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An Analysis of David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*

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In order to develop an interesting and riveting story, authors will often include a character who at first appears to be evil or immoral, but as the story progresses, the reader becomes more sympathetic to the character. Interactions between the characters in the story and the environment in which they live influence how the reader will feel about them and their roles in the story. Another influencing factor in the emotions and opinion of the reader is how the story is told. The events that unfold in the story are not always displayed from a third person, unbiased point of view, and when the events are seen from a character's point of view, the reader gains a deeper understanding of what is happening and how the characters feel. It is only when a reader has that deeper understanding that he can discern which character is right and which character is wrong. In some cases, knowledge may be initially withheld from the reader, making judgments and assumptions about characters misinformed. This is especially apparent in books where the details are revealed as the story continues and where the story's setting is one where the inhabitants are discriminatory toward other characters.

In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, David Guterson used not only writing style but also the interactions of characters in a historically accurate racially prejudiced fictitious society to make the reader feel sympathetic toward a character. Guterson believes that, "it is the obligation of writers to present moral questions for reflection" ("David Guterson - Author Biography"). And his work definitely poses moral questions to the audience. This novel takes place in the Pacific Northwest, a common place for people with Japanese ancestry to live during the early twentieth century. And while the island of San Piedro in Washington State is fictitious, the racially motivated prejudice displayed by the islanders holds true to the attitude of Americans during the time period. In San Piedro, Japanese people are just as prevalent as the people who don't like

them. People with Japanese blood are commonly referred to as “japs” by the citizens, and the respect they are shown is minimal. They are primarily seen as a source of cheap labor for unwanted jobs, and prejudice against them is very popular, just as it was in real life. “Because of their success [in some crops and their role in the fishing industry], white agricultural and fishing interests were hostile” (“A History of the Camps”). “Agricultural interest groups in western states and many local politicians had long been opposed to the presence of Japanese Americans...” (“Relocation and Incarceration”). The real world events that unfold change the mood in the story and further shape the opinion of the reader toward all the characters, especially the Japanese. The story of Kabuo Miyamoto in David Guterson’s novel, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, changes the reader from feeling indifferent in the beginning to becoming sympathetic in the end based on the context and content of the story.

The first of the two literary mechanics that Guterson used in his story, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, to make Kabuo a character whom the reader unexpectedly feels sympathetic toward by the end of the novel is context. The setting in which the novel takes place is a small island off the coast of Washington in the Pacific Northwest. Guterson tied in historically accurate documents and events into his story to give it a very realistic plausibility. The characters’ emotions and the way they interact with each other greatly impacts how the reader feels toward the events within the story.

In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, many historically accurate and real aspects of how life was during World War II are used to make a reader feel empathy toward the Japanese in the story. The 1940’s was a time of great racial tension between Asians and Caucasians in the United States. Historically, people from Japan were often taken advantage of in the Pacific Northwest and used for manual labor in situations where it was convenient to the other citizens. Despite

their patriotism and hard work ethics, the Japanese were not granted many rights. Laws passed in the early 1900's denied them the right to become citizens, own land, and marry outside their race ("Pre-War Discrimination"). Discrimination against them only grew stronger when World War II started and Japan became involved in the war. The Japanese were often targeted more than other races that also had ancestral connections to enemy nations during the war because of the easy distinguishability between them and Caucasians compared with Caucasians to other Caucasians. "Because they were easily identifiable as being Asian, Japanese Americans felt more racial hatred than German Americans and Italian Americans" ("Japanese Americans: The War at Home"). Japanese children weren't even allowed to go to public schools ("A History of the Camps"). The negative attitude toward the Japanese spiraled out of control when on February 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, creating internment or concentration camps in which to move the Japanese people ("Executive Order 9066: The President Authorizes Japanese Relocation"). More than 120,000 Japanese were sent to the camps, half of whom were children ("Internment History"). People were forced to go to these camps, "and they could not be certain their homes and livelihoods would be there upon their return" ("Japanese-American Internment"). Guterson incorporated all of this real racial tension and all of these real events into his fictional society.

Within the story, all of the characteristics of the island and the people living there are parallel and emulative of how things actually were in the United States during the same time period. The livelihoods of the people and the history of the island are comparative to real people and places during the War. The island is economically supported mainly by its agricultural industry. San Pedro is known for its strawberries and also for its huge fishing business. "...Japanese labor contributed to the rapid growth of the nation's agricultural industry and other

important areas of the economy” (“A History of the Camps”). Japanese characters moved to the island in the 1800’s to work on the fields and to fish, and they were taken advantage of, which is historically accurate to how the Japanese were treated. The inhabitants of the island are also realistic in the sense that the racial tension between the groups is present, clear, and it affects what happens in the story. And when the real events such as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Japanese relocation happen within the fictional society, the reader gains a deeper understanding and greater emotional connection to the characters, affecting how the reader feels.

By incorporating realistic aspects and real events into his story, Guterson sets the reader up to feel empathy toward the Japanese and toward Kabuo in particular. The reader can see that historically and within the story, the discrimination against the Japanese was and is unfair. The emotions of the reader are more deeply affected by the fact that everything that happens in the story is completely historically plausible. “And so the shape of Kabuo Miyamoto’s eyes, the country of his parents’ birth – these things must not influence your decision. You must sentence him simply as an American...” (Guterson 418). The oppressive attitude toward Kabuo because he’s Japanese makes the reader react more sympathetically than if Kabuo had been an unoppressed white male. The sympathy the reader feels builds when the nature of Kabuo’s family’s lifestyle is revealed, along with the other events in the story.

The reader gains a deeper feeling of sympathy and an understanding of how the Japanese must feel by the content, the manner in which the events and circumstances are portrayed, of *Snow Falling on Cedars*. In its shortest and simplest form, the story is about a Japanese fisherman accused of murder, who is named Kabuo Miyamoto. He is accused of murdering another Caucasian fisherman named Carl Heine Jr. In the story, the reader mainly discovers facts and details about the murder case in the third person point of view as someone who is in the

court room or with the characters as things happen. Otherwise, the reader sees the story from the point of view of various characters in the form of recollection. The emotion displayed by this method of narration and the understanding it creates make the reader feel progressively more sympathetic towards Kabuo as events unfold.

From the beginning, the reader is predisposed to being biased against the accused murderer. Kabuo is described in a way that from the beginning gives a suspicious impression of him to the reader. "In the face of a charge that had been leveled against him he sat with his dark eyes trained ahead and did not appear moved at all" (Guterson 3). The suspicion builds from there, when a lot of circumstantial evidence that suggests Carl's murder was on Kabuo's boat without an explanation of why. Evidence and testimony against Kabuo is presented in the beginning as the plaintiff is trying to incriminate him, but when the defense makes their case and the story progresses, the reader learns that Kabuo is completely innocent of murder.

In the trial, it is explained that a possible motive for Kabuo Miyamoto to kill Carl Heine Jr. is a dispute over land ownership that started before the war. Growing up, Kabuo had worked alongside the other Miyamotos working strawberry fields on Carl Heine Sr.'s land. Kabuo's father had made an agreement with Carl Heine Sr. to purchase seven acres of land by making payments when the Miyamoto family could afford it, and after so many payments, the land would belong to Kabuo under Carl's name. No official contract was ever signed because at the time it was illegal for the Japanese to own land. Despite the legality of the agreement being questionable, both parties agreed to hold up their end of the deal. However, due to the Japanese relocation to internment camps, the Miyamotos were sent away before they could make their last payment, which they agreed to pay upon their return. But while they were away, Carl Heine Sr. passed away and ownership of the land fell to his wife, Etta Heine. Etta was very racist toward

the Japanese and wanted nothing to do with them, so she decided to legally sell the land to another man, despite the agreement her husband had previously made with the Miyamotos. Kabuo eventually came back and was upset to hear that the land that was rightfully his was now owned by someone else. When an opportunity finally came up to buy the land, Carl Heine Jr. had beat him to it and bought the land that Kabuo wanted.

When this information is given to the reader from the point of view of the racist Etta Heine, it seems very likely that Kabuo was motivated by this to kill Carl Heine Jr. "We're enemies all right. They've been botherin' us over those seven acres for near ten years now. My son was killed over it" (Guterson 140). But through hearing the story through other characters, the reader learns that Carl and Kabuo had come to an agreement on the ownership of the land the day before Carl died on his boat. The assumed racial tension between Carl and Kabuo was nonexistent in reality and only appeared to be there because Carl felt obligated to make his racist mother happy and because Kabuo was unhappy with Carl's mother. "Look goddamn it, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry over this whole damn business. I'd a been around, it wouldn't have happened how it did. My mother pulled it off, I was out at sea..." (Guterson 404). Kabuo had even helped Carl on his boat the night Carl died, and all of the evidence that suggested a murder was because of his kindness to Carl. Ironically, Kabuo had denied any association with Carl on the night of his death because he was afraid telling the truth would actually make him a suspect. "The situation was difficult" (Guterson 407). But in not telling the truth he was charged with murder. It was only through the previous relationship of two characters that it was revealed that Carl's death was an accident and that Kabuo was innocent.

Another aspect in the telling of the story that makes the reader feel sympathetic toward the Japanese is the relationship between Kabuo's wife, Hatsue, and a local reporter, Ishmael

Chambers. As Ishmael is reporting on the murder case of Carl Heine, he recalls his involvement with Kabuo's wife years ago before the war. Ishmael had grown up with Hatsue, and he knew her since they were both young. Growing up, they became great friends and spent a lot of time together outside of school. But in school, they would never be seen together, and Ishmael didn't understand why she pretended he didn't exist. It wasn't until they were older and had to sneak out of the house to see each other that Hatsue explained and Ishmael understood that it was socially unacceptable for them to be together. Despite the romantic attachment that she had to him, Hatsue knew that her mother would not approve of her being with a "hakujin," or Caucasian. Her mother even said to her, "...living among the *hakujin* has tainted you, made your soul impure, Hatsue" (Guterson 202). Ishmael refused to believe that they couldn't be together and insisted that all of the racial tension in their society would wash away as soon as the war was over. But after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hatsue knew that their love would always be forbidden. "We don't go out—that isn't the right word—we *can't* go out, Ishmael. We're trapped [where we are hidden]" (Guterson 207). They cherished every moment they had together up until relocation day, when busloads of Japanese people were taken to the docks to be transported, and the Caucasians just looked on with indifference. They still wrote to each other, but Hatsue's mother found a letter from Ishmael and forced Hatsue to end things with him. It is only through previously having this relationship with Hatsue that Ishmael is motivated to dig for the proof that Kabuo is innocent, ultimately saving him from being charged with murder.

This example of how a racially separated society affected people personally is relatable and gives the reader an even greater sense of sympathy toward the Japanese in the story. No matter how much either ethnic group wants to be associated with the other, a monstrous society ultimately condemns it. This illustrates the extent of the struggle the Japanese Americans faced

in the story, making the reader feel sympathetic. When combined with the story of Kabuo working hard his entire life and even volunteering to fight in the war, something not very many Japanese men did, it's impossible for the reader to not feel empathy toward Kabuo. The accused man who at first appears so guilty transforms into a character who the reader wants to see succeed. In the end, he's not a cold-blooded murderer; he's an honest, hardworking family man who wants the best for his family. To the reader's satisfaction, Ishmael discovers a lighthouse record that shows that a large ship passed right by Carl's boat the night of his death, showing that it was the wake from the ship that caused Carl to fall off his boat and to die, proving Kabuo's innocence. The story is resolved when the record is presented in court, Kabuo is set free, and he is reunited with his family.

The realistic but fictional society and the layout and events in *Snow Falling on Cedars* change the reader's feeling of indifference in the beginning to empathy by the end toward Kabuo Miyamoto. Guterson used a historically accurate island for his story to give it a realistic plausibility that curves the reader's emotions along with the events that unfold in the story. If Kabuo had not been an oppressed member of a society where the Japanese are often taken advantage of and had rights taken away from them, or if it was found out that Kabuo Miyamoto was actually guilty of murder, the reader wouldn't have felt sympathetic toward him. The struggles of the Japanese are portrayed flawlessly in the novel with backstories of characters' previous experiences and dynamic interactions between the characters, which also influences the reader to feel empathy toward the Japanese, and Kabuo in particular. In *Snow Falling on Cedars*, David Guterson ingeniously used the context and content of his story to completely change the reader's opinion of Kabuo Miyamoto from one of indifference to complete empathy.

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