

AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING
WORLD

COMPREHENSIVE STUDY GUIDE

ENGLISH & LITERATURE

SAMPLE GUIDE NOTES

SERIES 1

For Complete Guide Notes

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MWALIMU CONSULTANCY

AN ARTIST OF THE FLOATING WORLD

Introduction

- ✓ *An Artist of the Floating World* is a novel by British author Kazuo Ishiguro, published in 1986. Ishiguro is a prolific and well-known novelist, famous for his books *The Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*. He has won the Man Booker Prize and won the Nobel Prize in 2017, and was knighted in 2019. *An Artist of the Floating World*, his second novel, is an example of his earlier writing, and was well-received, earning a Whitbread Award. This novel is particularly well-known for its use of an unreliable narrator, Masuji Ono.
- ✓ It tells the story of Ono, a retired Japanese artist trying to come to terms with changes in his country after the Second World War. Ishiguro himself was born in Japan, but emigrated to the United Kingdom as a child and did not return to Japan until after publishing *An Artist of the Floating World*. He has said that, by writing about places with which he is unfamiliar, such as post-war Japan in this novel, he is able to write more imaginatively.
- ✓ Though the book dwells on events from **Ono's** childhood and early adulthood, it is held together by a linear thread-taking place in the novel's present, the late 1940s and early 1950s. This thread describes Ono's attempt to arrange a marriage for his younger daughter, Noriko. He believes that his reputation is in shambles because of his early nationalistic paintings, and he grieves for the family members lost in the war.
- ✓ Over the course of the novel, Ono's narration flashes between past and present, and he often calls his own reliability into question by interrogating the accuracy of his own memories. The novel deals with themes including *war, solitude, aging and death, and grief*. Stylistically, it is rather spare and direct, though its structure calls that directness into question with poignant omissions. The book is split into four sections, which are titled using time markers: **October 1948, April 1949, November 1949, and June 1950**.
- ✓ *An Artist of the Floating World* is not Ishiguro's best-known novel, but it is one of his most critically acclaimed, and was shortlisted for a Man Booker Prize. Robert McCrum listed it as one of the 100 best novels in the English language in the *Guardian* in 2015, and it was a finalist in the ALA Best

Books for Young Adults. In the *New York Times*, Kathryn Morton, reviewing the novel, wrote that it "*stretches the reader's awareness, teaching him to read more perceptively.*"

- ✓ **Ishiguro**, speaking of his early novels, notes that he tended to focus on the way older people viewed their younger selves, saying, of his youth, "I'd spend long nights with my friends sorting out moral and political positions that we thought would take us through adult life. And part of that would end up meaning we despised some people not for what they did, but for the opinions they professed to hold. But as I've got older I think I've realised that while it is important to have principles, you have far less control of what happens. These principles and positions only get you so far because what actually happens is that you don't carefully chart your way through life."

An Artist of the Floating World Brief Summary of Mwalimu Consultancy Team

- ✓ The novel begins in an unnamed city in Japan in October 1948. The narrator is **Masuji Ono**, a retired artist who lost both his son and wife during the war which also caused serious damage to his beautiful house. Ono recalls the previous month's visit of his older daughter **Setsuko** and her son **Ichiro** who live in a different town. The whole family is concerned about the marriage prospects of Ono's younger daughter **Noriko**, because, a year before, Noriko had been in marriage talks with a man named **Jiro Miyake** when his family withdrew from negotiations under mysterious circumstances. Noriko is currently at the start of new marriage talks with a man named **Taro Saito**, but at nearly twenty-six, she is considered old to be unmarried. Ono is annoyed because he feels his daughters believe he knows the real reason why the marriage negotiations broke off and is hiding it from them.
- ✓ Ichiro is fascinated by a poster for a monster movie that he saw at the train station. Ono decides to take Ichiro to the movie the next day, but his daughter Noriko says she has made plans. Setsuko says that she will stay with her father the next day, and Ono and Ichiro can go see the monster movie the following day. The next day, Setsuko says to her father that it may be wise to take precautions to prevent certain facts about his past from coming into the hands of the Saito family when they investigate the Ono family background. The day after that, Ichiro and Ono go to the monster movie. On the way there, they run into Taro Saito's father, who tells Ono that he has discovered they have a mutual acquaintance: Mr. **Kuroda**.

"My students can't get enough of your charts and their results have gone through the roof." -Graham S.

- ✓ Ono intersperses reflections about the past and present into his account of Setsuko's visit. He describes the time he spends at **Mrs. Kawakami's** place, the last bar standing in an area that had been a pleasure district with a number of bars and restaurants in the years before the war. There, he and his former pupil **Shintaro** reminisce with Mrs. Kawakami about the old days. Ono also recounts his role in bringing the pleasure district into existence. As a prominent artist, he had written to the authorities and gotten them to place their support behind a bar. The bar, called the Migi-Hidari, became a place where Ono and his students often drank and talked about the role of their art in building a great new future for Japan.
- ✓ Ono also recalls an incident from his own childhood when his father told him he would disgrace the family if he became an artist and then burned Ono's paintings. Ono also recollects several run-ins with the younger generation. He remembers running into Jiro Miyake and hearing from him that he is glad that the president of his company committed suicide to atone for the company's behavior during the war. He also recalls a conversation with Setsuko's husband **Suichi** at the reception after his son Kenji's funeral, where Suichi expresses anger over the many members of his generation that were killed during the war and the many leaders who have been too cowardly to take responsibility for their role during the war. Finally, Ono describes his first visit to an old colleague to make sure nothing from his past gets in the way of Noriko's marriage. He visits his old colleague **Matsuda**, who has been ill, in the Arakawa district. Matsuda tells him that he will be sure to say only kind things about Ono, but advises that he seek out his former pupil Kuroda, if he is concerned about the investigation.
- ✓ The second set of recollections are recorded in April 1949 and center around Noriko's *miai*, a formal meeting between two families who are considering marrying their children. Ono first describes how he has a falling-out with Shintaro, who asks him to write to a potential employer and tell them that Shintaro disagreed with Ono about work they did together during the war. Ono says that it may seem that he was harsh with Shintaro, but explains that Shintaro's visit occurred only a few days after the *miai*.

- ✓ Ono describes Noriko's bad mood and incivility to him in the weeks leading up to the *miai*, and says that Noriko does not know all that he is doing to make sure her wedding goes ahead. For instance, Ono goes to visit Kuroda. He is let into Kuroda's apartment by Kuroda's protégé, **Enchi**, who mistakes Ono for someone else. When Enchi realizes Ono's true identity, he asks Ono to leave, saying that he is sure Kuroda would not want to see the man who is responsible for his having been beaten and injured in prison and labeled a traitor.
- ✓ At the *miai*, Ono drinks quickly and is made uncomfortable by the stilted conversation. Eventually, he interrupts the flow of conversation to make a declaration that he can admit that he made mistakes with some of the work he did and may have been a bad influence in the country. He thinks that Taro's father, an art expert named Dr. Saito, approves of his statement. After that, the conversation loosens up and it seems clear that Noriko and Taro like one another.
- ✓ The third set of Ono's recollections is recorded in November 1949 and centers around another visit Setsuko and Ichiro pay to the family some months after Noriko is married to Taro Saito. During a walk in Kawabe Park, Setsuko says to Ono that she was concerned to hear that he has compared himself to a composer who wrote highly influential nationalist songs during the war and recently committed suicide to atone for his role encouraging the bloodshed. Ono tries to reassure his daughter that he is not considering suicide, but she says other things that he finds upsetting. Setsuko says that he did beautiful work, but it was not at all responsible for influencing anything during the war. Ono points out that, the previous year, she had seemed to think his career a great liability in Noriko's marriage negotiations. Setsuko says she does not remember any such conversation. Ono is shocked and points out that he made a statement during the *miai* as a result of her comment. Setsuko says that Noriko and the Saitos all found his declaration very puzzling. Ono defends his statement as appropriate, explaining that Dr. Saito was familiar with his wartime work and seemed to appreciate hearing that his position had changed. Setsuko says that she believes that Dr. Saito was not even aware that Ono was an artist.
- ✓ Later that day, Ono takes his grandson Ichiro on an outing and promises that he will get Ichiro a taste of sake that night at dinner. That night at the home of newlyweds Noriko and Taro, Ono tries to

convince Setsuko to allow Ichiro to taste some sake, but Setsuko refuses. During the dinner, the younger generation discusses how happy they are with the new American-style leadership at the corporations where they work. After Ichiro goes to bed, Ono says to Taro that it is a shame that Dr. Saito and he were not better acquainted sooner, since they both worked in the art world and knew one another's reputations. Taro agrees with this and Ono looks to see how Setsuko is responding, but she does not seem to register this at all.

- ✓ Ono intersperses a variety of reflections about his past in his account of this conversation with Setsuko and his reactions to it. He recalls the moment sixteen years before when he moved into his home and, he says, Dr. Saito approached him and said how glad he was to have an artist of his stature in the neighborhood.
- ✓ He also looks back further into his past, recalling his relationship with a fellow artist nicknamed **the Tortoise**, who worked with him at **Master Takeda's** firm in 1913 or 1914, producing Japanese paintings for export to foreigners. When Ono gets an offer to go to live and study at the villa of the prestigious artist **Mori-san**, the Tortoise comes with him. Over the next seven years, Ono adopts Mori-san's style of painting and becomes Mori-san's prize pupil. But in the early 1920s, Ono gets to know Matsuda, a nationalist art appreciator, who convinces him to take a different direction in his art. The Tortoise is horrified at Ono's disloyalty to Mori-san's methods, and Mori-san tells Ono that he must leave the villa. Ono reflects how gratifying it was that, in later years, his own career took off, and Mori-san's declined.
- ✓ The final set of recollections is set in June 1950. Ono reveals that he has learned of Matsuda's death and recounts the visit he paid to Matsuda the month before. On this visit, he tells Matsuda that both Noriko and Setsuko are now pregnant and that it will soon be five years since his wife **Michiko's** death. Matsuda says that they were two ordinary men who made a marginal contribution, but Ono says that he believes Matsuda actually feels proud of his life's work. Ono compares himself and Matsuda to the Tortoise to Shintaro, saying that he and Matsuda can be proud to have boldly tried to do something ambitious that they believed in, while the Tortoise and Shintaro have never tried to rise above mediocrity.

- ✓ Ono also describes how the area that used to be the pleasure district is now full of office buildings. He sits in a bench outside one of these buildings and looks at the enthusiastic young office workers, whom he wishes well.

TITLE

- ✓ Mr Isaboke, the Analyst of Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd for this Novel believes that the novel's title is based on the literal translation of Ukiyo-e, a word referring to the **Japanese art of prints**. Therefore, it can be read as "a printmaker" or "an artist living in a changing world," given both Ono's limited understanding and the dramatic changes his world, Japan in the first half of the twentieth century, has undergone in his lifetime.
- ✓ The title also refers to an artistic genre. Ono's master is especially interested in depicting scenes from the pleasure district adjacent to the villa in which he and his students live. Ono mentions the ephemeral nature of the floating world that could be experienced during each night.
- ✓ His master experiments with innovative softer Western-style painting techniques, rejecting the hard black outlining that was considered more traditional. Under the influence of right-wing political ideas about tradition, Ono becomes estranged from his master and forges his own career. He feels gleeful when his master's paintings fell into disfavour during a return to the use of more traditional bold lines in the paintings used for nationalistic posters.

SETTING

- ✓ The setting for Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *An Artist of the Floating World* is post-World War II Japan, in an unnamed city. Furukawa, where young narrator and protagonist Masuji Ono relocates as a young man to work as an artist under Master Takeda, and Arakawa District, where older Ono visits his friend Chishi Matsuda, are both suburbs in present-day Tokyo though it cannot be assumed with certainty that these are the actual locations to which the novel makes reference.
- ✓ Parks such as Kawabe Park are mentioned which speak to the urban planning design of large cities in Japan where residents frequently live in high-rise apartments (as will Ono's daughter Noriko and her husband later in the novel) and do not have green space of their own but are able to make use of

the public spaces. The home Ono purchases after getting married is a house with a yard and garden up the hill from the Bridge of Hesitation, a bridge which leads to the former pleasure district where Mrs Kawakami's bar is located. The less congested Arakawa District, where Ono takes a train to visit Chishi Matsuda, is a neighbourhood situated outside the city centre.

- ✓ The floating world referred to in the novel's title is the colloquial term used for pleasure districts which existed throughout Japanese cities before the war. Ono refers to the pleasure district he frequented as a young artist to capture subject matter for his art, where Mrs Kawakami's bar is situated, but which is gradually being replaced by modern office blocks.
- ✓ **Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd** analyses that by the end of **World War II** and the surrender of Japan, who together with Germany and Italy had formed the Axis powers, Japan had suffered wide-scale damage. Of particular note are the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States which caused damage to physical infrastructure as well as emotional trauma. American forces under General Douglas MacArthur, on behalf of the Allied powers, subsequently occupied Japan from 1946 until 1950. Among the sweeping reforms and reprisals that took place were the trials of many members of the Japanese military for war crimes, with hundreds committing suicide, the creation of a new Japanese constitution, which relegated the emperor's position to a ceremonial one, the introduction of universal suffrage, and the Shinto religion being officially separated from state. Censoring of the Japanese media to restrict anti-American sentiment, the disbanding of the Japanese military, and the introduction of a Western-style free market, capitalist economic system, also took place. While the latter reform initially saw the economy suffer, the commencement of the Korean War and the use of Japan as a supply depot for the United Nations led Japan to undergo rapid economic growth.
- ✓ During the years of Japan's occupation by US forces its citizens were heavily influenced by the post-war wealth that the United States brought, including in areas of popular culture such as movies and television. The pervasiveness of the American influence which occurred in Japan at this time is frequently referenced in the novel. A major conflict to the story is the contrast between those like Ono who held favourable views on Japanese imperialism and the younger generation who had embraced the American occupation and resented the war.

CHARACTERISATION

MASUJI ONO

- ✓ Mr Isaboke, the Analyst of Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd for this Novel believes that Masuji Ono is a former painter in post-World War II Japan who looks back on and evaluates the contribution his life has made to his city. Eager to be an artist from a young age, but strongly discouraged in this pursuit by his father, Ono leaves home in 1913 and moves to Fukurama where he earns his living as an artist under Master Takeda. Ono only ever refers to his family through a recollection of his father burning his paintings thus it is unclear if Ono has cut ties with them.
- ✓ At the Takeda firm, Ono works long hours to meet the quota of Japanese-style prints commissioned by foreigners, until his ambition and talent lead him to work under Seiji Moriyama (Mori-San), a 'true artist'. Ono succumbs to the decadent lifestyle his father predicted, through spending time in the pleasure district to gather the subject matter for his art, until a meeting with the nationalist Chishu Matsuda influences his ideology and career trajectory towards the escalating view at the time, Japanese imperialism. Ono achieves high status as a wartime artist and is conflicted when the war comes to an end when his works, and the ideology they represented, are discredited.
- ✓ Ono struggles to arrive at an interpretation of his contribution during the war that both celebrates his success but absolves him of any guilt. He claims to be an independent thinker but in many of his recollections he admits he cannot remember if the thoughts or words he used are his own or if he acquired them from the person who features in the account. He is categorical in his summations of certain others, casting some as mediocre (e.g. the Tortoise, Shintaro) and others as having risen above mediocrity (e.g. Akira Sugimura, Matsuda), which enables him to reach a satisfactory appraisal of himself through his assuming superiority over the former group and solidarity with the latter.
- ✓ He purports to be unassuming of the praise his status accords him, yet his frequent referral to instances in which he received such praise belies his modesty, suggesting he may have embellished his stories or has deluded himself into believing his career was more important than was actually the case. Because Ono does frequently provide great detail in certain of his descriptions, such as of the physical environment, when he leaves details out that the reader assumes should be there, it is difficult to unequivocally believe his account.

- ✓ Ono lost both his wife and only son during the war, although he only ever mentions them matter-of-factly and does not describe his grief. Ono's interactions with his daughters Noriko and Setsuko have changed since war, Noriko calling Ono 'less of a tyrant', and are further marred by Ono's suspicions that his daughters and Setsuko's husband, Suichi, believe Ono's wartime career may be responsible for Noriko's previously failed marriage talks and could thus interfere with the present negotiation.
- ✓ Ono attempts to bond with his grandson Ichiro but he does not understand or engage with Ichiro's captivation with American heroes, such as cowboys. Ono's belief that Japanese society has embraced American influences too quickly is a point of digression with his sons-in-law, Suichi and Taro, but by the end of the novel, having resolved his inner conflict somewhat, Ono is able to embrace their optimism for the country's future.

Masuji Ono Quotes

- ✓ 'Setsuko probably has no idea of what you're like these days, Father. She only remembers you from when you were a tyrant and ordered us all around. You're much more gentle these days, isn't that so?' (*Noriko, to Setsuko and Ono*) Page 8
- ✓ Indeed, I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing, and even now, I am often surprised afresh when some event, or something someone may say, reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held. (*Ono*) Pages 13-14
- ✓ 'Indeed, as the instance he has just related amply illustrates, his reputation has now spread beyond the world of art, to all walks of life. But how typical of Sensei's modest nature that he is unaware of this.' (*Kuroda praising Ono to the group at Migi-Hidari*) Page 19
- ✓ 'Being at Takeda's', I told them, 'taught me an important lesson early in my life. That while it was right to look up to teachers, it was always important to question their authority. The Takeda experience taught me never to follow the crowd blindly, but to consider carefully the direction in which I was being pushed.' (*Ono to his pupils at the Migi-Hidari*) Page 66
- ✓ '... I must say I find it hard to understand how any man who values his self-respect would wish for long to avoid responsibility for his past deeds; it may not always be an easy thing, but there is certainly a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the course of one's life.' (*Ono*) Page 111
- ✓ For indeed, a man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if in the end he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions. (*Ono, on Akira Sugimura*) Page 117

- ✓ 'Sensei, it is my belief that in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. It is not necessary that artists always occupy a decadent and enclosed world. My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world.' (*Ono's last conversation with Mori-san*) Page 161

NORIKO

- ✓ Ono's younger daughter is 26, bolder than her sister, and frankly speaks her mind. Noriko's planned marriage comprises the linear story within the novel, the success of which is made more critical due to failed marriage talks which occurred the previous year. Noriko has a close relationship with her sister Setsuko and an easy relationship with her nephew Inchiro. Noriko lives with her retired father with whom she shares a strained relationship; she thinks her father meddles too much with the garden and that he 'mopes around'.
- ✓ By the end of the novel, Noriko is married to Taro and living in a modern apartment in the city, expecting their first child.

Noriko Quotes

- ✓ 'The point is, Noriko began to talk about the marriage negotiations in front of him [Mr Mori]. She took much the same attitude as just now, that everything was settled. It was most embarrassing. Mr Mori even congratulated me as he was leaving, and asked me the groom's occupation.' (*Ono to Setsuko, on Noriko's forwardness*) Page 11
- ✓ 'Noriko was always so good with children,' Setsuko remarked. ... 'Ichiro's taken a great liking to her.' (*Setsuko to Ono*) Page 29
- ✓ 'Really, Noriko, you shouldn't be so indiscreet.' (*Ono*) Page 44
- ✓ 'Your mother was rather like you, Noriko. She had no bones about saying whatever came into her head.' (*Ono*) Page 95
- ✓ When amongst family, or in the company of close friends, Noriko is in the habit of adopting her somewhat flippant manner of address, and often achieves a wit and eloquence of sorts; but in more formal settings, I have often known her to have difficulty finding an appropriate tone, thus giving the impression she is a timid young woman. (*Ono*) Page 106

SETSUKO

- ✓ **Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd** analyses that Setsuko is Ono's elder daughter and at the start of the novel she is already living elsewhere with her husband Suichi and their son Ichiro. Setsuko is more reserved than her sister and is deferent to her father, but can be strong-willed when the situation calls for it. She has greater influence in her family home than Ono's mother would have had, and in this way represents the changing gender roles of post-war Japan. Ono values Setsuko's opinion; it is on her suggestion that Ono visits old acquaintances ahead of Noriko's marriage talks to ensure favourable reviews are returned, and whose appraisal of Ono's career at the end of the novel has Ono reassessing his narrative.

By the end of the novel, Setsuko is expecting her second child.

Setsuko Quotes

- ✓ Even as a child, Setsuko had rather masculine features, ... , Noriko was always able to get the better of her elder sister by calling her 'Boy! Boy!'. Who knows what effect such things have on personalities? It is no coincidence, surely, that Noriko should have grown up so headstrong, and Setsuko so shy and retiring. (*Ono*) Page 12
- ✓ 'Our Setsuko will flower in the summer' she had often said. (*Ono, on his late wife's comments coming true about their daughter's physical appearance*) Page 12
- ✓ 'He seems convinced I know some secret and that we're all keeping it from him. I have to continually reassure him that I have no idea myself.' (*Setsuko to Ono, on Suichi's persistent questioning of her about a family secret he thinks underpinned the failure of Noriko's previous marriage talks*) Page 13
- ✓ 'How sad to see her reach this age and still unmarried.' 'Indeed. The war came at a bad time for her.' (*Setsuko to Ono, about Noriko*) Page 76
- ✓ 'Sometimes at home, Father wants to do something and Mother tells him it's not allowed. Sometimes, even Father's no match for Mother.' (*Ichiro, to Ono about his mother and father*) Page 169
- ✓ 'Father painted some splendid pictures, and was no doubt most influential amongst other such painters. But Father's work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong.' (*Setsuko to Ono*) Page 173

ICHIRO

- ✓ **Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd** analyses that Ichiro is Setsuko and Suichi's young son, he is captivated with American cinema and TV heroes, lively, cheeky, and occasionally misbehaves. Compared to Ono's upbringing, in which he was only allowed into the family's reception room at age 12, Ichiro's upbringing is more permissive, he is allowed to sit in on adult conversations at age 8. It is from Ichiro's inquisitive questions that Ono learns much of the content of what his daughters and their husbands discuss, such as their concerns for Ono's mental health after he talks positively of a wartime composer having owned his responsibility for the war by committing suicide. As Ichiro grows he starts to resemble Ono's deceased son, Kenji, and it is Ichiro who innocently points out Ono's sense of powerlessness when he is unable to persuade Setsuko that Ichiro be allowed to taste sake.

ICHIRO QUOTES

- ✓ 'Ichiro's a fine boy,' I said. 'Not at all shy like a lot of children that age.' 'I hope he wasn't giving you trouble just now. He can be quite headstrong at times. Please don't hesitate to scold him if he becomes a nuisance.' (*Ono and Setsuko*) Page 29
- ✓ 'Suichi believes it's better he likes cowboys than that he idolise people like Miyamoto [a ronin: samurai for hire]. Suichi thinks the American heroes are the better models for children now.' (*Setsuko to Ono, on Ichiro liking cowboys*) Pages 29-30
- ✓ 'He's so arrogant. Pulling people back and forth. Such bad manners.' (*Setsuko about Ichiro, seeing him pulling on his aunt's arm*) Page 30
- ✓ 'Sometimes at home, Father wants to do something and Mother tells him it's not allowed. Sometimes, even Father's no match for Mother.' (*Ichiro, to Ono about his mother, after she didn't allow Ono to give sake to Ichiro*) Page 169

SUICHI

- ✓ Suichi is Setsuko's husband and Ichiro's father. Suichi is against the war which claimed the lives of half his high school graduation class, and welcomes the American occupation, even to the point of encouraging Ichiro to idolise American heroes rather than Japanese ones. Ono suspects Suichi's anti-war sentiments have influenced Noriko and Setsuko, which fuels his suspicion that his daughters blame him for Noriko's failed marriage negotiation.

- ✓ By the end of the war Suichi is working for a company under American leadership and feels optimistic about the nation's future.

Suichi Quotes

- ✓ 'Suichi believes it's better he likes cowboys than that he idolise people like Miyamoto [a ronin: samurai for hire]. Suichi thinks the American heroes are the better models for children now.' (*Setsuko to Ono, on Ichiro liking cowboys*) Pages 29-30
- ✓ 'There seems to be no end of courageous deaths,' he said, eventually. 'Half of my high school graduation year have died courageous deaths. They were all for stupid causes, though they were never to know that.' (*Suichi to Ono, at Kenji's funeral*) Page 50
- ✓ 'Those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths, where are they today? ...Many are more successful than before, behaving so well in front of the Americans, the very ones who led us to disaster. ...This is what makes me angry. Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid ...to admit their responsibility.' (*Suichi to Ono, at Kenji's funeral*) Pages 50-51

TARO

- ✓ Taro is the groom in the present marriage talks involving Noriko. He comes from a more forward thinking family which encourages females to participate and not be deferent. Ono appears to have an easier relationship with Taro than with Suichi, considering he shared his thoughts with him about the well-known wartime composer who suicided. Taro welcomes the American changes such as democracy but asserts they should be carried out slowly.
- ✓ Taro is married to Noriko by the end of the novel.

Taro Quotes

'Democracy is a fine thing, but it doesn't mean citizens have a right to run riot whenever they disagree with something. In this respect, we Japanese have been shown to be like children. We've yet to learn how to handle the responsibility of democracy.' (*Taro to his father, on the night of the miai*) Page 107

‘...We feel very optimistic about the future. Within the next ten years, provided we all do our best, KNC should be a name recognised not just all over Japan but all over the world ...’ (*Taro, about this firm*) Page 166

‘In fact, Father, just the other week I attended a reunion dinner of my school graduation year and for the first time since the surrender, all those present from every walk of life were expressing optimism for the future.’ (*Taro to his father-in-law, Ono*) Page 167

SHINTARO

- ✓ Shintaro is presented as a naïve character who once aspired to be a great artist but who is stuck nostalgically in the past, drinking at the same bar for 17 years and producing art considered by Ono to be of a low quality. Shintaro was Ono’s student during the war and involved in the same propagandistic art, still referring to Ono as ‘Sensei’ in the present day when they frequently drink together at Mrs Kawakami’s bar.
- ✓ Ono chastises Shintaro for wishing to disassociate post-war from his wartime career in order to secure a teaching position. Interestingly, Ono fails to notice the hypocrisy of his own similar request of colleague Matsuda for a favourable wartime report for the Saito family’s investigator as part of Noriko’s marriage negotiation. Ono perceives Shintaro to be mediocre which allows Ono to use him as a standard of measure against which to evaluate his own achievements.
- ✓ At the end of the novel, Shintaro is teaching art at a high school.

Shintaro Quotes

- ✓ There is something reassuring about going into Mrs Kawakami’s and finding Shintaro sitting up there at the bar, just as one may have found him on any evening for the past seventeen or so years, absentmindedly turning his cap round and round on the counter in that old way of his. (*Ono*) Page 16
- ✓ Sometimes he will even ask me questions relating to technique or style with all the eagerness of a young apprentice – though the truth is, of course, Shintaro has long ceased to be concerned with any real art. For some years now, he has devoted his time to his book illustrations, and his present specialty, I gather, is fire engines. (*Ono*) Page 16

- ✓ But I suppose in the evenings, after a few drinks, Shintaro likes to believe he is still the idealistic young artist I first took under my supervision. (*Ono*) Page 17
- ✓ ‘Shintaro,’ I said, ‘why don’t you simply face up to the past? You gained much credit at the time for your poster campaign. Much credit and much praise. The world may now have a different opinion of your work, but there’s no need to lie about yourself.’ (*Ono*) Page 91
- ✓ The likes of the Tortoise – the likes of Shintaro – they may plod on, competent and inoffensive, but their kind ... do not know what it is to risk everything in the endeavour to rise above the mediocre. (*Ono*) Page 182

THE TORTOISE (YASUNARI NAKAHARA)

- ✓ The Tortoise, having received this nickname for his slow work, is a peer of Ono’s who worked with him both at the Takeda firm and at Mori-san’s villa. The Tortoise is devoted to the painting priorities of his employers, never departing from their style, and ingratiated to Ono’s assistance throughout his career which makes for a power imbalance in their relationship which Ono is able to exploit. Ono views the Tortoise as even more mediocre than Shintaro, but the Tortoise’s slow and cautious nature are also a symbol of weakness to Ono.

THE TORTOISE QUOTES

- ✓ All he would have recognised was that it represented a blatant disregard for Mori-san’s priorities; abandoned had been the school’s collective endeavour to capture the fragile lantern light of the pleasure world; bold calligraphy and been introduced to complement the visual impact ... (*Ono, on the Tortoise’s appraisal of his ‘Complacency’ painting*) Page 156
- ✓ The likes of the Tortoise – the likes of Shintaro – they may plod on, competent and inoffensive, but their kind ... do not know what it is to risk everything in the endeavour to rise above the mediocre. (*Ono*) Page 182

KURODA

- ✓ Kuroda and his postwar fate is a narrative which remains a mystery for a large part of the novel though it is clear he holds significance for Ono. Once Ono’s protégé and leading student during the war, Kuroda’s art comes to diverge from Ono’s principles and Ono reports his work to the authorities

which culminates in an interrogation of Kuroda's family and Kuroda's imprisonment and torture. After the war, Kuroda is the proverbial thorn in Ono's flesh; Ono's perception of his role in Kuroda's fate as integral to Noriko's previously failed marriage talks compels him to manage his reputation in the present marriage negotiation, while the guilt he carries for Kuroda's fate derails Ono's success at constructing an image of his own wartime efforts in which he can take pride. Ono is never quite able to fully absolve himself of his guilt, grandiosely believing he can still reconcile with Kuroda who wants nothing more to do with him.

- ✓ By the end of the novel Kuroda is teaching art, his work highly esteemed by his protégé Enchi.

KURODA QUOTES

- ✓ 'But I personally have no doubt. His reputation will become all the greater, and in years to come, our proudest honour will be to tell others that we were once the pupils of Masuji Ono.' (*Kuroda to the group at Migi-Hidari*) Page 20
- ✓ 'Mr Kuroda is always telling me,' he said, 'I should try and paint in a style more distinctly my own. But I find so much to admire in Mr Kuroda's ways, I can hardly help mimicking him.' (*Enchi, Kuroda's protégé to Ono*) Page 98
- ✓ 'We all know now who the real traitors were. And many of them are still walking free.' (*Kuroda's protégé Enchi to Ono*) Page 101
- ✓ 'I had no idea,' I said, 'something like this would happen. I merely suggested to the committee someone come round and give Mr Kuroda a talking-to for his own good.' I started again at the smouldering pile in the middle of the yard. 'It was quite unnecessary to burn those. There were many fine works amongst them.' (*Ono and the police officer on the burning of Kuroda's paintings*) Page 164

CHISHI MATSUDA

- ✓ **Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd** analyses that Matsuda holds an influential role in Ono's life and development and may be loosely considered a father figure to him, Matsuda having no children of his own and Ono never recalling any impactful conversations with his own father other than the burning of his early artwork. Matsuda facilitated the marriage talks between Ono and Ono's late wife, and introduced Ono to new ideologies, ultimately guiding his career towards nationalistic purposes. His postwar self-assessment of his own role in the war, which he shares with Ono, is

instrumental to Ono forming his own similar assessment, which demonstrates that Ono was not the independent thinker he often professed himself to be.

- ✓ By the end of the novel Matsuda is old and frail, and before passing away shares his revised view of his and Ono's contribution to the war, relegating its status to the contribution of ordinary men with no particular insight, a point which Ono finds difficult to assimilate, contradicting as it does the careful assessment of himself he has spent the entire novel constructing.

Chishi Matsuda Quotes

- ✓ 'But, Ono, there are things we should both be proud of. Never mind what people today are all saying. Before long, a few more years, and the likes of us will be able to hold our heads high about what we tried to do. I simply hope I live as long as that.' (*Chishu Matsuda, to Ono about their role in the war*)
Page 85
- ✓ 'Your eyes are indeed far from open, Ono, if you believe a little goodhearted charity can help the poor of our country. The truth is, Japan is headed for crisis. We are in the hands of greedy businessmen and weak politicians. Such people will see to it poverty grows every day. Unless, that is, we the emerging generation, take action.' (*Matsuda to Ono*) *Page 154*
- ✓ 'But I'm no political agitator, Ono. My concern is with art. And with artists like you. Talented young artists, not yet irreversibly blinkered by that enclosed little world you all inhabit. The Okada-Shingen [Society] exists to help the likes of you open your eyes and produce work of genuine value for these difficult times.' (*Matsuda to Ono*) *Page 154*
- ✓ Although he and I often quarrelled, our approaches to life were identical, and I am confident he would have been able to look back on one or two such moments. Indeed, I am sure he was thinking along these lines when he said to me that last time we spoke, a gentle smile on his face: 'We at least acted on what we believed and did our utmost.' (*Ono, on Matsuda*) *Page 182*

SEIJI MORIYAMA (MORI-SAN)

- ✓ **Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd** analyses that Ono's second teacher Mori-san, with whom he worked for seven years while living at his villa with the other students, was to Ono 'a true artist'. Compared to the mass-produced art at the Takeda firm, Mori-san introduced his students to the decadent lifestyle of the pleasure district, from where they captured its beauty as subject matter for their art.

When Ono's art starts to take on his newfound ideologies and departs from Mori-san's principles, the two part ways. Mori-san remains powerful to Ono's persona during the war (and after), when Mori-san's status declines and Ono's status is elevated, demonstrated through Ono being unable to enjoy winning a prestigious award until he assures himself that he has thwarted the negative prediction Mori-san made of Ono's career when they last talked.

Seiji Moriyama (Mori-san) Quotes

'The finest, most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within those pleasure houses after dark ... But as for those pictures up there, they don't even hint at these transitory, illusory qualities.' (*Mori-san*) Page 133

'I suspect the reason I couldn't celebrate the floating world was that I couldn't bring myself to believe in its worth. ...to spend one's skills celebrating things so intangible and transient, I suppose I thought it all rather wasteful, all rather decadent. It's hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity.' (*Mori-san*) Page 133

'When I am an old man, when I look back over my life and see I have devoted it to the task of capturing the unique beauty of that world. I believe I will be well satisfied and no man will make me believe I've wasted my time.' It is possible ...that Mori-san did not use those exact words ...such phrases sound rather more like the sort of thing I myself would declare ... (*Ono*) Page 133

MRS KAWAKAMI

- ✓ Mrs Kawakami's is the setting for many nostalgic conversations between Ono, Shintaro and the proprietor herself. She and her establishment represent all that is left from the old days, among the otherwise abandoned neighbourhood after the war. By the end of the novel, Mrs Kawakami has taken a buy out of her bar and moved elsewhere.

Mrs Kawakami Quote

- ✓ As for Mrs Kawakami, although she will do her best not to allow the current mood to affect her, there is no denying she has been greatly aged by the war years. (*Ono*) Page 18

QUICK SUMMARY ANALYSIS

PART ONE

October 1948 (pp 2-86)

- ❖ **Mwalimu Consultancy Ltd** analyses that Part One commences with the reader oriented to the time period, October 1948. Masuji Oni describes the approach to his home from the 'Bridge of Hesitation' (p 2); the bridge is both a literal bridge Ono crosses to get home but also symbolic of the many crossings he will make.

Ono provides a vivid description of his unique and imposing home, taking.....

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