

A House in the Country

Pre-reading

The House in Colombo

1. There are three 'characters' which appear in the story: Ray, Siri and the house. Read the following extracts from the story and decide what you know about these characters.

Ray

Ray had not planned on having any help or company when he first returned to Colombo from England. He'd had a secure job with a building society, a flat in 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 time. But they never had much to talk about and quite often he simply thought of going back to Sri Lanka.

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

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

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

Siri

Then a shadow moved. A young man appeared, his white sarong glowing 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 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 tradition of Colombo serfdom died years ago, but Siri kept saying 'Sir' and circumscribing their roles.

'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

The House

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.

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.

'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.

2. What kind of picture have you built up of the characters? Choose from the following to describe either Ray or Siri (some may suit characters). Justify your choice.

enjoys solitude

traditional

is used to comfort

quiet

gentle

hard working

used to simplicity

cosmopolitan

older

family orientated

3. Use your imagination or the texts above to guess at the answers to these questions.

- Why did Ray go to Colombo? Where did he come from?
- What was his first reaction when he got to Colombo?
- How did he meet Siri?
- What was Siri looking for?
- What work did Siri do for Ray?
- What did Ray think of Siri's work?
- Why did Siri suddenly decide that he had to leave Ray's employment?
- Where did Siri go?
- What did Ray think about this?