

A Personal Matter Study Guide

A Personal Matter by Kenzaburo Oe

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Plot Summary

This "coming of age" novel set in the early 1960's tells the story of Bird, a young Japanese man facing both the imminent birth of his first child and what he believes to be the imminent loss of his dreams. As the novel chronicles his struggles to avoid the responsibilities that come with the child's difficult birth, it also explores themes relating to the nature of parent/child relationships in general, and to the necessity of letting go of the past.

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As the novel begins, Bird is in a bookstore, having just purchased some maps of Africa, a place he has long dreamed of visiting. As he goes in search of a telephone (to call his mother-in-law to find out how the birth is going), he reflects on the possibility that being a father will put an end to those dreams, and on his history as an alcoholic. After finding out that the birth is taking much longer than expected, Bird tests his strength in an arcade (where he learns he is weaker than he thinks he should be) and with a gang of young toughs in the arcade. He is initially overpowered by them, but then fights back and chases them off. The next morning, he receives word that the baby has been born, but there is something wrong with it. At the hospital, he discovers the baby has what is being called a brain hernia - parts of the brain have been pushed outside of the skull. After discussing the situation with the doctors (who assure him there is little chance of any surgery to correct the situation being successful), and after taking the baby to a second hospital (where tests will be done to determine the viability of surgery), Bird visits his father-in-law to pass on the news. The father-in-law, a professor at the local university, gives him a bottle of scotch. Bird decides to share it with an old girlfriend, Himiko, and visits her apartment.

Bird finds Himiko (whose husband has recently committed suicide) more than willing to share his scotch, but not quite as willing to drink it as quickly as Bird, who soon becomes intoxicated and passes out in Himiko's bed. The next morning, a hung-over Bird vomits in front of the class he teaches at a cram-school, and one of the students threatens to tell the principal. On his way back to Himiko's apartment, Bird realizes that he will probably have to use the money he had saved for his future trip to Africa to pay the baby's bills. This triggers in him a surge of anger which, in turn, transforms into intense sexual energy, which Bird eventually expends on Himiko. Later, Bird visits his wife in the maternity hospital, facing down her accusations that he is probably planning to abandon both her and the baby (whom she knows is ill) in the same way as he abandoned his youthful friend, Kikuhiko, whose name she is planning to give their son.

Back at Himiko's apartment, Bird and Himiko wait for news of the baby from the second hospital, and considering Bird's maps of Africa, which Himiko is starting to find interesting. The next day, Bird resigns from his job at the cram-school (before he can get fired), and is challenged by a friend of Himiko's and one of his own friends to look at his behavior and see how badly he's avoiding his responsibility. After being told that he and Himiko should follow through on their dreams of visiting Africa together, Bird



receives word that his baby is almost strong enough to have the operation that may seal his brain in his skull properly. Bird tells the doctor planning the surgery, however, that he intends to take the baby home. The next day, Bird and Himiko take the baby from the hospital, planning to take him to a doctor that Himiko knows who has performed abortions and who, Himiko says, will help them get rid of the baby. Eventually, after getting lost in the rain, Bird and Himiko find the doctor's clinic and drop the baby off, afterwards going into a gay bar that Himiko knows for a drink. There, Bird encounters his former friend Kikuhiko, and conversation makes Bird realize that he, in effect, has no life to protect from what he believes to be the controlling, dominating influence of his child. This, in turn, makes him drive back to the clinic to save the baby. Later, after the baby's head and brain are surgically re-shaped, Bird's father-in-law comments on how much he (Bird) has changed, and how grown-up he now seems.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

In the cooling air of a once hot summer day, Bird lingers in a store over an open atlas, it is open to a map of Africa (see "Objects/Places - Africa"). During these contemplations, narration also includes a brief reference to Bird's wife, naked, moaning and sweating as she gives birth to Bird's child. Eventually, Bird asks a salesclerk to bring Bird him some road maps of Africa, a place Bird (according to narration) has always wanted to visit, but with the birth of his child may no longer be able to (see "Quotes", p. 3).

After paying for the maps and leaving the shop, Bird encounters a transvestite who at first thinks that Bird might be interested in an encounter, but soon realizes s/he has made a mistake and hurries off. Bird fantasizes briefly about how comfortably intimate an evening with the transvestite might be, but then lets the fantasy go. As he walks down streets lined with bars and prostitutes, he recalls his experience as an alcoholic - the summer after he got married, he was drunk for four weeks straight, for reasons he still doesn't understand. As a result of that summer, narration comments, he left graduate school and got a job (with the help of his father in law) at a "cram school" (see "Objects/Places"). At the same time, he considers his birdlike nature (which manifests in both physical appearance and voice), his youth (which, he believes, is being wasted), and the changes being brought to his life by the impending birth of his child. His contemplations lead him to the realization that he needs to call his mother-in-law at the hospital to find out how the birth is progressing, and goes in search of a phone, avoiding the bars where he knows he could find one.

Eventually, Bird finds his way into a noisy arcade filled with video games and the young people playing them, where he finds a phone, calls his mother-in-law, and learns the birth is not going well. After hanging up, he sees two tests of strength nearby, tries them both, and fails miserably, watched by a gang of arrogant young men. As he contemplates how he, at twenty five, has failed tests that he should have aced, he realizes the gang is becoming tense, and leaves, hurrying out of the arcade and into a park. After urinating, he suddenly realizes the gang has surrounded him, and is looking for a fight. After an initial hit from one of them, he realizes he has to fight back (see "Quotes", p. 12). As rain begins to fall (see "Objects/Places - Rain"), the gang sends forth what looks to be its biggest fighter. Bird ducks his blow, head-butts him in the belly, and sends him to the ground. The gang hurries off, shouting that Bird is too old. In pain but "in high spirits for the first time since his wife's labor had begun", Bird limps off, spitting out a broken tooth while he's waiting for a cab.

Chapter 1 Analysis

In this first chapter, the narrative introduces its central character (Bird), his background (his bout with alcoholism, his job) and current state of mind (unhappiness with his life,



sexual longing), and his current situation (the difficult birth of his child conflicting with his longing for Africa). The overall sense is of a very troubled young man about to enter a new phase of life (i.e. becoming a father, accepting responsibility - see "Themes - Responsibility") while being both ill-equipped and reluctant to do so. In other words Bird is, in this chapter, at the beginning of a "journey of transformation" from which he will emerge, as his father-in-law actually says, a different man (see "Themes - Coming of Age").

That said, there are several narrative elements in this section that foreshadow steps along the way of that journey occurring later in the narrative. The references to the maps of Africa, for example, and to the importance Africa plays in Bird's fantasy life, foreshadow several moments in the narrative where he becomes aware that his dreams of visiting the so-called "dark continent" are fading away. Those same references also foreshadow the sequence of events in Chapter 11 and beyond in which Himiko (see Chapter 3) adopts his dreams as her own. For consideration about the metaphoric value of the maps, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the symbolic relationship between ..."

Other important pieces of foreshadowing include the failed tests of strength and the encounter with the gang, both of which symbolically foreshadow Bird's discovering, in the novel's final chapter, reserves of strength he never knew he had or even needed. It's interesting to note here that in that chapter, and as Bird is discovering that strength, the gang reappears, this time with a member as wounded as Bird is at the end of THIS chapter (see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the symbolic value of the return ...")



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Bird is wakened from a dream (in which he is being chased by an angry animal from which there is no escape) by a telephone call summoning him to the hospital. "The baby is abnormal," Bird is told. Bird, still in pain from the fight the night before, hurries to dress, frantically rides his bicycle to the hospital, and is shown into the waiting room. There he finds his mother-in-law (hiding her face in either embarrassment or pain), the hospital's Director (whose presence makes Bird uncomfortable - see "Quotes", p. 17) and a pair of doctors, one of whom (Bird notes) has a glass eye.

Bird identifies himself as the father and, with a strange nervous giggle that Bird attributes to embarrassment, the Director asks whether he would like to see "the goods". Bird asks for an explanation of what's wrong with the baby, and as he continues to giggle, the Director explains that the baby has a "brain hernia" (a portion of the brain protrudes outside the skull). When Bird asks whether it will be possible for the baby to be normal, the Director angrily tells him that it won't - the surgery to push the brain into the skull is too risky. It can, however, be attempted, but only at another hospital. After going home to change his clothes (at which time he has a pained reaction to his own body - see "Quotes", p 21), Bird rides in an ambulance with the doctor with the glass eye. As the ambulance pulls away, Bird notices the pregnant women gathered at the windows on the upper levels of the hospital, women who, with their billowing nightgowns and expressions of anxiety, resemble angels. On the drive to the hospital the doctor chats casually about the tests that can be done on the baby, on his hopes of being present for an autopsy on its body, voices his belief that both the baby and his parents would be better off if the baby was dead, and describes the baby as a vegetable.

When it turns out that the baby isn't receiving its oxygen properly, and as the equipment providing that oxygen is reset, Bird gets his first look at his child (see "Quotes", p. 24), discovers a similarity between the child's situation and that of a wounded war hero "on a dark and lonely battlefield", and begins to cry.

Chapter 2 Analysis

There are several points to note about this chapter. These include the metaphoric value of Bird's dream (which can be seen as a representation of the responsibility he fears, flees from, and ultimately cannot escape), the determination of his mother-in-law to avoid embarrassment and extra stress (which she displays throughout the novel), and the appearance of the "angel" women. The reference here foreshadows their reappearance in Chapter 8 (as Bird and Himiko are taking the baby away), with both references having several possible symbolic meanings - that the baby is being watched by "guardian angels", or that new mothers (either pregnant or having just given birth) are somehow "otherworldly".



Then there is the peculiar characterization of the Director, specifically, his giggle. This last is particularly interesting, in that when referred to here it merely appears strange or idiosyncratic, but when it's revealed he giggled during the baby's birth (Chapter 8), the giggle comes across as callous and insensitive. This, in turn, relates to another significant point about the chapter, the callousness of the medical profession vividly portrayed here in both the giggling director and the one-eyed doctor. This sort of portrayal occurs consistently throughout the book in every member of the profession that appears, giving the sense that an important thread of the novel's complex tapestry of images, recurring motifs and themes is an indictment of the medical profession.

Finally, there is the reference to Bird's image of his child as a war hero on a battlefield, and his reaction to that image. This marks an important element of his journey of transformation, in that his feelings here indicate some kind of conscience, some awareness of the challenges his child will face. In other words, this and other similar moments in the narrative suggest that Bird is not evading his responsibilities towards his child out of callousness or selfishness - on the contrary, he is clearly sensitive to what the boy will need. Bird is, however, AFRAID of responsibility, and therefore afraid of losing what little sense of identity (i.e. his dreams of Africa) he actually has left. This sense of his acting as he does out of fear makes him a sympathetic, all too human protagonist.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Chapter 3 - At the hospital, the glass-eyed doctor tells Bird that they'll know nothing definite about the baby's condition until after the brain surgeon has finished his examination - or, if the baby dies before the examination is finished, the autopsy. He suggests that Bird come back the following afternoon, but before Bird leaves, he calls his mother-in-law, who tells him not to come to the maternity hospital (where his wife is resting), as she might get suspicious. Bird is relieved to not have to face his wife with the truth right away, and goes to visit his father-in-law, a professor, at his university, contemplating as he goes the nature of his baby's life (see "Quotes", p. 28). Bird finds him in the company of three junior professors who, Bird thinks, are living the kind of life he would be living if he hadn't gone on that four week drunk and left graduate school. After hearing the news about his grandson with apparent calmness, his father-in-law thanks Bird for coming by, and suggests he take his (the professor's) bottle of whisky away with him. Bird, fully aware that he may be on the verge of another long drunk, takes the bottle and leaves, trying to decide where to go to drink. He finally decides to visit an old girlfriend, Himiko, an eccentric young woman from rural Japan, once married but whose husband committed suicide. When Himiko welcomes him, Bird feels "as though he had entered just one more plus on the psychological balance sheet for the day".

Chapter 4 - As Bird comes in to Himiko's messy, crowded apartment (see "Objects/Places", he realizes that all the curtains are closed and it's as dark as night in there. He apologizes for waking her, but Himiko tells him she wasn't sleeping, but contemplating the "pluralistic universe". He also tells her that he is the father of a recently deceased baby, and she offers her sympathies. As she goes to have a quick shower, Bird collects glasses for the scotch from the kitchen, catching a glimpse of her naked body as he passes the bathroom and feeling the return of his juvenile disgust with nudity. In the living room, he drinks down three shots of whisky in quick succession, feeling relief and gratitude as "red hot pleasure" moves through him. Returning from the shower, Himiko also drinks (but much more slowly) as they discuss Himiko's theories of the pluralistic universe (see "Quotes", p. 45). As part of the discussion, Himiko suggests that in another universe, different from this one, Bird's baby survived, and will, in some universe somewhere, live to his nineties. Becoming increasingly drunk, Bird challenges her philosophy at times aggressively, but Himiko forgives him out of recognition of his situation and his drunkenness.

After sitting in silence for a few minutes, Bird and Himiko reminisce about their attempt to make love several years ago when they were both in college. They each discover that the other was a virgin, and Bird becomes suddenly, blindingly aroused by the thought of making love with her again. He suggests they do so, but Himiko tells him there's no way he would be successful, having had that much to drink. As Bird falls asleep, Himiko carries him to her bedroom and lies him down. After sleeping a while,



he's awakened first by a young man and then a middle aged man, both calling for Himiko from outside. Realizing that Himiko has gone out, Bird drinks some more scotch and goes back to bed.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

There are several important elements in this section, among them the continued portrayals of both the callousness of the medical profession and the anxiety of Bird's mother-in-law. Then there is the reference to Bird's history as an alcoholic which, as narration now reveals, had significant personal and professional repercussions. It's interesting here to note that Bird's recognition of who he might have been contains no real sense of loss - he doesn't seem to regret not being where the other students are, he simply notes the missed opportunity. Also important to note are the actions of his father-in-law, which come across as somewhat questionable - why does he give someone with a known alcohol problem (i.e. Bird) a bottle of liquor? Does he perhaps suspect that the booze will play a key component in waking Bird up to the truth of his responsibilities? The narrative never makes that clear; neither does it offer any real hints.

When the character of Himiko appears on the scene, the narrative introduces several new elements. Among the most notable are Bird's tortured sexuality (the transfiguration of which plays a key component in his journey of transformation) and Himiko's theory of pluralism (which manifests several times in the narrative, perhaps most notably in Chapter 13, when the theory and its implications are not necessarily discussed, but are embodied in the action). The two men who visit Himiko are also important, with both playing important roles in the narration later (the older man showing up in Chapter 12 as a desperately sought abortion doctor, the younger man as Himiko's second choice for a travel companion to Africa).

At this point, it's important to note the presence (or absence) of names in the narrative. Bird, Himiko, Delchef (see Chapter 5) and the baby (and his namesake at the gay bar - see Chapter 13) are the only characters given names in the entire narrative. Every other character is referred to by his or her identity, or function - Bird's wife, father/mother-in-law, the "Hairy Director", etc. While there is no clear or explicit indication of why the author made this particular narrative choice, there is the sense that he gave names to only the most important characters. This highlights them as the central figures in the story, characters most closely involved in the novel's thematic and narrative cores. In this context, it's interesting to note that the baby is not actually named until quite late in the action. This suggests that from Bird's perspective, the baby is NOT important, something to be discounted in his life. Later, however, in spite of his apparent best efforts, Bird is placed in a position to accept both the baby's presence and his name - in other words, the now-named baby is, and indeed has been, as important in defining Bird as Himiko and Bird himself. Meanwhile, for consideration of Delchef's importance to the narrative, see Chapters 5 and 10.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

Chapter 5 - Waking up after his drunken evening with the still sleeping Himiko, Bird vomits into Himiko's toilet, wondering whether his suffering "would amount to at least partial restitution" for that of the baby. As he berates himself for the foolishness of the thought, he returns to the bedroom, where he finds that Himiko has awakened. After following her advice on how to deal with a hangover, Bird gets dressed and goes in to teach. At the cram-school, and as he painfully climbs the stairs to his classroom, he is interrupted by a colleague who wants him to help bring an absent fellow colleague (a foreigner named Delchef who has recently moved in with a Japanese girl) back to work. Bird tells him that he is unable to because of the baby, and the first colleague responds with sympathy, saying Bird doesn't have to get directly involved but adds that someone will probably call him when it's decided what plan of action to take.

In the middle of reading a short story to his class, Bird suddenly and irresistibly vomits. As he dismisses class early a student, who had for several weeks been loudly and consistently criticizing both Bird's teaching and qualifications, starts shouting out attacks. Unable to answer articulately, Bird only moans (see "Quotes", p. 65). Meanwhile, the student (in spite of a second student telling him to shut up) continues his attacks, realizes Bird has a hangover, and shouts that he is planning to appeal to the school's principal. As he leaves his classroom and the school, Bird remembers the student who told the first student to be quiet, and for a few minutes, is happy.

Chapter 6 - As he searches through the hospital for the intensive care ward and his son, Bird remains convinced that the child has actually died (see "Quotes", p. 67). But when he finds the ward, he discovers not only that his son is still alive, but that he's doing well. After listening to an argument between the father of another ill child (who was born without a liver) and a doctor, and after enduring a trick played on him by the nurses (in which they ask him to guess which bed his baby is in), Bird is eventually shown his son. He is shocked to see how vital he seems to be (see "Quotes", p. 71), and even more surprised when the baby's pediatrician tells him that there is to be an operative attempt to put the baby's brain back in his head. After Bird hints clumsily that he might prefer the baby to die (see "Quotes", p. 75), the pediatrician at first berates him, but then hints that there might be ways in which that could be allowed to happen. As he leaves, Bird cries with shame, hurrying past an exhibitionist patient masturbating and ignoring efforts at dark humor coming from the father of the baby with no liver. As he waits for a bus to take him to Himiko's, he realizes he has no choice but to pay the hospital bills with money he had saved to go to Africa. Then, as it gets hotter and the wait for the bus gets longer, Bird starts to feel the strange surgings of a powerful, angry sexual desire (see "Quotes", p. 78-79). He gives up waiting for the bus and looks for a taxi, wanting to get to Himiko's room as soon as possible (see "Quotes", p. 79).



Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

Among the important points to note in this section is Bird's bad hangover, a metaphoric representation of the (punishment? consequences? suffering?) he faces if he continues to avoid his responsibilities to his child (said avoidance manifesting, in this case, as his becoming drunk). It could also be argued that his vomiting in class (foreshadowing as it does his eventual being fired) functions in a similar manner, symbolically manifesting the results of his not taking responsibility for preparing for his class. It's important to note, however, that he doesn't seem to learn his lesson. Even though he is, on some level, aware that he is avoiding his responsibility (his thoughts about the hangover being retribution suggest this), he continues to desperately run away from what he perceives to be the trap represented by the child. Specifically, he hints to the pediatrician that the baby should maybe die. In other words, at this point in his journey of transformation, Bird has yet to hit rock bottom. He still has further experiences of darkness and avoidance to travel through before he reaches a point in his life where he has no choice but to change his perspective.

The nature of those experiences is hinted in the final images and moments of Chapter 6 - specifically, his surging sexual energy. As the narrative over the next few chapters clearly indicates, Bird uses intense sexuality as a means of avoiding responsibility. It's interesting to note here the ambivalent, or two-sided-ness, of his experience of sex over the course of the narrative. As has previously been discussed, he longs for the intimacy it represents (the encounter with the transvestite in Chapter 1) while avoiding any actual experience of it (the masturbating patient), but somehow intuitively feels that it's a powerful force that he may very well benefit from experiencing. This is why he goes to Himiko in the first place - he knows she's sexually freer than he is, and hopes she will be able to help him. It's also interesting to note, however, exactly what expressing his sexuality does to/for Bird - he uses it as a way to avoid responsibility, but in doing so taps into a deeper experience of humanity and relationship and connection that, in turn, enables him to TAKE responsibility, for both his son and himself. In other words, he does the right thing for what at first are the wrong reasons.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Africa, with Bird's thoughts about the money again reinforcing the idea that he does, on some level, have to give up on the sense/spirit of avoidance represented by Africa in order to face/take responsibility. Then there are the encounters with the students, with the first student representing and/or foreshadowing the destruction of Bird's old habits of avoiding responsibility and the second student representing and/or foreshadowing Bird's perhaps surprising contentment at being freed from what he thinks he should be doing and accepting the reality of what he needs to be doing.



Chapter 7 and 8

Chapter 7 and 8 Summary

Chapter 7 - At Himiko's house, Himiko responds with a degree of impatience to Bird's suggestion that they have sex (see "Quotes", p 80), but agrees. As she prepares herself, she reveals that "there's a danger of pregnancy", which immediately douses Bird's feelings of desire. She also tells him he must define and isolate his feelings of fear in order to conquer them. After some consideration, Bird confesses that he sees the vagina and womb as "a battlefield", an opening to one of Himiko's pluralistic universes (see "Quotes", p. 84). Himiko proposes that he attempt to get over his distaste for the female body by "approach[ing] from behind" ... in other words, anal intercourse. Bird feels concerned that she will be humiliated (she says she won't), and whether there will be any pleasure for her (she says at this point she's only interested in pleasuring him). Suddenly Bird's sexual energy returns and he enthusiastically takes Himiko up on her offer, his desire blending with and easing his sense of shame (see "Quotes", p. 85-86). After his orgasm and after cleaning themselves, in the drowsy moments before sleep Bird speaks of how comforted he feels. Himiko comments that he will need even more comfort (see "Quotes", p. 87), particularly when he comes to the challenges he's going to be facing sooner rather than later. As they fall asleep, Bird wonders if in her sexual expertise and compassion, Himiko is making amends to her dead husband who, narration suddenly reveals, died in the room where she and Bird are lying together. Shortly afterwards, he wakes to discover that he has lost his fear of the female body, and he and Himiko have vaginal intercourse. Afterwards, they both fall back asleep, but Bird is suddenly awakened by a bad dream from which he wakes crying.

Chapter 8 - Bird visits his wife in the maternity hospital. He encounters the one-eyed doctor, who tells Bird his wife doesn't know the truth about what's wrong, and urges him to continue lying. As Bird continues to his wife's room, he is aware that he is being watched by the same women who watched him leave (Chapter 2), imagining that they know he's left his child to die and are judging him (see "Quotes", p. 92). When he comes to his wife's room, he finds his mother-in-law is there, trying to send him silent signals. Unable to understand what she is indicating, Bird turns to his wife, who seems pale, uneasy, and in pain. Bird repeats what the one-eyed doctor said was the lie being told to her - that one of the baby's organs is malfunctioning, and tests are being performed. His wife comments that she heard the Director giggling while she was giving birth, and a surge of anger rushes through Bird, dissipating as he realizes what his mother-in-law's been trying to signal to him - they need to meet outside the room for a talk. They go out, and Bird tells his mother-in-law what's happening to the baby. She tells him again to not tell his wife the truth - if he does, she says, she will not want to have any more children. Back in the hospital room, Bird's wife is at first tender with him (realizing how upset he is) and then somewhat harsh, as she accuses him of abandoning the baby in the same way as he abandoned a troubled teenaged friend whose name, Kikuhiko, she had been thinking of giving to their son. He again assures her the baby is not going to die and, after superficially polite tea-and-conversation with



his mother-in-law, leaves to reunite with Himiko, who has been sleeping in her car. She drives him to his apartment, where he collects a few things (including his maps of Africa) that he will need while staying with her for a few days. She then drives him to the hospital, where he learns that the baby is weakening but still alive, and after being shouted at by the pediatrician for wanting to hurry things along, tells him to call whenever something definite happens. Himiko then takes him back to her apartment, where they spend the afternoon and evening waiting for the phone to ring with news. It never does, and Bird eventually falls asleep, waking frequently from dreams in which he imagines the phone ringing. As the chapter closes, narration comments that Bird was very glad to be with Himiko. "Not once since becoming an adult had he so needed another person. This was the first time."

Chapter 7 and 8 Analysis

The most important element of this section is the intensity with which the narration portrays Bird's experiences of avoidance - specifically, his experiences of sexuality, his encounters with his wife, and his brief conversation with the pediatrician, all of which are startling in their intensity not only for Bird, but for the reader as well. It's important to note, however, that the intensity of these three confrontations is on some level necessary for Bird to realize just how dangerous it is for him to be as absorbed and/or defined by responsibility as he seems to be. In other words, the depth and power and perhaps even shock of these experiences suggests he is coming closer to the darkness at the core of his fear. At the same time, however, within these moments of intensity, there are also moments of something gentler, something broader in perspective, living within the fear and reachable once Bird works through it. These moments include Himiko's tenderness and selflessness, the glimpses of love and affection in his wife, the reappearance of the baby's guardian "angels", and the final words of Chapter 8. All these, to look at it another way, can be seen as foreshadowing of the new life of responsibility, what some might call "grace", awaiting Bird at the end of his journey of transformation.

Other important elements in this section include the discussions of the female anatomy and Bird's reactions to them, which echo his perceptions of his child's life at the close of Chapter 2. While some might see these comments as somewhat misogynistic, it must be remembered that Bird's predominant emotional state at this point in his life and in the narrative is one of fear and resistance, and as the narrative itself makes clear, those perceptions are transformed primarily through his experiences with Himiko. She, at the same time as she teaches him to not be afraid of femaleness, also teaches him to not be afraid of responsibility and adulthood. Her femaleness, her comfort with her own sexuality is, in some ways, helping him connect with similar femaleness in him - she is, in effect, helping him give birth to himself.

Another important element in this section is the introduction of the name Kikuhiko, the name of Bird's childhood friend (whose identity and story are defined in Chapter 13) which becomes the name of his child. As referred to here, the name suggests another situation in which Bird avoided responsibility. The question arises here of whether Bird's



wife is actually aware of that meaning, and whether that's the reason for her choosing the name. It would not be unreasonable for the answer to be yes, given her comments about whether Bird intends to abandon the child (which, ironically enough, he does). In any case, the reference to the name here foreshadows the revelation in Chapter 12 that Himiko knows the first Kikuhiko, and events in Chapter 13 that link Bird's newly found sense of responsibility to both Kikuhikos, his friend and his son.

Finally, there is the reference to the maps of Africa, which functions as foreshadowing of their increasing importance to Himiko which, in turn, defines Bird's final choice of responsibility over evasion later in the narrative.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 9 - The next day, Bird drives Himiko's car to his job at the school, where he learns that the troublesome student who threatened to report his apparently hung-over behavior to the Principal (see Chapter 5) has done exactly that, and that he (Bird) is to meet the Principal after class. He also receives a sealed letter, but decides to save opening it until later. After he teaches his class, he visits the Principal and, almost before the Principal can say anything, offers his resignation, commenting on how upset his father-in-law (the Professor) will be. After leaving the school, Bird encounters the second student from that fateful class (the one who told the first student to be quiet). When he learns that Bird told the truth about what happened (that he had a hangover), the second student offers to help him find a job as a tour guide. Bird accepts, and they agree to meet again later. Later, on his way to Himiko's, he reads the letter he received earlier, and discovers that Mr. Delchef (see Chapter 5) has not left the Japanese student with whom he is involved, and has not resumed work. The letter states that a meeting between Delchef and his colleagues has been arranged for a couple of days hence, and that Bird (because he is particularly close to Delchef) is specially requested to attend. Bird realizes that the meeting will be a good distraction from his worries about the baby, and resolves to go.

Back at Himiko's apartment, Bird discovers that Himiko has treated his African treasures (maps, a poster, a book) shabbily. He also finds that she has company - an overweight woman with whom Himiko went to college, a radio producer who considers herself the "fairy godmother" of all the girls who went to school together, and with whom Himiko has evidently just had sex. Conversation between the three of them (Bird, Himiko, and the woman) reveals that both Himiko and the woman (who, Bird is surprised to learn, has been told everything about his situation) think Bird is in denial about the reality of both his current situation and how his future will play out. Bird tries to convince both women that he is handling things properly, but neither of them accepts his arguments. Eventually, the woman leaves, and Himiko accompanies her. When she returns an hour later, she tells Bird the woman said what she did because she was jealous of him and that she's generally an unhappy person. Bird tells her that whatever her situation, he was still hurt by the things she said.

Chapter 10 - After a day spent waiting for the telephone to ring, Bird is startled by a sudden cry from Himiko who had been looking through one of his African books, but after a while had started watching television. When he asks what's wrong, she tells him Russia has resumed nuclear testing, meaning that "the atomic war that will mean the end of the world" is closer than ever. Bird explains his being unmoved by the news by saying that he can't think of anything but the baby (see "Quotes", p. 120), and Himiko warns against letting himself get possessed by thoughts and imaginings about his child. Later, when she's asleep, Bird remains awake all night, imagining both that his baby is not being starved but is actually being fed, and that he keeps hearing the telephone



ring. The next day, on a visit to the hospital, Bird is assured by the baby's doctor that the "crisis" will occur that day or the next. After watching his baby scratch behind his ears, Bird realizes that he's copying the gesture, even while he's meeting first with a friend (who fills him in on the latest situation with Mr. Delchef, warning of possible scandal - see "Quotes", p. 124). Later, after a long and difficult search, Bird meets with Delchef himself, their conversation (both speaking in broken English) revealing that Delchef has no intention of leaving his Japanese girlfriend voluntarily. As Bird is leaving, Delchef asks whether the baby has been born, and Bird blurts out the entire truth of his situation. Delchef asks why he's waiting "for the baby to die when it needs an operation", and when Bird tries to defend himself, then suggests that Bird is being selfish (see "Quotes", p. 129). Again Bird attempts to leave, but this time as he goes Delchef gives him a dictionary of his native language (which narration suggests is Balkan). After Delchef autographs the book with the word in his native language for "hope", Bird leaves.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Several times in this section, Bird is reminded of possibilities for/of his future. There are negative reminders (such as those mentioned to him by the spiteful radio producer) as well as positive reminders (such as those referred to by the second student, whose suggestion that Bird become a tour guide foreshadows Bird's choices in the final moments of the book, in which he does exactly that. Interestingly, the character of Mr. Delchef provides both, a circumstance that suggesting that for all the brevity of his actual appearance, he is in fact one of the most significant characters in the book (an idea supported by the fact that he is actually given a name - see Chapter 4).

There are, in fact, several important elements of Delchef's appearance here. The first has to do with his situation. He has taken up with a woman who seems to be both young and vulnerable - in that sense, his situation is different in specifics but similar in principle to Bird's. But where Bird seems, at this point, to be doing everything he can to avoid the responsibility of his situation, Delchef is refusing to do so in his. He is, it could strongly be argued, doing the right thing by accepting the responsibilities and commitments he signed up for by getting involved in his relationship. This is perhaps why he argues so strongly (albeit briefly) against Bird allowing the child to die, at the same time implying he will face significant negativity in his life (i.e. selfishness) if he does so. Finally, the idea that Delchef is, both literally and metaphorically, an advocate and/or trigger for Bird changing his ways can be found in the word inscribed in the dictionary - "hope". It could also be argued that the fact he not only gives Bird a dictionary in a foreign language but also inscribes in it in the same language that he is, in metaphoric terms, introducing Bird to a new "language" of feeling, a new way of looking at himself and his experiences, a new "hope".

Finally, there is the description of Bird's echoing his son's gesture of scratching his ears. This can be seen as a metaphoric representation of both father and son being in a similar place in their lives - both with a handicap (the baby's "injury", Bird's inability to take responsibility), both in a place of uncertainty and transition (the baby unconsciously

so, Bird fully conscious). It can also be seen as a manifestation of Bird's unconscious, not to mention unwilling, connection and/or identification with his son. The gesture, to both Bird and the reader, suggests that try what he will, Bird is/will be ultimately unable to separate himself from this newborn part of himself.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

Chapter 11 - The next day, Himiko is visited by her father-in-law, who notes the Africa posters and maps and suggests that she and Bird sell the house and property and go to Africa. Himiko likes the idea, and Bird is immediately both enticed and repulsed, excited about fulfilling his dream but imagining that he would feel too guilty about abandoning his baby to really enjoy Africa. Later that night, Himiko and Bird have an extended sexual encounter, with Himiko having orgasm after orgasm while Bird delays his repeatedly, wanting to avoid ending both their intimacy and the distraction that sex provides. In the middle of one of Himiko's orgasms, however, the telephone rings. When the eager Bird answers it, he is told to report to the hospital for a meeting with the surgeon. As he's telling Himiko of his conviction that the baby is dead, the doubtful but nevertheless supportive Himiko tells him he can actually have a good night's sleep.

At the hospital, Bird is told that the baby is nearly strong enough for the operation to repair its skull. When Bird asks for assurances that the surgery will work, the surgeon can't offer them. Bird then impulsively rejects the operation and announces his intention to bring the baby home. Leaving the angry doctors, he rejoins Himiko, who suggests they get in touch with a doctor she knows (the middle aged man who called for her - Chapter 4) and arrange for his help in ending the baby's life. They discuss the eventuality of Bird's getting a divorce and Himiko's sudden, intense desire to visit Africa with him, which she wants to do after the baby dies. She explains that her feelings for him have grown and gone beyond the merely sexual, adding that that's the reason she's prepared to help him with the baby. Meanwhile, it starts to rain, and Bird wonders whether Himiko's open car has a roof they can put on it. "Otherwise," he says, "the baby will get all wet."

Chapter 12 - As Himiko and Bird are preparing to collect the baby and find the doctor, Bird hears a sound from outside that turns out to be someone stealing one of the car's tires. When he tells Himiko what happened, she tells him that the thief was probably the young man who yelled for her earlier (see Chapter 4). Bird changes the tire, and together they drive to the hospital to pick up the baby. There, Bird is forced to give the baby a name and chooses Kikuhiko, the name suggested by his wife (Chapter 8). While discussing this with Himiko, she tells him that it's also the name of a gay bar run by a man named Kikuhiko who, Bird realizes, may be the friend he abandoned years before. When they pick up the baby, the pediatrician makes one last attempt to get Bird to change his mind, but Bird refuses, and he and Himiko leave.

As Bird and Himiko drive to the clinic where Himiko's doctor friend works, news on the radio comments on how the international conflict over nuclear weapons has resurged (see "Quotes", p. 150), leading Himiko to wonder whether there were actually people in the world who simply wanted the human race to be annihilated. Bird has no real answer. Later, after Himiko swerves to avoid a dead sparrow, the baby starts crying loudly and



cannot be quieted, even when Himiko runs into a store and purchases a pacifier. Unable to escape the noise or to find the clinic, Himiko gets lost and ends up driving in circles, eventually being stopped by a police officer who notices that only one of her headlights is working and suggests that she walk to her destination. Desperate to avoid any involvement with the law, Himiko cries out that the baby is sick, and shows the officer its head. Shocked, the officer directs them to the clinic and tells them they're free to go. At the clinic, the doctor berates Himiko for being late, and as he looks at the baby, comments that "the poor little fella" is developing pneumonia.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

This section contains the beginning of the novel's climax - specifically, Bird's being confronted with the final, ultimate choice about what to do with his son. Developments in this section suggest that his initial choice (to do something himself about ending the baby's life) are, in the novel's perspective at least, the wrong thing to do - in the same way as Himiko gets repeatedly lost on the way to the clinic, Bird is "lost" when it comes to making the right choice for his son. It could also be argued that Bird worrying about the baby getting wet and Himiko swerving to avoid the already dead sparrow are both further (suggestions? foreshadowing?) of the choice that Bird should, and ultimately does, make.

That choice comes in the next (final) chapter, in which Bird's simultaneous reasons about the nature of his past and the hope for his future combine to make clear what his final choice should and/or needs to be. Before that, however, come some of the most vivid examples of the tempting power of irresponsibility - specifically, the lure of Africa and of sex, both represented by the pleasures they afford Himiko. It's interesting to note how, in the middle of both these experiences, Bird's conscience continues to trouble him, manifesting in his less than whole-hearted acceptance of the plan to go to Africa and, most tellingly, in his reluctance to have an orgasm. While he seems to be telling himself one thing (i.e. that he wants their intimacy continue), on a deeper level (and in the larger context of the novel as a whole), there is the very strong sense that if he has an orgasm, he commits to full irresponsibility as represented by sex with Himiko. Yes, he attempts to follow through on his weakening determination to end his baby's life, but as indicated by the circumstances defined above and by his actions in the following section, it would seem that his heart isn't really in it.

Finally, there is the question of the baby's name, and of the connection that name provides to both Bird's past and his future. In terms of the former, and as previously discussed, the name carries with it associations of a time when he abandoned a friend in the same way as he's tempted to abandon his baby. He's reached a time and situation in his life when he may be able to redeem the mistakes of the past with better choices in the present. Meanwhile, it's less easy to discern what the name implies in terms of the latter (Bird's future), but here it may help to consider the time at which the novel was written and the perceptions of homosexuality at that time.



The novel was first published in Japanese in the early 1960's meaning that it was (in all likelihood) written in the late 1950's or very early 60's, a period that was pre-civil rights, pre-gay rights, pre-women's rights ... pre-minority rights in general. It was a period in which homosexuality was still regarded as a mental disorder or an illness, at the very least an aberration, certainly a handicap (particularly in a traditional culture like Japan). Individuals who identified as homosexual were marginalized, clearly on the "outside" of contemporary culture and society. In that context, it's therefore possible to see the author paralleling the sexual "handicap" or "outsiderness" of the gay Kikuhiro with the physical / mental "handicap" or "outsiderness" of the newborn Kikuhiro. The point is not made to suggest in any way that being gay is a handicap, but rather to suggest that in the socio-political context of the time and place in which the novel is set, that was the prevailing societal attitude.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

After leaving the baby with the doctor, Bird and Himiko go to the gay bar that Himiko spoke of earlier. There they encounter Bird's friend Kikuhiko who, as he pours drinks, recognizes Bird and reminisces briefly with him. Bird, for his part, recalls how, when they last saw each other at the end of an adventure (a search for a missing man), Kikuhiko's last words were of fear. As the result of their conversation, Bird realizes that unlike his old friend, he has nothing to make his life worthy, nothing to defend from the influence of the baby (see "Quotes", p. 161). He then announces to Himiko that he's changed his mind and is going to retrieve the baby, take it back to the hospital, and have the operation. Himiko tries with increasing desperation to talk him out of it, reminding him of their plans to go to Africa and of the probable fate that awaits the baby even if he survives the operation. Bird tells her he's not doing it for the baby, he's doing it for himself "so he can stop being a man who's always running away". Eventually, Himiko accepts his choice, and says she'll go to Africa with the young man who stole her tire. Bird then takes a taxi to the clinic where he left the baby.

The narrative then jumps ahead several months. The baby has had the operation, which revealed that it didn't have a brain hernia at all, simply a small benign tumor. Cheerful conversation between Bird and his in-laws at the hospital reveals how pleased they are with him, and that Bird realized he could no longer run away from his life (see "Quotes", p. 164). He also reveals his plans to get a job as a guide for tourists, reversing his dream to go to Africa and "hire a native guide ... I'll be the native guide, for the foreigners who come to Japan." As he's talking, he and the Professor are passed by a gang of youths, one of whom has a broken arm and all of whom Bird recognizes as the gang that attacked him at the arcade (Chapter 1). He comments that the boys didn't seem to recognize him. The Professor comments that over the last few weeks he's become almost unrecognizable, adding that a childish nickname like "Bird" no longer seems to suit him.

As Bird and the Professor wait for Bird's wife and her mother, Bird looks into the eyes of his son for his reflection, but can't quite see it. As he resolves to look in the mirror when he gets home, he also resolves to look in Mr. Delchef's dictionary for the word for "forbearance."

Chapter 13 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the reappearance of the motif, or image, of fear. Throughout the narrative, there has been the increasingly intense and/or clear feeling that Bird is acting as he is out of fear of responsibility. Here, in the gay bar, he comes face to face with someone who also acted out of fear but who has, at least to some degree, transcended it. Yes, he's a gay man in a culture and society that



represses (to say the least) gay people, but he has claimed his identity. Yes, he's an outsider, but he's alive and well in that outsider-ness ... aspects of life, and of conquering adversity, that the narrative seems to be suggesting should be allowed into the lives of both Bird and his son. Bird seems to accept this, since upon hearing this story, he immediately rushes out and retrieves his son. And in the same way as the book has suggested throughout that responsibility will be rewarded, in accepting responsibility for his son's life Bird is rewarded with his son's "handicap" being much less than initially thought. He no longer runs away, he faces the truth - and is given the gift of being much less painful and/or fear-triggering than he believed it to be. In other words, courage defines responsibility, taking responsibility TAKES courage, and both are the better, stronger, more affirming choices.

Bird here has reached the end of his journey of transformation. He is physically, emotionally and spiritually different from how and who he was as the novel began. There are several proofs of this - the comments and attitudes of his in-laws, the attitudes of the passing gang, and his decision to be a tour guide (i.e. exploring and showing others his home and life as opposed to escaping and exploring the home and life of others) among them. It could be argued, in fact, and to follow through on previous references to the pluralistic universe, that Bird has in effect "changed universes". He has left the fear-defined universe in which he left his son to die and joined the life-affirming universe in which he joins his son in a mutual struggle to not just survive (a possibility suggested by the book's final lines), but prosper.



Characters

Bird

Bird is the novel's central character, its protagonist. Narration describes him as both physically and vocally birdlike, his face somewhat beakish, his belly rounded like that of a bird, his voice having a croaky, crow-like sound. At twenty-five years of age, he begins the narrative with a clear vision of what he thinks he and his life should each be, and a growing sense of dismay that neither is what he wants. His experience of a four-week drunken blackout and his dreams of visiting Africa suggest, as do other aspects of his life and history, that he has difficulty facing reality and dealing with the responsibilities of his life. This aspect of his essential character comes to the forefront even more strongly when he is faced not only with the birth of his child but with that child being born with a so-called "brain hernia" (see "Objects/Places"). The strength of that "assault" on his beliefs is countered, at least at first, by equally strong attempts at resistance, beginning with immersion in sex and alcohol, continuing with passively bringing about his baby's death, and concluding with his active effort to end the baby's life.

Ultimately, however, Bird accepts the responsibility that has come to him. Indeed, his Bird's transformation from someone with an active, driving reluctance to accept responsibility into an individual who has, in many ways, grows INTO his responsibilities is the novel's central narrative and thematic movement. Where his dreams once defined his life, by the end of the narrative he and his ways and means become defined by the needs and responsibilities of reality. In other words, the book is the story of Bird's journey of transformation from dreamy, unmotivated and somewhat sullen youth into mature, responsible, and more personable young man.

Himiko

Himiko is Bird's former girlfriend, the young woman with whom he had his first sexual experience (which, narration reveals, turned out badly for them both) and to whom he turns in his desperation to escape the demanding influences of his life. In the years since they first knew each other, Himiko has become more experienced sexually, emotionally, and philosophically. But while her ideas, actions and attitudes are in many ways more sophisticated than Bird's, she has in common with him a fairly evident determination to avoid responsibility. Although she does, on occasion, point out the essential selfishness of his actions and attitudes, she ultimately becomes a full partner in his self-indulgence, an accomplice in both his attempts to avoid responsibility and indulge his dreams. An important question, however, is why. While the novel never makes the suggestion explicitly, it does seem to portray her as avoiding responsibility in her own way - hiding away in a completely dark house, indulging in no-strings sexuality, buying into Bird's plans for Africa. This avoidance of responsibility seems to be connected to a desire to avoid any responsibility for the suicide of her husband. In other words, both Himiko and Bird have, or in Himiko's case BELIEVE they have, the life (or



quality of life) of another person on their conscience, and both seem desperate to do anything in order to evade the responsibility associated with that circumstance. But while circumstances (force? convince?) Bird to change his perspective and actions, they do not do the same for Himiko who, at the novel's conclusion, has escaped to Africa in the way Bird always dreamed, "a sufficiently enticing prospect of Hell." In short, Himiko is both antagonist and contrast, simultaneously defining and transforming the protagonist (Bird) and, in doing so, embodying the dark aspect of the narrative's thematic interest in responsibility.

Bird's Baby

Bird's baby, officially unnamed until the narrative's final moments, is, like Himiko, an antagonist. But where Himiko is an active antagonist, triggering transformation in Bird through action and choice, the baby is a passive antagonist, triggering transformation simply by being who and what he is. On another level, the baby is also a metaphoric representation of the state of Bird's identity. The fact that a portion of the baby's brain lives outside the skull can be seen as an echo of the fact that a portion of Bird's psyche (his desire for a lack of responsibility as manifest in his dreams of Africa) lives outside of reality. The parallel continues into the novel's resolution, as Bird successfully integrates his responsibility into his identity in the same way as the exterior portion of the baby's brain has been integrated with the interior portion.

Bird's Wife

Bird's wife, unnamed throughout the narrative, (see "Analysis, Chapter 4" for consideration of the meaning of the named and unnamed characters) is referred to several times but only actually appears once, in Chapter 8. While the narrative offers limited perspectives and/or commentary on who she is as a woman and/or as a human being (and, perhaps most tellingly, who she is as a mother), it does clearly portray her in terms that relate to her identity as a "wife." Primarily among these are the sense that she evidently knows her husband very well (both his good points and bad) and that she believes it's important for him to accept the responsibilities that go along with being a husband and father. This may, in fact, be another aspect of the fact that so many of the supporting characters are referred to only by their type, or their function (wife, doctor, mother-in-law, professor). They are perhaps intended to be seen as archetypes, as roles, or as positions, rather than as fully developed, multi-faceted individuals like the named, more central characters.

Bird's Mother-in-law, the Professor (Bird's father-in-law)

The parents of Bird's wife are also unnamed, and also seem to embody archetypal aspects of their role in Bird's life. The mother-in-law is focused, to the point of near-obsession, with the well-being of Bird's wife. Meanwhile, the narrative makes a point of



clearly choosing to refer to the father-in-law as the Professor, apparently more concerned with status and with his academically and intellectually superior relationship with Bird than with any kind of familial intimacy or connection. In any case, neither seems all that interested in Bird as a person. Although the Professor does comment that he (Bird) has changed, there is the sense that he is making his observations from a more academic, more intellectual perspective, one more observed than felt or intuited.

The Hairy Director, the One Eyed Obstetrician, the Pediatric

Aside from the fact that they are the primary figures involved in the medical care of Bird's baby, there are a few other important points to note about these three members of the medical profession. The first is that they, like so many of the other supporting characters, are all unnamed, suggesting they are less individuals than functionaries. While they are each characterized with a particular quirk (the Director's nervous giggle, the obstetrician's one eye, the pediatrician's short temper), the portrayals are essentially shallow, which leads to the other main point about these characters. As noted in the analysis of Chapter 2, there is the very clear sense that the medical profession is under a degree of attack in this narrative, with the quirks of these three doctors increasing the sense of authorial negativity towards that profession.

The Students at the Cram School

On the day Bird teaches while hung-over after his intense bout of scotch drinking with Himiko, he has a direct encounter with a student who, according to narration, has been out for him from the beginning of his time at the school and who, on this particular occasion, threatens to expose his behavior to the principal of the school. That student is challenged by another student who, later in the narrative, offers Bird his moral and practical support. Both students, in their different ways, play defining roles in Bird's journey of transformation. The former directly shows him, in no uncertain terms, how inappropriate his behavior and attitude are and indirectly triggering the circumstances that lead to Bird's freedom to transform. The latter offers him not only support, but an actual way into transformation - it's his suggestion that Bird become a tour guide that leads Bird to do just that, a choice that defines his new perspective and enables him to take appropriate responsibility for his son.

The Middle-Aged Doctor, the Young Man, the Radio Producer

These three friends of Himiko's, again all unnamed, play a role in cementing Bird's transformation from irresponsibility into responsibility. The doctor is the abortionist to whom Himiko turns when it comes to taking decisive action to end the baby's life, with the threat of his action finally triggering the realization in Bird of how irresponsible he's



been. The radio producer attacks Bird for his own lack of identity, putting him on the defensive (and thereby making him subconsciously realize that she has a point), and also embodies an irresponsibility with self-identity that he both disrespects and recognizes in himself. The young man, is as selfish about Himiko as Bird is, his actions in slashing her tire suggesting that he, again like Bird, he wants his relationship with Himiko on his terms. This selfishness, like the radio producer's delusions, point out to Bird those same characteristics in himself, eventually triggering increased self awareness and the desire / intent to change.

Mr. Delchef

There are two exceptions in the narrative to the premise of the supporting characters being unnamed. The first is that of Mr. Delchef, an immigrant teacher whose determination to accept responsibility for both the relationship he has become involved with and the individual with whom he shares that relationship proves both an inspiration and a catalyst for Bird to take his own responsibility. Delchef's gift to Bird (see "Objects/Places - Delchef's Dictionary") is a concrete, physical manifestation of that same catalytic influence.

Kikuhiko (the man)

The second exception to the "unnamed secondary characters" premise is Kikuhiko who, as a youth, was abandoned by the selfish, irresponsible Bird and is later encountered by him when Bird is at the peak of his irresponsibility (that is, having just abandoned his baby to the fatal ministrations of Himiko's doctor friend). Conversation with the adult Kikuhiko plays a particularly important role in defining and/or triggering the final stages of Bird's journey of transformation. Through talking to Kikuhiko, Bird realizes he has been acting out of fear for much of his adult life, and that it's time to move past that fear (particularly the fear that his life is about to be completely absorbed by his child) and accept responsibility that he didn't necessarily seek, but ultimately has no choice but to accept.



Objects/Places

Africa

To Bird, visiting the mysterious, far-off Africa has long been a goal and a dream. After looking for a long time at Bird's maps of the so-called "dark continent", it becomes a dream for Himiko as well. In both situations, Africa represents escape and irresponsibility. Meanwhile, in the opening lines of the first chapter, Africa is described in narration as being shaped like a skull, "gazing at Australia", with miniature maps showing both population distribution and "transportation routes" described in terms that evoke "unnatural death, raw and violent". In other words, Africa also represents decay, destruction, and "unnatural-ness", simultaneously foreshadowing the "unnatural", grotesque birth of Bird's baby and the parallel "unnatural-ness" of his determination to not take responsibility for his son's life.

Bird's Maps

Bird's maps of Africa, purchased in the first chapter, provide constant and consistent temptation throughout the narrative, reminding him of his dreams and urging him (and eventually Himiko) to follow through on their desire to avoid responsibility.

Bird's Apartment

Bird and his wife live in a small, under-furnished apartment that narration leaves generally un-described (with the exception of the very telling detail that Bird keeps clean underwear on the top of the television). He spends very little narrative time there, taking things he needs and/or wants (including a poster of Africa) to Himiko's for the few days after the baby's birth that he stays there. This shifting of apartments represents his desire to escape from his real life into the lack of responsibility afforded to him by his relationship with Himiko.

The Bassinet

The baby's bassinet, vividly white and clean, still wrapped in plastic, is parked by Bird's bed in his apartment, and serves as a powerful and intimidating symbol of the responsibility he is determined to avoid.

Himiko's Apartment

Bird takes refuge from his life and responsibilities here (see "Quotes", p. 115). It's interesting to note that, as described throughout the narrative, the room is described as dark and warm, often humid, somewhat cave-like. It might not be going too far to



suggest that "womblike" might be an appropriate adjective, fitting for its associations with birth, both the physical birth of Bird's son and, perhaps more relevantly, the (emotional? metaphorical? spiritual?) birth of Bird's new sense of responsibility. In other words, he emerges from the "womb" of Himiko's apartment, and indeed his relationship with her, a new being.

The Cram School

A "cram-school" is an institution where education is defined in minimalist terms, teaching students only what they need to know in order to pass exams (university entrance exams, college exams). There is the sense that both the school itself and teaching in such a school are regarded as lower status activities and responsibilities than, for example, teaching in a university. Bird's teaching in such a school is, therefore, another manifestation of his not taking responsibility for his life or for himself, or more specifically improving his life, making the most of it.

Brain Hernia

This is the name applied to the condition of Bird's son when he is born (having a portion of the brain outside the skull). The condition is portrayed by Bird's physicians as essentially untreatable, and in their perspective will inevitably result in either death or the baby being essentially a vegetable. The narrative reveals in the final chapter, however, that the baby does not suffer from a brain hernia at all, a situation that metaphorically suggests that Bird's determination to avoid responsibility is, like the "hernia", a false interpretation of circumstances.

The Maternity Hospital, the Children's Hospital

Bird's baby is taken care of in two hospitals, born in the maternity hospital (where Bird's wife remains over the course of the narrative) and the children's hospital (where the baby is to be both examined and considered for surgery). The two hospitals are generally portrayed as being intimidating and unwelcoming, reinforcing both Bird's fear (which, in turn, reinforces his irresponsibility) and the narrative's apparently negative perspective on the practice of medicine.

Mr. Delchef's Dictionary

At the end of Bird's conversation with the in-hiding Delchef, Delchef gives him a dictionary of words in his (Delchef's) language, defined in narration as "Balkan". For consideration of the metaphoric value of both the dictionary and the inscription Delchef writes into it, see "Chapters 9 and 10, Analysis").



Kikuhiko (the bar)

After leaving the baby in the hands of Himiko's doctor/abortionist friend, Bird and Himiko go to a gay bar named after its owner, a man who, as it turns out, Bird knew when they were both much younger. There, in an environment defined by secrecy and outsider-ness (see "Chapters 11 and 12, Analysis"), Bird comes to realize the depth and nature of the mistake he is making with his son. In other words, the bar is the setting for the narrative's climax, the point at which Bird's journey of transformation reaches a crucial, unavoidable turning point.

Rain

At several key points in the narrative, action unfolds in the rain. Among the most notable occasions is the encounter between Bird and the gang in Chapter 1, and Bird and Himiko's search for the abortion doctor in Chapter 10. In both cases, there is the sense that rain is connected with Bird facing a test of strength, perhaps as a manifestation of nature (i.e. Rain is a natural occurrence; Bird is encountering his true inner nature).



Themes

Coming of Age

The popular "coming of age" genre, in most if not all forms of both fiction and non-fiction writing, is defined by the journey of a central character from youth to adulthood. Manifestations of this journey can take several forms and affect several different aspects of a character's life - sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual, as well as economic. The central character of "A Personal Matter" undergoes exactly this sort of journey, one that manifests (albeit to varying degrees) in each of these main areas. In terms of sexuality, he moves from both relative inexperience and revulsion with the human body into experience and a celebration of the body, and from emotional selfishness to emotional responsibility. He moves from psychological immaturity to a somewhat more adult view of the world and relationships, and from a self-centered, "why me, God?" sort of spirituality into one in which he perceives the "hand of God" manifesting in ways other than what he expects. Finally, he moves from a perspective on money (particularly his savings) that is essentially defined by his own dreams and desires to one more reflective of the needs of another human being (i.e. his son).

The nature and manifestations of Bird's coming of age are summed up comments made by his father-in-law in the final chapter, who says that Bird has outgrown his "childish" nickname. Over the course of the narrative, he has also outgrown his childish ways of thinking, believing, and acting - or in Bird's case, NOT acting - that is, not acting out of a sense of responsibility. This aspect of his journey, acceptance of responsibility, is one of the narrative's most important secondary themes.

Responsibility

Bird's thoughts, attitudes and actions throughout almost the entire novel are those of someone desperate to avoid responsibility. He dreams of escaping to Africa, he worries that the responsibilities of being a father are going to impinge on the possibility of that escape, and he takes increasingly desperate measures to ensure that while he may not escape to Africa, he can at least escape his life. He is relieved each time the potential for confrontation with the truth (and any responsibility associated with living with that truth) is avoided, and on several occasions takes steps to actually ENSURE avoidance of such confrontations. Nevertheless, such confrontations prove inevitable (i.e. the confrontation with the principal of the cram school), and as such foreshadow the equally inevitable confrontation between Bird and his responsibility for the life and well being of his child. In other words, as the narrative details Bird's coming of age, it seems to be doing so from the position that acceptance of responsibility is itself inevitable. The narrative's apparent thematic contention is that an individual's innate sense of what is right (i.e. taking care of one's child) will win out over any desire to hide from reality, and an individual avoiding that reality, or the responsibilities associated with it, will, no matter how hard he tries to avoid it, have to deal with it. It's interesting to note, meanwhile, just



how many characters in the book embody the negative side of this theme, which is the avoidance of responsibility. With the eventual exceptions of Bird and possibly Mr. Delchef, almost everyone from Himiko down (in terms of importance) acts out of a desire and / or a determination to avoid responsibility. Those that do (such as the principal of the cram school) serve as contrasts to, catalysts in, and foreshadowing of Bird's eventual transformation. Meanwhile, for further consideration of this aspect of the narrative, see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways do the various characters..."

Parent / Child Relationships

One of the ways in which both the "coming of age" theme and the "responsibility" theme manifest is in the variety of parent/child relationships portrayed throughout. Aside from the most obvious (the relationship between Bird and his child), there are relationships involving Bird's in-laws. Specifically, there is the relationship between Bird's wife and his mother-in-law (in which the latter is fiercely, blindly devoted to the protection of the former), and the relationship between Bird and the Professor (who, although the latter is not a biological relation, nevertheless has a clearly father-like relationship with his son-in-law). These two relationships manifest the novel's thematic concern with responsibility in opposite ways, with the former portraying a parent taking too much responsibility for a child and the latter portraying a parent not taking enough. Specifically, it's bad enough that the Professor barely mentions his biological daughter, but he also gives his non-biological son (i.e. Bird) a bottle of alcohol, a profoundly irresponsible act given Bird's history. In other words, Bird does not have a particularly good pair of parenting role models here, a circumstance made all the more interesting by the fact that Bird's parents are barely, if ever mentioned.

Other parent/child relationships in the narrative exist in primarily non-biological ways. For example, there are times when both Bird and Himiko react in parent-like ways to each other and times when the doctors react to Bird with a sort of patronizing parentalness. Even Bird's visit to the principal of the cram school can be seen as having a (scolding) parent / (misbehaving) child dynamic at work. Ultimately, however, defined as it is by Bird's journey of transformation, the narrative seems to be suggesting that becoming a good parent is the ultimate act of both enacting truth in human identity and responsibility.

Letting Go of the Past

Another of the narrative's sub-themes, associated with the primary theme of coming of age, is its examination of the relationship between past and present, and most particularly of the importance of letting the past go. Most importantly, Bird lets go of several aspects of his past (his revulsion towards the body in general and the female body in particular, his sense of self as an asexual weakling, his long-cherished dreams of Africa) in order to effectively embrace the reality of his present. Other important examples of this theme include Himiko's letting go of her unsuccessful past with Bird (in order to embrace her current life with him) and, on the reverse (darker, negative) side,



her inability to let go of her past with her dead husband. In other words, in her inability to let go of what happened to him, she is essentially (albeit unconsciously) showing Bird the desperation that HE will feel and/or experience if he doesn't let go of what he wished would happen for him.

Other manifestations of this theme include Delchef (who commits to letting go of his past to embrace his future), Himiko's friend the radio producer (who remains stuck in the pain and delusions of the past). Perhaps most vividly, there is the adult Kikuhiko, who has moved away from the fear that defined his past and accepted his present, even though it is, given that he is a homosexual in a very conservative time, a very dangerous present.

Ultimately, though, the point of the novel's explorations of this particular sub-theme appears to be this - letting go of the past is a particularly necessary and significant component if one (i.e. Bird) is to deal effectively with the present, and even the future.



Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person, past tense point of view. Its perspectives are defined and/or limited to the perceptions and reactions of protagonist Bird. Narration is omniscient (all knowing), but only when it comes to Bird's experiences. The actions, intentions and feelings of the other characters are seen, interpreted, and understood through the filter of his perceptions and history. This brings the reader closely and intimately into Bird's situation, although it's important to note that many readers might find being put in such a position uncomfortable, given some of what Bird experiences.

To be specific, the fact that Bird so seriously considers first passively then actively ending his son's life might be an aspect of the human experience that some readers find distasteful, perhaps even to the point that they may wish to emotionally distance themselves from such an experience as much as possible. It might not be going too far to suggest that in exploring this particular point of view in such an intimate, immediate fashion, the author is saying things and/or putting his central character (Bird) in situations that most (many?) people might, in the deepest part of themselves, have also had but have ultimately rejected (i.e. abandoning a difficult child). In other words, he is showing his readers a part of themselves they may recognize, but may also want to ignore. It must be remembered, however, that even while doing that, he is preparing the reader to hear his ultimate message - that the responsibility of having a child is not one that can ever justifiably be shirked.

Setting

The key points to note about the novel's setting are its time and place, circumstances which are ultimately interrelated. Specifically, the narrative is set in Japan in the early 1960's, a time in which Japan's defeat in World War II (which many Japanese of the time would probably, in fact, see as a profound humiliation) was still fresh in the minds of its people. In fact, there are references in the narrative (albeit brief ones) to its characters having memories of the war and particularly of its last days. In any case, this setting in time and place is particularly important, in that it fleetingly portrays a nation, or at the very least a society within that nation, struggling to arise from the self-perception that it is a conquered community, one with its identity stripped away, its positive sense of self non-existent. It is, in short, a setting which simultaneously echoes and defines the state of mind of Bird, the novel's central character.

Another important, and again related, point to note about the novel's setting is the fact that in terms of both place (Japan) and time (the early 1960's), the culture was significantly conservative. The sexual revolution of the mid-to-late 1960's, originating in America and England and spreading around the world, was only just beginning to stir, meaning that Himiko's sexuality, and Bird's embracing of it, were both significantly



unusual, in many ways acts of defiance in resistance of traditional morality. It's possible, in fact, to see Bird and Himiko's sexual experiences, previously defined as acts of evading personal responsibility, can also be seen as acts of evading social and cultural responsibility. They are not only renegades from their lives, but renegades from the world and/or society in which they live those lives.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about this book is that it is a translation, meaning that it is one step removed from the author's original intentions and ideas. The second point to note, however, is the sense that it is a very good translation. In a large number of translated works, the translator has allowed idioms, word usages, phrases and communicative styles from his/her own language to creep into the translated work, filtering its original ideas and intentions through a different sensibility (not just a different vocabulary). There is the sense with this translation; however, that additional effort has been made to ensure the translation is accurate in terms of both the "letter" and the "spirit" of the original work.

That said, there is also the sense about this book that it functions exceptionally well as a blend of styles and images, with a dry sense of humor and of the absurd existing tellingly alongside a minimalistic, some might say typically Japanese, sense of poetry. Every detail counts, there being a sense that every line and phrase has been shaped to pack the deepest possible meaning in the smallest amount of words. Subtlety and delicacy are effective and important, well shaped, and evocative, without losing any sense of clarity, specificity, or at times raw honesty. In this context, it's important to note the way the sex scenes are handled. While they are in many ways uncompromisingly direct (particularly given the time and place in which the novel both was written and is set), they are neither gratuitous nor graphic. The reader is, for the most part, given enough information to know exactly what's going on, but never so much information that it becomes self-conscious, exploitative, or confrontational. Every once in a while, such as in the quote from p. 14, the language occasionally includes a crudity or vulgarity, but again these are not gratuitous, serving instead to evoke the raw power and intensity of Bird's feelings, feelings which he (for the most part) has never encountered before, and which he comes to master as part of his journey of transformation ... his coming of age.

Structure

The first point to note about the narrative's structure is that it is essentially linear, moving from event through reaction to choice and so on from beginning to end in a straightforward, almost uninterrupted fashion. There are occasional flashbacks, occasional diversions into Bird's memories (of Himiko and/or of Kikuhiko in particular) that serve to illuminate and / or give weight and depth to present circumstances, but in general the novel's focus is primarily on the present ... or rather, Bird's present.



In this context, it's also important to note that for the most part, the narrative unfolds within the context of only a few days. While the final two pages are set approximately a month into the new baby's life, the vast majority of the book's action takes place in less than a week. What's particularly interesting about this aspect of the novel is that the narration has such an unmistakable sense of depth about it, of moments and incidents being quite rich with feeling, meaning and intensity, that the book as a whole has a sense of its action unfolding over a longer period of time than it actually is. In other words, a lot of life is structurally packed into a relatively little time, an experience that, it could be argued, is not unique to anyone with an experience of new parenthood, and of doubt in both him/herself as they face that experience. The novel's tightly packed, but richly underpinned, structure can therefore be seen as reflecting the intensity of the central character's experience.



Quotes

"Uneasily [Bird] wondered if the day would ever come when he actually set foot on African soil and gazed through dark sunglasses at the African sky. Or was he losing, this very minute, once and for all, any chance he might have of setting out for Africa? Was he being forced to say good bye, in spite of himself, the single and final occasion of dazzling tension in his youth?" p. 3

"If I don't fight now, I'll not only lose the chance to go to Africa forever, my baby will be born into the world solely to lead the worst possible life - it was like the voice of inspiration, and Bird believed." p. 12

"...something suspicious about this hairy, middle-aged doctor prevented [Bird] from letting down his guard. As if, deep beneath that hirsute skin, something potentially lethal was trying to rear its bushy head and was being forcibly restrained." p. 17

"Bird fled the apartment with his eyes on the floor, fled down the stairs, fled through the hall, straddled his bicycle and fled everything behind him. He would have liked to flee his own body. Speeding away on a bike, he felt he was escaping himself more effectively than he could on foot, if only a little." p. 21

"An ugly baby with a pinched, tiny, red face covered with wrinkles and blotchy with fat ... its mouth was wrenched open in a soundless scream ... the skull was buried under a mound of bloody cotton; but there was no hiding the presence there of something large and abnormal." p. 24

"Bird was angry ... and his anger was connected by a slender pipe to a tank of huge, dark rage compressed inside him. A rage he had no way of releasing had been building inside him under increasing pressure since dawn." p. 27

"Soon I'll forget all about the baby, a life that appeared out of infinite darkness, hovered for nine months in a fetal state, tasted a few hours of cruel discomfort, and descended once again into darkness, final and infinite." p. 28

"Every time you stand at a crossroads of life and death, you have two universes in front of you; one loses all relation to you because you die, the other maintains its relation to you because you survive in it. ... various universes emerge around each of us the way tree limbs and leaves branch away from the trunk. The worlds that contain us are constantly multiplying." Himiko to Bird, p. 45

"This kind of awful pitfall is always lurking in my life, waiting for me to tumble in. And this is different from the kind of crisis I was supposed to encounter in my life as an adventurer in Africa." p. 65

"He had placed a bet on the baby's death, he installed the fact prominently in his consciousness. Now he was the baby's true enemy, the first enemy in its life, the



worst ... but his guilt now, like the grief that had assailed him in the ambulance ... tasted primarily of honey." p. 67

"The baby was no longer on the verge of death; no longer would the sweet, easy tears of mourning melt it away as if it were a simple jelly. The baby continued to live, and it was oppressing Bird, even beginning to attack him ... the baby was beginning ferociously to live ... a vegetable existence? Maybe so; a deadly cactus." p. 71

"...how can we spend the rest of our lives, my wife and I, with a monster baby riding on our backs? Somehow I must get away from the monster baby. If I don't, ah, what will become of my trip to Africa?" p. 75

"His eyes closed still, Bird groped for his trousers and felt his erected penis through the cloth, he felt wretched, base, rueful; he longed for the ultimate in antisocial sex. The kind of coitus that would strip and hold up to the light the shame that was worming into him." p. 78-79.

"If she turns me down, he thought irritably, as if to whip himself, I'll beat her unconscious and fuck her then." p. 79

"You know, Bird, you're always in the worst condition when you try to get me into bed with you ... right now you're about the least attractive Bird I've ever met." p. 80

"Like the wrestlers of antiquity who wrestled in the nude, they first defended their most vulnerable parts with their bare hands and then stood their ground, eying each other warily." p. 81

"I have this feeling there's what you'd call another universe back in there. It's dark, it's infinite, it's teeming with everything antihuman: a grotesque universe. And I'm afraid that if I entered it, I'd get trapped ... and wouldn't be able to return ...' " Bird to Himiko, p. 84

"Bird raised a war-cry at the back of his flaming head: I'm trampling a woman now in the most ignominious way! I'm capable of all that's meanest and most vile, I'm shame itself, the hot mass my penis is rending now is really me, he raged, and was smitten by an orgasm of such intensity that it made his head swim." p. 85-86

"I bet you haven't been comforted once since all this began. And that's not good, Bird, At a time like this you must be careful to have someone comfort you almost more than you need at least once. Otherwise you'll find yourself helpless when the time comes to summon up your courage and break away from chaos." Himiko to Bird, p. 87

"Like the expectant mothers and the women who had just given birth who passed him in their many-colored rayon nightgowns, like those who carried in their bodies a large, squirming mass, and those who had not quite escaped the memory and habit of it, Bird took short, careful steps. He was pregnant himself, in the womb of his brain, with a large squirming mass that was the sensation of shame." p. 92



"I was trying to decide whether I could rely on you to take care of the baby and I began to think I didn't know you all that well. Bird, are you the kind of person who'll take responsibility for the baby even at a sacrifice to yourself ... are you the responsible, brave type?" Bird's wife to Bird, p. 98

"This was Himiko's lair. She had to rub the odor of her body into all its corners and thereby certify her territory or she could not escape anxiety, like a small timid animal." p. 115

"...with some personal experiences that lead you way into a cave all by yourself, you must eventually come to a side tunnel or something that opens on a truth that concerns not just yourself but everyone. And with that kind of experience at least the individual is rewarded for his suffering." Bird to Himiko, p. 120

"In the event that the newspapers picked up the Delchef incident and treated it as a scandal, their situation was certain to be awkward if their superiors should discover that they were associated with the man in any way. Not one of them was as free as Bird, instructor at a cram-school and soon to be fired." p. 124

"Kafka, you know, wrote in a letter to his father, the only thing a parent can do for a child is to welcome it when it arrives. And are you rejecting your baby instead? Can we excuse the egotism that rejects another life because a man is a father?" p. 129

"Now that this decision had been made it would no longer be possible to prolong their married life by enveloping his wife in vague doubts. That was beyond his power now, no matter what kind of anguished battle he waged against the internal itchiness of deception. Bird hit into another reality coated with the sugars of fraud." p. 140

"In a world shared by all those others, time was passing, mankind's one and only time, and a destiny apprehended the world over as one and the same destiny was taking evil shape. Bird, on the other hand, was answerable only to the baby in the basket on his lap, to the monster who governed his personal destiny." p. 150

"You always feel that a baby's cry is full of meaning ... for all we know, it may contain all the meaning of all of man's words." Himiko to Bird, p. 151

"What was he trying to protect from that monster of a baby that he must run so hard and so shamelessly? What was it in himself he was so frantic to defend? The answer was horrifying - nothing! Zero!" p. 161

"...it seems that reality compels you to live properly when you live in the real world. I mean, even if you intend to get yourself caught in a trap of deception, you find somewhere along the line that your only choice is to avoid it ... that's what I've found, anyway." Bird to the Professor, p. 164



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the symbolic relationship between Bird's maps of Africa and his growing to accept responsibility for his life and child. What do the maps represent in Bird's life? How does his rejection of Himiko's intention to help him fulfill his dreams of Africa relate to his eventual decision to be a father to his child?

Discuss the symbolic value of the return of the gang that attacked Bird (Chapter 1) at a moment in his life when he is making the strongest moral decision of his life and the gang is having an experience of being wounded (Chapter 11).

Several times throughout the narrative (most notably in Chapters 10 and 12), the author interjects brief references to the increasing threat of nuclear war. What do you think is the connection between these references and the primary narrative line (i.e. Bird's choice of what to do about his son)?

In what ways do various secondary characters avoid their responsibilities? Your considerations should include, but not be limited to Himiko ... Bird's mother-in-law ... the Professor ... and/or the Director.

What is your experience of being caught between the demands of reality and the possibility of a dream? What choices have you been forced to make between the two? How were you transformed by those choices? In what ways have demand and possibility intersected? In what ways were you transformed when they did?

Discuss Himiko's theory on the pluralistic universe. Do you believe the number of realities suggested by that the theory are possible, or do you reject the theory altogether? Explain your answer. At what points in your life, points of crucial decision or occurrence, do you think alternate universes might have been created? What would your life be like in such an alternate universe?

In your opinion, is Bird doing the right thing when he gives up his dreams of visiting Africa and accepts a job as a tour guide? How would you navigate a similar choice?