

Some Prefer Nettles Study Guide

Some Prefer Nettles by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki

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Contents

Some Prefer Nettles Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapters 1-2.....	4
Chapter 3-4.....	6
Chapter 5.....	8
Chapter 6.....	10
Chapter 7.....	12
Chapter 8.....	14
Chapter 9.....	16
Chapter 10.....	18
Chapters 11-12.....	20
Chapters 13-14.....	22
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	34
Topics for Discussion.....	36



Plot Summary

Kaname and Misako are a Japanese couple living in Japan in the 1950s. They have been married for ten years and have a son named Hiroshi. For a long time, they have been considering getting a divorce, but they cannot seem to make up their minds.

Kaname and Misako try to keep their marital problems a secret, and in fact only confide in Kaname's cousin, Takanatsu. Takanatsu can hardly believe how long the two of them procrastinate deciding what to do and when to do it, and urges the couple to tell Hiroshi what is going on. Takanatsu secretly breaks the news to Hiroshi, and then tells Kaname and Misako that he will not visit them any more until they have resolved the matter. Kaname has lost interest in Misako sexually after about two years of marriage, although he visits prostitutes once in a while. Two years ago, Misako confessed to Kaname that she is interested in a man named Aso, and with Kaname's permission, she has been having an affair with Aso, and now wants to marry him. For the last several years, Kaname himself has been secretly going to see a Eurasian prostitute named Louise, who presses him for more money.

Misako's father is fascinated with all things that are old-fashioned and Japanese, and so he keeps a young mistress named O-hisa, whom he dresses up in old kimonos like a doll. O-hisa waits on the old man hand and foot and plays ancient music for him. The old man loves traditional Japanese puppet theater, and he prevails upon Kaname and Misako to come see some puppet shows with him and O-hisa. Although Misako knows she will be bored and Kaname expects to be, he finds that he is fascinated by the art of puppetry, and comes back for more performances with Misako's father and O-hisa. Kaname is torn between his love of the ancient traditions of Japanese culture and the more modern, Western ideas and technology. He thinks about two opposite ideals of the perfect woman, epitomized by O-hisa and a Hollywood movie star. Kaname finds out that Misako does not really want to marry Aso, and he feels bad for having pushed her to be unfaithful. Nonetheless, he has so little interest in her that he does not see how he could possibly stay with her for the rest of his life, and he knows that she badly wants out of the marriage. He finally tells his father-in-law what they plan to do, and he and Misako stand firm in the face of her father's arguments as he tries to make them stay together.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Kaname and Misako are a Japanese couple living in Japan in the 1950s (Kaname is the husband, and Misako is the wife). They are planning to get a divorce but they are mindful of the strict social rules of Japanese etiquette and want to make sure that they do not cause a scandal.

In the late morning, Kaname and Misako are trying to decide whether or not to go to the puppet theater together. Misako's father enjoys watching traditional Japanese puppet theater and has invited the couple to join him at a theater in downtown Osaka. Although Kaname is not a fan of the art form, he wants to extend one last gesture of familial respect to his father-in-law, so he is considering going. Misako, always acting out the role of the dutiful wife, refuses to tell her husband whether or not she wants to go, instead telling him that she will go if he does. Kaname suspects that Misako would rather go to nearby Suma to visit Aso, her boyfriend. Misako, wanting to avoid any impropriety or deception, is always honest with her husband when she goes to see Aso. Finally, Kaname decides that he had better go meet his father-in-law, and so Misako goes too. She helps her husband dress, carefully avoiding eye contact, since there is a tense awkwardness between them. He asks her if she needs to telephone Aso and let him know that she will not be visiting him that day. Misako protests that this is not necessary, but then Aso calls her and she agrees to visit him the next day.

On the train ride, Kaname thinks about how they are going to break their news to their son, Hiroshi. Hiroshi is in fourth grade, and Kaname does not know if Hiroshi suspects that his parents' marriage has fallen apart. Although husband and wife still interact politely, and do not fight, all the passion is gone, and Kaname knows that Misako hates having to pretend that everything is all right. Both spouses want to act very carefully, for if they handle things incorrectly, the divorce could ruin them all socially. Kaname worries that Misako's father may decide to disown her when he learns of the divorce, and that if that happens, Aso will be unwilling to take her as his wife. Although Kaname is socially powerful enough to recover from an ugly divorce, Misako is not. Kaname also worries about the effect it may have on Hiroshi's life, since not many of his classmates have divorced parents.

The couple arrives at the puppet theater and go into a small stall to join Misako's father and his mistress, O-hisa. O-hisa is younger than Misako and Misako hates the girl, thinking of her as dull, spiritless, and low-class. O-hisa is a wonderful hostess, serving food and drink to them from beautiful dishes that she has brought from home. As Kaname watches the dutiful way she cares for Misako's father, he thinks about how nice it would be to be old enough to have a mistress like that. He reminds himself that he should not resign himself to the pleasures of old age, because the entire point of him and Misako getting a divorce is that they both want to relive their youths. However, it is



clear that Misako's father enjoys old age and in fact pretends to be older than he really is.

Misako and Kaname do not really enjoy puppet theater, considering it to be dreadfully boring compared to going to the movies. As Kaname watches, however, he is moved by the way the puppeteer animates the female puppet. He muses on the design of the puppet, and thinks to himself how the beauty of the puppet is stylized, as though she represents all proper Japanese women. As Misako uncomfortably tries not to accidentally touch her husband in the crowded booth, Kaname thinks to himself how O-hisa, with her gentle, submissive ways, reminds him of the puppet on stage.

Chapters 1-2 Analysis

Kaname and Misako's relationship is symbolized by the puppet theater. Kaname thinks about how different Western marionette puppets are from Japanese Bunraku puppets. Marionettes are quite lively at moving their hands and feet, but it is hard to animate their torsos. Bunraku puppets, on the other hand, are animated from inside the puppet's torso, so their body postures tend to be very expressive, while their limbs do very little. It occurs to Kaname that this utterly Japanese art form works best when the puppets are in a kneeling position. Watching the female puppet, Kaname compares her to Tinkerbell in the movie "Peter Pan," which is an interesting contrast with a Western, more modern art form. This is significant, since Tinkerbell is such a spirited, willful fairy, exactly the opposite of the submissive woman portrayed by the puppet.

Misako herself sees how their lives are like a puppet show, and just as she does not like attending puppet theater, so she grows weary of putting up the facade that they are a happily married couple. The contrast between Misako and O-hisa could be seen as a comparison between old-fashioned Japanese ideals, symbolized by the female puppet on stage, and more modern ideals, symbolized by marionettes and Tinkerbell. Misako herself comments on how much her knees hurt when she is forced by propriety to kneel for long periods of time, indicating that she can express herself better by moving her hands and feet, like a marionette, or by flying around, like Tinkerbell. She is a modern woman of Tokyo, and wants to live a modern life. O-hisa, on the other hand, represents the old-fashioned Osaka, where women do not need to have much individuality, but merely to serve their men well, and to act as a beautiful decoration.



Chapter 3-4

Chapter 3-4 Summary

As the act in the puppet show comes to an end, Misako indicates that this is a good time for the couple to politely leave, but Kaname finds himself riveted by the performance and wants to stay and see more. Although Misako's father tells Kaname that there is no need to pretend that he is enjoying himself, Kaname honestly tells him that he has never before appreciated the art form. They stay for another act, and Kaname is moved by the scene portraying the pain of a neglected wife, whose husband wants to leave her for a beautiful geisha. He feels that her lines perfectly portray the tension of being trapped in a passionless marriage, and he worries that his father-in-law will decide to discuss this very subject, having no idea that Kaname and Misako are planning to get a divorce. Kaname wonders why it is that he has always hated music and theater from Osaka, which uses the artistic style of the Edo period. He admits to himself that Osaka always reminds him of the uncouth, unrefined merchant class, which he has tried to leave behind, being the son of a merchant. Compared to Osakans, people from Tokyo seem so much more civilized and polite, respecting the boundaries of strangers and concealing their emotions.

After much urging from O-hisa, the couple stays long enough to eat some of the feast that she has prepared and then take their leave. Kaname knows that Misako is in a hurry to get back so she can see Aso. On the street they agree to part ways, and Kaname wanders around Osaka for a while. Misako heads home.

In the next few weeks, Hiroshi has his spring break from school. Hiroshi is close to Kaname's cousin, Takanatsu, and the two often exchange letters. Takanatsu, who is living in China, comes for a visit, and brings Hiroshi a greyhound named Lindy as a special present. When Kaname and Hiroshi go to meet Takanatsu, Hiroshi is very excited about the beautiful, Western dog, and Takanatsu suggests that he can exercise the dog by tying it to his bicycle. Hiroshi amuses the men by talking with an Osakan accent, since most of his schoolmates are from Osaka. The men send him off to play with Lindy so they can talk privately.

Takanatsu knows about Kaname and Misako's situation, and wants to help if he can. Although he is loathe to get involved in someone else's divorce, he recognizes that the couple seem to be having trouble making up their minds exactly what they want to do. Takanatsu especially urges Kaname to have a talk with Hiroshi about it. Kaname has put off talking to his son for some time, and they can tell that Hiroshi is worried. Takanatsu tells Kaname that if he will sit down and explain the situation to Hiroshi, at least the boy will not assume the worst. Kaname admits to himself that he has been procrastinating, and has hoped that Takanatsu's arrival will force him to talk with Hiroshi. Takanatsu tells Kaname not to worry, for children can understand and deal with more than Kaname thinks.



Chapter 3-4 Analysis

When watching the puppet show, Kaname is surprised that the play seems so compelling to him. He cannot figure out why, and it does not occur to him that perhaps the reason the play is so significant now is because it is illustrating what is going on in his own life. He mentally compares the brash, passionate manner of the puppets, and Osakans in general, to the subdued politeness of people from Tokyo. Perhaps he finds the show so inspiring because he and Misako are so unable to show what is under the surface.

Kaname also thinks about the differences between the way women are portrayed in Japanese theater, as opposed to how they appear in Hollywood movies. Kaname considers himself to be a "woman-worshipper," loving the idea of falling to his knees because of a woman's powerful beauty or charisma. He notes that the idea of the woman-worshipper has been popular in Western culture for ages, with writers and poets comparing women to Venus or the Virgin Mary. Thus, when Hollywood makes a movie, they have centuries of tradition to draw upon in creating female characters with the radiance of a goddess, and Hollywood movies often seem calculated to present as many images of beautiful women as possible. In Japanese art from the Edo period, however, women are seen as soft and yielding, with a gentle radiance that is hard to see next to a glittering Hollywood goddess.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

After sending Hiroshi home with his new dog, Kaname and Takanatsu go to lunch at a restaurant. Right away, Takanatsu encourages Kaname to speak to Hiroshi and tell him the truth. Both men acknowledge that Kaname and Misako are both terrible procrastinators, and just as likely to endure an unpleasant situation, as face the pain of leaving it. Takanatsu offers to speak with Hiroshi for Kaname, but Kaname wants to put it off more. Although Misako and Kaname have not officially even decided to get a divorce, Takanatsu acts as though they have, and that the only important question is, when? He points out to Kaname that he was initially brought in to the situation to try to mediate the divorce. Kaname says that he wants to get a divorce at the correct time of year so that he will not face a sad, lonely winter. He also wistfully says that he wishes that Misako were really a loose woman, because it would be so much easier to leave her then.

Takanatsu disagrees with Kaname. He tells him that any time of year is just as bad as another for a separation, and that every kind of woman is equally hard to leave. Takanatsu is regarded as an authority on the subject, having divorced his own wife, Yoshiko. Yoshiko has previously worked as a courtesan, and Takanatsu deals with her by abruptly informing her of his desire for a divorce, followed by a day of explanations and a night of tears. This seems to Kaname to be inapplicable to his situation, since he and Misako can find no fault with one another and do not like emotional displays. He acknowledges that the two get along very well together, and that if they were not married, they could perhaps be good friends. As he examines his motives, he admits that he has pushed Misako to develop her "courtesan" side, encouraging her to wear makeup and even pushing her into her affair with Aso. Kaname realizes that for his entire marriage he has always been searching for a way out. He thinks about how Misako must feel about such cold contempt, and he feels sorry for treating her in such a way.

Kaname tells Takanatsu that what he is seeking is a smart, intelligent woman with spirit, who is enough like a prostitute to turn him on but classy enough to restrain herself in public. Takanatsu laughs and wonders aloud where they will find such a woman. Kaname insists that, once his divorce finally goes through, he will not marry again, or at least not for many years. Takanatsu laughs at him again and tells him that he will certainly marry again and will ruin that marriage too, because that is what woman-worshippers do.

Chapter 5 Analysis

There is an interesting mix of kindness and cruelty that becomes evident in Kaname and Misako's relationship. They treat one another so politely, so carefully and properly,



that it is easy to miss the cold dismissal Kaname feels toward his wife. Although their situation hurts both of them, neither of them is willing to end the other one's pain and so take the blame for the divorce. It seems that Kaname has never before considered how painful his coldness must be to Misako. He also avoids admitting that Misako would be much happier if she were free to marry Aso.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Misako wakes up at ten, having gotten enough sleep for the first time in weeks. Through the shuttered window, she can see that it is a bright spring day and she feels good getting to lie in bed so long. Most mornings, she gets up early to get Hiroshi ready for school and lets Kaname sleep late. Misako can hear Hiroshi playing in the yard with Lindy and their collie, Peony. Although Misako does not like dogs, Peony has grown on her, and once in a while she pets the dog. Misako thinks about the coming Doll Festival and how she wishes that she did not need to set out all her antique dolls for the holiday. In fact, she wonders whether or not she will still be around when the holiday comes, or whether she will be at Aso's house by then. Misako bathes quickly, then goes downstairs and joins the rest of the family in the yard.

Misako and Takanatsu joke around about whether the new dog is prettier than Misako and about what diseases she might catch if she uses Takanatsu's bathwater. It occurs to Misako that she and Kaname have a much easier, happier manner when they are around Takanatsu, and she realizes that they get along much better when they can just be themselves, without having to pretend to be a proper married couple. Since Takanatsu knows everything, there is no need to keep up a facade around him.

Takanatsu offers to take Hiroshi to Tokyo with him for a few days, and at first Hiroshi is excited. However, he begins to hold back, saying that he has too much homework to do and asking Takanatsu if he has business in the city. Hiroshi has sensed the tension in his household for a long time, and he worries that this trip has been arranged simply to get him out of the way. Hiroshi imagines Takanatsu having an important conversation with him on the train ride back, telling him that Misako will not be there when he gets back. When the adults reassure him, Hiroshi agrees to the trip.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The two dogs, Lindy and Peony, are a sort of metaphor for Kaname and Misako. When Hiroshi is trying to get the two dogs to be friends, Takanatsu cautions him that he is hurrying them too much and tells him that he should give them a little time to get to know one another. Hiroshi is confused, because he has heard that male dogs do not fight with female dogs. Takanatsu answers that these two are very similar in size and shape, so there is no obvious dominant dog. The dogs will have to work out between them which one will dominate. Just as the dogs are too similar to get along at first and unable to determine which dog should be the victor, so also Kaname and Misako are very similar in personality and unable to separate or please one another. Hiroshi wants to do whatever he can to force the two together, but Takanatsu understands that such relationships cannot be forced. Misako herself thinks about how she likes it when Peony is so excited to see her arrive late at night at the train station, indicating that Kaname's



dog cares more about Misako than Kaname himself does. Perhaps the reason Misako enjoys the dog's company is because she has overcome her initial dislike of the animal, who always jumps on her and gets mud on her kimono. Misako has never had the chance to learn to love Kaname in spite of his faults, because they are always so polite to one another.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Misako follows Takanatsu up to his room so he can give her a souvenir. Takanatsu lets her look through his suitcase filled with beautiful pieces of fabric and pick a few. Takanatsu makes the mistake of joking that a certain flamboyant fabric will make her look like a loose woman, and she replies that she is a loose woman. He asks her if she is not worried about her reputation, since he thinks that they are being careful not to cause a scandal. Misako answers that it does not matter what they do, since the rumors will soon fly against her anyway. She knows that everyone will think that Misako has abandoned her family and that people will feel sorry for Kaname, painting Misako as a hussy. She tells Takanatsu that she is happy that he is taking Hiroshi into the city for a few days so that she can see how well she can get along without her son. As Misako complains about Takanatsu's garlic breath, the two go downstairs for breakfast. They pass Kaname, who is absorbed in a copy of "The Arabian Nights" that Takanatsu has brought him. Misako comments that Kaname always loves something new, like a new toy, but really he is going through the book, looking for dirty stories and naked pictures.

As Misako and Takanatsu eat, he tells her of his discussion the day before with Kaname. Misako points out that there is much better communication when Takanatsu mediates, because when she is in the presence of her husband she is so controlled and polite that she cannot honestly admit what she wants or be herself. She feels that things are much easier with Aso, with whom she is natural and happy. She says that the big difference between marriage and dating is that dating can be a fun game but that her marriage is an oppressive ritual. Takanatsu asks if she does not think the same thing will happen if she marries Aso, and Misako insists that it is different with Aso. She and Aso have discussed things and have agreed that there is no need for Aso to promise to love Misako forever. Aso hates lying, and does not know for certain how he will feel for the rest of his life, so he does not want to make a promise that turns out to be a lie. Takanatsu asks what will happen if their love does go away, and Misako says that she supposes they will get a divorce too, if that should happen. When Takanatsu realizes that Misako's position is more precarious than he has thought, he is concerned for her. He tells her she is reckless to think of divorcing her husband for a man who cannot promise to love her forever. Misako confesses that it is very hard for her to live with Kaname, knowing that they are no longer truly married, and she cries a single tear, unable to hide her pain any longer.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Although Kaname has trouble understanding why he has spent most of his marriage trying to get away from Misako, she seems to understand him better than he knows himself. Misako comments that it is never hard to find something to occupy her husband because all he needs is some new stimulus. However, he quickly gets bored with his



entertainments and wants to move on to something new. She compares him to a child wanting a new toy. This could be why Kaname has so quickly lost interest in Misako. Although he found her sexy early in their marriage, she has become so familiar to him that she does nothing for him. He thinks that he just needs to find the right woman, but Takanatsu knows that with such capricious taste, Kaname will only be satisfied by variety.

This is the first time that Misako has shown any emotion, and in fact, it's the first time that the narrator has given any indication at all of her inner feelings. Although there has been some mention of her thoughts and desires, they have been treated as practical matters, as though holidays and travel plans are key factors in whether or not to get divorced. Kaname seems to think that his marriage is just boring and tense, without sensing the deep pain that Misako feels. Misako is doing her best to not let on how much she hates acting out a happy marriage. It seems that perhaps she cares more about leaving Kaname than about marrying Aso. Although Aso is in love with her, Misako has not let on exactly how she feels about him except to say that she has more fun when she is with him.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Just when Kaname has finally found a good part in "The Arabian Nights," he is interrupted by Takanatsu. Takanatsu is quite concerned about Misako's situation, and asks Kaname if he is aware that Aso will not make any promises to her. Kaname is unworried, pointing out that men usually only make promises to please a woman anyway, so he thinks that Aso's honesty is refreshing and is better than leading Misako on. Takanatsu disagrees, saying that such brutal honesty is evidence of a lack of commitment on Aso's part. Kaname assures him that he is sure that Aso's intentions are honorable, and Takanatsu assumes that Kaname knows Aso's family, or has hired a detective to make sure he is not just some scoundrel. Kaname admits that he does not know much about Aso, whom Misako met at French class.

Kaname thinks back on his marriage and the way it has broken down. Within about a year of marriage, Kaname begins to withdraw sexually from his wife, no longer finding her desirable and never having developed any love for her. Her only response to the change in him is to secretly sob at night, with the covers pulled up over her head. Eventually, her crying stops as she becomes reconciled to her loveless marriage. After many years, she begins taking French classes out of boredom, and one day Kaname comes home to find Aso on his porch, talking with Misako. It takes a long time for Kaname to notice that Misako begins putting much more effort into her appearance, buying new clothes and makeup. What he does notice is that she begins crying at night again, and after about six months he complains to her about the noise. Misako breaks down and admits that she cares for Aso and asks Kaname if he has also found someone. Although he knows that Misako has never slept with Aso, Kaname does not admit to her that he has entertained himself with whores from time to time.

Kaname and Misako have a long talk, in which they agree that she should continue seeing Aso, for two or three more years, as a trial period. At the end of this time, either Misako and Aso will get married, or Misako will remain married to Kaname. For the sake of discretion, the affair is kept a secret, although Kaname gives Misako permission to sleep with Aso if she wants to, knowing that she would never cheat on him behind his back. Now that two years have passed, it is time to make a decision, but they just keep putting it off.

Takanatsu points out to Kaname that if he keeps putting off his decision, they will probably never get a divorce. Kaname insists that, just as Aso should not be forced to make promises for a future that is uncertain, so also he and Misako should not be forced into making a decision before they are ready. Takanatsu, disgusted with the two of them, tells Kaname that he wants nothing more to do with the situation. Kaname begs him to continue mediating, saying that they will do much better with his help. Takanatsu answers that they must make up their own minds, and that his interference can only make the situation worse.



Chapter 8 Analysis

When Kaname is recollecting his marriage, he admits to himself that he has been hoping for years that Misako would leave him for another man. He realizes that he wants a woman to be either a goddess or a plaything, and Misako cannot be either to him. This, however, is not because of her unwillingness to act out those roles, but because he is unwilling to see her in them. He has too much respect for her as his wife to use her sexually, and yet this is the reason that their marriage is so unhappy. Both partners want to play the role of the passive one, not recognizing that they are trying to force one another into the dominant role. In fact, Kaname wants a dominant woman, like the Hollywood movie stars, but is unwilling to dominantly tell Misako to become like them. However, he does slowly try to influence her to dress and act more modern and more Western, and she happily complies. This also means that she is less willing to put up with the charade of a proper, happy marriage.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

In the summer, Kaname accepts an invitation to come visit his father-in-law and O-hisa. There is a popular tradition of stylish gentlemen and their mistresses dressing up as pilgrims and going on a trip to visit thirty-three holy places. They are to begin in Awaji, where the old man is staying. They will also visit a puppet theater that uses an even older style of puppets, and Kaname is looking forward to seeing what that is like. As the two men talk, Misako's father makes O-hisa play music for them on the samisen, a traditional Japanese instrument similar to a dulcimer. As O-hisa sings and plays, the old man criticizes her singing, saying that she sings too sweetly for the subject matter. Finally she encourages the old man to play something himself, which he agrees to do once he has had enough to drink. Since most samisen songs are composed by blind men, he closes his eyes while he plays, as though he really is blind.

Listening to the music reminds Kaname of his childhood in Tokyo. As a child, he would often hear a certain song being played next door, and one day he caught a glimpse of a pretty girl playing her samisen. Although he did not fall in love with the neighbor girl, he imagines that the brief encounter with her planted the seed for his later tendency to worship women. Years later, he hears a geisha perform the same song at a teahouse, and he is deeply moved by the memory from his childhood. Hearing O-hisa play it for him, he is filled with the same feelings.

O-hisa is utterly attentive to Misako's father. Although she is not a cultured girl, the old man has paid for her to take classes in cooking, dressing, flower arranging, and music, so that when he dies, she will have no trouble finding someone else. She also waits on the old man hand and foot, playing samisen for him wherever he requests it, even if she is embarrassed. When the time comes for them to go to bed, she continues massaging the old man's shoulders long after he falls asleep. Kaname thinks about their relationship and feels ambivalent about it. Although O-hisa has certainly benefited from their relationship, the old man treats her like a favorite pet or a decoration. She is only allowed to see puppet theater and eat Japanese delicacies, and Kaname wonders whether she gets tired of this. He also finds the difference in their ages somewhat disconcerting, and imagines how he would feel if his own father were living with O-hisa. He thinks perhaps he understands why Misako dislikes O-hisa so much.

Since the others go to bed so early, Kaname finds himself alone in his room, awake for several more hours. He thinks back on how annoying it always is when Misako cries all night, and how sometimes he has gone to a resort for several days, just for the chance to sleep alone in the room. Now, however, he has gotten so used to the company of Hiroshi and Misako, who hardly ever cries anymore, that he finds that it is hard for him to fall asleep alone. He sits up in bed writing postcards to people, and informs Takanutsu that he and Misako are no closer to a decision.



Chapter 9 Analysis

It seems that O-hisa and Misako's father symbolize Osaka and the old-fashioned ways of Japan, while Kaname and Misako symbolize Tokyo and the modern Westernization of Japan. Since the Japanese culture is so ritualized, O-hisa and the old man spend almost all of their time engaging in old-fashioned rituals. In Japan, it is not considered scandalous or immoral for a man to take a mistress, even if he is already married, and a man can have a very official, legally defined relationship with his mistress. O-hisa and the old man understand their respective roles, with him being completely dominant and her being completely submissive. Misako and Kaname, on the other hand, represent a city going through a transition, still clinging affectionately to the old rituals, but desiring the more modern technology and global culture. They like the old ways too much to entirely throw them away, but they are both tired of the old traditions. This can be seen in the way Kaname worships beautiful American movie stars and in Misako's distaste for the collectible Japanese dolls that her father has bought for her. Neither Kaname nor Misako can admit that if they want to live the modern life, they are going to have to let go of the old ways, symbolized by their proper, loveless marriage.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

In the morning, Kaname joins Misako's father and O-hisa in their room as they get ready to go out for the day to see the shows at the theater. As they prepare to go out, the old man and O-hisa discuss the play, as advertised in the program. O-hisa puts a lot of time into getting her look just right, since this is very important to the old man. She uses hot water and a comb to fix imperfections in her elaborate, oiled hairstyle. O-hisa needs the old man's help to tie the sash of her kimono, and even with the two of them working together, they can barely get it tied. This is because the old man likes to find the most ancient, old-fashioned fabrics and make O-hisa dress like someone from another era. Although most modern sashes contain rayon, which is much easier to work with, the old fabrics that he picks are pure silk and practically impossible to tie. Before they go out, O-hisa comments on how sunny it is and wants to go back for her parasol so she will not get sunburned. Although Misako's father is determined to show her off like an antique porcelain doll, he laughs and says that she will be burned to a crisp anyway. O-hisa makes the men wait while she carefully pats sunblock on all exposed skin, including her ankles.

The plays go from eleven in the morning until after midnight, so the hotel manager suggests that the group might want to head to the theater in afternoon or early evening, since no one sits through all of them. However, Misako's father is determined to get the full experience, so he urges O-hisa and Kaname ahead, wanting to see all the plays. In his hurry, the old man still likes to stop at various antique shops in the village. While he admires the antiques, Kaname and O-hisa talk, and she admits that on a beautiful day like this she would much rather be tromping around the countryside, gathering rare vegetables for the old man to eat.

Observing the scenery, Kaname thinks about how lovely the old Japanese architecture is. Although there are a few pieces of modernity in the village, it is made mostly of old-fashioned buildings and seems almost like a place out of another era. For the most part, Japanese architecture is still beautiful in the sturdier parts of the land, but this is not the case in areas where there have been natural disasters. In places that have been destroyed by fire, earthquakes, or storms, cheap, prefabricated Western-style housing has been quickly erected to replace what was lost. This is more common in the eastern portions of Japan, which tend to be ravaged by the elements more. As Kaname thinks about the many theater performers who have walked past these shops, perhaps in costume, he imagines that O-hisa herself is an old actress or musician, a relic from the past.



Chapter 10 Analysis

When Kaname and Misako first meet up with Misako's father and O-hisa at the puppet theater, they comment that the old man is obsessed with antiques and suggest that he has transferred his interest from sex to antiques. They see O-hisa as a sort of old-fashioned doll that the old man likes to dress up in the old ways. This does seem evident, especially in the way that he makes O-hisa dress in ways that are uncomfortable and impractical. The odd thing about him insisting on O-hisa practicing the old ways is that they do not work so well in the modern world. The sash on an old-fashioned kimono is hard to tie because tying kimono sashes (also called an "obi") was once a skilled, paid profession. Fashions like these were meant to be worn by people who have lots of servants to dress them, and who have very little that they need to do, once they are securely tied up in their clothes. In addition to making O-hisa act like someone from another era, the old man also makes her lie about her age, trying to pass her off as being in her late twenties so that the age gap between them will seem more appropriate.



Chapters 11-12

Chapters 11-12 Summary

Kaname, O-hisa, and Misako's father arrive at the theater and sit down in the pit on cushions scattered on the floor. Awaji is the place of origin for Japanese puppet plays, and the style used in Awaji is far more primitive than the style used in Osaka. Since the art originated as a farmer's hobby that country folk would do in their spare time, the theaters are all makeshift buildings or outdoor stalls, or performances are even held in the fields, and the show is over if it starts raining. The theater is full, and the vital, loud group of people pay little attention to what is going on on stage. When they do look, it is mostly to admire the stylistic puppets. As the time passes and more people are drinking sake, the crowd gets louder and the puppeteers get as drunk as the audience, moving their bodies in the same motions as the puppets. When O-hisa needs to go to the bathroom, Kaname investigates the facilities and finds that they are utterly inappropriate for a young lady. Outside are several buckets which are used in the open air by men and women alike. O-hisa leaves and wanders around town for an hour, trying to find a bathroom.

In the evening, they leave the play early, wanting to prepare for their pilgrimage to the shrines the next day. They spend the evening practicing chants that they will recite along the way. In the morning, Kaname admires O-hisa's pilgrim costume and says goodbye to the couple. He gets on a boat which takes him to Kobe. On the way, on a whim he changes into a Western-style suit.

In Kobe, Kaname goes to an old mansion, which is a whorehouse that employs only European women. The house rarely allows Japanese customers, which is part of the reason that Kaname likes going there. When he arrives, he finds that Mrs. Brent, the old English madam, is crying because she has just found out that her brother has died. Kaname uncomfortably says reassuring words to her, mentally reflecting on how sad the woman's decline in recent years has been. When he feels that he has done enough to be polite, Kaname goes upstairs to see Louise, a prostitute who works there.

Louise is powdering her body when Kaname arrives. She claims to be from Poland, but Kaname knows that she is actually half Korean and half Russian. Knowing that many Japanese men find a foreigner to be exotic and sexy, Louise covers her entire body with white powder to look more Caucasian. Kaname has been coming to see her about once a week for about two years, and every time he leaves, he scrubs his body carefully so that Misako will not smell Louise's powder on him. After they indulge in some afternoon delight, Louise begins pestering Kaname to give her a large amount of money, supposedly so that she can leave her life of sin behind. Kaname half-heartedly agrees, promising to bring the money next time, but thinking that there will never be a next time. Each time Kaname leaves the brothel, he tells himself that he will never come back, but within three days he is dying to go back. When he thinks about how much sexier Louise



is to him than Misako is, mostly because Misako is a proper Japanese wife, Kaname thinks that it is totally unacceptable that he should stay with Misako.

Chapters 11-12 Analysis

It is surprising how such a significant character is introduced so late in the book. It is not as though Kaname is meeting Louise for the first time, since he has known her for years. All the times that Kaname has talked with Takanatsu, or thought to himself about his sex life, his own marriage, Misako's infidelity, and the nature of O-hisa's relationship to Misako's father, the narrator has never once hinted at Louise's existence, except to mention that Kaname visits prostitutes or geishas once in a while. This is in keeping with the secrecy Kaname tries to give to his actions. He has chosen a foreign whorehouse partly because he is unlikely to be recognized by someone he knows. He visits Louise in the afternoons so that he can come back in the evening, pretending to have gone shopping in Kobe. Kaname's relationship with Louise is much more than simply a hooker-john partnership, since she means a lot to him. Kaname is able to notice some of Louise's flaws, like her dishonesty and greed, and in fact he feels a pain when he thinks about trying to leave her for good.



Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 Summary

Kaname finally sends a letter to Misako's father, telling him of their decision to get a divorce. Misako would rather break the news face to face, but Kaname feels that it would be strange to just abruptly tell him, without having given any indication during their Awaji holiday. Kaname is careful to stress that both he and Misako are to blame, and that he is not angry with her for going to Aso. Nonetheless, Misako's father is very disappointed and upset, and begs them to come see him so he can talk some sense into them. He also apologizes for his daughter's behavior, and suggests punishing her for her wanton ways. When Kaname tells Misako of her father's reaction, she refuses to go see her father, saying that she cannot stand to be lectured to in front of O-hisa. Misako tells Kaname of a letter she has just received from Takanatsu, in which he reveals that he has already told Hiroshi about the separation. Hiroshi has never let on that he knows. Kaname asks to see the letter, but Misako answers that she does not remember where she has put it, and she goes out to see Aso.

Kaname happens to find the letter from Takanatsu, and he quickly realizes that Misako does not want him to read it. Based on what he reads, Kaname realizes that Misako wishes that he had not allowed her to date Aso, and in fact, that she wishes she had never met Aso. Still, she is determined to remarry. Takanatsu urges Misako to put more work into her second marriage, so that it will last.

After a morning of arguing about whether or not to go, the next day Kaname and Misako both go to visit her father. The two men talk privately for a while, and the old man tells Kaname that, while Kaname thinks that he was giving Misako freedom by allowing her to go with Aso, really he was putting her into a situation that she could not possibly back out of. Misako's father says that Misako may pretend to be modern, but underneath, she still has old-fashioned values. The old man knows that the two have problems, but he still wants them to try to make it work. Kaname points out that, at this point, Misako has developed a hard, bitter edge, trying to protect herself and get herself out of her unhappy marriage.

Misako's father takes her out to dinner at a restaurant, to try to change her mind. Kaname takes a bath in the old-fashioned, outdoor bathhouse, attended by many mosquitoes, and O-hisa. Kaname admits to himself that what he really wants is a living doll, who will be even more stylistic and submissive than O-hisa, to wait on him, as he goes through the courteous mannerisms of the Japanese aristocracy. Looking around the garden, Kaname finally decides that he wants the divorce just as much as Misako does. Misako's father telephones to let them know that they are returning from the restaurant, and O-hisa and Kaname can tell that he has not changed Misako's mind.



Chapters 13-14 Analysis

Kaname seems torn between wanting too many things, which are not all compatible: he wants a quiet, submissive mistress to act as his mannerly, Japanese servant, and he wants the vital, insistent brashness of a European woman. It is not simply the beauty or sexuality of these women that he desires, but the entire civilizations that they represent. On the other hand, Misako is unable to choose between situations which all seem bad. She is unhappy with her husband's lack of affection, but she does not really love Aso enough to be happy about marrying him. A third option would be for her to be single, with no husband to wait upon, but this is never even considered.

Although there is no single event that cements the divorce, no moment that is the turning point, things have changed at the end. For the first time, both partners are really sure that this is what they want, although it makes them both sad. It is an ending, but it is the ending of something that has taken eight years to die, so it is a blessing when it is finally resolved.



Characters

Kaname

Kaname is the main character, and most of the story is told from his point of view. Kaname is married to Misako. Kaname loves the stimulation of new toys and new forms of entertainment, but he gets bored quickly and moves on to something else. In some ways, Kaname, who is wealthy enough that he shows up at his office about once a week, wants to live his life like a proper, old-fashioned Japanese gentleman of tastes. He enjoys going to the puppet theater with his father-in-law and eating good food out of expensive lacquer dishes while drinking hot sake and listening to a song played on the samisen, a traditional Japanese musical instrument. Kaname sees these things as the finer things in life and imagines how nice it would be if he could have his own doll-like mistress to wait on him. However, Kaname has been influenced by the West (Europe and America) and the modern times, and he is also fascinated by the beautiful, strong women he sees portrayed in Hollywood movies. Just as Kaname cannot make up his mind whether he prefers old or new style, so he also cannot make up his mind whether or not to get a divorce. He enjoys being passive, and keeps hoping someone else will make the decision for him. He also wants to appear to be a better husband than he really is. When Misako admits that she has feelings for another man, Kaname tells her that he has no such feelings for other women, even though he is half in love with a prostitute named Louise.

Misako

Misako is Kaname's wife of ten years. She has been raised to be a traditional Japanese woman who runs her house well and takes good care of her husband. Misako is a good wife, but when Kaname withdraws from her sexually after about two years of marriage, it hurts her a lot. Her only protest is to cry at night under the covers in bed, which bothers her husband. When Kaname encourages Misako to become more modern and more independent, like an American woman, she tries her best, although most of the changes are outward, like putting on makeup in public. Although Misako starts changing to please Kaname, she finds that she cannot go back to pretending to be a perfect, submissive wife, after she has learned to stand up for herself. Misako ends up being very confused, having thrown away one set of values (marital fidelity, reputation, family opinion), but not really gaining a proper set of values to replace what she has lost. Misako feels that she absolutely must escape her loveless marriage, but the only thing that she can think to escape to is another marriage, even though she does not really want to marry Aso. Like Kaname, Misako tends to procrastinate as long as possible, and she fears confrontation.



Hiroshi

Hiroshi is Kaname and Misako's son, who is in fourth grade. Although they do not get around to telling him that they are getting a divorce, he can tell that something is wrong and tries to be happy and loving enough to make his parents love each other.

Takanatsu Hideo

Takanatsu is Kaname's cousin, and the only person that Kaname and Misako confide in about their situation. When they refuse to take action, Takanatsu tells Hiroshi about the divorce, and tells the couple that he wants no more involvement.

Misako's Father

Misako's father loves to pretend to be older than he is, and surrounds himself with old-fashioned Japanese things. He treats his mistress, O-hisa, like a doll that he can dress up.

O-hisa

O-hisa is the mistress of Misako's father. Although she is just a country girl in her early twenties, the old man has sponsored her education in many fine skills of Japanese art.

Louise

Louise is a Eurasian prostitute that Kaname visits every week. She is really half Korean, half Russian, but she pretends to be Polish. She tries to get Kaname to pay off her debts for her.

Mrs. Brent

Mrs. Brent is the madam of a whorehouse that employs only white girls. Kaname visits her house often.

Aso

Aso is Misako's boyfriend. Although he wants to marry her, he is unwilling to promise that he will love her forever, and he is willing to wait as long as it takes for her to get a divorce.



Jiia

Jiia is Kaname and Misako's servant, and always meets Misako at the train station late at night.

Yoshiko

Yoshiko is Takanatsu's ex-wife. Before they were married, she was a prostitute.



Objects/Places

Osaka

Osaka is a city in Japan. It represents very old-fashioned, countrified ways of doing things.

Tokyo

Tokyo is another city in Japan. It represents the wave of modern times and technology, having been rebuilt with new buildings after a huge earthquake in 1923.

Benten Puppet Theater

Kaname and Misako meet Misako's father and O-hisa at this theater, and Kaname is surprised to find that he enjoys the performance.

Suma

Aso lives in Suma, and so "going to Suma" becomes code for Misako going to see Aso.

Kobe

Kobe is where Kaname goes to Mrs. Brent's House, the whorehouse where Louise lives.

Awaji

Awaji is the beginning point for a route that includes thirty-three sacred shrines. This route is often traveled by pilgrims watching puppet shows, since the shows originated in Awaji.

Ichimura

Ichimura is also known as "Puppet Town" because of all the puppet shows that are shown and performed there. It is part of the Awaji pilgrimage.



Lindy

Lindy is the greyhound that Takanatsu brings as a gift for Hiroshi. Lindy is short for Lindbergh, after the famous pilot.

Peony

Peony is Kaname and Misako's collie. Although Misako does not like dogs, Peony is friendly enough that Misako starts to care for her.

O-hisa's Samisen

A samisen (or shamisen) is a traditional Japanese stringed instrument, similar to a sitar or lute. Misako's father makes O-hisa carry hers around and play for him when he wants to hear a song.

Louise's Powder

Louise always covers herself with perfumed white powder to make her skin look lighter so she can pass as fully white. This powder clings to Kaname after he has been with her, and he worries that Misako will notice the smell.

Bunraku Puppets

The old style of Japanese puppets are meant as entertainment for adults, and the shows are performed a little like opera or kabuki.



Themes

Puppets

At the beginning of the book, Misako's father has invited Misako and Kaname to come see a puppet show with him. They are not interested, since they find traditional Japanese puppet theater to be boring. During the performance, however, Kaname finds the performance to be enchanting, and for him it begins to symbolize everything that is charming and Japanese. These huge puppets are performed by three puppeteers each, and move primarily through the torso and head, suggesting emotion through subtle nuances of pose. The story is sung by a narrator and is similar to an opera. This art style was originally the hobby of farmers, who could not afford lavish entertainment but could entertain one another with their wooden puppets. In Chapter 11, the narrator says, "In the days before motion pictures, there was thus a happy substitute for them: a few hands and a little equipment, and a puppet theater could be put together to wander lightly over the country" (Chap. 11, p. 144). This art form is passing away in the modern age, though, as more audiences flock to see movies, and there are hardly any puppet masters left who can make or repair old puppets. As Misako's father says to Kaname, "These are almost the last of the great puppeteers. I wonder how it will be when they are gone" (Chap. 3, p. 27).

The puppets can be seen to represent the old, stylistic forms of etiquette in Japan, with beautiful roles to be filled. Misako often feels like a doll or a puppet, acting out the role of a stylish and dutiful wife, as though she and Kaname are happy, and she finds it unbearable to always pretend. This is shown by how she hates the doll collection that her father has bought her, but she does not feel that she can throw it away, because of propriety. When Kaname thinks about O-hisa, he sees her as a girl who has willingly submitted to being turned into a doll for Misako's father to play with, and he thinks about how appealing it would be if he could obtain his own doll-girl.

Marriage

Kaname and Misako's marriage is the entire focus of the book, as they try to evaluate it and decide how to fix it. They have gotten so good at pretending to be a happy couple that both of them are good at coming up with excuses for why, really, their marriage is all right. Misako seems to feel, having been raised as a traditional Japanese daughter, that she has no identity outside of being a wife, and thus feels compelled to leave Kaname only when he sends her away and only when there is another man waiting to marry her. Kaname, for his part, manufactures no end of excuses for why he wants to get rid of Misako, although deep down, he is just bored with the Japanese values that she represents. He pushes her to become more of the ideal woman that he wants, but unfortunately, as she conforms to the role of the independent, Western woman, she realizes that she is tired of acting out a role to please Kaname. When they are leaving the puppet theater, Kaname wishes that she would act more submissive to him in front



of the others, thinking that, ". . . she ought to at least for the sake of appearances to let him make the decision this once—she ought to restrain herself and play the part of the wife to that small extent" (Chap. 3, p. 31).

Kaname and Misako's marriage, in which the two are rather similar in personality and thus grow to loathe the rut that they fall into, is contrasted with the relationship of O-hisa and Misako's father, who are not married. O-hisa and the old man are opposites, as O-hisa is young, provincial, and submissive, and the old man is domineering and demanding and pretends to be older than he is. Watching them, Kaname begins to wish that he could find a wife who would act like a doll, not talking back with her own ideas. He thinks that, "A sensitive woman, a woman with ideas, can only get more troublesome and less likable with the years" (Chap. 12, p. 153). Kaname is attracted by the idea of a marriage that is less of a partnership and more of a master-servant relationship, although he does not seem sure whether he wants to be the master, as with O-hisa, or the servant, as with Louise.

The Changing Culture of Japan

The unrest between Misako and Kaname is symbolic of the changing attitudes in Japan, which had only recently opened up its borders to outside cultures. Kaname cannot decide if he prefers traditional Japanese values, represented by O-hisa and the puppet theater, or modern Western ideas, represented by Louise and all of the exciting foreign imports, like the greyhound that Takanatsu brings for Hiroshi. As the twentieth century progressed, many Japanese people felt confused, wanting to embrace the exciting fads brought by foreigners, but then finding themselves empty because they had rejected their roots. These opposing viewpoints are also represented by various cities in Japan. Since Tokyo was mostly destroyed in an earthquake in 1923, most of the city was rebuilt in a modern, Western style, and people of Tokyo are seen as very sophisticated and sharp. Osaka is another city, which still clings to the stylized, traditional culture of the merchant class. People from Osaka are seen as naive and hickish, and unable to conceal their emotions, but they uphold the old-fashioned ways, which are dying out. When Kaname, O-hisa, and Misako's father go to a puppet show in Awaji, the old man makes O-hisa wear a sash of very old silk, which has achieved a dull sheen after many years. The old man insists that, although the original brightness of the fabric is gone, this actually enhances the subtle beauty of the silk. As Kaname looks around at the village in Awaji, he thinks about the beauty of the old, weather-beaten town walls, comparing them to O-hisa's sash. "Those walls were a little like the sash around O-hisa's waist: their first luster had disappeared in long years under the fresh sea winds and rains, and bright though they were, their brightness was tempered by a certain reserve, a soft austerity" (Chap. 10, p. 132). At the end of the book, it is not clear whether Kaname has chosen modern, foreign ways, or if he wants to return to the old Japanese ways.



Style

Point of View

The story is told by a third-person narrator, who can see into the characters' inner thoughts. This narrator does not reveal everything to the reader, however, but artistically provides tidbits of information and details about the characters' behavior, when he wants the reader to guess what is going on in their heads. This vagueness is a feature of Japanese writing, where the writer likes to convey information through symbolic details, rather than just coming out and saying what he means. This makes the reader do a little bit of work, trying to figure out what the plot really is, and to some extent, this leaves the plot open to interpretation, so that it is not clear to the reader what conclusion is going to follow the last scene of the book. Perhaps Kaname will embrace Western culture and begin to keep Louise as his mistress, or perhaps he will embrace Japanese culture and try to obtain a mistress like O-hisa, or perhaps he will give up women altogether, instead turning to beautiful, traditional objects like Bunraku puppets for inspiration. When the narrator does reveal characters' inner thoughts, it is most often the thoughts of Kaname, who often examines his own motives privately. Yet the narrator keeps Kaname's long-running, expensive affair with Louise a secret until three-quarters of the way through the book. Secrets like these give the book the feel of a session with a story-teller, who withholds important information for the sake of dramatic timing. Whenever the outside characters (those other than Kaname and Misako) reveal their thoughts, it is through letters that they write to Kaname and Misako.

Setting

"Some Prefer Nettles" takes place in Japan, in the 1950s. For many centuries, Japan was closed off to the outside world, with no contact with foreign cultures. Relatively recently, it opened up to the rest of the world, particularly the West (Europe and America). This means that Japan is a mix of old and new, traditional and exotic. Tokyo represents modern ways, especially since it was mostly rebuilt after an earthquake in 1923 destroyed most of the city. Osaka, on the other hand, is another Japanese city, which represents the old-fashioned merchant class, with their expressive, aristocratic ways, and who consider themselves the most truly Japanese. Kobe is a place of infidelity, since that is where Kaname goes to visit Louise, and also where Misako meets Aso at her French class. Awaji is a place dedicated to the art of puppet theater, at the beginning of a pilgrimage route of thirty-three sacred places, many of which have their own puppet theater. There are several puppet theaters in the story, with the Benten one in the city showing the subtle refinement of Osaka puppetry, and with the one at Ichimura or "Puppet Town" being a makeshift picnic area for country families to hang out and relax in.

In Japan, reputation and family bonds are very important socially, and people act carefully, not wanting to offend someone to whom they owe respect. This is part of the



reason that Misako and Kaname have so much trouble trying to decide what to do about their marriage: Kaname does not want to disappoint or alienate Misako's father, and he also does not want to risk ruining Misako socially by allowing her to look like a bad wife. Misako's boyfriend, Aso, is also concerned with his own reputation and family, and in fact wants both Kaname and Misako to come meet his mother, so that no one's reputation will be threatened.

Language and Meaning

It is important to remember that *Some Prefer Nettles* was originally written in Japanese and translated into English by Edward G. Seidensticker. The Japanese language reflects the Japanese culture, and so there are many, many differences in the two languages. Japanese writing tends to be vague, and leads the reader, using symbolic details and images, to guess what is going on. There are also many idioms that only make sense to a person who has studied the Japanese culture and history at length. Naturally, these idioms cannot be translated directly and still retain the same meaning to an English-speaking reader. That being said, Seidensticker has worked to convey not just the words, but the meaning and symbolism of Tanizaki's book.

There are many Japanese terms used in the book, like "samisen," "kimono," "koto," and "Bunraku," but Japanese is not the only language referred to. Misako meets her boyfriend when she is attending French classes, which she is taking because she is bored with being a housewife. There are several references to German food, which is considered exotic and rich. At Mrs. Brent's whorehouse, none of the customers are allowed to speak Japanese but must speak English, French, or German, and Louise claims to have a genius for foreign languages. All these foreign languages, dropped casually into the conversations, represent the encroachment of global culture on a land that had previously been closed up and isolated for many years.

The title of the book comes from a Japanese proverb that says,

"Every worm to his taste;

some prefer to eat nettles."

This hints at the way Kaname and Misako draw out the experience of their divorce, as though they love the pain of it. Nettles are very abrasive, sharp plants, and though they are edible when cooked, when they are raw, they sting the skin if someone touches them. The proverb indicates that everyone must choose their own path in life, but some people seem to deliberately place themselves in a situation which hurts them.

Structure

Some Prefer Nettles is divided into fourteen chapters. The beginning scene, in Chapter 1, shows Misako and Kaname sitting side by side, trying to decide whether or not to go to the puppet theater with Misako's father. The tension in the scene is representative of



the tension of the entire book, as Misako pretends that she is willing to do what society asks of her, and Kaname acts as though he is powerless to change the situation. In Chapters 2 and 3, the couple attends the puppet show, and the characters of Misako's father and O-hisa are introduced. As the two couples are forced to interact in a small space, the contrast between their relationships begins to show some of the problems between Misako and Kaname. In Chapters 4 through 8, Takanatsu visits the couple, and Hiroshi is also introduced. Takanatsu helps the couple clarify a lot of their problems, but finally ends up deciding that the situation is too complex for him to get involved. He takes Hiroshi with him to Tokyo. In Chapters 9 through 11, Kaname goes with O-hisa and Misako's father on part of their vacation pilgrimage and observes their relationship, comparing it mentally to his own marriage. In Chapter 12, the narrator surprises the reader with the sudden introduction of Louise, Kaname's favorite prostitute, with whom he has been having an affair. Chapter 13 takes place just after a climax, since Kaname has finally written Misako's father a letter, explaining that they wish to get a divorce. Even though everything is not final, both spouses finally agree on what must be done. In Chapter 14, Kaname has a chance to think about the implications of the decision he has made, and he knows that it is what he wants. The book ends on an uncertain note, with the reader not really knowing what Kaname will do with himself next.



Quotes

"It was as if they held a basin of water balanced between them and waited to see in which direction it would spill." Chap. 1, p. 4

"He preferred to live quietly, unobtrusively, casting no dishonor on his ancestors, a member of the leisure class—a marginal member perhaps, but still a member—with the capital, somewhat diminished, that his father had left, and with at least the nominal title of director of his father's company." Chap. 2, p.13

"She was in many ways timid and indecisive, but she had a hard core that made her resist the demands of custom, duty, friendship, more strongly than Kaname himself could." Chap. 2, p. 14

"The reason for their decision to separate, after all, was that they did not want to grow old, that they wanted to be free to live their youth again." Chap. 2, p. 26

"It was not enough that something should be touching, charming, graceful; it had to have about it a certain radiance, the power to inspire veneration." Chap. 3, p. 36

"It's a mistake for an outsider to get mixed up in a divorce, no matter how good a friend he may be, but with you two it's a matter of getting you to make up your own minds." Chap. 4, p.45

"Quite unable to take action, sunk in daydreams to a pleasant new liveliness, an immediacy, as though they were about to become realities." Chap. 5, p. 52

"To him she was not 'female,' to her he was not 'male'—it was the consciousness of being husband and wife that caused the tension between them, and had they not been married they could probably have been excellent friends." Chap. 5, p.53

"They had not been entirely happy perhaps, but they had after all lived together as husband and wife, gone to bed together and got up together, for more than ten years, had even had a child together." Chap. 5, p. 54

"In the years since he married Misako he had been obsessed with one question: how to leave her." Chap. 5, p. 60

"You'll marry again and make a mess of it again. All woman-worshippers do." Chap. 5, p. 61

"She wanted always to be in spirits as bright as the skies today, and she wished she could meet every problem with the casual, unhurried eye one has for festivals." Chap. 6, p. 66

"Children retain a great deal, and when they grow up they start going over things, and rejudging them from a grownup's point of view." Chap. 7, p. 84



"But when two people are really in love, a slight smell of garlic makes no difference. If it does, they're only pretending." Chap. 7, p. 86

"Misako began to be more careful of her appearance, but Kaname quite overlooked the assortment of cosmetics and toilet articles steadily building up on her dresser—testimony indeed to the apathy into which he had fallen as a husband." Chap. 8, p. 98

"In an excess of pain at being unable to love her as a husband should, he had only nursed a prayer, almost a dream, that someone might come along to give the luckless woman what he himself could not." Chap. 8, p. 100

"He had kept his eyes carefully shut, but they would one day have to open." Chap. 8, p. 107

"But with the new age and its pressures, even this proud art is dying." Chap. 11, p. 135

"to Kaname the line expressed, with grace and circumspection but with an acuteness that tightened his chest, the innermost secret of a marriage from which sexual passion had disappeared." Chap. 3, p. 32

"Aside from the question of whether Misako knew about his flirtation or not, it seemed a breach of etiquette to bring another woman's scent home to his wife, granted that she was hardly his wife anymore." Chap. 12, p. 164

"A well-tended toilet in the pure Japanese style should have a delicate odor all its own. That gives one an inexpressible feeling of elegance and refinement." Chap. 14, p. 194



Topics for Discussion

What exactly went wrong in Kaname and Misako's marriage? Do you think that the marriage could be saved?

What are the two ideals of women that Kaname desires? Are either of them realistic?

Why is it easier for Kaname to get along with Louise than with Misako?

How does the art of puppet theater compare to other forms of entertainment? How is it different from American puppet shows?

In what ways has Japan become modernized in the book? How is it still old-fashioned?

How honest are the characters with one another? How honest are they with themselves?

What do you think Misako really wants? If she could write the ending, how would she end the book?

Are there passages that are confusing because of their Japanese style? How can you learn more about Japanese culture? What aspects of it do you find the most appealing?