Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Fire on the Mountain

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Plot

- Part I, Nanda Kaul at Carignano: Nanda Kaul, an elderly widow, lives alone by choice at Carignano, a bare, quiet house on a hill at Kasauli in the Himalayan foothills, with her cook, Ram Lal. A letter from her daughter Asha asks her to look after her great-granddaughter Raka, who is recovering from typhoid while Raka's mother, Tara, is in Geneva with her abusive diplomat husband. Nanda resents the intrusion.
- Part II, Raka comes to Carignano: Raka is thin, silent and solitary. She avoids Nanda and explores the ravines, the burnt house on the ridge and the area near the Pasteur Institute. One night she sees a frightening dance at the club that reminds her of her drunken father beating her mother. Nanda, to her own surprise, starts to want Raka's attention and tells her wonderful stories about her childhood and her father, but Raka begins to doubt them.
- Part III, Ila Das leaves Carignano: Nanda's old friend Ila Das, poor and mocked for her shrill voice, comes to tea. She now works as a government social worker in the villages, trying to stop child marriages. On her way home she is attacked, raped and killed by Preet Singh, the father of a child bride she had tried to protect.
- When the police phone, Nanda faces the truth she has hidden: her husband had a lifelong affair with Miss David, she never loved her children, her stories were lies, and Carignano was not a choice but her last refuge. Raka then tells her that she has set the forest on fire.

Characters

- Nanda Kaul: once the busy wife of a Vice-Chancellor, now proud, withdrawn and determined to be left alone. Her stillness hides loneliness and pain.
- Raka: her great-granddaughter, a damaged child drawn to wild, burnt and empty places. She is as solitary as Nanda, but genuinely so.

- Ila Das: Nanda's childhood friend, from a rich family whose fortune her brothers wasted. Brave, kind and comic in others' eyes; her death is the novel's tragedy.
- Ram Lal: the cook, practical and superstitious, who looks after both of them.

Themes and context

- **Isolation** and withdrawal: Nanda chooses to be alone; Raka simply is. The novel asks whether withdrawal is freedom or escape.
- Women's lives: Nanda's duty-filled marriage, Tara's abuse and Ila's poverty and murder show how women are trapped and harmed.
- Truth and **illusion**: Nanda's stories are a defence against the truth of her life.
- Nature and destruction: the dry hills, the burnt house and the threat of fire build to the final fire.
- Anita Desai published it in 1977. It is set in post-Independence India; Kasauli was once a British **hill station**.

Form, structure and language

- Three parts, each named after a character's movement: Nanda at Carignano, Raka comes, Ila Das leaves.
- Close **third-person narration** that moves between Nanda's and Raka's minds, so we see each from the inside and the outside.
- Rich imagery of the landscape: heat, dryness, the ravine of bones and the fire across the valley foreshadow the ending.

Key terms

Hill station	A town in the hills, built by the British in India to escape the summer heat.
Foreshadowing	Hints of what will happen later, like the fires across the valley.
Isolation	Being cut off from other people.
Third-person narration	Telling the story as "she" and "he", from outside the characters, sometimes close to their thoughts.
Illusion	A false belief, like the stories Nanda tells herself and Raka.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Where does Nanda Kaul live?
2. Who is sent to stay with Nanda Kaul?
3. What illness is Raka recovering from?
4. Who cooks for Nanda Kaul?

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5. What frightens Raka at the club?
6. What work does Ila Das do?
7. What happens to Ila Das on her way home?
8. What truth does Nanda finally face?

Answers

1. Carignano, a house in Kasauli
2. Her great-granddaughter, Raka
3. Typhoid
4. Ram Lal
5. A wild, drunken dance that reminds her of her violent father
6. She is a social worker trying to stop child marriages
7. She is attacked and killed by Preet Singh
8. Her stories were lies and her husband had a lifelong affair

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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