A Pale View of Hills Short Guide

A Pale View of Hills by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Contents

Characters

Etsuko, as narrator, is the most prominent character in A Pale View of Hills, but she is hardly the most dramatic, and we know little about her except for the story of her life. More strongly delineated are Sachiko and Mariko. Sachiko has rejected the traditional Japanese role of women, refusing to return to live with her uncle and scheming to take Mariko away to America. "Japan is no place for a girl," she tells Etsuko.

Etsuko's first husband Jiro is a new Japanese type, a corporate warrior. He seems emotionless, and treats his father, Ogata, with thinly-veiled contempt. While Etsuko tells others she is happy with Jiro, it is not difficult to see why she might wish to leave their emotionally dead relationship.

Social Concerns

In this seemingly simple story of a Japanese woman ruminating on her past in Japan before she came to England, readers must follow closely to note concerns and themes. Ishiguro seems to be talking about the difficulty of cultural change, for the suicide of Keiko, the eldest daughter of Etsuko, the narrator, hovers over the narrative.

Etsuko describes her as "pure Japanese," and while their coming to England is not made directly responsible for her death, Etsuko's youngest daughter Niki, part English, comes to her mother at the beginning of the novel to assure her she is not responsible for Keiko's death. The novel is, in fact, filled with examples of cultural change, both in England and in Etsuko's memories of Nagasaki after the Second World War. The pre- and postwar generations in Japan and England have particularly different beliefs and different ways of life, and Etsuko is caught in the middle, feeling the tug of both.

Another ghostly presence hovering over the novel is the atomic bomb, and although the devastation of Nagasaki is rarely mentioned, the novel's setting in that city draws our attention back to that catastrophic event.

Techniques

Since A Pale View of Hills is a novel of memory, its structure is a series of reminiscences framed by the present.

The story of Sachiko and Mariko gradually begins to demonstrate more and more relevance to Etsuko's life, until finally, in Chapter Eleven, the last chapter set in Japan, Etsuko's decision to leave Japan and take Keiko is presented in such similar fashion to an earlier conversation with Sachiko's daughter Mariko that the artful blending of the stories finally reveals the true importance of these memories.

Otherwise, true to memory and human nature, Etsuko's story circles around its true subjects, and unpleasantness is often suggested elliptically rather than presented dramatically.

Unless one reads with some attention to detail, it is easy to conclude that this is a novel about nothing; unlike Ishiguro's later novels, Etsuko is not presented with a scene of dramatic revelation which allows her past life to come into true focus. She does, however, discover the relevance of her memories of Sachiko, and perhaps that is enough.

Themes

As in all of Ishiguro's work, characters must balance the pulls of obligation, duty, and the established ways of doing things — represented in the novel as typical Japanese virtues — against the desire for individual freedom and happiness. The traditional Japanese ideals are represented most strongly perhaps by Etsuko's first father-in-law, Ogata-San, who does not like the way Japan is changing under the American occupation. "We may have lost the war." he once says, "but that's no reason to ape the ways of the enemy." Other Japanese have accepted the view that the war was evil but have converted their energies to capitalism and company in the same way they once single-mindedly served empire.

Sachiko, a female neighbor of Etsuko, and her willful daughter Mariko, represent a rejection of old and new Japanese values, and present an alternative which may have ultimately prompted Etsuko to leave her Japanese husband and come to England.

The novel considers the role and power of memory in our lives. "Memory," Etsuko says, "can be an unreliable thing," and she admits that the recollections which make up the novel may be colored by the circumstances under which they are called to the surface. Etsuko does not dwell on the most highly-charged events of her life, her leaving Japan and her daughter's recent suicide, but instead recalls the story of Sachiko and Mariko and without perhaps her realizing it, their story begins to merge with hers, shedding light on the events of Etsuko's life as well.

Key Questions

Since Ishiguro's novels are often elliptical and require close reading, attention should be paid to even the most insignificant details and plot elements, which often turn out to resonate strongly in the larger story. General questions for group discussion might concern contrasts between old and new ways of doing and believing, and between England and Japan; questions on memory and the importance of the past to the present also seem to be important in Ishiguro's work.

1. Why does Etsuko remember the story of Mariko at this particular time?

How does it ultimately prove to be relevant to her situation?

2. What do we learn about Keiko?

Are we given sufficient information or would you like to learn more about her directly?

3. How would you describe or diagram the structure of the book? Does it seem to you to be effective?

4. What is the meaning of the title of the novel? Where does it appear?

5. How do the conflicts between Jiro and his father seem to be important in delineating the novel's themes?

6. How does Ishiguro use dreams in the novel?

7. What does Ishiguro gain by setting the novel in Nagasaki?

8. How does the relationship between Etsuko and Niki function in the novel?

9. Does Etsuko seem to be any different at the end of the novel? Has she learned anything?

10. How is Mrs. Fujiwara an important character in the novel? What does she represent?

11. Why is the episode concerning Shigeo Matsuda's article important?

12. In what ways does the culture of Japan seem to be changing, as related in Etsuko's memories? How do these changes affect the characters in the novel?

Literary Precedents

The technique of a narrator sifting through memories to attempt to arrive at truth or revelation is a staple of many books, including works such as Norman Maclean's A River Runs Through It (1976) and Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye (1989). Perhaps the most artful use of this technique of a narrator who comes to realize the falseness of his past is in Ford Madox Ford's The Good Soldier (1915). While Etsuko does not reach the level of awareness of Ford's narrator, the technique is put to similar use.

Related Titles

In An Artist of the Floating World (1986) and The Remains of the Day (1989), Ishiguro returns to his interests in changing worlds, the unreliability of memory, and the relative virtues of loyalty, fidelity, and unthinking service. He also experiments further in those novels with the unreliable narrator who makes a first appearance in A Pale View of Hills.

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