

A NEW CRITICS READING OF HONEY PIE

Michelle Chan

Story and Characters



- Junpei – main character, mid thirties, close friend of Takatsuki and Sayoko from college, in love with Sayoko, short story author
- Sayoko – close friends with Takatsuki (husband) and Junpei
- Takatsuki – initiated friendship with Junpei and Sayoko (wife) in college, very close with both, husband to Sayoko, athletic, outgoing, reporter
- Sala – Takatsuki and Sayoko’s young daughter, traumatized by news of Kobe earthquake

Story and Characters



- Junpei has been in love with Sayoko since the beginning of their friendship but never voiced it.
- Takatsuki and Sayoko get married and have a daughter together, but Takatsuki cheats on his wife and they eventually divorce.
- Junpei tells a bedtime story about a bear to Sala to help her sleep because she's having nightmares about the Kobe earthquake

Theory



- The bedtime story Junpei tells Sala is ambiguous because it runs almost parallel to the main story, yet it is never really interpreted and the characters reference the bedtime story.
 - ▣ The bedtime story Junpei tells is actually a commentary on his own life and in reality the bear, Masakichi, is actually a representation of Junpei.

- In an article in the journal *Manoa*, Jane Houston writes that the bedtime story that Junpei tells Sala "releases his pent-up yearning by creating a bedtime story for the child that reveals his frustrations and failings."

Theory



- If we follow this line of thought and examine the text through a New Critics perspective, we can see Junpei creating Masakichi as a representation of himself.
- Masakichi's failings, aspirations, and yearnings become a metaphor for Junpei's own failings, aspirations and yearnings.
- The follow slides will compare select quotes from the story drawing similarities between the two.
- The earthquake fits into the story through how the characters react to it and through Sala's nightmares of the "The Earthquake Man"

Quotes

- (Junpei) "So Masakichi didn't really belong to either world--the bear world or the people world."
(Sala) "Didn't he have any friends?"
(Junpei) "Not a single friend ..."
- Masakichi is introduced as a bear that can speak the human language and adopt human habits.
 - ▣ Not welcomed as a human or as a bear.
 - ▣ There's a loneliness that Masakichi and Junpei share, a feeling of being an outsider or not "belonging."
 - ▣ Junpei essentially became an "outsider" or third wheel after his two friends in their tightly knit group of three decide to start dating

Quotes



- "...he's kind of on the small side. For a bear. He's just about your size, Sala. And he's a very sweet-tempered little guy. When he listens to music, he doesn't listen to rock or punk or that kind of stuff. He likes to listen to Schubert, all by himself.”
- “sweet-tempered little guy,” “Schubert,” “small side” all paint a picture of a mild mannered bear who enjoys time alone, “all by himself.” This image of the bear is closely related to the next slide that describes Junpei. When Junpei describes Masakichi’s musical tastes, it’s very specific and seems to be more anecdotal than arbitrary. We get the physical description of the bear and its personal habits and personality.

Quotes

- “Junpei was the kind of person who liked to sit alone in his room reading books or listening to music, and he was terrible at sports.”
- “He was respectful, kind, and tender to her, but never passionate or devoted.”
- These two quotes describe the kind of person Junpei is. Like the bear he likes to “sit alone” in the room, listen to music and doesn’t have an athletic build. In regards to his temperament, he is also mild-mannered and polite, much like the bear, but moderate enough to come off as kind of distant or aloof.

Quotes



- “How come Masakichi doesn't make honey pies and sell them? I think the people in the town would like that better than just plain honey.”
- Masakichi prefers to stick to his ways and decisions and continue selling his product as he intended them to be without changing it based on what popular tastes are at the time. In that sense, Masakichi is a bit old-fashioned in his ways.

Quotes



- Writing a novel could open up whole new worlds for a writer. As a practical matter, too, novels attracted far more attention than stories. Writing only short stories was a hard way to make a living. But Junpei was a born short-story writer.
- Similar to Masakichi, Junpei sticks to what he wants to do and intended to do, which was to write short stories. Junpei stubbornly remains steadfast in his decision to only write short stories and perhaps Junpei designed Masakichi's character in that way with respects to his own job and with respect to remaining faithful to what he's good at doing.

Quotes

- "But you didn't get it. You just didn't get it. Not till the salmon disappeared from the river." - Sayoko
- The “salmon” is a metaphor for the chance Junpei had with Sayoko in college. Masakichi and Tonkichi became best of friends, but Tonkichi can no longer catch salmon to sustain his life in the mountains, leaves the mountain and gets caught by a zoo. Tonkichi was the only friend Masakichi had. Sayoko was the most important connection Junpei had with anyone, even more than with Takatsuki because Junpei was in love with Sayoko. When Takatsuki voiced his feelings, Junpei lost his chance because he waited too long and before long over ten years passed.

Quotes

- [Tonkichi] would use the honey that Masakichi had collected to bake honey pies. [...] Masakichi took the honey pies to town and sold them to the people there. The people loved Tonkichi's honey pies and bought them by the dozen. So Tonkichi and Masakichi never had to separate again: they lived happily ever after in the mountains.
- Rather than have Takatsuki leave the mountain because of the loss of salmon, Junpei rewrote the story and allowed the two bears to cooperate and stay together. Junpei is rewriting the bleak ending for the bears and for himself—he would make sure he would solidify his connection (marriage) with Sayoko and never be separated from her again. Tonkichi's redemption can be a metaphor for the new life Junpei wants to start.

“The Box”

- Throughout the text, Sala cannot sleep because of nightmares of the Kobe Earthquake.
- Early in the story: “She wakes up at around the time of the quake. She says a man woke her up, somebody she doesn't know. The Earthquake Man. He tries to put her in a little box—too little for anyone to fit into. She tells him she doesn't want to get inside, and he starts pushing her—so hard her joints crack—and he tries to stuff her inside. That's when she screams and wakes up.”
- There is tension in this line that occurs later in the story: “The Earthquake Man. He came and woke me up. He told me to tell you. He said he has the box ready for everybody. He said he's waiting with the lid open. He said I should tell you that, and you would understand.”

“The Box”



- This “little box” they are being forced in in Sala’s dream could mean the TV box. Sala only saw the earthquake through live footage and through TV reports. As a child, she could be rationalizing the devastation happening as being contained within a TV set rather than an issue in the physical world. To Sala, in order to be a part of that destruction, she needs to be put inside the TV (becoming a part of the footage).