



An Artist of the
Floating World
Kazuo Ishiguro

Gabby



Author's Context

- Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan 1954 and at the age of five, moved to Surrey in the UK as his father was invited for research at the 'National Institute of Oceanography'
- He did not return to Japan until 1989, nearly 30 years later
- He has noted that growing up in a Japanese family in the UK has been crucial to help him see things from a different perspective → he also still 'maintained' a Japanese upbringing in the UK through his mother reading him Japanese comics and novels, which enabled him to acknowledge *and* make comparisons between Japanese and Western society
- After finishing high school, he didn't go straight to university but instead took a gap year and travelled around the US and Canada, whilst writing a journal and sending demo tapes to record companies
- In 1974, he began studying at the University of Kent and in 1978, graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy and later returned to receive a Master of Arts in Creative Writing in 1980
- He became an official UK citizen in 1983 and currently resides in London with his wife and daughter

Context of Composition

- The novel is a 1st person narration, set in post-WW2 Japan and sits in the the 'historical fiction genre'
- It is inspired by the post-war political landscape
- Ono's reminiscent narration of his life spans through 4 key time periods
 - October 1948
 - April 1949
 - November 1949
 - June 1950
- The Floating World refers to the culture of 'play and entertainment' that characterised many Japanese cities (Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto), during the Edo Period (1616-1868)
- Some features of this 'play and entertainment' culture included 'bohemian celebrations' such as geishas, kabuki (dance-drama), puppet theatres and 'pleasure districts'

Plot Summary

- Pre-WW2, Ono, a promising artist, breaks away from his teaching master (who focused on aesthetic beauty and *European artistic techniques* within pieces) and instead begins painting nationalistic, propagandistic art pieces for a political purpose
- Ono even becomes a 'police-informer', taking part in a 'witch-hunt' for those against Japan's WW2 ideologies
- Following WW2 and the collapse of Japan's 'Imperial Era', Ono becomes discredited and is regarded as a figure who "led the country astray"
- As the novel progresses, we learn that Ono becomes increasingly more aware of his past, yet this is never explicitly stated, only hinted at.
- The book is written in first person by a single, *unreliable* narrator, which the audience can recognise is not overly trustworthy as Ono narrates with his own personal experiences and therefore, his bias too
- His self-image over time, begins to erode and shift as a result of additional narrators (such as his daughters) providing critical information which provide both a new and modern (much like the new era of Japan!) perspective of Ono

Setting

- The text is set in Japan between 1948 and 1950 following WW2
- The city where the text is set, is never named, but we do know that Ono has lived there since 1913
- As the novel progresses, the audience becomes aware of the city's modernisation (tramlines being built, buildings being rebuilt)
- The pleasure district is torn down and this disruption and destruction of one setting is reflective of Japan's attitude of losing the war and wanting to purge themselves of any national symbols and Japanese identity
- We also see other landmarks like Kawabe Park, the Nishizuru District and the suburb of Arakawa receiving the same treatment → these suburbs change with the times following Japan's loss of WW2

Characters

Masuji Ono - the narrator

- An aging artist who created Japanese propaganda during the WWII and is now consumed with assessing his legacy.
- As a young man he moves to the city to become an artist and his art catches the eye of a patron of the arts, Mori-san and he spends several years living with him.
- During WW2, Ono changes his painting style to promote Japanese imperialism and he earns prestige
- Following the end of the war, Ono is forced into retirement as a result of nationalist ideas being credited.
- Ono grapples with the idea that even if his work reflected a mistaken ideology of nationalism
- Ono also lost his wife in the war but doesn't ever discuss this grief and in turn, preoccupies himself arranging the marriage of his youngest daughter Noriko, who resents her father she believes it is his clouded past that overshadows her marriage prospects
- The end of the novel however, suggests that Ono was 'merely' a painter who had little to no impact on the fate of Japan

Noriko

- The younger and more outspoken of Ono's two daughters → she is nearly 26 and unmarried, and hopes to marry soon
- She was supposed to marry Jiro Miyake but his family withdrew negotiations at the last minute and she suspects it is the doing of her father
- She is later set to be married with a new match, Taro Saito but becomes increasingly nervous and quiet during the formal meetings → they eventually marry and at the end of the novel and we learn she is expecting her first child

Characters

Setsuko

- The well-mannered, kind, dignified older daughter of Ono → she is the one who softly suggests to Ono that their family past may be getting in the way of Noriko's marriage plans

Suichi

- A once polite and friendly man married to Setsuko who overtime becomes angry and poor-mannered as his experience as a soldier in Manchuria haunts him
- He is bitter and resentful of the older generation and considers them the reason for the losses of the war and his current trauma

Ichiro:

- The strong-willed 7 year old grandchild of Ono who often (unintentionally) asks uncomfortable questions of his grandfather (about the war, Japan's descent and America's increase in power)
- He is obsessed with American pop culture and enjoys acting out 'male solidarity' with his grandfather

Jiro Miyake

- The potential husband of Noriko, who pulled out marriage negotiations

Characters

Kuroda

- Ono's most promising student who eventually abandons Ono's artistic direction and mentorship → in disapproval, Ono gives Kuroda's name to the 'Committee of Unpatriotic Activities' which leads to Kuroda's arrest, interrogation and prison mistreatment
- Following the war, Ono visits Kuroda who has become a teacher, but Kuroda refuses to see him and even reiterates his dislike for him in a letter

Shintaro

- One of Ono's less promising students yet Ono still seeks his company
- They remain close friends following the war

Mrs Kawakami

- A bar owner in the pleasure district who has greatly aged following the war
- Despite other buildings in the area being torn down and Ono and Shintaro are her only customers, she still keeps her bar open in the hope that the pleasure district will see a resurgence; but she has to eventually sell her bar

Characters

Akira Sugimura

- A well-known, wealthy and eccentric character who has great influence in the city → he attempts to enrich the city by establishing cultural institutions in Kawabe Park but loses his wealth in the 1920s and cannot carry through with these plans

Chishu Matsuda

- Nationalist and art-appreciator who influences Ono to take a new direction in his art
- He believes that artists are failing to address the social and political problems around them and mocks Ono's naivety of the world

Seiji Moriyama, Mori-san

- A wealthy, talented artist who takes on pupils to live in his villa and be taught by him
- He believes the most delicate beauty in the world exists in 'transient moments' e.g. geishas in the pleasure districts, late-night bars and tries to replicate this in his art
- He uses *European* techniques in his art work and when a student of his doesn't do so, they are demanded to leave the villa

Themes

Politicisation of art

- Art and its role as propaganda is a key element of the storyline → much of the art in the novel considers its ability to influence and inspire community action
- There is a conflict between whether or not art should be politicised or if it is simply a source of gratification

Unreliable narrator

- The novel is structured as a series of interconnected memories of Ono and uses various techniques to capture the fallibility of Ono's memories
- Overtime, the audience finds it increasingly more difficult to determine Ono's actions and the responsibility he bears for them

Changing values

- Post war Japan saw a great shift in values - Ono represents the traditional Japanese values and Ichiro represents the new generation
- Gender and its perception also shifts following post war too, with Japanese masculinity altered as a result of the loss, however the role of women doesn't change drastically

Symbols

Bridge of Hesitation

- Has both literal and symbolic functions → it represents Ono's hesitancy between the past and the future, self-perception and the search for truth
- It also metaphorically symbolises the district into the city's previous pleasure district and floating world and also the now post-war district that reminds him of his morality

The smell of burning

- The 'smell of burning' always incites for Ono, a feeling of melancholy as he associated with it, the notion of 'Japan burning' as a result of the US bombings of his city
- There are several occasions where his prized artwork is singed by fire → first by his father, then Mori-san, Kuroda's work is burned as a result of his 'new wave' and 'non-nationalistic' artworks, as well as the bombings of course
- Ono's 'smell of burning' also evokes the traumatic memories of losing his wife to the war, however we know that Ono never addresses this grief

Symbols

Samurai

- Japanese warriors in Medieval and Early Modern ages who represent sovereignty and patriotism - reflecting the Ono's ideal version and image of Japan
- This notion of 'samurai' as Ono's 'ideal version of Japan' is made evident in his encounter with his grandson who is pretending to be a cowboy → Ono instead encourages traditional Japanese values and instead suggests he should be a 'samurai' as this reflects his interpretation of Japan's nationalist, golden era

Cowboys

- Cowboys are the source of Ichiro's affection and also represent the advancement of American influence over Japan post war; as a result of military occupation and absorption of new-found 'mainstream culture'
- Films about cowboy's in the text are seen by Ono as symbols of expansion and self-reliance due to the cowboy's connection to the American frontier

Example Essay Questions

1. How does *An Artist of the Floating World* reflect the interplay between connection and disconnection?
2. How does the composer's representation of guilt resonate with your values and perspective?
3. To what extent does *An Artist of the Floating World* show that there is no pure form of art?
4. What makes Ono an unreliable narrator in his own story?
5. Characters in Ishiguro's novel fail to take responsibility for their actions. Discuss
6. Some of the changing values within the text are seen as positive. Discuss
7. "Suichi believes it's better he [Ichiro] likes cowboys than that he ideologies people like Miyamoto Musashi. Suichi thinks the american heroes are the better models for children now" To what extent does the text demonstrate the extent to which Japan accepted American influence?
8. In what ways do Suichi's and Ichiro's generations differ from Ono's?
9. How does Setsuko's character exemplify the changing role of women in *An Artist of the Floating World*?
10. Ono has more reasons to feel proud than he does to feel guilty. Do you agree?