

Q. Critically evaluate the short story "In a Grove", with specific reference to the murder.

Model answer:

The story "In a Grove" builds itself on the typical plot of a whodunit, but takes a very different turn near the conclusion, by withholding the identity of the murderer, unlike a conventional murder mystery.

The plot of this story concerns the death of a samurai, who, along with his wife, is waylaid deceitfully by the robber Tajomaru. Tajomaru's main aim is to ravish the samurai's wife, after which – so he claims – he kills the husband in a sword-fight. Subsequent development of the plot presents other characters in the story narrating the details of the supposed murder.

Of the six characters whose testimonies are offered to the reader, the central three are the most critical. These include the testimonies of the samurai, his wife, and the robber, with the samurai speaking through a medium. However, each of them presents a version of what happened which is radically different from the other two versions.

Also, contrary to expectation, each of them claims to have committed the murder, including the husband who claims that he killed himself.

Unlike a realistic story, the meaning or theme of "In a Grove" does not depend on the disclosure of the identity of the murder. Here the question of who killed the samurai is never revealed, precisely because the story's aim is not to resolve the mystery.

Instead, the reader is left with three possible ways in which the samurai may have been killed, without any of them established as the right/wrong explanation. Since each character claims counter-intuitively to have committed the crime, and believes implicitly in his/her version, the story becomes a commentary on how reality is subjective, and is determined not objectively but by an individual's belief.

To convey this modernist idea, Akutagawa takes as extreme an example as a murder to show that even on such a matter that appears black-and-white, opinions diverge, depending on who holds that opinion. (325 words)

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General Instructions – failure to observe which will result in penalties, mark-wise:

1. Please observe the word-limit if specified in the question.
  2. All titles of texts are to be put within quotation-marks.
  3. If you are quoting from the text, quote accurately and put the quoted words within inverted commas.
- Conversely, do not put inverted commas for words that are not directly taken from the text.
4. Even/especially in the case of a first-person narrator, do not confuse the narrator with the author.
  5. Do not provide summaries – and if you must, do so in not more than a couple of sentences.
  6. Do not use bullets/number your ‘points’. You need to write in coherent paragraphs.
  7. Each paragraph should lead from the previous and to the next, in terms of argument, and there should be no repetition of ideas.
  8. Give examples from the story if required, in your own words.
  9. The entire answer should be written in your own words.
  10. Essays with mistakes in spelling and grammar will draw penalties.
  11. Leave a margin for the instructor to offer feedback.