

Snow falling on cedars: contrasting characters and their meaning

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Much is revealed about Ishmael Chambers, the main character in David Guterson's novel *Snow Falling on Cedars* through contrast. Readers are able to come to a better understanding of Ishmael once his beliefs and motives are contrasted with those of other characters in the novel. Through his interactions with Hatsue Imada – his childhood girlfriend – it becomes clear that for him, love conquers all while for her, things aren't so black and white. Kabuo Miyamoto, a key character in the novel can also be contrasted with Ishmael in order to reveal more about his character. While they have both experienced war and been changed by it, the different ways in which they perceive their experience tells us much about Ishmael. Lastly, Ishmael's mother – Helen Chambers – voices a very different set of beliefs to her son and this contrast provides us with further detail. There are of course, many things that only Ishmael can teach us about himself but in contrasting him with other characters, we gain a better insight into what makes Ishmael who he is.

The relationship between Ishmael Chambers and Hatsue Imada is central to *Snow Falling on Cedars* and the completely different way that the two react to their relationship enhances our ability to understand Ishmael's character. During the throws of World War II, when the Japanese bomb Pearl Harbour, San Pedro experiences great racial tension. Hatsue, who is Japanese American and whose parents can barely speak English recognises the fact that being in a relationship with an American boy could be ill-fated. Even prior to Pearl Harbour, Hatsue feels tremendous guilt for seeing Ishmael. Her parents would not approve and in order to spend time with him, Hatsue must lie to them and this is hugely detrimental to her spirit. Ishmael, in great

contrast, is unable to be realistic or see the bigger picture as he is consumed with love for Hatsue and cares little for any negative consequences that may result. While Hatsue uses her head, Ishmael follows his heart and this key difference proves that Ishmael loves Hatsue much more than she loves him. “ How can this be evil? It wouldn’t make any sense for this to be evil. It’s the world that’s evil, Hatsue...don’t pay it any mind.” “ That isn’t so easy...I lie every day to my family Ishmael...Sometimes I think this can’t go on.” This imbalance of love is what ends their relationship but despite Hatsue’s rejection of Ishmael, he continues to love her and is influenced by this love throughout the novel. The way in which Hatsue moves on with her life, marries Kabuo and has three children contrasts hugely with Ishmael’s inability to move on. When Hatsue’s husband faces going to jail for murder, he is so obsessed with the possibility of rekindling their love that he withholds key evidence which would prove Kabuo’s innocence. “ His father, of course, would have gone hours earlier...to show him the coast guard shipping lane records...but not Ishmael, not now – no. Those records would stay in his pocket.” Hatsue’s obvious disinterest highlights Ishmael’s weakness and shows just how disillusioned his character is.

Despite Ishmael and Kabuo not interacting in the novel, their parallel existences epitomise cultural differences and reveal another side of Ishmael. There are certainly some similarities between Kabuo and Ishmael: both love Hatsue, both fight in the war and both come home different men. Ishmael returns a cynical and bitter man who can barely stomach day to day life for its flippancy. Someone who never voiced racist views came away from war

blaming the entire Japanese race for the loss of his arm, “ The Japs did it, they shot my arm off”. His bitterness can be boiled down to the fact that he still loves Hatsue – a Japanese woman – who rejected him; the Japanese race is his scapegoat. Kabuo’s perception of wartime is quite the opposite. While he is deeply affected and disturbed by his experiences, he does not have a scapegoat and holds himself responsible for how he feels. “ He was a Buddhist and believed in the laws of karma, so it made sense to him that he might pay for his war murders: everything comes back to you, nothing is accidental.” Despite not killing Carl Heine, it makes sense to Kabuo that he should serve the punishment. It is here that the gap between Ishmael and Kabuo widens. Kabuo, as a Buddhist feels that nothing is accidental, that everything happens for a reason while Ishmael believes the opposite: “...that accident ruled every corner of the universe except the chambers of the human heart.” In Ishmael’s opinion, it is only love that is predestined but above all, he cannot be held accountable for what happens in his life.

Ishmael’s mother plays a small role but her presence is important, it provides another contrast which sheds light on Ishmael’s personality.

Religion is addressed throughout the novel, the majority of the white Islanders are Christian and the Japanese are Buddhist but it is not until a discussion between Ishmael and his mother that we see his views. Helen Chambers is clear in her views; she is a Christian and tries to encourage her son to feel God, believing that He will provide Ishmael with inner peace.

Ishmael reveals that he does not believe in God, simply because he is unable to feel his presence “ After the war he had tried to feel God, to take solace in

Him. It hadn't worked..." It is as if negativity has permeated Ishmael's being and on the rare occasion that he does seek harmony, it is unreachable. Helen Chambers cannot bear to see Ishmael so incomplete and suggests that if he can't find solace in God, finding love and starting a family is the only solution. She is unaware of Ishmael's love for Hatsue and cannot comprehend why he has not already found someone. " When it comes down to it – to answer your question – here's what you should do about being unhappy: you should get married and have some children." " That isn't going to happen...that's not the answer to the question." Ishmael is quick to disagree with his mother's notion, obviously because he can not and will not look past Hatsue. Ishmael's mother suggests measures he can take to improve his quality of life because she loves him and truly believes that her way is the best way. This conversation, full of conflicting opinions clearly illustrates how Ishmael dwells in and thrives on self-pity; he is unwilling to move forward.

Through the contrasting of characters in *Snow Falling on Cedars*, David Guterson teaches us a great deal about the central character Ishmael Chambers. The contrast between Hatsue and Ishmael is the most tragic, as they perceive their love very differently and this is what ends their relationship. Ishmael devotes his heart to Hatsue even after she has given hers to Kabuo. Guterson very effectively contrasts Ishmael with Kabuo and his mother Helen Chambers to teach us about his beliefs and the continuance of his obsession with Hatsue. To a certain extent we are able to

learn about characters in isolated scenarios but it is not until characters are contrasted with others that we can fully understand them.