sees azalea bushes blooming "grudgingly, here and there on the lawn." The color of the blossoms is crimson, a very deep red. The color red has moved to the natural world, and with this movement, the steam and fury is removed from Akio's plan. He thinks he is angry about his plan falling apart, but when he tries to shout, all that comes out is a sneeze. And it is this sneeze that reminds Akio of his vulnerability: "If I am not careful, I'm going to get a cold, he thought." His perspective of himself has changed, much like his perspective of the fountains, which he once thought were grander than Masako's tears and the rain. It is with these sentiments that Mishima ends his story. There are no clues that the young couple will stay together or break up, but there is hope that Akio has learned that there is more power in the natural world than he had initially conceived. Perhhaps by allowing his natural self to come out, as opposed to playing out a calculated, mechanical role, he will break out of "the endless repetition of a stupid and pointless process."

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Fountains in the Rain," in *Short Stories for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Topics for Further Study

Read one of Mishima's more political or philosophical stories, such as "Patriotism" or "Death in Midsummer." Then contrast the story you have chosen and "Fountains in the Rain" in terms of characters, action, and message. Which story do you prefer, and why?

Little criticism is available on "Fountains in the Rain." If you had to present an original talk on the story, what would you say? Create an outline for your speech.

Japanese society changed greatly in the post- World War II years. Find out what changes took place, particularly in regard to the relationships between young men and women. Then decide if you think "Fountains in the Rain" accurately portrays these societal changes.

One explanation of the imagery of the fountains has been discussed in this entry. John Bester also suggests that the fountains symbolize aggression and ambition in addition to sexuality. What do you think the fountains most closely symbolize? Explain your answer.

Do you think the boy's claims not to care for the girl are true? Explain your answer.

Though the young woman says and does very little in the story, her presence is integral to its unraveling. What can you say about the character of Masako? What is she like as a person?

What image does Mishima present of Japan in the 1960s through the story? Does this image coincide with what you may have learned about Japan in the 1960s?

Compare and Contrast

1960s: In 1960, the population of Japan is 93,419,000.

1990s In 1998, the population of Japan is 126,486,000.

1960s: By 1970, seventy-nine percent of students continue to attend school past the compulsory level, and twenty-four percent of students go to college.

1990s: In 1998, 96.9 percent of students continue to attend upper secondary school, and 44.2 percent of students go to university.

1960s: In 1960, 32.6 percent of the Japanese labor force are employed in primary industries, such as farming or forestry.

1990s: By the 1990s, less than ten percent of the Japanese labor force are employed in primary industries, and more than half of the labor force is employed in tertiary industries, such as research or management.

1960s: Most Japanese women enter the labor force early, work for a few years, and then retire by their mid-twenties to marry and have children. For many companies, retirement upon childbearing is mandatory.

1990s: Many married women re-enter the workforce when they are in their mid-thirties, after their children are of school age. Women make up nearly forty percent of the workforce.

What Do I Read Next?

"Patriotism" is Mishima's most well-known short story. Mishima portrays a married couple unable to participate in the attempted reinstatement of the Japanese emperor. The couple commit ritual suicide, and the story delineates the connection between death and sexual ecstasy.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* depicts through the eyes of the butler the events of an English manor house in the 1930s and 1940s.

Kenzaburo Oe is a Japanese novelist whose work epitomizes the rebellion of the post-World War II generation. *The Silent Cry* is a novel that explores the issues of personal identity, selfknowledge, and the ability to relate to the truth.

House of Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories includes three stories by the Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata. Mishima wrote the introduction to this collection.

Haruki Murikami's novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicles* is about a man whose wife disappears; in his efforts to find her, he discovers the bizarre underworld of Tokyo.

Further Study

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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