

The Woman in the Dunes Study Guide

The Woman in the Dunes by Kobo Abe

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Plot Summary

Kobo Abe was one of Japan's most famous novelists of the 20th century, winning a number of awards and prizes both nationally and internationally. Following the publication of *The Woman in the Dunes* in 1962, he received international attention and praise, and his works were widely translated and published. Besides telling the harrowing tale of a man forced to live in a sand hole in an isolated village, his novel also presents a number of ideas about modern living and how people define their existence.

The novel follows an isolated schoolteacher, Niki Junpei, tired of living the same routine with no purpose in his life, who leaves for a vacation and never returns. He intends to find an undiscovered beetle by the sea and earn himself a place in encyclopedias by its discovery and thus justify the significance of his life. However, after he passes through a small, poor village and sees a number of deep holes with houses at the bottom, an old man comes up to him and asks him what he is doing.

After the old man realizes Junpei isn't a government inspector, he offers him lodging in a dilapidated house at the bottom of one of the holes. Junpei climbs down the rope ladder and meets a woman in her thirties, who welcomes him and makes him dinner. At night, he's surprised to find that she shovels the sand that has accumulated in the hole into cans that are then hauled up by crews at the top. He offers to help, but after he realizes she does this monotonous task all night, every night, he loses patience and goes into the house to sleep.

The next morning, he finds the rope ladder has been removed and as the sand walls can't be climbed without it, he has been trapped. Uncertainty gives way to fear and then rage, as the woman explains that she needs another person to help her dig out the sand every night, protecting the village houses from collapsing under sand slides. He becomes dehydrated trying to climb the wall in the unbearable heat, falls, hurts his shoulder, and passes out. He recovers after a few days and takes her hostage, hoping the villagers will let him go in exchange for her safety, and when that doesn't work he doesn't let her work on the sand walls so the village will be in danger. But, he has to give up that plan because they ran out of water and have to ask the village for more.

His other plan to escape almost succeeds, as he manages to climb out of the hole with some rope that he made and walks towards the road, but he loses his sense of direction and ends up walking right into the center of the village. They catch him later when he runs into a sand sinkhole, and calls for help. After that attempt, the months pass and he and the woman work on the sand walls without escaping. She strings and sells beads to earn money for a radio, and he works on a project to catch a crow, hoping to tie a note to its foot and let it go. Despite the daily work that they accomplish, Junpei feels that he is deceiving himself and can't stand living in the hole.

Although his trap doesn't work, he does discover he can collect water from the dampness in the ground and save it in the bucket. With their radio, he listens to the weather reports and keeps a record of rainfalls and his average collection, so that one



day they can hold out digging for the village in exchange for their freedom, or some other ploy. In the spring, however, the woman realizes she's pregnant and it turns out she has an extra-uterine pregnancy, requiring the villagers to take her to a doctor. They leave the rope ladder hanging down the wall and Junpei climbs up, then sees his water project and, realizing he wants to show it someday to someone who will appreciate his work, climbs back down into the hole and waits.



Part 1: Chapters 1-3

Summary

The novel begins with a description of a missing person who has not been heard from in over seven years. The man (Niki Junpei) disappeared one day with no word to his colleagues or wife, and speculation was given as to his whereabouts. Guesses that he left for another woman were unsupported by the fact that someone saw him at the bus station alone, with just his insect collecting gear. A colleague suggested his hobby of insect-collecting was a sign of his suppression of a homosexual origin, or of kleptomania, an Oedipus complex, or some other preoccupation. Another possibility was that of suicide, as he had a supply of potassium cyanide in his collecting kit. Despite the police inquiry, no results came about and after seven years of no news, he was pronounced dead.

The next chapter initially begins with the same description of a man at a bus station, and then continues on by following his actions. He takes a bus away from the mountains, despite wearing gear suitable for climbing, and gets off at the last station, close to the sea. He walks until the landscape turns to flat dunes and the ground is completely made of sand. He comes upon a poor village, with a few children playing in the streets and old people sitting outside. He notices the strange slope, as the houses stay on the same level and the sand around them rises, until the houses farthest away are far below the top of the sand. After walking for some time he reaches the dunes along the sea, where he intends to find a new species of beetle. While looking at the sand he falls into a reverie, thinking about the properties of sand and the encyclopedic description that just labels them intermediate particles, made of other stones or minerals. His impression of sand's restless, always moving, invading energy excites him because it completely contradicts his dreary and stationary life. He also thinks about the many types of beetles, their flight patterns, and a type of Japanese beetle that lures out larger predators until they collapse from the heat, and then eats them.

According to his theory about the sandy environment, the desert should host many different variations of species because of the need to adapt. He searches around the sand, looking in areas of three feet beyond him, remaining very patient even though there appears to be no life. The only creature he sees is one spider in a bush. Despite the extreme heat, he keeps walking because of a feeling that the beetles lie just beyond him. Eventually he comes upon a house sunk deep into the sand over 60 feet below, and tries to take a picture with his camera. An old villager comes up to him and asks him what his purpose is, particularly concerned that he might be an inspector from the government. When Junpei replies he's a schoolteacher, there to collect beetles, the man leaves to confer with three other villagers. He returns a second time and speaks in a friendly way, offering to give him a house to stay in for the night as no more buses will drive back to the city. Junpei accepts, thanking the man for his hospitality.



Analysis

The first chapter immediately reveals the man will disappear after his vacation, as he hasn't returned or sent word to his wife or job in over seven years. His colleagues' reactions also indicate he was not especially close to any friends and they all regarded him as separate and perhaps odd. He thinks a great deal about the properties of sand and how each grain is 1/8 millimeter because of the constant movement by the wind, revealing how his desire for movement represents his boredom with life. His use of vocabulary and concepts also indicate he has a fair amount of education, though he often reasons incorrectly when forming his theories. For example, he believes a place with sand would have an undiscovered species of beetle, because he saw a beetle (that may or may not have been a new species) by a patch of sand in his yard.

Many of Junpei's explanations or thoughts on scientific concepts represent his future situation or his actions. His description of the strange, irregular flight pattern of beetles in the desert that draws out predators foreshadows his own imprisonment by the villagers, after he has wandered too far looking for beetles.

The appearance of the spider in the bush also symbolizes his approaching capture, just as spiders spin a web to trap their prey.

The representation of the village as seeming like the cross-cut of a beehive also hints as to the nature of their work. Bees work together very industriously to achieve one goal, such as protecting their queen. The villagers all work to stay the encroaching sands, necessitating the slave labor of villagers to ensure the village's survival.

Vocabulary

Oedipus complex, potassium cyanide, entomologist, quizzically, aggregate, beguiled, distribution curve, erosive, indispensable, veranda, barrenness, gaudy, innumerable, sheath, adhere, ceaseless, tantalizing, turbulent, juttled out, gregarious, dubious



Part 1: Chapters 4-6

Summary

The old man meets him at twilight in the village, and Junpei sees a sign, reading “Love Your Home,” before he is taken to one of the holes. He climbs down the rope ladder with a feeling of curiosity, as if he had “returned to his childhood.” A woman, about thirty and not disagreeable-looking, comes out to meet him and seems extremely happy at his arrival. The house looks very flimsy, has rotting straw mats, warped boards, and an unpleasant smell. However, Junpei tries to make the best of it and tells himself it will make a good story for when he has returned. When he asks for water to take a bath, the woman seems embarrassed to tell him that he will have to wait until the day after the next for enough water. He simply laughs and tells her he will have left by that time.

The sand has pervaded every crevice and opening in the house, and his teeth feel gritty because so much sand has gotten into his mouth. When they eat, she places an umbrella over his food so the sand won't land on top. As he eats, she explains how the sand rots away the wood of the house and anything it lands on. Shocked and upset to have his theories contradicted, he tells her that sand is too dry to rot anything. The woman also mentions her husband and daughter died the year before, in the monsoon season when the most amount of sand came falling down. The lamp goes out and she relights it, smiling to show off her dimple and attract the man.

After dinner some people at the top of the hole call out that they have brought a shovel and cans for “the other one.” Feeling uneasy, Junpei questions her but she just shrugs it off. The tools were meant for him to help her dig sand away from the house, into the cans, to be hauled up by people who went from house to house all night. She tickles him in passing and he puts down the lamp, about to return the tickling, when she tells him she has to continue digging. The rhythmic, continuous sounds from the other holes remind him of a beehive, and he helps her for the first round. Junpei becomes astonished and angry (likened to stepping on a snake's tail and realizing too late that the head was threatening him) when she explains that they work all night clearing sand and he tells her it's useless seeing as the sand would never stop, but she simply keeps working. He goes inside and tries to fall asleep, thinking about her refusal to see her prison, the futile nature of their work (it was like trying to “build a house in the sea by brushing water aside”), and dreaming of ways to invent an apparatus that would drift to the top of the sand so she wouldn't have to work every night.

Analysis

In these chapters, Junpei has not yet realized he's a prisoner of the villagers' whims, and so tries to make light of their strange customs despite his feeling of uneasiness. The reader already knows he does not return from this trip, so his observances on the sign in the village (reading ‘Love Your Home’), the woman's indication she expects he



will still be there the day after tomorrow, and the extra shovel and cans for digging all confirm his suspicions. While he finds the woman not unattractive, he also judges her for living in the village and describes some of her behaviors transparent and puts it down to the manner of country folk (such as when she changes her expression when he states he would be leaving the next day).

Her speech on the dampness and rotting nature of sand upsets him because it overturns his previous understanding of nature's workings. Despite his love of creatures that adapt to the environment and don't hold still, he refuses to change his definitions and theories to adapt to his situation, and he attributes her different ideas to ignorance and country customs. He quickly corrects her 'wrong' ideas and gives a short speech on his theory of sand's purity without pausing to consider the merits of her theories. To his mind, she's ignorant because of her situation and her refusal to see the labor as pointless and a waste of time is a refusal to see the prison she's in. He can't imagine what kind of prison bars he might have in his own life in the city as a schoolteacher, and fails to understand her explanations and reasoning.

The village is again described as a beehive, emphasizing the collective nature and the common goal of everyone to protect their homes from the sand blown in from the shore. The process of collective work at first excites him and gives him a sense of purpose, until he realizes the extent of their obligations and describes the monotonous repetition as useless.

Vocabulary

cavities, stronghold, matting, moldering, premonition, pretense, manifestation, precipitously, preposterous, dumbfounded, unfathomable, eerie, antithesis, antiquity



Part 1: Chapters 7- 9

Summary

The next day the man wakes up just before noon according to his watch, although the light outside of the house still seems dark because the sunlight hasn't penetrated the hole yet. A layer of sand has gathered on his body and grains have gotten into his eyes so that they tear up, so he goes into the main room to use the water in the jug. The woman is sleeping on the other side of the room and has only a towel over her face and the sand covers her body. He drinks the water, and then goes to retrieve his clothes and belongings that have been partially buried under the sand. Deciding not to wake the woman, as it might embarrass her, he goes outside and looks for the rope ladder to climb out. To his dismay, the ladder has been removed and the sand walls are steep and too fragile to climb, and he falls back after barely five yards, hurting his shoulder. Panicking, he runs back and questions the woman. She falls to her knees and turns away, shaking her head and appearing animal-like in her refusal to answer. Then, he realizes he has to relieve himself and goes outside.

As he tries to collect his thoughts and remain calm, or convince himself it's not a trap, he remembers the insects that become paralyzed when attacked and go into shock. He tries to stay reasonable and convinces himself that perhaps he had misunderstood the entire situation, and jumped to conclusions too quickly. He goes back inside to question the woman.

His efforts to act natural don't go very far, and she seems to sink into silence when he mentions leaving the village. She mentions because the monsoon season is approaching, where as much as twenty feet of sand might fall each day, she needs help clearing the sand. He protests at the illegal detention and threatens there will be an investigation by the police as he's a registered, taxpaying citizen. In reply, she offers to make dinner.

Analysis

In this section Junpei realizes he has been trapped in the hole, lured on by his insect collecting just like the desert mice that are lured on by a beetle. His denial of the situation comes after he realizes his trouble, and he tries to convince himself his assumptions about the shovel, the woman's comments, and the vanished rope ladder are false because of the village's strange customs. He reasons in the modern world of cars, taxes, and electricity, such a backward place focused on this manual labor just can't exist.

His efforts to reason with her and convince her she lives in a prison, and needs only to leave to find her freedom only result in her silence and sad, suffering expression. Her silence more than her answers confirm his fears, and his wordless shouting while trying



to climb the sand wall illustrate that he loses control of his actions almost immediately, overwhelmed with the fear of being imprisoned in the hole for an extended period of time. At the same time, the woman appears to be animal-like in her posture of crouching and facing the ground, and her refusal to answer many of his questions makes her seem timid and enslaved, such that neither of them are fully in control of their lives.

Vocabulary

encrusted, welled up, viscid, blundering, outlandish, impotence, ominous, intimating, stupefied, hazardous, solicitous, dolefully



Part 1: Chapter 10

Summary

Despite his wishes to refuse dinner and thus remain morally aloof in their argument, he's too hungry to refuse and convinces himself eating the food isn't giving in, and he must remember only the sand is his enemy. He eats under the umbrella, and then she uses a piece of plastic over her head to keep the sand from falling in her meal, appearing like an insect. After she cleans the dishes she climbs up to the roof to begin clearing sand from the ceiling. He attempts to convince her of the futility of her labors by telling a story (most likely made-up to prove his point) of a miserable dog he once had, which he tried to help one summer by cutting its fur. When he clipped off the first tuft of fur, it grabbed the fur in its mouth and ran inside, as if to protect its dignity, not realizing the haircut would make it much more comfortable in the heat. She ignores the moral of the story, however, and continues to work without replying.

Junpei then goes outside and, in an attempt to escape, digs into the sand wall to make the top part collapse and to lessen the slope so that he could climb out. When his labors come to nothing, he leaves the shovel and tries to reenact his idea in a smaller hole in the ground. The small hole's slope of the sand at a 45-degree angle confuses him, as the slope of the walls appear much steeper. To his embarrassment the woman watches from the door, and some of the villagers watch overhead. Aware of their silent ridicule, he tries to dig into the sand wall without pause and eventually collapses from dehydration and vomits.

Analysis

In this chapter Junpei continues to explore the nature of his confinement and understand the philosophy and personality of the woman. His somewhat one-sided conversation with the woman, such as the anecdote about the dog, only results in her glances or a change of subject, so she seems either shy or wishing to keep the topic away from imprisonment and escape. She works silently and doesn't ask for his help in clearing the ceiling, ignoring his anger and derision at her lifestyle. His actions indicate he's rather quick to judge her, but in her submissiveness she doesn't seem to resent his behavior or comments.

Each time he confronts an obstacle, he devises a theory to solve his problems and tries to use logic to escape. However, his idea of digging out the sand to collapse the wall clearly has great danger, yet he tells himself that no one can drown in sand, clearly disregarding the fact that a great mass of sand could fall and crush a person quite easily. His next attempt, of testing his idea in a small hole, brings unexpected results and so he tries to find a reason that would allow his theory to be true instead of understanding why his smaller model had such a result. Following these events, he



seems more concerned to prove his own theories right as to solve the problem at hand, which limits his success.

Vocabulary

predicament, ludicrous, partition, furtively, peevish, tractable, supersaturated, crystalline, precipitate, spurred, despicable, unflagging



Part II: Chapters 11- 13

Summary

After his collapse, the man spends several days recovering on his bed. His fever comes down soon, but he fakes being ill and pretends to have dislocated his back or shoulder in the hopes they would take him to a doctor, or let him go after he proved to be useless. The other part of his plan was to distract the woman with cries of pain during the day when she tried to sleep, such that she lost productivity during the night and the security of the village was threatened, but it doesn't succeed because he repeatedly falls asleep during the day and stays awake at night.

As he lies there, his mind drifts and he wonders what his colleagues will think at his disappearance. He imagines the gossip that will follow the jealousy they'll feel at his fortune to have escaped the boredom of daily life, knowing first-hand the jealousy of a teacher. He describes the plight of a teacher as a rock buried in a stream as the students rush by. Other thoughts turn to the police report and investigations, and he hopes the villagers will soon give him up and let him go.

When the woman comes over with water and a cloth to bathe him, he asks for a newspaper to read and her reply seems insincere, so he throws a small tantrum. She doesn't respond to his shouts and threats, and he soon falls asleep. After so many naps and the reversal of his internal clock, Junpei finds his memory to be failing, and he has strange dreams.

In one dream, he rides a chopstick along a road, then falls off and finds himself in a room with a table and people playing cards. The card dealer gives cards to everyone except him until the end, when the card dealer shouts and gives him a soft card. When Junpei squeezes it, blood comes out, and then he wakes up sweating. That day's newspaper lies on his face and he asks the woman how she received it, hoping that she had gone out to get it. Unfortunately, she tells him that only a few of the villagers receive the newspaper deliveries, as they cannot leave their houses either. Junpei becomes frightened at the fact that the villagers themselves aren't free to leave if they wish, and he asks her why she lives in such a prison. To his surprise she doesn't miss walking outside because she remembers it as too tiring. Then, she leans over and tickles him, making him confused as to her intentions. He doesn't know if she wants to see how ill he really is, or if she is attracted to him, or why she sometimes seems playful.

When he wakes up again, he's sweating profusely and finds sand crusted around his face. His watch has stopped, so he doesn't know the exact time anymore. His eyes can open normally because of the eye medicine he applies before sleeping, but his supply will run out in a few days and he hopes he will have escaped by then. To pass the time until the woman wakes up, he reads the newspaper and is disappointed to find nothing of importance in the headlines. The same news stories seem like a "tower of illusion" to him, where each person builds their life around unimportant things to be treated



carefully. Lastly, he sees one story about a man who died after being buried under a sand slide at a construction site, clearly a warning from the villagers not to engage in such projects again, and he realizes he has underestimated his problems.

Analysis

Junpei's ideas about what his colleagues will think of his disappearance reveal what he thinks about himself and how he values his own life. By describing their ordinary lives as holes, to be escaped from, it's clear he began insect-collecting just to break the routine and introduce variety. The description of teachers as buried rocks in a stream refers to himself, too, as he is a schoolteacher. The students swirl on to accomplish valuable things, using the knowledge they have learned, but he must remain in the same position and teach the same lessons each year. From this description, he thinks of himself as lonely, worthless, and dreams of freedom.

Furthermore, his ideas of everyday life as a tower of illusion, full of seemingly important things, can be applied to his life in the city as well as his life in the sand hole. Shifting sand from one side to another each night, just to have more fall down the next day has no more meaning to him than his job and relationships in a city full of people.

The watch represents his sense of control and power over his situation. It stops after his plans to disturb the woman by faking illness fail, his sleeping patterns become reversed, and he learns other villagers are imprisoned just as he is. Not knowing the time of day limits his connection to the outside world and increases his isolation and dependence on the woman and the villagers.

Vocabulary

feigned, malicious, unheeded, eccentric, masochistic, meddling, sodden, vigilance, summarily, enumerating, blearily, illusory



Part II: Chapters 14- 18

Summary

That night, the woman goes out of the house to clear the sand while he stays inside. He gathers a towel in his hand and prepares to run out, and thinks about what is happening in the city. The police won't look for him despite his disappearance because he wrote a letter to his wife, gloating about his vacation and hinting at a disappearance just to make her jealous. Furthermore, he didn't say anything to his colleagues about his vacation, relishing the thought of their curiosity and jealousy at his disappearance. After several days of missing work the police would enter his room and see the letter, tossed on the desk in his last moments before leaving, and assume it was meant to be read.

He reminisces about a conversation he had with another man from a union, who seemed fresh-faced and ready to listen. Junpei tried explaining his theory of sand and the necessity of giving over to change (saying "you yourself become sand"), and the man tries to understand. He asks Junpei if he's afraid of his students, and he replies that he is. He reminisces again about a conversation he had with his wife and the fights they had, and how she would always choose a contrary position to what he said. At the end of his remembering, he runs out of the house with the towel toward the woman.

He grabs her, taking her by surprise, and stuffs the towel in her mouth so she can't cry out. He pushes her into the house and ties her hands and legs together, and tells her to be still. To his surprise, her expression isn't that of anger but rather of infinite sorrow. When night falls he shouts to the crew he has tied her up, and won't let her go until they pull him out of the hole. They deliberate, and pull him partway up with one of the ropes, but halfway they left go and he tumbles back, and they walk away. The woman tells him that because the mist covered the stars, the moisture kept the walls in place and less would fall, such that the villagers didn't need to bargain with him.

Junpei imagines a conversation with a friend after he returns, and how he would describe the experience and how they would see him changed and developed, as a person of value. The imaginary conversation continues with ideas of writing a book.

A package is dropped from above, with a bottle of sake and cigarettes. He celebrates, attributing it to country custom to give gifts after striking a deal, and smokes a cigarette. After a moment, the woman tells him that sake and cigarettes are usually delivered once a week. When he questions her about other visitors taken prisoner, she tells him about a student who was taken, and a postcard dealer who died because he was too weak. One family escaped, she said, but no one else has been able to leave. He remains confident that he'll be the first prisoner to escape, and scratches her ear when she asks him to.

The next morning they run out of water, as none was brought to them in the night. The woman trembles because she knows the villagers wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice her. He



loosens her hands after she promises not to dig, and she goes to relieve herself outside.

Analysis

It becomes clear Junpei must rely on himself to escape, as he can't expect any police investigations or inquiries to search the village for him. The letter to his wife represents the bleeding card in his dream before, as he isolated himself by writing it. With this revelation that he must free himself, he becomes desperate enough to try and bargain with the villagers by threatening to hold the woman back and not dig sand. However, his theory fails again when he miscalculates on their value of human life, and the weather foils his plan. They don't feel a concern to free her and they don't need to reason with him as long as the mist holds the sand in place. Without water, it will become a waiting game between the sand falling and the endurance of Junpei to withstand dehydration.

He doesn't hurt the woman although he doesn't see to her comfort, either. Their relationship hasn't progressed so he trusts her entirely, but when she promises not to dig he knows she will keep her word, and so lets her untie the ropes.

The remembered and imaginary conversations simply emphasize his feelings that he lacks value. When conversing with his union friend, the man didn't understand the concepts Junpei was trying to explain, which were so important to him and made him so excited. His wife ("the other woman") never supported his thoughts and ideas, and he dreams of earning some kind of respect and merit if he manages to return to his lonely life.

Vocabulary

Möbius strip, discordant, hydrodynamic, obscure, retort, receded, palpable, taut, inert, convulsed, offhanded, tenterhooks, nonsensical, lustrous, proportionate, compunction, eddied



Part II: Chapters 19- 22

Summary

The morning continues and they suffer from dehydration. The sand continues to slide down in increments as the sun heats the air and they both continue to wait. To ease his throat he drinks some of the sake and it gives him a headache instantly because his stomach is empty. He goes outside, wincing in the light, and takes the shovel back to the house and begins to hack at the wood. It breaks, however, as the dampness of the sand has rotted most of it, and he can't use any to make a ladder. Then he tries to cut one of the crossbeams to see if the thicker planks could be used, but the woman runs forward and stops him, although they both fall down and he becomes aroused. This encounter leads to a memory about his wife who ridiculed him even in their moments of intimacy.

In the next chapter he meditates on the necessity of certificates and contracts to have sex, thinking they produce nothing but jealousy between two people. He again remembers a conversation with his wife, who made fun of him for always using a condom. After this, he and the woman wait for a sand slide to finish before having sex, and brush the sand from each other. He feels drained and falls back into despair. They sleep briefly, and then he wakes up and looks for water. He yells at the woman and she mentions the villagers have a lookout fire tower and binoculars, through which they can see everything outside the house. He takes the shovel and waves the metal part to reflect the sun, catching their attention. A bucket of water is lowered for him and the woman and he pushes her aside until he drinks enough. Before the old man pulls up the bucket again, Junpei grabs onto the rope and questions him about the sanity of digging sand, and suggests earning revenue by inviting tourists, or growing crops, or petitioning the government for compensation. The man tells him they have already explored all of those options and none were possible. He also informs Junpei that ten days have passed, and no notices have been posted for his disappearance.

They shovel sand before sleeping, and she gives him advice on how to conserve energy when digging. They both fall asleep early, exhausted from the physical toil. That night he wakes up and eats a small rice ball. The woman bashfully tells him she fixed the towel over his face three times in his sleep, clearly affected by their actions.

He remembers a meeting he once went to, in a building surrounded by a fence, and then reminds himself to tell the woman a story about a guard who watched over an invisible castle. Each day the guard kept watch for the enemy, who came one morning. He sounded the alarm but the army didn't respond, and he was overwhelmed immediately and lay dying. Through the mist he could see the army swirling through the air, as the castle was imaginary and he had spent his life for nothing.



Analysis

Junpei's plan has failed when he and the woman need access to water and begin digging sand, giving in to the village's will. The communication with the old man also proves reasoning with them or providing a financial solution won't let him leave the hole. However, he has learned more about the workings of the village as he understands their lack of options, and he knows there is a watch during the day from the fire tower. While he is now certain there is no help coming in the way of the police or his family, and the villagers know that too, he hasn't given up thoughts of escape.

The story of the guard and the invisible castle is similar to his anecdote of the dog and its fur, as through both he means to convince the woman the actions are futile and foolish. The idea of the castle relates to his previous description of the tower of illusions, where one guards or protects something, devoting their life to a cause, but the cause doesn't exist and one wastes a lifetime guarding something of no value.

His flashback memories show his wife was not particularly kind to him, and although they might love each other, they were lonely in each other's company and he didn't find a good companion in her. As his relationship with the woman is now developing more (though not romantically), his ties to the village are growing in relation to his isolation in the city.

Vocabulary

compunction, eddied, compressed, venereal, myriad, premonition, promissory, ascetic, unadulterated, inevitable, indiscriminately, encumbrance



Part II: Chapters 23-27

Summary

The chapter begins with a song and description of two kinds of people. One has a one-way ticket, and the other has a round trip ticket. The first sings the blues of a round-trip ticket, and has no sense of time between the past, present and future. The second, on the other hand, sings the blues of a one-way ticket, and is able to plan ahead by buying stocks and life insurance. His desperation is the possibility of losing the second half of his ticket, thus becoming narrow minded with tunnel vision.

Junpei begins twisting a rope together made of shirts and a kimono, and tries to plan the best time to leave. He questions the woman about the layout of the village and topography, and sees the formation as that of a bag of sand tied together at the top. The tie is the village, while the edges stretch out towards the sea and the sand dunes. The day he tries to escape, he pretends to have a cold and asks for aspirin. He sleeps during the night, and during the day she bathes him and he tries to make her tired. Then, he makes her take some aspirin with sake to make sure she sleeps, collects his rope and a grappling hook-type device, and climbs onto the roof. After several tries he catches hold of one of the sandbags and climbs up the wall, considering the possible future and what the woman will think when she wakes up.

He makes it to the top and clings to the sand bags. A fierce wind is blowing, throwing sand into his eyes and possibly blowing away the mist, which he had counted on having for cover. Luckily, the mist springs up where the wind dies down so he continues forward, sneaking from hollow to hollow and trying to conserve energy. However, he finds he continues to veer off his desired path. Despite intending to go left of the village and find a road to the bus station, his feet keep guiding him to the right, towards the village itself. When he reaches the outskirts of the village, there's a hollow with a wild dog standing in front, staring at him. He stares back, not wishing to fight and the dog leaves.

Junpei crawls into the hollow to wait, and thinks again about what the woman will do when he is gone, and how she won't have anyone to bathe. To appease his thoughts, he decides he will send her a radio when he returns. He also imagines a conversation with his friend, about the horizontal or vertical nature of time. In other words, does time go forward or do you stand still, waiting for something to happen? His friend also tells him he's no longer focused on escaping and leaving the village behind, but on the process of leaving the village. A bug crawls up his leg, but he no longer cares and doesn't look to see what it is. As he looks over the landscape, it suddenly appears beautiful despite the fact that he hated it the day before, when he was trapped.

He sets out again, planning to walk in the mist until he reaches the highway and then to run until he finds a bus. However, he can't see the lights of the village and so keeping a straight path is difficult. He slips down a ravine at one point, and continues to remember



exchanges he had with the woman. He had asked her why she stayed in the hole, and she talks about the memory of her husband and child, though he can't find the remains of the collapsed building she spoke of despite digging in several places. At this point, he hears barking and realizes he is walking directly to the center of the village. The dogs bark at him, and chase him through the streets. He hits three children by accident and people catch sight of him and point with flashlights, so he turns around and runs away, racing over the sand toward the sea. After running for some time he becomes trapped in a sand pit, and calls for them to help him.

In the sand, he sees all of his dreams, desperation, and concern for appearances in the layers, and finds his pride broken when they pull him out. Everything seems blurred, and he doesn't have the strength to help the woman dig. Instead, he sits and smokes, watching a fat spider circle the lamp, and he burns a moth with his cigarette and gives it to the spider. He muses on the idea that man-made lamps have produced such strange behaviors in insects, before realizing the connection is irrational, and all of his laws and theories don't necessarily have a reason behind them.

The woman cries as she goes to make tea, and he realizes his attempt has failed. They talk about buying a radio, and she bathes him.

Analysis

This escape attempt relies upon the timing and knowledge he has gained from living in the hole and observing the habits of the villagers. Even after he escapes the hole, though, his thoughts return constantly to the woman as he wonders what she will do without him there. She won't have the pleasure of bathing someone, or have the need to buy a mirror (which she was saving up for), and she would be much more tired at night.

His view of the sand changes when he observes the beauty of the landscape. The beautiful scenery doesn't necessarily oppose the terrible prison in the holes, and he observes the beauty of the sand belonged to death, admitting the destructive and deadly power of its restless force. This change of mind signals his character has changed in some way, and he has adapted to or learned from his environment. Yet, after this maturation he also feels a bond to the people and the work, even if he can't stand the idea of living in the hole for the rest of his life. He also doesn't pause to identify the bug, illustrating his need to justify himself in insect-collecting has passed.

This ritual of maturation is also played out in the scene where he sinks into the sand, almost suffocating. The layers and layers of sand containing his dreams and concern for appearances are left behind, and his survival leaves him changed and able to realize how many of his theories and ideas were false or poorly reasoned. The reappearance of the spider around the lamp has a different significance than the first sighting, as he kills and feeds the moth (possibly representing his dreams or plans for escape) to the spider.



Vocabulary

bulwark, billowed, undulating, tantalized, spleen, gigolo, gilt-edged, bashfully, quicksilver, misapprehension, tenaciously, reticence, interment, phototropic, mottled, immutable



Part III: Chapters 28-30

Summary

In October, the cold air comes through the cracks in the wall and winter approaches. Junpei comes up with another plan for escape that relies on patience, which he names project HOPE. He builds a trap in the backyard for crows, with a piece of dried fish for bait, reasoning he could tie a note to its foot and let it go in the hope that someone would see it and help him leave.

Meanwhile, the woman strings beads for two months, earning money and saving almost enough to buy the radio they talked about. The monotonous work gives meaning and color to their lives, and they try to make it feel like the center of the world. Junpei still hasn't given up, and he compares his situation to a Hell of Loneliness, where he is searching for an illusion to believe.

In this time his smoking increases and he has nightmares about hiding. One day, he gets a cartoon from the village that makes him laugh uncontrollably, even though the images aren't that funny, and he becomes concerned. He goes outside and stares at the mist, pretending to address a judge. The judge questions him about his own guilt and obedience, and then tells him he's strange, and all of humankind is abnormal in some way. After all, the judge reminds him, he came to the village because he rejected his former existence. The mist vanishes and Junpei goes to check the trap, which is empty.

Returning to the house, he knocks the beads from the woman's lap in anger, and she tells him the village sells sand to companies to be mixed in with concrete. Shocked, he tells her it's illegal and endangers people's lives, to which she asks why should they care what happens to others? This brutal question changes his view of the village as an executioner to one of the abandoned. He's shocked to find himself accepting their position, and helps her pick up the beads. They agree to get some kind of tree to plant in the house.

Junpei goes outside and stares at the moon and feels chilled, remembering the potassium cyanide in his bag. It could be a way to commit suicide, but he quickly shrugs off the thought and tries to think of other things. He wants to walk outside, and asks one of the villagers at the top of the hole. Some of them gather together and agree, under the stipulation that he and the woman have sex in front of the house. Junpei turns to the woman to ask, and sees that she has fled into the house, and he grabs her and drags her out. However, she fights him and kicks him until his face is bloody and the villagers leave. As he's about to pass out, he feels as if his body has turned to liquid and drained all its energy into her.



Analysis

After his unsuccessful escape attempt, Junpei tries to give the impression he has accepted their life in the hole and busies himself with digging the sand every night, washes dishes, fixes the roof, and engages in the other daily trivialities. He hopes he will be able to blend in with the other villagers until they don't take notice of his actions, at which point he can make his escape. The cartoon upsets him, though, and he worries that he found it amusing only because he has become complacent with village life. He can't stand his own deception anymore and then contemplates suicide, but only for a moment. That he considers striking the deal with the villagers illustrates just how desperate and low he really is. While he and the woman have worked together over the winter months very well, it's clear he doesn't feel romantically involved with her and cares little for her dignity.

The woman's personality develops in this section, as well, with her startling reply to his question about the concern of others. According to her view, the world has forgotten and abandoned the village to survive on their own, in an unforgiving environment that necessitates the strictest routines. Junpei had thought of himself as an innocent passerby, cruelly plucked from his life and forced to labor in a prison setting, but her comment makes him realize they see the balance of justice differently.

Vocabulary

elliptic, reveries, abnormality, proselytism, sheaves, avaricious, malaise, efflorescent, vehemence, reverberations



Part III: Chapter 31

Summary

After he comes to, he checks on the progress of HOPE. There are no crows, and the fish bait has liquefied, but there's a pool of clean water, more pure than what the village gives them, in the bucket even though it hasn't rained in over a month. He realizes that the dampness of the sand has collected in the hole, and that they can collect fresh water. With this discovery he feels like he can see the whole picture instead of just the details, as if he has found a new self. The radio's weather forecasts will help him in his plan, so he strings beads with the woman to raise money faster. The water level drops off as winter comes, so he decides to wait until spring to form his next plan. With the spring comes the woman's pregnancy, which another village woman recognizes as an extra-uterine pregnancy and requires a visit to the doctor. The villagers take her in the truck, and leave the rope ladder behind. Junpei climbs to the top, looks around, and sees that his water collector has been displaced. He climbs back down to fix it, reasoning he wants to share his exciting discovery with someone and will wait until they return.

The book ends with a Missing Persons Report, filed by his mother, followed by a certificate pronouncing him dead after an absence of seven years.

Analysis

In the final chapter, the discovery of the water in project HOPE signifies his final development as a character. What he describes as seeing the whole picture or the whole mosaic means he understands how the villagers think and what kind of reaction they would give at his discovery. Essentially, his laughter and excitement comes not just from the results of a scientific experiment, but also from his comprehension of his past behaviors and past relationships with his colleagues and wife, and why it was so superficial and unsatisfactory. To him the people he knew were just like insects, tiny and focused on small details that seemed magnified to their eyes. His choice to stay in the hole comes partly from the desire to keep his connection with people, a connection he didn't have while free to go as he wished in the city, and comes partly from his freedom to choose. The water gives him power and leverage over his situation, and so with the return of his dignity and choices he decides to enjoy the understanding to which he and the villagers have come.

Vocabulary

spurned, contraption, capillary, suction pump, incomprehensible, spatulate, apparatus, chilblain, rasping, unascertainability



Characters

Niki Junpei

Niki Junpei is the main character, a schoolteacher. He leaves his city one day with insect-collecting gear, planning to take a three-day vacation and escape the boredom of his life and loneliness. He constantly devises schemes or makes up theories to escape the hole, many times using faulty logic, and most of his plans fail. In the end he succeeds by accident, as one of his experiments resulted in collected water from the sand.

The Woman

The woman is who Junpei lives with in the sand hole. She says her husband and child were killed by the sand before his arrival, but when Junpei dug for the remains he couldn't find any. She remains very quiet when he questions or yells at her and is very submissive.

The Other Woman

The other woman is Junpei's wife who lives in the city. They sleep apart, and don't have a close relationship. She constantly takes the opposing view if he makes an observation or theory, and he wrote her a letter out of spite but didn't send it.

Old Village Men

The old village men are the people Junpei and the woman meet in the village. The first one he meets lures him into the village by offering him a place to stay overnight, seemingly friendly and warm. They dictate that Junpei and the woman must work before receiving water, and laugh at his threats and attempts to escape.



Objects/Places

Village

A poor, run down village that Junpei passes through on his vacation. It's a few hours from the city and close to the sea. The view of the village looks like the cross-section of a beehive.

Sand Hole

The sand hole is the place of Junpei's imprisonment and growth. The house he and the woman live in is against the one side, appearing like an oyster, and supports the sand wall. The sides are over sixty feet tall.

Dog's Hole

The dog's hole is the place Junpei hides in when he escapes from the hole. It smells like dog, and it is there that he reasons with himself about his flight and method of escape.

Fire Tower

The fire tower is the location of the lookout of the village that allows the watchman to see everything that goes on in every hole. They have binoculars to see in detail.

Sand Sinkhole

The sand sinkhole is the place where Junpei is caught and saved by the villagers. To him, it represents the hopes, dreams, and vain concerns he had in his city life that he had to leave behind in his village life.

Columbus' Egg

Junpei refers to Columbus' egg when he has to solve the puzzle of escaping the sand hole. Columbus had a bottle with a wide body and a thin neck, and he wanted to get the egg into the bottle without breaking the egg, so he lit a match and heated the neck of the bottle, temporarily expanding the glass so the egg could pass through.

Beads

The beads that the woman strings together to earn more money represent the small, daily cares and tasks that each person builds their life around. When the man becomes



angry at the pointlessness of their labors he strikes the beads from her hands, but when he understands her position he helps her pick them up from the sand.

Radio/Mirror

The radio and mirror are the connections to the outside world that Junpei and the woman work so hard to get. He explains they both work to fill some core human craving for connections.

Round Trip Ticket / One Way Ticket

Junpei's uses the metaphors of a round trip ticket or one-way ticket as ways of describing people who live only in the present, or people who plan ahead and worry about not planning ahead. In the end, he describes his own round trip ticket as having blanks for time and destination that he could fill in himself at any time he wishes.

Sand

The grains of sand penetrate every crevice and opening of the house, and are in every part of their lives. When they sleep, they place towels over their face so they can breathe comfortably, and when they awake their eyes water from the irritation of the sand. When the grains are moved in a wave by the wind, it creates a huge, destructive, powerful force that no one can halt.



Themes

Self-Worth

Junpei is a man who is struggling with his own feelings of self-worth. He is stuck in a life and a job that he is unhappy with, yet he doesn't seem to have the sense of self-worth that would enable him to take the actions necessary to change his own life. Instead, he feels that he needs to escape from the life that he has created for himself. He leaves his city and life for a vacation because he finds the daily schedule miserable. His job as a schoolteacher leads him to feel his life is inadequate, and he finds little support in colleagues or his wife.

As he heads out on his adventure, he finds himself facing his own image of himself and the beliefs he holds about his own abilities. In the beginning, this lack of self-worth and self-esteem limited his success because everything he tried to do, such as collecting beetles, escaping from the hole, and reasoning his way out of a problem, failed due to his miscalculation of other people's situations or viewpoints. He had to face these failures without giving in to despair and his doubts about his own self-worth and his abilities. The author shows how, through his multiple escape attempts and failures, interactions with the woman and eventual understanding of the village, Junpei eventually thinks of himself differently and no longer underestimates his self-worth. The author shows the reader how overcoming challenges and difficulty can help a person develop their own sense of self and improve their own self-worth.

Movement and Stagnation

The play between movement and stagnation forms an underlying and important component of the play, which becomes obvious by the time of the sandpits. When the author first meets Junpei, he is stagnant in his life; he is stuck in a job he finds unsatisfying and in a life where he is not happy. He takes the first step away from that stagnant life, engaging in the action, or motion, of taking his trip. Junpei is first drawn to the sand of the region because he believes that sand constantly moves and beings must constantly adapt to the change. To his view, the movement equals life and without movement, one dies.

By temporarily leaving behind his life in the city he hopes to experience a renewal of some kind by being around the movement and great force that sand accumulates. At the same time, the movement of sand in the village occurs because they refuse to abandon the houses. To Junpei, he is imprisoned in the sand holes, motionless, in an environment of continual change. The duality of the village perplexes him and presents a challenge to the reader to understand. For the reader, the message is also clear that movement poses some risk; that moving sand, while forcing adaptation and growth, also poses danger. At the same time, stagnation, while boring and lifeless, is also safer. The reader is made to understand there is a tradeoff between choosing the motion and



challenges of a forward-moving, risky life, or the safe, but boring choice of a stagnant life.

Identity and Belonging

The theme of identity and belonging in modern life is crucial to the novel "The Woman in the Dunes". Junpei lives in a relatively modern life compared to the life he encounters in the village. He starts his story in his life in the city, in his job, and engaging in the daily actions and requirements of a highly structured social life. The main problem Junpei struggles to solve relates to his isolation among a city full of people. When he was surrounded by acquaintances, his wife, students, and strangers, he had an unfulfilling life and believed he didn't measure up to the students he taught. According to what most people would probably believe, Junpei should have been happy in a life that was similar to what many people seek; a job, a home and a social network of friends, acquaintances and a family. Yet Junpei is not happy with his life; he feels that something is missing.

When Junpei leaves the modern, social world, he heads into a life that many people would find unimaginable as a place where one could be happy. Yet the isolation in the sand hole, with only a submissive woman for company, led him to gain a new sense of self and develop a connection with the villagers, with whom he never had a chance to really talk. So, the novel pits the quandary of modern life, such as the city and its social isolation, and the belonging he finds when he's removed from that environment.



Style

Point of View

The story is told from a third-person point of view, with insight into the man's thoughts and emotions. The emotions and thoughts of the other characters, especially those of the woman, are often shown through the focus of Junpei's observations. For this reason, her emotions often seem limited and cause her to appear more obedient and servant-like, yet the reader never truly knows what occurs in her mind. This limited vantage point serves to characterize Junpei, who cannot comprehend much of what other people feel, and who has little curiosity for their thoughts and feelings.

Setting

The story takes place mainly in a small village in Japan, close to the sea. It can be reached by bus after several hours, and is quite remote from any other villages or forms of civilization. The geography of the cliffs, ocean, and sand dunes form a kind of oval shape, where the villagers can control the passage of people and round up anyone who tries to escape, with their truck. The wind off the ocean makes the air difficult to breathe above the sand holes, and there seem to be few organisms that can grow or thrive in the environment. This barrenness represents the isolation he feels in the city and feels between himself and other people.

Language and Meaning

Abe uses words that range from intermediate to very professional, as the protagonist is a schoolteacher that loves to construct theories about scientific processes. He also names lots of insect species and draws upon complicated concepts to explain his thoughts.

Structure

The book is divided into three parts and 31 chapters. The first part follows his arrival in the village, his capture and first attempt to climb the walls. The second part describes his second attempt at escape, until the crew pulls him from the sand pit, and the third follows his project and development in the winter months until the spring. The third part is considerably shorter, as it only deals with his emotional and psychological development after the failed escape attempt, even though it covers a longer period of time.



Quotes

The sands never rested. Gently but surely they invaded and destroyed the surface of the earth. (Part 1, Chapter 2)

Furthermore, sand is sand wherever it is; strangely enough, there is almost no difference in the size of the grains whether they come from the Gobi Desert or from the beach at Enoshima. (Part 1, Chapter 2)

The barrenness of sand, as it is usually pictured, was not caused by simple dryness, but apparently was due to the ceaseless movement that made it inhospitable to all living things. (Part 1, Chapter 2)

He was angry at the things that bound the woman... and at the woman who let herself be bound. (Part 1, Chapter 6)

It was like trying to build a house in the sea by brushing the water aside. (Part 1, Chapter 6)

Year after year students tumble along like the waters of a river. They flow away, and only the teacher is left behind, like some deeply buried rock at the bottom of the current. (Part 2, Chapter 11)

And so everybody, knowing the meaninglessness of existence, sets the center of his compass at his own home. (Part 2, Chapter 13)

There wasn't a single item of importance. A tower of illusion, all of it, made of illusory bricks and full of holes. (Part 2, Chapter 13)

You yourself become sand. You see with the eyes of sand. (Part 2, Chapter 14)

The only way to go beyond work is through work. It is not that work itself is valuable' we surmount work by work. The real value of work lies in the strength of self-denial. (Part 2, Chapter 22)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is the significance of Junpei's bug collecting in the beginning of the novel? What does it signify when he doesn't look at the bug crawling on his leg near the end?

Topic 2

How does his relationship with the woman change or evolve, and how does that affect his view of the village?

Topic 3

What prompts him to understand the village's customs and way of living?

Topic 4

Why does he ultimately decide to stay in the sand hole, and how has his idea of 'worthwhile work' changed?

Topic 5

How does the sand work as a destructive force? Does it create positive outcomes, too?

Topic 6

Why does the woman respond to his comment about endangering human lives with the question, "Why should we worry what happens to others?"

Topic 7

Why do Junpei's relatives and wife not send out a search party for him or post notices?

Topic 8

What is the significance of all of the insect imagery throughout the book, such as the spiders, the village beehive, etc?