

CHARACTERS

K, a schoolteacher

SUMIRE, an aspiring writing and (later) personal assistant to Miu

MIU, a Korean wine importer living in Japan

MRS. NIMURA, parent of Shin'ichi and girlfriend of K

SHIN'ICHI NIMURA, a student of K's, called "Carrot" by his classmates

PLOT

K is a man in his mid-twenties teaching elementary school. He's in love with a girl he met in college, Sumire, who dropped out to become a writer and leads an unconventional lifestyle. Sumire maintains nocturnal hours to write, calls him regularly at 3am to "talk," but she loves him only as a friend, a source of deep frustration for K. In the meantime, K conducts a sexual affair with the (married) mother of one of his students.

At a wedding, Sumire falls in love with a woman seventeen years older than her: Miu, a Korean-Japanese woman. Miu runs a wine importing business and is impossibly sophisticated, impossibly polished; she hires Sumire as a personal assistant, and Sumire accepts so she can be near Miu. Sumire alters her dress, lifestyle, and personality in order to be more pleasing to Miu, abandoning her free spirited ways to become organized and responsible. The trade-off for Sumire is that she is no longer able to write.

Sumire loves Miu, but Miu doesn't love anybody. Miu proposes that Sumire accompany her on a business trip to France. Sumire obliges her. In France, they meet a gifted British writer who suggests the two women make use of his vacant house on a Greek Island. Miu takes Sumire to Greece, and as they spend their days together, Sumire's attraction to Miu grows stronger. One night Sumire is so desperate for Miu that she collapses in a ball in Miu's room, trembling and sweating. Miu helps her into bed, and Sumire tries to initiate sexual intercourse. Miu declines. In the morning, Miu finds that Sumire has disappeared without a trace.

K flies to Greece at Miu's request to help find Sumire. Investigating, K becomes more and more convinced that Sumire has gone to The Other Side (led, as he is for a while, by mysterious music coming from the hilltop).

K discovers two computer files written by Sumire. The first records Sumire's thoughts and dreams and suggests both that true self-knowledge may be impossible and that we may be doomed to never truly connect with others. The second gives more information about Miu. In Miu's early twenties, while studying to be a concert pianist, she lived for a summer in a small Swiss town. One night she was trapped on a Ferris wheel car overnight, and from the top of the arc of the ride she could see into her apartment off in the distance. Inside the apartment, she saw herself having sex with a man whom she'd already rejected. The Miu in the apartment seems to be enjoying it, but the Miu on the Ferris wheel feels defiled. From that point forward she feels no sexual desire, nor can she play piano, and her hair turns snow white. She feels that half of her split that night and went to another, parallel world-- The Other Side.

Sumire, as a postscript to the account, notes that she's in love with both halves of Miu, and K theorizes that when she had the chance to cross over to The Other Side, she took it.

With the end of summer approaching with no luck in their attempt to locate Sumire, K and Miu return to Japan separately. K never hears from Miu again, despite her promising to keep in touch.

K returns to his job. The child of the woman with whom he had been having the affair is caught shoplifting, and K suspects it was at least in part an expression of confusion over his mother's affair. K realizes he cannot be both teacher to his pupil and boyfriend to the mother, and he chooses his role as teacher. He settles in for a lifetime of loneliness and thinking about Sumire.

One night, however, Sumire calls in the middle of the night and says that she is back; however, it is unclear whether she has really returned, whether she is calling from The Other Side, or whether K is imagining the phone call. Either way, knowing that Sumire is out there (somewhere) seems to give a measure of closure for K.

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

Alienation

- Connection to others is fleeting.
- We ultimately end up alone.
- Even when we connect with others, we only occasionally understand them. These moments of understanding are not permanent.

Individual vs. Society

- Conformity stunts individual growth and expression.
- Individual desire trades off with societal norms. One can conform and be miserable, or one can choose not to conform and remain alienated from society. A balance can be struck, but it does not fully solve either problem.
- Denying one's creative potential for conventional pursuits leads to unhappiness.

Knowledge

- We do not truly know ourselves or those we love.
- True knowledge is elusive and may be impossible to define.
- Every idea contains within it its own opposite.
- The world is more mysterious than people give credit.

Duality

- Many things have a dual nature, and conflict is created by the opposition of the two opposing forces.
- Understanding and misunderstanding are linked. They are two sides of the same coin and should not necessarily be seen as opposites.
- Unconscious worlds of desire and conscious worlds of conformity can lead both to fragmentation and integration. The real world and the Other Side should be understood in Freudian terms (making literal the metaphor of a conscious mind that is accessible to us and an unconscious mind that operates according to a hidden logic of its own).

Desire

- Longing can never be quite divorced from true love. This longing is never completely fulfilled.
- People hunger for more than they can have. They want to understand and master the world around them, but this often proves impossible.
- One often desires that which is unattainable. Unfortunately, even something as simple as human connection may be beyond our capacity.