

The Sound of the Mountain Study Guide

The Sound of the Mountain by Yasunari Kawabata

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Plot Summary

The Sound of the Mountain is a novel by Nobel Prize winning writer Yasunari Kawabata. In this novel, Ogata Shingo is a man in his sixties who is beginning to feel the edge of his mortality. Shingo becomes obsessed with his memories and the legacy he will leave behind when he dies. While consumed with memories of the sister of his wife, a woman with whom he was once madly in love, Shingo finds himself growing closer to the young woman who is his son's wife. A complicated situation emerges, causing Shingo to question his own actions in regards to the disaster that has become of both his children's marriages. The Sound of the Mountain is a novel of mortality and the legacy each living being leaves behind upon his death.

Shingo is aware that his mind is beginning to go. Often Shingo becomes aware that his son and his secretary have to subtly remind him of things that he needs to do at work or help him find items he has left in some place he cannot recall. Age has sneaked up on Shingo and it often causes him to think back on his life and to recall the people of his past. Shingo finds himself thinking often of his wife's sister, a woman he once loved deeply who died at too young an age. Despite more than thirty years of marriage, Shingo finds himself still wishing he had been lucky enough to marry the other sister.

Shingo has also become aware that his son is unfaithful to his wife. Kikuko is a beautiful young woman who reminds him of the sister he once adored. The way his own son treats such a young, engaging young woman makes Shingo feel himself a failure when it comes to his children. For this reason, Shingo asks his secretary, Eiko, about his son's mistress. Over time Eiko tells Shingo about the woman, even taking him to see the house where she lives. Shingo, however, afraid of interfering too much, does not see the woman.

As Shingo worries over his son's marriage, his daughter comes to stay with the family. The daughter has left her husband and wants to divorce him. However, the family talks her into going back to her husband. A short time later, Shingo learns that his daughter has left her husband again and gone to stay with family in the country. Shingo sends his son to retrieve his sister and bring her home before the family reputation is spoiled.

One morning, Kikuko gets a letter from a friend who has had an abortion and is having complications. Shingo goes with her to the hospital, aware that she must pass the section of town where her husband's mistress lives. Later, Shingo learns that Kikuko has traveled into Tokyo again to have a medical exam. A conversation with his son the following day allows Shingo to learn that Kikuko has had an abortion because she does not want to have a child with his son as long as he has a mistress. To add insult to injury, Shingo learns that his son asked his mistress to pay for the abortion.

A few days after her abortion, Kikuko goes into Tokyo to stay with her family for a few days. Shingo calls to check on her and finds her in much better spirits. In fact, Kikuko insists on meeting with him in a park where he is impressed with her high color and apparent happiness. Kikuko comes back to the family home the following day.

Not long after Kikuko's abortion, Shingo learns from Eiko that his son's mistress is pregnant. Shingo goes to see the mistress and learns that she is determined to have the child despite the insistence of Shingo's son that she not have it. The woman then claims that the child is not his. Shingo pays her money and tries to believe the child is not his grandchild, but he finds it impossible to convince himself of such a thing.

At home, Kikuko expresses a desire to separate from her husband and become a full servant to Shingo. Shingo is startled by this, seeing it as a first declaration of love. Shingo tells her that she should not think that way and that she is a free woman, free to do as she pleases. This seems to satisfy her. That night, Shingo's daughter, who is now divorced from her drug addicted husband, asks him to buy her a shop where she and Kikuko might make a living together.

The Sound of the Mountain and The Wings of the Locust

The Sound of the Mountain and The Wings of the Locust Summary

This novel was originally published in Japan in 1954 in the author's native language. It was then translated and published in the United States in 1970.

The Sound of the Mountain.

Ogata Shingo has begun to notice that he forgets many simple things and that his son and secretary often have to give him subtle reminders. Shingo is married to Yasuko, a woman a year older than himself with whom he has two children, a boy and a girl, as well as two granddaughters from his daughter. Shingo finds himself growing annoyed with Yasuko at night because, as in the early years of their marriage, she has begun to snore. It often wakes Shingo in the night. Tonight Shingo wakes to her snoring and he finds it difficult to go to sleep. Shingo stares out the window and listens to the locusts out in the garden. As Shingo stands at the windows he hears what he believes is the sound of the mountain, a foretelling of death. This makes Shingo think of a geisha he met ten days before who told him of her attempt at suicide.

Shingo often travels to and from work with his son, Shuichi, because they work at the same firm. However, Shingo has been coming home alone lately. Shingo knows this is because his son is having an affair with an unknown girl. Out of guilt, Shingo stops to buy fish on the way home from work to help Kikuko, his daughter-in-law, who does most of the cooking only to discover she has already bought fish for the night's meal.

A short time later, Shingo questions Shuichi about his desire to have a friend of Shingo's secretary, Eiko, work as a maid in their home. Shingo knows that Eiko knows about Shuichi's affair and worries her maid friend might tell Kikuko about it. Shuichi dismisses his fears.

The Wings of the Locust.

Fusako, Shingo's daughter, leaves her husband and comes to stay with her parents. Shingo wonders how long his daughter plans to stay, unhappy with her sudden arrival even as Kikuko and Yasuko seem to embrace it.

A few days later, on the walk home from the train station Shingo finds himself distracted by sunflowers growing in a neighbor's yard. When Kikuko comes to join him in his walk, he talks of how nice it would be to give one's head to a hospital for a good cleaning, thinking of his sudden bouts of forgetfulness.



That night, Shingo dreams of an old acquaintance who has died and of his young daughter. There are some sexual overtones to the dream that bother Shingo. A short time later, Fusako points out to Shingo that he is often more kind to Kikuko than he ought to be. This causes Shingo to think on his relationship with Kikuko, on how she does not treat him as an old man.

A few days later, Shingo takes Eiko dancing at a dance club his son frequents with hopes of meeting his son's mistress.

The Sound of the Mountain and The Wings of the Locust Analysis

The novel begins with the introduction of the main characters. Ogata Shingo is the patriarch of a Japanese family living in a suburb of Tokyo. Shingo, a man in his sixties, has recently become aware of his growing inability to remember things. This makes Shingo feel old and begin to reflect on his life, especially the legacy he will leave when he dies. This legacy consists mainly of his two children. Shuichi is his son, a young man who is married to the beautiful Kikuko. Kikuko has made herself invaluable in Shingo's home by taking over all the chores of the recently departed maid. Shingo is deeply fond of Kikuko, something the reader quickly discovers not only in the author's descriptions of their relationship, but also in Fusako, Shingo's daughter, who is jealous of the attentions Shingo shows to Kikuko. The reader suspects that Shingo's deep fondness for Kikuko contributes to his concerns over the fact that his son is having an affair with another woman.

As Shingo begins to deal with the affair his son is having, and his own shame that his son would do such a thing to the family reputation, he also finds himself forced to deal with his daughter. Fusako is in an unhappy marriage and comes to stay with the family for a time. Shingo finds himself thinking about his wife's beautiful sister and his hope that his own daughter would look like her and his profound disappointment that she does not. Shingo does not have much affection for his only daughter and for this reason does not have much affection for her children, either. It is a difficult situation that leaves Shingo disappointed in his child and the legacy he will leave behind when he dies.

The reader should also note in these early chapters the use of the descriptions of nature the author often makes. The main character, Shingo, is often reflecting on the beauty of nature as he struggles with things that upset him, such as the strength and height of the neighbor's sunflowers or the sounds of locusts. The author will continue to do this throughout the novel, using the descriptions of nature to illustrate or emphasize Shingo's state of mind.



A Blaze of Clouds, The Chestnuts, and A Dream of Islands

A Blaze of Clouds, The Chestnuts, and A Dream of Islands Summary

A Blaze of Clouds.

A bad storm hits the Tokyo area and Shingo and Shuichi come home to find Kikuko shutting up the house as she sings along with a record. A short time later the power goes out so the entire family decides to go to bed early. Shingo becomes aware of voices from Shuichi and Kikuko's room, curious what they are talking about. In his own room, his wife speaks to him about hairstyles. Shingo asks her about a kerchief he saw his daughter wrap her things in when she left a short time earlier and is surprised to learn it once belonged to the sister he loved so many years before. Shingo wonders where the kerchief is at that moment and if he will see it again. Kikuko wakes Shingo sometime later to tell him a sheet of tin has crashed onto their roof.

Shingo speaks to Eiko about his son's mistress and learns that she has not only met the woman, but has been to her home. Eiko says the mistress lives with another woman and Shuichi often forces the other woman to sing for him when he is drunk.

The Chestnuts.

At dinner one night Kikuko notices the ginkgo is blooming even though Shingo has known for weeks. Kikuko promises to notice more. Later, Kikuko relays words from Yasuko to Shingo because he cannot hear. Yasuko tells Shingo that she has dreamed that her family home is falling to ruin. This causes Shingo to remember their wedding when he felt incredibly intimidated by her sister's widower.

Shingo learns that Fusako has left her husband and gone to the country to stay with family. Shingo decides to send Shuichi to retrieve her. After Shuichi leaves, Shingo asks Eiko where Shuichi's lover lives and she describes the area.

That same afternoon, Shingo discovers an old school friend has died and he must go to the funeral. Shingo remembers that the friend was once persecuted by his wife while she went through menopause. However, Shingo is embarrassed that he forgets this fact when he sees the wife at the funeral. After returning to the office, Shingo has Eiko show him the mistress's house, but he does not approach it.

A Dream of Islands.

A dog belonging to a neighbor who has become something of a stray has puppies under the Ogata house. Kikuko is excited by the event.



At the office, Shingo realizes he has never climbed Mount Fuji and this bothers him. As he ponders this, an old school friend of his comes to the office to sell him some No masks that belonged to another friend who died during the war. The man died with a young woman not his wife, which has caused the friend to take the masks from the widow in an attempt to help her. Shingo agrees to take two of the masks which his friend insists are male. Shingo has Eiko wear one of the masks and finds it oddly fascinating. At home Shingo shows the masks to Yasuko and Kikuko and finds himself drawn to the jido mask, nearly kissing it.

A short time later, Shingo is washing in the morning when he sees the puppies are all out sunning themselves. Shingo learns that Kikuko has already found homes for two of them, sparing Shingo the task of getting rid of them himself.

A Blaze of Clouds, The Chestnuts, and A Dream of Islands Analysis

Shingo spends a great deal of time thinking about his son's wife. Shingo clearly cares deeply for the woman and the reader can soon see that Shingo's obsession with his wife's sister all those years before have somehow been transferred to Kikuko without Shingo being fully aware of it. Shingo has a sexual dream about the daughter of a man he barely knew, a young girl he knew even less, and it startles him. The dream suggests to the reader Shingo's desire to be younger, to be with a woman like Kikuko.

As Shingo continues to obsess about the woman he once loved, he finds himself drawn more and more into the mystery of his son's lover. Shingo begins making inquiries and soon learns where the woman lives. However, Shingo cannot make himself confront the woman and he walks away. The reader wonders, however, if Shingo will come back to this place before the novel is finished to confront the woman who is breaking Kikuko's heart.

It is no wonder that Shingo is becoming so infatuated with Kikuko. With the departing of the maid, Kikuko has taken over most of the household chores and she takes care of all of Shingo's daily needs. Not only this, but she deals with the unpleasant responsibilities of the house as well. Kikuko is like the wife Shingo cannot remember ever having in his own wife. At the same time, the reader sees parallels in Kikuko's role in the Ogata family and the role Yasuko once played in the home of her sister's husband, making the reader wonder if Shingo's affection for Yasuko's sister was not paralleled toward her by the sister's widower. Perhaps this is why they have managed to remain married for so long.

The Cherry in the Winter, Water in the Morning, and The Voice in the Night

The Cherry in the Winter, Water in the Morning, and The Voice in the Night Summary

The Cherry in the Winter.

On New Year's Eve, Fusako and the children come to live with the Ogata's again. Shingo is annoyed when the oldest child wakes him early in the morning on the one day he should be allowed to sleep late. Shingo lies in his bed wondering how he feels about the child, aware that his feelings seem to be ambiguous. Shingo hopes that his wife's love for the children will be enough.

Eiko comes to the house to wish the family a happy New Year, but she refuses to come inside. Shingo asks her to accompany him on a visit to the old president of the firm where they work. On the way, Eiko tells Shingo she heard that Shuichi told his mistress that Kikuko is too much of a child. Eiko also tells him she has decided to quit her job in her shame in helping Shingo find the home of Shuichi's mistress.

Water in the Morning.

Shingo recalls the story of a friend who went crazy after becoming obsessed with plucking all his white hairs. Shingo also recalls that it was a recommendation from this man's daughter that made Shingo hire Eiko.

A few mornings later, as she prepares the water for Shingo to wash his face, Kikuko has a nose bleed that deeply concerns Shingo.

At the office, Shingo is surprised to find Eiko waiting for him even though it has been two months since she quit. Eiko has brought with her Mrs. Ikeda, the woman with whom Shuichi's mistress lives. This woman tells Shingo that he has tried to talk the young woman, Kinu, into leaving Shuichi because of his wife, but Kinu, who is a war widow, feels that Kikuko should consider herself lucky because her husband comes home. Mrs. Ikeda also asks that he encourage Shuichi to move into a home of his own with his wife. When Shingo mentions this to his wife that night, Fusako suggests she be the one to move out.

The Voice in the Night.

Shingo wakes to an odd noise and it takes him time to realize that it is Shuichi coming home drunk. Shingo listens as Kikuko goes out to the gate to walk him inside and then puts him to bed. Shingo is surprised at how easily Kikuko seems to forgive her husband. Shingo goes back to sleep and has a dream about a young woman who has an abortion

because an article in the newspaper he had read gets confused in his tired mind with a novel he read.

Kikuko gets a letter from a friend who has had an abortion and is experiencing complications. Shingo escorts her to the hospital, going so far as to ride with her in a taxi from the train station because he knows she will have to walk close to the mistress' house to get to the hospital on foot.

The Cherry in the Winter, Water in the Morning, and The Voice in the Night Analysis

Shingo's daughter and granddaughters come to live with them and Shingo finds himself wondering if he cares for his granddaughters at all. Shingo's feelings toward his own daughter are somewhat ambivalent; therefore, his feelings for her children seem to be the same. This concerns Shingo somewhat, but not enough for him to do anything about it.

Shingo's secretary quits because she has helped Shingo learn about the home of his son's mistress. Later Shingo speaks to the woman's roommate and learns that the woman is a war widow. This is the first time the author has mentioned the war in direct reference to anyone in his family. The war has been something of a background thing thus far in the novel, but now the reader realizes that Shuichi is young enough to have served in the military and that perhaps this has some bearing on his behavior in regards to his wife. At the same time, the reader learns that Shuichi's mistress is a war widow, something that appears to have great bearing on her decision to be his mistress.

Kikuko appears oblivious to those around her as to the affair her husband is conducting. However, when Shingo overhears her putting her drunk husband to bed, it seems clear that she does know about it, but has no recourse for dealing with it. In fact, Kikuko seems to offer her forgiveness to him. This surprises Shingo, but it does not stop him from protecting her from possibly running into her husband's lover. Finally, the reader should take note of the multiple mentions of abortion in this set of chapters because it will soon become an important theme to the novel.

The Bell in Spring, The Kite's House, and A Garden in the Capital

The Bell in Spring, The Kite's House, and A Garden in the Capital Summary

The Bell in Spring.

Kikuko, Yasuko, and Shingo discuss a reported suicide that they have read about in the newspaper. Shingo is struck that the old couple who apparently committed suicide only left one set of suicide notes written in the husband's hand. Shingo wonders why the woman did not write a note as well.

Later in the day, Kikuko sends Fusako and her oldest daughter, Satoko, to see a procession at the Buddha shrine. Satoko desperately wants a kimono and makes a fuss about it while they walk around downtown and enjoy the procession. On the way home, Satoko grabs at a child wearing a pretty kimono. The child trips and falls in front of a car when Satoko grabs her sleeve, nearly causing her to be run over. That night after dinner, Shingo feels guilty about the incident and goes shopping for a kimono but cannot find one similar to the other girl's.

Over tea, Kikuko tells Shingo that she has thought about leaving Shuichi and giving tea lessons like a friend of hers.

The Kite's House.

Shingo wakes early one morning and hears a kite has returned to their home as it has several years in the past. Shingo finds it amusing that so many animals find their house for some reason and that they consider the kite theirs.

One morning on the way to work, Shingo questions Shuichi about a recent illness of Kikuko's. Shuichi tells his father that Kikuko has had an abortion because she does not want to raise a child with him while he is having an affair. Shingo is upset by this and goes home early to check on Kikuko. Shingo arrives home to find Kikuko watching Fusako's baby while she goes to the post office. Shingo sends her back to bed. The next day, Kikuko goes into Tokyo to see the doctor and ends up stopping by her family's house. They decide to keep her until she feels better. Shingo tells Yasuko about her abortion. Fusako claims to have already known about the abortion.

A Garden in the Capital.

Fusako becomes angry with Shingo because he does not seem to enjoy her cooking as much as Kikuko's. Later Shingo and Yasuko confront her about her trip to the post office and learn she was sending a note to her husband. Shingo tells her that he has had a

man checking on her husband from time to time and has learned that the man, a drug addict, has abandoned his disabled mother and home.

A few days later, Shingo calls Kikuko at her family home. Kikuko is thrilled to hear from him and asks to see him right away. They meet at Shinjuku Garden. Shingo is struck at the number of lovers who meet in this vast, beautiful garden and by Kikuko's youth and beauty and her enthusiasm in seeing him. Kikuko agrees to return to his home the following day.

The next day, Shingo has a visit from Eiko. Eiko, who now works in the same clothing shop as Kinu, tells him that Kinu paid for Kikuko's abortion at Shuichi's request.

The Bell in Spring, The Kite's House, and A Garden in the Capital Analysis

The idea of suicide comes into the plot when Yasuko and Shingo discuss with Kikuko the suicide of an older couple mentioned in the newspaper. Shingo does not focus on the tragedy of the actual suicide but on the fact that the woman did not leave a note. For some reason, the woman's absence of a goodbye note bothers Shingo and he finds himself connecting it to Kikuko and her bad marriage to Shuichi.

Shingo learns that Kikuko had an abortion because she does not want to have a child with her philandering husband. Shuichi describes this as a weakness, but Shingo sees it as a desperate cry for help. Shingo worries about Kikuko, rushing home to check on her health. His concern for her is very clear to the reader. However, Kikuko turns from this concern and hides out at her family home to recover. In time, Kikuko is visited by her husband, an act that should draw her back to the family home. Instead, Kikuko waits for her father-in-law to call her, rushing to his side as though he is her lover. Shingo does not seem too concerned over this enthusiasm, but the reader begins to wonder if perhaps Shingo's deep affection for Kikuko does not go both ways.

The Scar, In the Rain, and The Cluster of Mosquitoes

The Scar, In the Rain, and The Cluster of Mosquitoes Summary

The Scar.

One Sunday morning soon after Kikuko's return, Shingo is clearing the yatsude from the base of the cherry tree in the garden when Shuichi comes to help. Shingo is annoyed by his presence, but allows him to help when he learns it was Kikuko's idea. Shingo notes that Shuichi is home on a Sunday when he would normally be with his mistress. Shingo instructs Shuichi to cut some cherry tree shoots as well and then carry the trash to a corner of the garden.

Upon her return to the family home, Kikuko brings gifts for everyone, including an electric razor for Shingo. Everyone in the family is fascinated with the razor, the first machine of its sort to be purchased for the household. Feeling guilty for this, Shingo goes out and buys Kikuko a vacuum cleaner for the house.

That night Shingo has a dream that features the naked body of a young, but impure girl. Shingo wakes with the sense that he was about to violate the girl's body. Shingo finds himself wonder if he subconsciously was dreaming of Kikuko but exchanged her body for that of the sister of a friend who was once to be Shuichi's bride in order to protect himself from a lust he feels for his daughter-in-law. The idea of infidelity of this type disgusts Shingo and he is deeply disturbed by the dream.

In the Rain.

Kikuko rouses Shingo in the morning with the newspaper. There is an article that describes how Fusako's husband attempted suicide with a young woman at a spa. The young woman died, but Fusako's husband is expected to survive. The family is not surprised by this article, but Fusako is beside herself. In the aftermath, Shingo decides he must file the divorce notice the husband sent them days before. Now Shingo must accept full responsibility for Fusako and her children. Shingo is unhappy with this. Shingo is also unhappy with the death of the young girl, wondering if somehow it is his fault for allowing Fusako to leave her husband. Shingo feels as though he is responsible for two deaths, the woman's and Kikuko's baby.

Later, Eiko comes to see Shingo again. Eiko is deeply upset and announces she will more than likely quit the shop where she works. Eiko tells Shingo that Shuichi's mistress is four months pregnant with his child.



The Cluster of Mosquitoes. Shingo goes to the home of Kinu. Mrs. Ikeda is there making dinner and invites him inside. When Kinu arrives she is unhappy to learn of Shingo's visit. Kinu tells Shingo that she and Shuichi have broken up and that she will not be a problem for the family. However, Shingo confronts her about the baby and she admits that she is pregnant. Kinu tells him how Shuichi became violent when he learned of the baby and tried to make her have an abortion. Kinu refuses, however, because she was not able to have her husband's baby and does not want to be denied this second chance. Kinu then tells Shingo that she told Shuichi that it was not his child and that she will swear the same to him. Shingo gives her money and leaves, but he believes the child is Shuichi's.

After meeting with Kinu, Shingo goes to have dinner with an old friend. Shingo calls a young geisha he has met before and lies with her in a back room, but the girl falls asleep. Shingo finds it comforting to hold her sleeping body in his arms. At home, Shingo dreams that he walks in the woods with a woodcutter whose body becomes swelled with mosquitoes.

The Scar, In the Rain, and The Cluster of Mosquitoes Analysis

Kikuko comes back home and brings gifts, the best gift being the one that she gives to Shingo. This is quite telling to the reader as well as the rest of the people in Shingo's family. Fusako seems to act out her jealousy of her sister-in-law by taking a comb Kikuko intended to be her own.

Shingo learns that Shuichi's mistress is pregnant. Shingo goes to confront her, hoping she will abort the baby so that no shame will have to come to Kikuko. Shingo questions his own motives, telling himself he is looking out for his son, but aware that his feelings for Kikuko rank higher than those for his son. This mistress tells Shingo of a young man who is very different from the man he knows, a young man prone to heavy drinking and violence. Shingo is aware that the war changed his son, but he fails to place any blame on his son or the war. It as though Shingo feels he is to blame for what has happened to his family, and to Kikuko in particular. In the end, the mistress tells a lie that Shingo recognizes for what it is, but he cannot allow himself to acknowledge it as a lie. It is a terrible position to be in, trapped between his outrage for the young woman he loves so deeply and his need to protect his son and his reputation.



The Snake's Egg and Fish in Autumn

The Snake's Egg and Fish in Autumn Summary

The Snake's Egg.

In early autumn, Shingo goes to visit an old friend who is dying of cancer. The friend asks him to give him some poisonous chemicals with which he might kill himself. Shingo refuses to answer, but knows he cannot. On the way home, Shingo's train is stalled by an accident on the tracks. As they wait, Shingo's attention is drawn to a male prostitute and his foreign companion, convinced that the boy will soon be dead.

That night in bed, Yasuko complains of the lack of mosquito netting over their bed and Shingo tells her to go sleep with someone else. Yasuko then tells him that Fasuko believes that Kikuko is pregnant again. That night Shingo dreams of two eggs, one a snake's egg, the other an ostrich egg. Shingo believes they are symbolic of the two women pregnant with his son's children. In the morning, Shingo asks Kikuko if she is pregnant. Kikuko denies it.

Eiko comes to see Shingo one last time. Eiko tells him that she has quit the store and works at another. Eiko then tells him that Kinu has left and is reportedly expected to open a store of her own in the town where she has moved.

Fish in Autumn.

One October morning Shingo cannot remember how to tie his tie. Kikuko tries to help, but she cannot. Yasuko ties it for him, but gets it wrong. On the way to the train, Shingo suddenly remembers how to do it properly.

A few days later, Shingo is on the train with Shuichi on the way home. They see a girl who appears to be waiting for someone. A short time later a man who appears to share some of her features takes the seat beside her. Shingo assumes the man is her father. However, the girl gets off the train alone. Shingo hypothesizes that the man is her father, but he abandoned the mother before the pregnancy was known and never knew his daughter. Shingo suggests to Shuichi that this might one day happen to him. Shuichi tells his father that there are many women he knew during the war who could also be having his child. Shuichi insists that he believes Kinu is not having his child and is at peace with the situation.

A Sunday, not long after, Shuichi is off fishing as he has begun to do each Sunday. Kikuko comes to Shingo and expresses once more her desire to leave Shuichi and become full servant to Shingo. Shingo feels as though her words are words of a lover and is shocked. Shingo tells Kikuko that she is free to do whatever she likes, that she does not need to serve anyone. Kikuko seems surprised by these words.

One night the entire family is having dinner. Fasuko asks her father to buy her a shop where she might make her own living for herself and her children. Fasuko even suggests that Kikuko could work independently there for her. Shingo ignores the request and invites the family to go to the country to see Yasuko's old home. Yasuko and Kikuko are both excited, but Fasuko and Shuichi fight over who should be left behind to care for their home.

The Snake's Egg and Fish in Autumn Analysis

Shingo is deeply concerned about the birth of his son's child by his mistress. He dreams of it in terms of good and evil, leaving him shaken by the idea. Shingo cannot stand to think he might have a grandson out in the world that he will never see. Shuichi is not bothered by the idea and this deeply bothers Shingo. Shingo does not understand his son or how he can be so callous. However, Shuichi is spending more time at home and seems to be getting along better with Kikuko; therefore, Shingo is somewhat satisfied. However, it becomes clear at the end of the novel that Kikuko is not happy in her marriage. Shingo finally admits that Shuichi has been changed by the war and that he is a difficult man. No one, however, seems to notice that Shuichi is once more spending time away from the home, suggesting he is again having an affair.

Little has changed in the characters at the end of the novel. Yasuko continues to be indifferent toward the entire family, Shuichi continues to treat his wife and the other women in his life with the same indifference, Fusako continues to be jealous of Kikuko, and Kikuko continues to be subservient to Shingo. Only Shingo appears to have changed any. Shingo has come to accept his family as it is and to accept what he has lost as well as what he has gained. Shingo has come to terms with old age and responsibility. It is a subtle change, but it is evident in his handling of Kikuko when she begins to express her deep fondness for him.



Characters

Ogata Shingo

Shingo is an elderly man who has recently become aware that his forgetfulness has become noticeable to those around him and that his son and secretary often cover for him, helping him to remember things he has forgotten. This causes Shingo to think about the past and to think about the legacy he will leave when he dies. Shingo is particularly thoughtful of the woman he loved as a young man, his own wife's sister, and the daughter-in-law who is being cuckolded by his own son.

It becomes clear to the reader early in the novel that Shingo has never loved his wife even though they have been together for more than thirty years. Shingo finds his wife indifferent and unattractive. The only reason Shingo married her was because he was in love with her sister. The sister, however, died at an early age leaving her young, handsome husband a widower. Shingo married the sister in hopes of keeping some fragment of his love and perhaps having a daughter who resembled her. Instead Shingo has a daughter who is just as plain and dull as his wife, making him deeply unhappy with her.

Shingo's favorite child, his son, is married to a beautiful woman who reminds Shingo of the woman he once loved. However, his son treats his wife with the same indifference Shingo has experienced with his own wife. The son, damaged from his time at war, has taken a mistress with whom he drinks heavily and says cruel things about his wife. Shingo sets out to end this relationship, but ends up allowing it to run its course and to allow his son to deal with it as he sees fit.

Yasuko

Yasuko is Shingo's wife. Yasuko is a dull, quiet woman who does not seem to notice that her husband is indifferent toward her or that he was once in love with her more perfect sister. Yasuko has always been the type of woman who was outshined and overlooked by her sister. In fact, Yasuko's father had planned to never have her married, but the death of his other daughter changed things. Yasuko's father was so pleased that she married that he decided to forgo an heir and die without leaving his home in the hands of a grandchild who would carry on his name. Yasuko seems to have accepted her place in life and grows old contently with a man who never really loved her.

Shuichi

Shuichi is Shingo's son. Shuichi fought in World War II just a few years before the time in which the novel is set. When Shuichi was at war, he spent a great deal of time in the arms of various women. When he came home, Shuichi married Kikuko, a small woman who is the youngest of her family, therefore the one treated as a child long past



childhood. Shuichi sees Kikuko as a child and for this reason he has affairs. Shuichi has reportedly told his mistress that he is not attracted to Kikuko because of her childishness.

Shuichi is a man haunted by the war and by what he saw there. Shuichi often drinks heavily and speaks cruelly and acts cruelly when drunk. When Shuichi learns his wife is pregnant, he not only supports her wish to have an abortion, he takes money from his mistress to pay for it. Shuichi then learns his mistress is pregnant and tries to force her to have an abortion, finally leaving her when she refuses. Shuichi is a cruel, selfish man who makes it clear to his father that he does not care how many illegitimate children he might have in the world.

Kikuko

Kikuko is a young, beautiful girl who was the baby of her family and pampered by all, including her beloved father. In her husband's home, Kikuko has made it her job to care for her father-in-law in all ways. By the end of the novel, the reader becomes aware that Kikuko is highly intelligent, clearly more so than her husband, and that she hides this fact from everyone except her father-in-law. The reader can also see that Kikuko is not as oblivious to her husband's affairs as she might appear and that she is deeply upset by the situation. In the end, the reader is also given the impression that Kikuko is either in love with Shingo or she feels that her devotion to him will insure that she will forever be cared for. When Shingo tells her she is free, she is touched by this idea and it causes her to back off from Shingo, suggesting the latter rather than the former.

Fusako

Fusako is Shingo's daughter. Fusako is an unattractive young woman who is married to a drug addict. Fusako leaves her husband several times before her father finally comes to the conclusion that the marriage is not a good one and that he must take on the responsibility of caring for her and her two children. Fusako blames her father for the bad marriage, claiming he chose a bad man to marry her off to. Fusako is also clearly jealous of Kikuko. Shingo has never been close to his daughter, seeing in her the same dullness he sees in his wife. Fusako can see that her father favors Kikuko over her and she is deeply jealous, deeply hurt by the obviousness of it, causing her to act in cruel and petty ways toward Kikuko while doing nothing to fix the problem between herself and her father.

Tanisaki Eiko

Eiko is Shingo's secretary when the novel begins. Eiko often helps Shingo when he struggles with his memory or loses items important to his daily work. Eiko is also friendly with Shuichi and the people with whom he spends his time in the office. Eiko frequents the same dance club where Shuichi goes with his mistress. For this reason, Shingo turns to Eiko to learn things about the mistress that Shuichi will not tell him. Toward the

middle of the novel Eiko quits her job out of shame for showing Shingo where the mistress lives. This does not stop her from continuing to help Shingo learn about the mistress. In fact, Eiko brings the mistress' roommate to meet him and tells him gossip about Shuichi and his mistress that she has learned from the mistress herself.

Kinu

Kinu is Shuichi's mistress. Kinu was married, but her husband died in the war. Kinu is very bitter about this and uses it as her excuse to continue the affair. Kinu says that Kikuko should be grateful that her husband is coming home every night because hers, Kinu's, is not. Kinu uses the same excuse when she becomes pregnant for not ending the pregnancy. Although it is scandalous and difficult for Shingo, Kinu vows to have the child and lies to Shuichi about it being his child to force him to leave her alone.

Mrs. Ikeda

Mrs. Ikeda is Kinu's roommate and another war widow. Mrs. Ikeda comes to Shingo reluctantly and describes Shuichi's drinking binges in her house and how they impact her. Mrs. Ikeda suggests to Shingo that Shuichi and Kikuko get a home of their home so that they might grow closer to one another, but this idea is vetoed by Kikuko who is afraid to be alone with Shuichi.

Yusako's Sister

Yusuko's sister is dead long before the novel begins, but Shingo's love for her continues to influence his thoughts and actions. Shingo once loved Yasuko's sister very much, a girl who was older than him and very beautiful, but also already married. Shingo married Yasuko because he wanted something of the dead lover, something to remember. Shingo even hoped Yasuko's children would look like the dead sister, but they did not. Shingo thinks a great deal of this sister as he becomes aware of his advancing age.

Mr. Aihara

Mr. Aihara is Fusako's husband. Mr. Aihara is a drug addict who acts unkindly toward Fusako and forces her to run from his home and seek a divorce. Toward the end of the novel, the family learns in the newspaper that Mr. Aihara has attempted suicide with a young woman. The woman has died, but Mr. Aihara is reported to be saved. Mr. Aihara never contacts the family, however; therefore, they do not know if he is dead or alive.

Objects/Places

Reading Glasses

Shingo often loses his reading glasses, so his son keeps an extra pair for him.

Tie

Shingo forgets how to tie his tie one morning even though he has been tying ties for thirty years.

Kimono

A kimono is a traditional Japanese piece of clothing. Shingo's granddaughter almost causes an accident in her desire to own one.

No Masks

Shingo buys two No, a type of play, masks from a friend to save the feelings of a widow whose husband died in the bed of a young woman not his wife. Shingo finds one of the masks very seductive.

Cherry Tree

Shingo has a cherry tree in his backyard and often notes when it is budding or shedding flowers.

Train

Shingo and his son ride the train to and from Tokyo each day to work.

Puppies

A stray dog from down the road has puppies under the Ogata house. Kikuko arranges homes for them all and saves Shingo from having to dispose of them.

Mrs. Ikeda's House

Kinu, Shuichi's mistress, lives in the home of another war widow, Mrs. Ikeda. Shingo goes to visit her there.



University Hospital

Kikuko goes to the university hospital to visit a friend and Shingo feels the need to escort her there to keep her from accidentally running into her husband's lover.

Shinshu

Shinshu is the country village where Shingo and Yasuko both grew up and where Yasuko continues to own her family home.

Kamakura

Kamakura is the Tokyo suburb where the Ogata family lives.

Tokyo

Shingo and his son both work in the city of Tokyo.

Themes

Aging

The main character of this novel is Ogata Shingo, a man in his early sixties who one day discovers that his memory is not what it once was. Shingo begins to think he might be coming close to the end of his days, especially when he comes to realize that many of his friends are already dead. One night Shingo believes he hears the sound of the mountain, a sound that suggests to him impending death.

Shingo begins to think about the legacy he will leave behind and his own past. Shingo begins to recall the love of his life, a young woman who was married to another. This woman happened to be the sister of his wife, a woman he married after his love's death in order to retain a part of her. As Shingo remembers his love, he begins to have dreams of youth and of lust. These dreams all feature faceless women and he cannot decide who they might be. However, in the end Shingo recognizes that these women represent his lust for his beautiful daughter-in-law, a woman he comes to believe that he desires as she was when she was virginal. For this reason, Shingo has spent a great deal of time trying to fix his son's infidelities only to come to realize there is little he can do in that regard.

Shingo is not a happy man, but he feels he can be content in his life. Shingo has never cheated on his wife and he never will. Shingo has become content with his daughter-in-law, in having her close and counting on her friendship. Shingo has also come to accept his children's failings and his wife's lack of desirability. Shingo is content in his old age, and that makes aging a theme of the novel.

Infidelity

While Shingo is a man who cannot fathom the idea of being unfaithful to his wife, despite his lack of affection for her, his son Shuichi has no such qualms. Shuichi is an unhappy man who has come back from World War II with a damaged psyche. Shuichi has taken to drinking a great deal and he is cruel when he does drink. Shuichi has also taken a beautiful mistress whom he feels is more woman than his wife will ever be.

Shingo is mortified by his son's infidelity. Shingo becomes involved in the affair by learning all he can from his secretary about his son's lover, but in the end he finds there is little he can do to change what is. Shingo's concern in the affair comes from his love for his daughter-in-law, but in the end there is nothing he can do to protect her from what is happening around him. Shingo must accept his son's actions as long as his daughter-in-law continues to do the same, making infidelity a theme of the novel.

Death

Death becomes a theme of the novel from the very first pages. Shingo thinks about his own death as he contemplates the loss of his memory, hearing in the night the sound of the mountain warning him that his death is imminent.

As the novel continues to develop, death comes into it many times. Shingo goes to a funeral and discusses other funerals with friends who come to visit. Many of Shingo's friends from school have already died and he finds himself discussing their deaths and the causes of them with other friends who are still alive but facing their own mortality.

The novel also touches on suicide when Shingo discusses the suicide of an elderly couple who left suicide notes in the hand of the man. When Kikuko has an abortion, Shingo sees that as a death that he caused by not protecting Kikuko from the reality of her husband's affairs. Finally, Shingo blames himself for the death of a woman who died in a suicide attempt with his daughter's husband. Death seems to be all around Shingo throughout the novel, reminding him time and time again of his own mortality and making it a theme of the novel.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person point of view. The narrator of this novel is Ogata Shingo, an elderly man who is beginning to feel his own mortality. The author remains with Shingo the entire novel and does not drift into the minds of other characters, nor does he insert his own voice in the novel. The novel is seen completely from Shingo's point of view, giving the reader an intimate view into Shingo's mind.

The point of view of this novel works well because it is a novel about the struggles one might face when growing old and the impact of the actions of one's children on the family life. This novel would not make half as much sense if the author had chosen to write it from another character's point of view or if he had attempted to show scenes in another character's voice. For this reason, the point of view of this novel works well with the plot.

Setting

The novel is set in the late forties, early fifties in Tokyo and a suburb of the city. Many of the scenes take place either in the Ogata home or in Shingo's office. The time period in which this novel is set is important to the plot because it is not long after the end of World War II, causing the war to have a role in the actions and behaviors of some of the characters in the novel.

The setting of the novel is important for several reasons. First, the setting of Tokyo is important because Shingo was born and raised in the country and he wonders if the impact of living in Tokyo has caused his son to grow up with a moral base that allows him to have a sexual affair behind his wife's back. Second, the setting in time allows for World War II to have had an impact on all the characters, but on Shuichi and his mistress in particular. This is important to show motive for these characters. In the end, the setting of the novel fits well with the plot.

Language and Meaning

The novel was originally written in Japanese, therefore the translation has altered some of the phrasing and left others with awkward grammar. However, the translation is in a clear English that is not overly difficult for a modern, Western reader to understand. While some of the phrasing and quaint traditions of the Japanese people is unfamiliar to modern readers, and the addition of unfamiliar Japanese words that have not been fully translated, might make the novel difficult to read, the overall meaning of the novel is clear.

The language of the novel is appropriate to its history. The novel was originally written in Japanese, therefore there are some translation problems with which modern readers might struggle. However, the reader should have no problem understanding the underlying themes of the novel nor understanding Shingo's need to protect his daughter-in-law and make his life work the way he wants before his death. It is a strong plot that is well written, one that has survived a translation to become a beautiful work in any language.

Structure

The novel is divided into sixteen chapters. Each chapter has a title that is unique to the particular chapter. Each chapter is divided into small sections, separating moments of action from one another in a chapter. The novel is told in both exposition and dialogue, telling a story rather than showing it. The novel follows a simple, linear time line, but sometimes a great deal of time will be skipped from one chapter to the next, or in the small divisions within a chapter.

The novel contains one main plot. The main plot follows Shingo as he attempts to deal with his own mortality as well as the legacy that he will leave behind. Shingo worries that his legacy will be two children with bad marriages, therefore he does all he can to save each marriage. Shingo fails to have much impact on his daughter's marriage, but he manages to keep his son and daughter-in-law together while essentially doing nothing to change the extramarital affair his son is having.

Quotes

"Ogata Shingo, his brow slightly furrowed, his lips slightly parted, wore an air of thought." *The Sound of the Mountain*, pg. 3

"He had had two dreams toward dawn this morning and the dead had figured in both." *The Wings of the Locust*, pg. 27

"He felt ashamed for himself, and he felt a revulsion, as if the true nature of Shuichi's woman and of Eiko herself were about to emerge." *A Blaze of Clouds*, pg. 51

"Holding his breath, he came so close as almost to touch his nose to that of the mask, and the blackish pupils came floating up at him, and the flesh of the lower lip swelled. He was on the point of kissing it." *A Dream of Islands*, pg. 88

"There was astonishing ignorance in the fact, and Shingo felt in it too was a frightening paralysis of the soul." *The Cherry in the Winter*, pg. 105

"Perhaps he need not have worried. Perhaps, as his wife, she took pleasure in sometimes being able to forgive." *The Voice in the Night*, pg. 127

"Shingo had seldom spoken of what a homely baby she was. To speak of the matter would have been to bring back the image of Yasuko's beautiful sister." *A Garden in the Capital*, pg. 179

"On the morning of Shuichi's admission, the pines had melted back into the grove, dim in the wind and rain. This morning, standing apart, associated in his mind with Kikuko's abortion, they somehow looked dirty. Perhaps the weather was too good." *A Garden in the Capital*, pg. 185

"And might it not be that, if his desires were given free rein, if he could remake his life as he wished, he would want to love the virgin Kikuko, before she was married to Shuichi?" *The Scar*, pg. 207

"The more favorable interpretation was that Shuichi, deeply troubled by Kinu and her resolution to have the baby, was pulling away from her, apologizing to Kikuko." *In the Rain*, pg. 225

"There could be no doubt that he had been thinking about Kikuko and Kinu. He did not know which child was the ostrich's, which the snake's." *The Snake's Egg*, pg. 247

"There was an indescribable freshness about the line from her jaw to her throat. It was not the product of a single generation, thought Shingo, somehow saddened." *Fish in Autumn*, pg. 269



Topics for Discussion

Who is Shingo? What is his main concern at the beginning of the novel? Why does he think he can hear the sound of the mountain? What does that mean to Shingo? What does Shingo think of his wife? What does Shingo do when his wife is snoring? What does this say about Shingo's feelings for his wife? Is this a cruel thing to do? Why or why not?

Who is Kikuko? How is she related to Shingo? What does Shingo tell the reader about his feelings for Kikuko at the beginning of the novel? How does the reader get the impression that Shingo cares more deeply for Kikuko than he lets on at first? To whom does Shingo often compare Kikuko? For what reason? Of whom does Kikuko remind Shingo?

Who is Eiko? Why does Shingo take her dancing? What does Shingo hope she will show him while they are dancing? Does she? Why does Eiko take him to the house of Mrs. Ikeda? Who else lives there? Why does Eiko feel the need to quit her job after this? Where does she go to work next? What information does Eiko give to Shingo over the next months? What purpose does this information serve?

Who is Shuichi? In what manner does he act inappropriately in his marriage? Why does Shingo become involved? Should Shingo become involved? Explain. What excuse might Shuichi have for his behavior? Is it right for men in his position to act out? Explain. Is the reader left with the impression that Shuichi plans to do right by his wife? Explain.

Who is Fusako? Why does she behave with cruelty toward Kikuko? Does she dislike Kikuko? Explain. Why has Fusako left her husband? Who does she blame? How does Fusako want to make a living as mentioned at the end of the novel? What is significant about this decision? How does Fusako feel about her father? For what reason?

Who is Yasuko? Why does her husband call her unattractive and dull? Why did they get married? Is Shingo happy in his marriage? How long have they been married? Is this a good marriage? What is Shingo's opinion on infidelity? Would he cheat on Yasuko? What does this say about Shingo as a man, as a husband? What does this say about his son?

Discuss the use of nature in this novel. Often in this novel Shingo will think about or stare out at nature. Discuss how the author uses this as symbolism for what is going on in Shingo's life. Discuss the shared interest in nature Shingo has with the women in his life, especially Yasuko and Kikuko. Discuss how nature makes Shingo feel and how it reflects what is happening in his life.