

A House in the Country

Characterisation

The House in Colombo

There are just two characters who appear in the story, Ray and Siri, though the house in Colombo which binds them might be considered another character. Look at the following extracts from the story and decide what you know about the house in Colombo by completing the exercises.

Pre-reading vocabulary check.

Decide which meaning fits which underlined word in the sentences. The first has been done for you.

1. He shoved the money roughly into the sack before she could see it.
2. The problem was quite straightforward to solve and he finished quickly.
3. If you're caught out after curfew you'll be in trouble with the police.
4. The carpenter had used the grain of the wood to give the furniture a warm, comfortable feeling.
5. As the fire spread throughout the house the whole night sky became inflamed.
6. The debris left behind after the storm took weeks to clear up.

- a period (at night?) when people must stay at home
- broken remains
- lines created by annual growth
- simple, uncomplicated
- push hard
- the colour of fire

1.

The first time he saw the house his uncle had left him, his blood turned to sand. It looked like a concrete box shoved into a hole. Nothing of the elegance of his converted London flat, nor the sensuality of the open tropical houses of his Sri Lankan childhood.

In your own words, explain what a) 'his blood turned to sand' means and b) the difference between the London flat and the childhood house.

2.

Much of the renovation was straightforward, but from time to time he would see the need for change. He would talk it over with Siri, his fingers designing in the air. The next day Siri would start on the work.

In this way a new veranda was created; rooms divided. The curfews allowed him to examine progress.

In your own words describe the different jobs that Ray and Siri had in building the house.

3.

'I hope no harm will come. It is becoming so beautiful'

Through the window he could see the sun set in an inflamed sky. He looked at the polished wood of his new windows. Siri had done a fine job. He had brought out the wood grain perfectly.

In this context, what do you think 'brought out' means? What is Siri's attitude to his work?

4.

Ray saw himself alone again in his house, picking his way through the debris at the back. There were two rooms still to be done; pots of yellow paint in the corner of the bedroom would remain unopened.

Something has happened between the third and fourth texts. Speculate on what it might be.

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Characterization

Ray

There are just two characters who appear in the story, Ray and Siri, though the house in Colombo which binds them might be considered another character. Look at the following extracts from the story and decide what you know about Ray by completing the exercises.

Pre-reading vocabulary check
Match the words with their meaning.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>burst out</p> <p>melt</p> <p>building society</p> <p>acquaintance</p> <p>thud</p> | <p>a kind of bank, for buying houses etc</p> <p>a kind of noise</p> <p>sudden explosion</p> <p>changing from solid state to liquid or air</p> <p>someone known but less than a friend</p> |
|---|---|

1. Complete the texts by adding ONE word from the box to each blank space. There is one extra word that doesn't fit anywhere.

Ray liked this extraordinary silence. He liked the way their few words burst out, and then hung __1__ the air before melting. It was the silence of his winter England transplanted. The silence of windows and doors closed __2__ the cold. Lately Colombo __3__ become too noisy. He had never expected such peace would come __4__ close to war."

"Ray had not planned on having __5__ help or company when he first returned to Colombo from England. He'd had a secure job with a building society, a flat __6__ London, a car, and a happy circle of acquaintances. There had also been a woman he'd spend a night or two with from time to __7__. But they never had much to talk about and quite often he simply thought __8__ going back to Sri Lanka."

" The road was deserted. He walked to the end and crossed __9__ into the park. He had a route he __10__ follow with his eyes closed, carefully planned and timed to avoid other people.

He liked walking alone, __11__ control of the sound around him: the thud of his feet, the blood __12__ his ears."

- so
- in
- time
- in
- against
- over
- never
- could
- about
- in
- had
- in
- any

2. Which word best completes these sentences describing Ray?

1. He was a man who enjoys **calmness / quietness / comfort.**
2. He enjoyed **a small group of close friends / his own company / a vigorous social life**
3. Walking the road to the park was **a new experience for him / something he didn't like doing / a route he frequently took**

3. Which adjectives from the list below best describe Ray? Use a dictionary. Find three or four more words to describe Ray.

| | | | | | | |
|----------|-----------|----------|--------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| friendly | lonely | isolated | self-assured | extrovert | thoughtful | reflective |
| | sensitive | rich | poetic | sad | depressed | vivacious |

4. Write 3 sentences describing Ray. Use some of the adjectives you have chosen by changing them into adverbs.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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Characterisation

Siri

There are just two characters who appear in the story, Ray and Siri, though the house in Colombo which binds them might be considered another character. Look at the following extracts from the story and decide what you know about Siri by completing the exercises.

Pre-reading vocabulary check
Match the meaning with the underlined word in context. One has been done for you.

| | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Just before the game, he dropped his <u>marbles</u> on the floor and they rolled everywhere. 2. She couldn't hide her <u>distress</u> and everyone knew that something was wrong. 3. They lived a life of <u>serfdom</u>, little better than slaves. 4. I can't sleep without 2 <u>pillows</u> on the bed. 5. He can't keep a <u>steady</u> job. He changes every few months. 6. He was upset, but <u>stalked</u> off without showing his disappointment. 7. If you agree, just <u>nod</u> your head. Shake if you disagree. 8. Don't rush your drink! If you <u>sip</u> it you will enjoy it more. 9. The escaped prisoner ran <u>amok</u> in the shop, smashing everything before the police could catch him. 10. He <u>peered</u> at the page, trying to understand every word. 11. The family <u>feud</u> went on for years before the two cousins would even speak to each other. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • walk proudly • glass balls used in children's game • long running argument • crazily • indicate assent • lowest state in feudal system • soft support for the head • sorrow; anguish • drink slowly, delicately • regular and reliable |
|---|---|

1. Complete the texts by choosing the most appropriate word, A, B, C or D. Use a dictionary.

Then a shadow moved. A young man appeared, his white sarong _____ in the moonlight.

He was much younger than Ray. Not as tall, but stronger, smoother skinned. His eyes were bright and hard like marbles. He came and stood by a pillar.

- A *gazing* B *growing* C *glowing* D *glancing*

"Trouble is no one knows." Siri's mouth turned down at both ends, but his was not a face that could show much distress. "Nobody really cares, do they? Except for _____."

- A *himself* B *each other* C *I* D *themselves*

A few days later Siri turned up. Ray liked his quiet competence; the strange innocence in his eyes. He didn't quite know how to develop their working relationship. To him it should have been simply a relationship of employment. The old _____ of Colombo serfdom died years ago, but Siri kept saying 'Sir' and circumscribing their roles.

- A *conveniences* B *memories* C *conventions* D *circumstances*

2. Underline examples of Siri's indifference to material things in the following text

'I don't need all this.' Siri pointed at the cupboard and the new bed, the new pillows and mats.

'Some comfort won't harm.'

'I have nothing to put in the cupboard. The old bed was fine, just as it was.'

Ray said now that Siri had a steady job he might accumulate some possessions.

'What for? My family needs things, my mother, my brother. I only need something to do. Some place

3. Add one word in each blank to complete the text.

Sometimes in the eveninghe 1 find Siri sitting on the steps or strolling about the garden.

'Have a beer?' he'd say.

Siri 2 nod hesitantly and approach Ray smoothing his sarong. He would take the glass and sip slowly. He 3 sat down when he had a beer. He would stand 4 Ray sat. Whether they shared a beer or not, Siri was usually quite happy to talk. He'd tell Ray about his life 5 the village: river bathing, family feuds, someone running amok. In the middle of 6 a story, Siri would sometimes stop and peer at Ray. 'Why do you look so sad?' he'd ask, and surprise Ray 7 his directness.

4. The following passage tells us that Siri A) respects B) distrusts C) envies D) dislikes Ray

Siri looked up; his hard black eyes gave nothing to Ray.

'Sir,' Siri said in a low voice, 'I want to go.'

'Where?'

'Away, Sir.' Siri remained sitting on the steps. His face was in shadow.

'What's wrong? What is it?'

'This destruction. I want to go away.' The eyes softened slightly. 'And you, Sir, have seen the world. Tell me where. Where is a good place?'

5. *Choose the best adjectives from the list below to describe Siri.*

| | | | | | |
|-----------|--------------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| lonely | conservative | content | respectful | resentful | irritating |
| extrovert | intimidating | threatening | servile | selfless | ascetic |
| | uncertain | hard-working | vulnerable | | |

6. *Write 3 sentences about Siri using some of the adjectives you have chosen, but by turning them into adverbs.*

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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Characterisation

Ray and Siri

There are just two characters who appear in the story, Ray and Siri. Look at the following extracts from the story and decide what you know about the relationship between Ray and Siri by completing the exercises.

Pre-reading vocabulary check

Which is the best meaning for the underlined word in the context given – A or B?

1. It is said that Stalin never trusted anyone enough to have a confidant.
A someone to tell personal secrets to B someone to look after your business interests
2. His face visibly brightened when he heard the good news.
A appeared concerned B appeared happier
3. Her cheeks rippled in excited anticipation when she realised what he had bought her.
A moved because she smiled B moved because she cried
4. His voice faltered when he started to tell her how her son had courageously died.
A became altered by emotion B became hard and unsympathetic
5. He picked his way through the debris left behind by the storm.
A wet ground B broken remains and rubbish

It was the first time since childhood that Ray had had a constant companion. He encouraged Siri to talk and wished, in a way, that Siri could turn into his confidant. He wanted to ask, "Why do you treat me like a" but could never bring himself even to suggest he saw himself as a master. Siri simply showed respect in his antiquated fashion.

1. Did Ray want Siri to be more like a friend or more like a servant?
2. Did Siri respect Ray? In what way?

Ray's only response was to care. He didn't know how to respect in turn, but he felt a need to protect in a way he had never felt before. He tried to be generous with the pay and reasonable in his demands, but Siri seemed to want to do everything that needed doing and to spend all his time in the house. He hardly ever went home to his village.

3. Why didn't Ray show Siri respect? What did he want to do for him?
4. What did Siri want to do?

'I'll buy the land. I'll *give* you a portion. You for your part can plant the trees for both of us. Cinnamon, or *cadju* or whatever.'

Siri's eyes brightened. There was a slight smile playing around his lips. The smooth boyish cheeks rippled. 'Why, Sir? Why do you want to do this for me?'

Ray could say nothing except that he wanted to.

'You are very good Sir, very good.'

Ray made the arrangements to buy the landhe was happy to be serving his time.

5. **What made Siri's eyes brighten?**
6. **What do you think it means when it is said that Ray was 'happy to be serving his time'?**

A house on *their* land out in the country. He thought if he provided the materials Siri could design and build a house with two wings, or even two small houses. One for each of them. If Siri were to marry it would make a good start. Ray wondered how he'd feel if that happened. He would lose something. The intimacy that had yet to be. But he would feel some satisfaction. He would have made a difference

7. **What did Ray feel he would lose if Siri got married?**
8. **What 'difference' would Ray have made?**

His voice faltered. They were not the words he wanted. Ray saw himself alone again in his house, picking his way through the debris at the back; pots of yellow paint in the corner of the bedroom would remain unopened. He found himself thinking that without Siri he would have to make his own morning tea again. Drink alone on his incomplete veranda; wait.

But Siri said nothing. Ray could not tell whether he had heard him. Siri slowly straightened out and stepped down on the path.

9. **Why did Ray think the pots of yellow paint would remain unopened?**
10. **In your opinion, what is Siri going to do?**