

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Sexuality in Cinema

In the Realm of the Senses (1976)

Nagisa Ōshima (1932-2013)

Director Nagisa Ōshima directed twenty-three feature films in a forty-year career beginning in 1959. His earliest films helped to usher in Japan's new wave (Nūberu bāgu), striving always for boldness and provocative themes and visuals. In 1968, the Cannes Film Festival propelled Ōshima to international fame with the primer of his film about Korean persecution, *Death by Hanging*. His career would pit him against the likes of Akira Kurosawa. He was a lifelong opponent of censorship and ultranationalism.



Film While highly dramatized, the film is based on real events: In 1936, Sada Abe strangled her lover, Kichizō Ishida, before cutting off his genitals and carrying them around in her kimono in the weeks preceding her surrender to the police. The film's title varies from culture to culture. The original Japanese, 愛のコリーダ (*Ai no Korīda*, literally 'Bullfight of Love'), is lost in translation, as the French publisher created a new title, *L'Empire des sens* (*Empire of the Senses*), based on the title of Roland Barthes' 1970 book about Japan, *L'Empire des signes* (*Empire of Signs*). UK and US releases held onto this transliteration with *In the Realm of the Senses*. Because of the film's unsimulated sex and portrayals of risqué sexuality, *In the Realm of the Senses* has long faced censorship and public outcry. In spite of these challenges, the film made more than \$7.6 million in French and German box offices alone in 1976. The uncut version of the film is still unavailable in Japan, whereas bans in the rest of the world were lifted sometime in the 80s or 90s.



Background Crime and sexuality had long been a focus of Nagisa Ōshima's work. We see similar themes explored in his 1969 film *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief* as *In the Realm of the Senses*, though the first looks at sexuality as an expression of political radicalism while the latter examines obsession and the role of societal norms in extreme sexual dynamics. The director wanted to explore sexual and erotic ideas more explicitly in earlier films but was held back by Japanese censorship standards. *In the Realm of the Senses* was only made with the help of a French production company willing to do the editing and publishing work, allowing Ōshima to sidestep censorship. At the time of writing, *In the Realm of the Senses* holds an 84% approval rating on the review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Sada Abe – A former prostitute working as a maid in a hotel who falls for the hotel's owner
Kichizō Ishida – A hotel owner who forsakes his marriage to begin an intense affair with Sada

SYNOPSIS

Early in 1936, Sada Abe is working in a Tokyo hotel as a maid. Despite her change of profession, the other maids mock and insult her for her past work as a prostitute, causing no end of conflict. One day, the hotel's owner, Kichizō Ishida, begins showing an interest in Sada, drunkenly initiating sex at night and attempting to feel her up while she works. Sada quickly falls obsessively in love with him, and the two begin experimenting with more and more depraved sexual acts. Kichizō abandons his wife and marries Sada, and the two remain locked in honeymoon lovemaking for weeks on end. Eventually, Sada must go to sleep with a former business partner of Kichizō's in order to make money to pay off a debt. After

completing this job, she returns home, and Kichizō's and Sada's obsession with one another escalates yet again.

Locking themselves away in another hotel in town, they drink and have sex all day, even in front of maids and performing geisha, giving them a bad reputation. Struck by jealousy from the idea that Kichizō may one day return to his wife, Sada threatens to cut off his penis to ensure he can never cheat on her. Kichizō laughs at this, and their sexual games escalate yet again, entering experiments with erotic asphyxiation. During one act, Kichizō asks Sada not to stop strangling him, as it hurts too much to remain conscious. Later that night as he sleeps, Sada wraps the obi from her kimono to strangle him again, this time killing him. She falls asleep and awakes later to find the corpse of her lover. She removes his penis with a knife and, using the blood, writes "Sada and Kichi, together forever" on his body.

PLOT

Early morning – A woman lies among others on tatami mats. The others sleep, but she stares at the sun's first light touching the paper window near her. Another woman enters the room, quietly asking, "Awake already? It's so cold. It's too early to get up. Let's sleep a little longer." Without asking, she jumps into bed with the other woman, snuggling up close for warmth. "I couldn't sleep all night," the first woman says. "I had the same problem when I started here," the second woman says, groping the first woman. "You're so stylish and refined... I took a liking to you as soon as I saw you yesterday." The first woman does nothing to stop the second, but she doesn't respond, looking away, refusing to make eye contact. "Don't you like women?" the second woman asks. The first woman shoots her a telling glance. "In that case..." The second woman says.



Spying on Mr. and Mrs. Ishida – In the early morning light, the two women quietly cross a snowy courtyard to another room. They part the door silently, peering inside. The hotel's owners are inside, Mrs. Ishida dressing her husband, wrapping his traditional loincloth for him. She slides down his front as he stands, kissing his stomach and thighs. "It's the same every morning before he goes to the fish market," the older woman whispers to the younger as they stare. Mr. and Mrs. Ishida begin having sex. The younger woman watches from the cracked door, breathing heavily.



The beggar – Later that morning, a group of women walk through the city streets, carrying goods back to the hotel. They laugh and gossip until they encounter a group of kids harassing a homeless man who sleeps beside an old shrine basin. The girl among them lifts his robe to reveal his penis, and the boys begin pelting it with snowballs. The man wakes up, smacking his lips before realizing what's going on. "Get out of here, you little brats!" one woman shouts as the others help her push the children away from the old beggar. A look of sudden recognition crosses the old man's face as he sees the young woman in the group: "It's you!" he shouts. "Osaka! Osaka!" He can't remember her name, but he remembers he saw her in a brothel. "You were so cheerful and kind," he continues. "I was your customer. Don't you remember me?" The young woman says she doesn't. The beggar tries to proposition her for sex, but she pushes him into the basin.



Persistence – Snow falls heavily at the hotel. A shamisen plays in the distance. The old man appears again as the young woman goes about her work. "You just won't give up," she says, sighing. They quickly make their way to the relative privacy of the carriage house. Between two rickshaws, the man propositions her again. "Hurry up," she says, kneeling and taking his penis in her hand. "What's wrong?" she asks. "It's limp." "Just let me see your..." the beggar asks. "What a pain!" the woman replies, lifting her



robe and showing him her crotch. Breathing heavily, the man strokes himself, staring. Realizing he'll more likely die of cold before reaching a climax, she sends him on his way.

"Once a whore" – In the hotel kitchen, the manager barks at the serving girls: "Don't just stand there singing! Hurry up!" The young woman enters, and the manager berates her, saying, "You're working in a proper inn. It's not as easy as being a whore." The young woman whirls around and throws the tray of sake bottles she's carrying at the manager. "Once a whore, always a whore!" the manager spits. In spite of the intervention of a handful of servers and a cook, the fight escalates. The young woman, we learn, is called Sada, and she grabs a knife, threatening the manager: "I'll kill her!" A man in a kitsune mask enters and quickly takes control, ending the fight. He removes the mask, revealing himself to be the owner, Mr. Ishida. "Why hold that knife when you could be holding something else?" he jokingly asks Sada.



Cleaning the floors – Sada is hard at work polishing the floorboards. She runs back and forth with a cloth, working hard to clean the hotel. Mr. Ishida enters, holding a blossoming plum branch in his hand. "What a nice view," he says, looking at Sada's upturned rear. She turns to bow, and he tells her not to stop working on his account. "I like the way you sway your hips," he says, sitting near her. Sada continues to work, and he keeps asking her probing, inappropriate questions. At one point in her work, she backs close to Mr. Ishida, who throws her robes up and places his hand between her legs. "I'm a married woman," she begins, but he interrupts her, saying he knows all about her situation. "I only came here because I heard this was an upstanding house," she says. "I'm an upstanding man," Mr. Ishida insists as he begins to finger her. The manager walks into the courtyard and interrupts them, Sada quickly getting back to work.



Drinking alone – Thinking she's serving a customer, Sada carries a bottle of sake to a room. Inside, she's surprised to find Mr. Ishida drinking and singing, alone. He says he stopped drinking out and asks for her to treat him like a customer. Sada asks why he stopped drinking out, and he responds, "So I can do this instead." He slips his hand into Sada's kimono. Chuckling, he slurps a mouthful of sake before kissing Sada. She says she has to get back to work, but Mr. Ishida mockingly sings, "*what is this narrow path*," burrowing his hand between her legs. "See how wet you are? Let's not waste time." He pulls Sada onto his legs and hikes up his robes, and they begin to have sex. Sada fears they'll be found out, but she also doesn't want him to stop. As if on cue, the geisha appears. Mr. Ishida asks for a moment before she enters, allowing Sada and himself to reorganize their clothes. Sada leaves without a word.



"Unusual woman" – Later that night, Sada walks down the steps in the hotel. Mr. Ishida reaches through and touches the back of her heel. "Where are you going?" he asks. She says she's headed to the toilet. After making a lewd gesture with his fingers, he tells her he'll be waiting, but she says she doesn't have to go just this moment. "They say it feels better with a full bladder," Mr. Ishida says. He pushes her into a room where they have sex. They both say they're holding back for one another, interested in each other's pleasure as much as their own. After reaching an orgasm, Sada asks if he's going to have sex with his wife later. He makes a noncommittal noise, and Sada replies, "What a slut, having sex every morning." As if seeking revenge on her, Sada pushes Mr. Ishida off of her and performs oral sex to relieve his load. "You're an unusual woman," he says, smoking a cigarette while watching her.



Shamisen – A poorly played shamisen rings out through the hotel. One of the women watches suspiciously. Inside the room, Sada rides atop Mr. Ishida while singing and strumming the shamisen. “Master,” she says, “I can’t play anymore.” “I told my wife you’d be playing the shamisen for me tonight,” he replies. If you stop, she’ll get suspicious.” Sada continues the song, plucking the shamisen and chuckling as she realizes the song she’s singing is a prostitute’s lament.



Razor – In a room at the top of the hotel, a group of serving girls sit and relax together. Sada watches as two girls play a game with stones, singing a folk tune about the birds of spring to keep time. Struck by some sudden desire, Sada rises and leaves the room, walking down the stairs. Peering into a nearby room, she sees Mrs. Ishida brandish a razor. She then turns to begin shaving Mr. Ishida’s neck and behind his ears. Sada approaches, begging forgiveness for the disturbance and asking to leave their employ. Mrs. Ishida laughs and says they’ll discuss it, but for now, she needs fresh water. Sada scoots closer to take the basin. She returns later and is shocked to see Mr. Ishida having sex with his wife. In her mind’s eye, she grasps the razor and chops off Mrs. Ishida’s ear. Sada is shocked back to reality. “I’m very happy with your work,” Mrs. Ishida says between gasps, her husband refusing to stop. “And you’re very well behaved. There’s no reason for you to leave us.”



“You’re the one who devours women” – A rickshaw rolls down a road between a slowly flowing stream and a factory billowing smoke. Inside are Sada and Mr. Ishida. “Oh no,” she says. “I just got my period.” Mr. Ishida pulls his fingers away from her crotch to see menstrual blood. After a moment, he puts his fingers in his mouth and sucks them clean before saying, “I don’t mind.” Sada smiles and leans into him as he continues fingering her. They exit the rickshaw at a hotel where Mr. Ishida announces their arrival. “This is the first time you’ll see me completely naked,” Sada says after they’ve settled into their room. “Are you happy?” Mr. Ishida asks. “Yes,” Sada replies. “But the man should undress first.” Mr. Ishida insists that he wants to undress her first. A serving girl peeks through the crack in the door at them as Mr. Ishida worships Sada’s body, kissing her up and down. He says her skin could “suck the blood from a man.” “You can’t be serious,” says Sada. “You’re the one who devours women.”



Wedding night – In ostentatious dress, a geisha sings, and several serving girls pour tea for Mr. Ishida and Sada. “Congratulations!” the serving girls say as Mr. Ishida downs his cup. When it’s Sada’s turn, she doesn’t know what to do, saying she’s never had a proper wedding before. “If my bride had already been properly wed,” says Mr. Ishida, “that would be quite a letdown!” He invites the serving girls to celebrate with them. One of the girls says they must consummate their marriage after drinking from the bridal cups. “It’s already been consummated,” Mr. Ishida says dryly. One of the serving girls tells him his bride will be “especially delicious” tonight. Turning to Sada, Mr. Ishida asks, “Shall we?” “Yes, master,” Sada replies, grinning. “Stop calling me ‘master,’” Mr. Ishida says. “Call me Kichi-san from now on.”



Shaking – The geisha plays a lively song about spring. On the floor before her, Kichizō touches her. “What’s this?” he asks. “You’re trembling. What’s wrong?” Sada says she doesn’t know. “Excuse us,” he says to the serving girls before pushing himself inside Sada. One serving girl can’t look away, and the others tease her. When she tries to look away, they hold her in place, forcing her to look. Suddenly, the other serving girls force themselves on her, stripping away her robes and using a bird-shaped dildo to penetrate her.



Orgy – The geisha plays a folk song while a man performs a comical dance, making silly faces and mimicking the movements of an owl. As he dances, the camera pans back to show us the room. Beneath him, the serving girls have joined Sada and Kichizō in an orgy. The geisha keeps playing and the man keeps dancing as if this were an everyday occurrence.



Noon already – While stroking and kissing Kichizō's penis, Sada sings a folk song about the rice harvest. A maid enters and interrupts her, asking if she can make the bed. "Give us a little longer," Sada asks. "What time is it?" "It's already noon," the maid replies. Sada tries to rouse Kichizō, who has apparently been sleeping for some time. "Good morning," he says with a wry smile. "Did you hold it all night?" Sada says she did. "Couldn't you sleep?" he asks. "I was too happy," she replies. He praises her beauty and hugs her for a moment before asking her to hold off for a second, saying he needs to pee. She asks him to pee inside of her, unwilling to wait. After a few moments, he agrees to have sex with her.



"The only time to rest..." – Sometime later, Kichizō exits a bathroom, chuckling to himself. "What's so funny?" asks Sada. "I was thinking," he says as he washes his hands, "that the only time my dick can rest is when I take a piss." "That's right," Sada replies. They sit down together, and she starts feeling him up, teasing that despite his complaints, he gets hard very fast. "You're right," he says. "It practically belongs to you... It knows you want it." She says she wants it now and climbs on top of Kichizō. "People can see us," he warns, but she doesn't care. Nearby, an older woman chuckles at the two of them, saying she's "full of spunk" with them around.



Walking home – Later that night, Sada and Kichizō walk over a bridge. "Let's say goodbye here," he says, but she insists on walking him home, leading him by the penis. Chuckling, he says, "Leave it alone! It hurts when I walk." Jokingly, he tries to kick her off, but she won't let go, and they grin at each other. "What if the servants see us?" he asks. "It's hard again," Sada says. She pushes him into the carriage house where the beggar propositioned her and tells Kichizō, "Take me now."



Still not tired – "Pardon me," a hotel manager says outside a room. "I've brought your sake." Sada beckons her to enter. Inside, Kichizō smokes, covered by a blanket, while Sada does her makeup. "How unusual," the manager comments. "You're not in bed together. I can't get my young girls to come in here." "Why's that?" Kichizō asks, and Sada makes a joke about how she's always sucking on him. Sada informs the manager she'll be out for a couple of days and asks her to keep an eye on Kichizō. Then Sada stands, asking Kichizō if she looks pretty. "You've lost weight," he says. "Makes you even lovelier."



Switching robes – Without another word, he pushes Sada over and starts having sex with her, the manager trying to contain her reaction. Sada, between moans, asks if he's still not tired. The manager excuses herself and leaves quickly before Kichizō replies, "I know we need the money, but I get mad with jealousy when I imagine you with another man." Sada says his jealousy makes him happy before telling him not to worry: "He's just a school principal and town alderman. Very upstanding." "You like 'em upstanding, don't you?" Kichizō asks. After they've finished, Sada crawls across the room and takes Kichizō's clothes, saying it's to make sure he doesn't go back home to his



wife. Joking that he'll just have to go around naked, Sada gives him her robe, and he drapes it over his shoulders, jokingly asking how he looks.

Train ride – Riding the train to her appointment with the principal, Sada imagines Kichizō running beside the train in only her robe, it flying out behind him like a cape. With his clothes in hand, she quickly makes her way to the restroom in the rear of the train carriage. As if for comfort, she drapes his robe around her shoulders and smells it deeply.



Rape – Back at the hotel, still dressed in Sada's robe, Kichizō drinks, the manager serving him. He is distant, and it takes her a couple of tries to figure out if he wants more sake. She comments that he and Sada rarely eat when they stay with them. Overstepping the typical boundaries of polite Japanese inn-keeping, the manager suggests that Kichizō run off before Sada returns: "If you stay, she'll end up killing you." Suddenly, Kichizō pushes the manager down and rapes her.



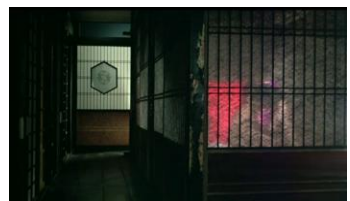
Client – Sada sits across a table from a middle-aged man. The scene suddenly jumps to the two in bed. "Master," she says, "Do you mind hurrying it up?" "It's hard for me in the afternoon," he explains. "I said we don't have to do this." "But I want to," Sada replies. "It's different with you because I like and respect you." Suddenly, Sada spins onto her back and asks him to beat her. He responds with obviously mimed slaps, Sada demanding, "Harder! Harder!" She then asks him to pinch her and pull her hair. Eventually he stops, and Sada rolls on top of him. After a short session, he seems completely worn out.



Returning home – "Kichi-san!" Sada shouts as she sprints down the long hall of a train station. He's there waiting for her, still wearing her robe. He asks how she's been, and she says she has the money. "Let's go spend it," he says with a grin. The two depart the station, arm in arm in the back of a rickshaw.



Talk about the principal – In yet another hotel room, Sada moans, swearing she'll never leave Kichizō's side again. We watch them through the thin rice-paper walls. "Can you put it in me again?" she asks. "If you want," he replies. "You're so restless—putting it in, taking it out." After they have sex, Kichizō asks how she did it with the principal. She tickles his nipples and he pushes her hands away, both of them laughing at the older man's tastes and the fatherly advice he gave her. She then tells him about how in a fit of guilt, she asked him to slap and pinch her. Kichizō lies back, grinning as he asks Sada to slap him. Hesitantly, she does so, and they start having sex again.



Laying an egg – Later, a geisha plays for Kichizō and Sada as they recline against each other. Kichizō sings a folk tune in time with the shamisen as he sips sake. Seemingly bored, Sada picks up some food from a nearby plate, anointing it with her juices before feeding it to Kichizō. He gives her a sideways glance before taking a bite. Sada grins, saying, "They say true love means eating food dipped in your lover's juices." He takes the rest of the morsel from the chopsticks and chews enthusiastically. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy," Kichizō says, dipping more food inside of Sada before eating it. Eventually, he puts an entire egg inside of her. She asks him to get it out, but he refuses, saying she'll have to do it herself. Squatting, she lays the egg before shoving it into Kichizō's mouth and climbing on top of him. "We're not alone," Kichizō says, the geisha watching without reaction. "I don't care," Sada says.



A threat – After another round of sex, Sada grasps a pair of shears from a nearby vanity, brandishing them at Kichizō. “What’s that for?” He asks. “To cut it off,” she says, a cruel edge to her voice. “So you can’t use it at home [implied: with your wife].” “Then you won’t be able to use it either,” he warns. To that, Sada says she’ll cut it off inside of her. “Go ahead,” Kichizō says calmly. She asks if he thinks he’d die if she cut it off, and he says most likely. Again, he promises he won’t have sex with his wife, only with Sada, and promises to set her up with a room at a nearby inn. “I don’t want to be your mistress,” she complains. Kichizō says if they lived together, he’d “be reduced to a skeleton.” This makes Sada angry. “Fine,” he says. “I’ll live with you, even if I become a skeleton.” Teasing him, Sada snips off some of his pubic hairs, swallowing them. “Now you’ll grow a beard!” Kichizō jokes. Again, Sada brandishes the shears, demanding that Kichizō never have sex with his wife again, asking him to swear she can kill her if he ever breaks his promise.



Rainy night – Late one rainy night, Sada and Kichizō walk under a parasol by the river. Seeing a woman walking alone, Sada says they should frighten her. They lower the parasol, pretending to be a kasa-obake, a folk monster that looks like a parasol with a big eye. The woman falls to the ground and cowers under her own parasol. Now with a hole cut into the parasol for this purpose, Sada and Kichizō wander the streets of Tokyo making ghostly noises. At a little sake stand sheltered from the rain, Sada and Kichizō drink. The man running the stall says it's closing time, and Sada offers to have sex with him to stay open longer. “Mine’s only good for peeing anymore,” the man replies. Later still, Kichizō performs oral sex on Sada in public. She screams his name, begging him to never leave her.



Bathing children – The rain still falling, Sada tries to get two children to take a bath. They run around the room, naked and screaming, and Sada plays a game with them, hoping to calm them down. The young boy won’t listen to her, so when she does finally catch him, she pinches his penis as a form of punishment, making him cry.



Burglar or her? – Late at night, glass shatters, causing Kichizō to stir in his bed next to his wife. A dog barks. Mrs. Ishida rises and steps out of the room, cracking a door to peer outside. She returns to the bedroom and asks her husband if it could have been a burglar. “Don’t be silly, Kichizō says. “A burglar wouldn’t make all that noise. Probably just some drunk.” Lying back in bed, Mrs. Ishida gives Kichizō a suspicious look, saying, “Do you think it could have been her?” “Go to sleep,” Kichizō replies. Outside, Sada kneels in the carriage house next to a rickshaw.



Broken window – The next day, preparing for the bath, Kichizō sits on a stool, shaving. “Going back to her?” Mrs. Ishida says from behind him. Startled, Kichizō cuts his cheek, mildly scolding his wife for startling him while he shaves. She closes the door and helps him tend to his wound. Continuing to play the part of the dutiful wife, she helps him bathe, wetting and washing his back as he sings. While she washes, she begins fondling him. Without another word, she sits on his lap and begins having sex with him. Behind them, a figure passes by the door, seen in the mirror. Suddenly, the window on the door shatters. A servant appears, saying he has a phone call.



Knifepoint lovemaking – Kichizō announces himself at another inn. After the staff greets him, Sada comes running down the steps, brandishing a kitchen knife, shouting, “Damn you!” In a room upstairs, Sada threatens him with the knife, accusing him of having sex with his wife. “If you want a



reverse grip," he chides, "you'll need a thicker blade. You can't kill anyone like that." Embarrassed, Sada says it was all she could find. He jokes about how she only thinks about having sex with him. Kichizō asks Sada to help take off his robes, and she moves them aside, gripping his penis and brandishing the knife, telling him to admit he had sex with his wife. Moments later, Sada climbs on top of Kichizō. As they have sex, Kichizō apologizes for leaving her alone, saying he'll do whatever she wants to make up for it.

Strange smell – Sometime later, a serving girl brings the couple sake. From inside the room, Sada asks her to bring it closer, explaining, "We're fused together." Obliging, but obviously unhappy, the girl moves the sake closer, asking if they want food. As always, Sada refuses, saying "a full stomach makes you sleepy." The girl then asks if she can clean the room, saying there's a "strange smell." "We like that smell," Sada snaps. Kichizō starts to nod off, and Sada tries to rouse him. He mentions that the other day when she choked him, it felt good, and Sada asks Kichizō to choke her. He finds that he doesn't like it so much, saying, "I don't like watching you suffer." They switch positions, and Sada chokes him several times, commenting about how he jerks and stiffens inside of her.



Perverts – The door slides open, and the serving girl speaks with a smile. "The geisha won't come in here," she explains. Sada asks why, and the woman explains further, "Because of your reputation." "What are they saying about us?" Sada asks. "That you're perverts," the woman replies curtly. Kichizō laughs, but Sada takes great offense at this, threatening and slapping the serving girl. Kichizō pulls her off, trying to calm her, and suddenly Sada suggests Kichizō have sex with the serving girl.



Old geisha – Despite what the serving girl said, a geisha appears and kneels dutifully at the door. "You certainly are a virile gentleman," she says as Sada climbs on top of Kichizō. He tells her to play something with spirit, and she starts singing a folk tune about hurtful relationships. Sada interrupts her, asking if the geisha thinks she is a pervert. The old woman says Sada's desires are natural. Sada then asks how old she is, and she replies, "Sixty-eight." Sada suggests that Kichizō have sex with the geisha, and, surprisingly, she accepts. It doesn't take much convincing for Kichizō to begin having sex with her in the hallway as Sada watches, making strange expressions between longing and jealousy. Getting up from the now-unconscious geisha, Kichizō realizes she urinated, drying his legs and hands and saying it was like having sex with his mother. He looks to Sada, saying, "Let's be happy together forever."



Rude farewell – In a lumberyard, children run with banners shaped like koi. Sada walks with the principal. They stop, and he says, "Let's say goodbye here. I must say, you don't smell very good today, like a dead rat or something." Sada asks if they could go away to the hot springs for a week, and he says he would never do such a thing: "If anyone knew about us, I'd have to shoot myself." Sada smiles as if he were making a joke, but her expression shows us she knows he's serious.



Soldiers – Kichizō exits a barbershop and walks down a street. His face is gaunt and his movements seem aimless. Walking in the opposite direction, he sees a battalion of soldiers led by an officer on horseback. On the other side of the street, children stand, waving flags. Kichizō keeps his eyes downcast, shame, anger, and frustration crossing his face as the shadows of the soldiers cross over him.



Asphyxiation as a thrill – Kichizō is surprised to find Sada at the inn. “What’s wrong?” he asks. “Why are you back so soon?” “You weren’t here, so they cleaned the room,” she cries, holding him close. He explains that he went for a haircut, and Sada pushes him down, brandishing the knife again: “How dare you go for a haircut while I’m out earning your keep!” Grinning, Kichizō says she loves it when his neck is shaved. “I love it so much,” she replies, “I want to slice it open.” She lowers the knife toward his neck, and he says, “Please don’t. Strangling me should suffice.” Both give each other a small smile as Sada says, “Perhaps that’s just what I’ll do.” Sada takes off her kimono, using the obi—the sash used to hold the kimono in place—she starts strangling Kichizō, seated atop his hips with him inside of her. “I’ll kill you,” she says as she thrusts her hips and tightens her obi.



Too tired – Sada spins an empty sake bottle like a top. Beside her, Kichizō dozes. “If you want it that badly,” he says, “get on top of me, though I might not keep it up.” He moves the blanket aside, and Sada goes through the motions of getting him hard and putting him inside of her. Kichizō starts dozing off again, and Sada slaps him awake, smiling down at him. “If I fall asleep again,” he asks, “you’ll choke me, won’t you?” Sada nods that she will. “Don’t stop midway,” he says with a smile. “It’s too painful afterward.” He starts to doze again, and Sada moves to grab her obi, wrapping it around his neck gently. She stops once to make sure he’s conscious, and then she pulls the obi tight. Kichizō wheezes, his face turning beet red.



Amphitheater – A girl chases a boy around an amphitheater, the benches empty. They shout a traditional call-and-response game. “Ready?” the girl asks. “Not yet!” the boy replies. Over and over they call and respond in sing-song voices as they chase circles around the empty benches. Suddenly, Sada appears, lying half-naked in her kimono on a platform where lights or sound equipment would be set up. Thrashing in her sleep, the girl calls out “ready,” but there is no response. Sada locks eyes with the girl who stares at her, asking, “Ready?” Sada sits up. The girl is gone. Sada’s alone in the amphitheater. “Kichi-san!” she calls out.



Sada and Kichizō forever – In the hotel room, Sada stands over Kichizō. “Kichi-san,” she says sadly, realizing what she has done. Kneeling, she pulls out the knife, sliding over to the body. Throwing back the blanket, she grabs his penis and holds it for a moment before raising the knife. Slowly, blood flowing, she saws through the tissue. Carefully, she places the severed member on the futon next to her. Then Sada sets to work removing the testicles. Holding the lumps of flesh in her hands, she smiles to herself. The scene jumps to an overhead shot. Sada caresses the corpse, her hands bloody. Across his chest, she has scrawled the symbols, “Sada and Kichi, together forever.” A voiceover explains that Sada carried the organs with her from inn to inn until her arrest and that, strangely, public opinion favored her.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sada Abe

A married woman and former prostitute who was driven to work as a maid and server in a hotel by economic desperation. There, she meets the owner, Kichizō, who she quickly falls in love with. This love quickly becomes a dangerous obsession that leads to immense loss for both.

Admiring While we don’t often see this side of Sada, it’s very important to her character. She admires those who are “upstanding” in the eyes of society. It’s this admiration that drives her to end her life as a

prostitute and join the ranks of polite society. It also drives her into the arms of Kichizō, who is said to run an upstanding establishment, though that seems to be *despite* his presence, not because of it. Her admiration soon shifts into outright obsession as she refuses to let go of Kichizō, literally holding his penis as they walk or having sex in front of servants or in public. Sada is a warning to those who are blinded by their admiration.

Dominant Sada's dominance really comes out as her affair with Kichizō escalates. She pushes him down, demands sex at all hours, and forces Kichizō to starve himself as he can barely get a break to drink sake or urinate because of her constant demands for sex. Eventually, she plays the sadist to Kichizō's masochist, engaging in knife play and erotic asphyxiation. Outside her sex life with Kichizō, we see Sada beat, berate, and domineer the women working at the various inns where the couple stays. If they say anything that could be insulting, Sada beats them, and she loves to humiliate them by demanding they serve them while she has sex with Kichizō.

Unstable We see this trait in Sada early on. When she is insulted or denied something she desires, she reacts with rage, often violently. A server at Kichizō's inn brings up her past as a prostitute, and instead of ignoring this comment or quipping back with an insult aimed at the woman, she grabs a knife and starts swinging it wildly. When Kichizō makes it clear he's not leaving his wife, Sada threatens to cut off his penis with a pair of sheers, demanding that he never sleep with his wife again. On the rare occasions that Kichizō does go to spend the evening with his wife, Sada responds with knife-point threats, interrogating him about his loyalty to her. Others see Sada's instability too, such as the hotel manager Kichizō rapes for suggesting that Sada would kill him some day.

Kichizō Ishida

A married man who owns a hotel, Kichizō shows himself to be a leech and a drunkard quickly. He is attracted to Sada's youth and experience, and he takes advantage of her as his boss. Kichizō lets his sexual desires run his life, much to his detriment.

Irresponsible Throughout the film, we see Kichizō shirking his responsibilities. We see this behavior for the first time when he returns from drinking at a festival (which is why he is wearing the fox spirit mask) and stops Sada from attacking the other servers and his wife. Rather than punishing her or offering comfort to the other women, he makes lewd remarks suggesting that Sada's "pretty hands" would be better suited for holding "something else." The next day, he begins an affair with Sada, posing as a customer to get her alone. In spite of being the owner of the inn, we never see him in the act of innkeeping, only drinking and having sex with his wife or Sada. The only thing he seems to actually do is go to the fish market in the early morning.

Trusting While he cannot be trusted to keep his promises to Sada or anyone else, Kichizō is a surprisingly trusting individual. He doesn't need any reassurance that Sada will keep quiet about their affair, trusting her implicitly when it comes to their relationship. Even though it makes him jealous when he pimps her out to make money to fund their affair, he knows that Sada will come back, waiting patiently for her at the train station. Even after all of Sada's violent and sadistic outbursts, he demonstrates his ultimate act of trust by allowing her to choke him as he sleeps. This final act of trust ends with his death.

Cruel In many ways, Kichizō is an incredibly cruel man. We see this from his first scene when, instead of tending to the needs of his staff and clients, he begins making lewd comments at Sada after she just tried to assault a server and his wife with a knife. This trait emerges again soon thereafter, as he forsakes his wife and ignores Sada's boundaries to start an affair with her. At his most cruel, we see him rape a woman for suggesting, quite innocently and helpfully, that Sada will be his downfall.

THEMES

Sexuality

Desire vs. Lust vs. Love It's very hard to tell what drives the two main characters of this film. Their motivations aren't always clear, and they often change throughout the film. Kichizō starts off as a womanizer abusing his power over women and ends up an obedient and devoted thrall of Sada's sexual desires. While they are obsessed with one another, they perform a false marriage, Kichizō unwilling to leave his wife. Anger and desire drive Kichizō to sexual acts with other women, his appetite nearly as insatiable as Sada's. They call this love, but their actions are that of domination and submission, and this grows violent at many points because of Sada's instability and short temper. Their lust is obvious, and having sex with other partners to instill jealousy becomes a frequent act in their sex play as well as exhibitionism. In a distorted version of childish puppy love, Sada scrawls "Sada and Kichi, together forever" with Kichizō's blood across his chest: Their love is immature in a similar way, based mostly in the obsession with sexual gratification they both share.

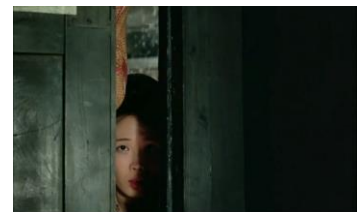
Exhibitionism We see many moments of exhibitionism throughout *In the Realm of the Senses*. Part of this comes from Kichizō and Sada's conspicuous sexuality, but some comes from a general lack of prudishness around nudity in Japanese culture. To a Western audience, some of the moments where maids, serving girls, and geisha fail to react to the nudity of Kichizō and Sada seems strange, but not only do they not have similar taboos about nudity, especially in private such as bathhouses or hotel rooms, it was expected that many using inns and hotels would be doing so to have sex. Sada and Kichizō do seem to have a thing for public sex, however, pushing these boundaries far beyond what could be excused by Japanese norms and engaging in risky behaviors.

Illustrative moment When walking home during a rainstorm, Sada and Kichizō stop for some hot sake at a stand sheltered from the rain. The proprietor says he's about to close for the night, and Sada offers to sleep with him to stay open, lifting her robe. The old man chuckles and says he couldn't even if he was interested. Immediately after this, Kichizō performs oral sex on Sada in public on another street.



Voyeurism While seen less frequently than exhibitionism in this film, voyeurism plays a nuanced role. In the beginning, Sada first sees Kichizō having sex through an act of purposeful voyeurism. During this moment, her obsession is born. Frequently, servants are made voyeurs by Sada's and Kichizō's sexual appetites and their refusal to stop in the presence of others. Some seem to enjoy such displays, such as the old woman cleaning the shrine at the hotel or the old geisha, but others detest it, such as the serving girl who Sada beats for saying people call them perverts. Many are forced into this middle ground where their profession and societal expectations of politeness force them to tolerate what obviously makes them uncomfortable. In a meta-analytical way, *In the Realm of the Senses* forces the viewer to act as voyeur, as there are so few moments that aren't sexual, the mostly unstimulated sex acts adding a grotesque touch to this sensation.

Illustrative moment one of the first scenes sees Sada and a co-worker sneaking through the hotel in the early morning to get a peep show. The co-worker says Mr. Ishida and his wife have sex every morning before he goes to the fish market. The two women crack open the door and peek inside, Sada becoming flustered and obsessed with Kichizō.



Sadism and Masochism This dual theme comes up often toward the film's end when, after several escalations, Sada's domineering sexual attitudes bring up a masochistic desire in Kichizō. During a session with a wealthy client in another town, Sada asks to be pinched and beaten. When she returns, she tells Kichizō about this, and he says he couldn't harm Sada but asks her to do it to him instead. He seems to enjoy this and soon dives deeper, asking Sada to choke him after she wants him to choke her. Using her obi, she strangles him until his face turns red. Their use of erotic

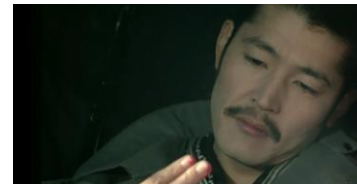
asphyxiation becomes a mainstay of their sexual exploits, leaving Kichizō too weak to fight back. In their sadism and masochism, Sada and Kichizō are doomed by a lack of self-control.

Illustrative moment There are many moments of sadism and masochism throughout the film, but one of the more important ones comes toward the end of the film. This is the first time Sada uses her obi on Kichizō. After binding his hands, she wraps her obi around his neck, commenting that he is twitching inside of her as she rides on top of him. He sputters and gasps for air, his face turning red. After a few moments of grinding, Sada reaches a climax and loosens her grip on the obi, collapsing into Kichizō. He asks if it felt good, to which she replies it did. After this moment, strangulation becomes a norm in their sexual relationship.



Menstruation There is only one small moment referencing menstruation in the film, but it is notable nonetheless. Most films tend to obscure this reality or treat it with disgust. When Kichizō realizes Sada is bleeding, he simply licks his fingers clean and continues to touch her. In this moment, we see both great sexual desire and acceptance from Kichizō: Many modern men would shirk away from touching a menstruating woman in a sexual manner, let alone tasting her blood. This small moment illustrates Kichizō's perversion and love for Sada.

Illustrative moment Riding in the back of a rickshaw, Kichizō and Sada make their way to an inn for their faux wedding. Kichizō touches Sada under her robes. She stops him, gasping, "Oh no. I just got my period." Kichizō removes his fingers from Sada and looks at the blood on them. After a moment, he sucks his fingers dry, saying, "I don't mind."



Old age Many films explicitly about sexuality fail to address sexuality in older age. *In the Realm of the Senses* is unique in its open exploration of this theme. Toward the end of the film, Sada and Kichizō are having sex in front of an old geisha. Sada quizzes her, asking if they're making her uncomfortable. Abruptly, she asks the geisha if she'd like to have sex with Kichizō. The old woman obliges, setting her shamisen aside and laying back as Kichizō lies on top of her. Sada watches them with a strange expression shifting between arousal and jealousy. When they're done, Kichizō collapses on top of the woman, only moving when Sada rouses him. They both laugh upon discovering that the old woman has passed out and urinated on herself from the effort of having sex. It is a small moment, but rarely in film do we see an old person express sexual desire in a form that isn't played for comedy or pure shock. In its depravity, *In the Realm of the Senses* allows the viewer to explore sexual ideas normally considered too taboo to contemplate.



Lesbianism This only comes up once very quickly at the beginning. Sada, unable to sleep, is joined in bed by another co-worker early in the morning. Seeking to warm up, the woman snuggles up close under the covers. Suddenly, she starts groping and kissing Sada, who tries to ignore her. "Don't you like women?" the co-worker asks. Realizing she's not going to get any sexual satisfaction from Sada, she shows her to the owners' room so they can peep on the Ishidas' morning sex ritual, the co-worker commenting that they do this every morning. Where she had no reaction to the woman's groping, Sada is obviously aroused by watching the Ishidas have sex.



Orgy There is one instance of an orgy in the film. Immediately after Kichizō and Sada perform their faux wedding ceremony, the serving girls who celebrate with them begin having sex with one another as Sada performs oral sex on Kichizō. This is an odd moment of pure indulgence, a true moment of the senses: Not only are these people having sex, they have



been drinking, and the geisha and a dancer are performing for them. Outside of this moment, sex typically comes with some deprivation, such as not eating or sleeping. Such overwhelm is likely exactly what Sada and Kichizō were looking for to celebrate their fake marriage. They are two who seek sexual thrill above all else.

Society

Culture Japanese culture is on full display throughout *In the Realm of the Senses*. Nagisa Ōshima very quickly sets the scene in a specific time and place: Mid-1930s Tokyo. Using the period's focus on return to cultural roots, folk culture, and military pride, we are able to quickly gauge some of the values and practices of the time without spoon-feeding information to us with voiceovers or prologues. Kichizō and Sada seek to both abuse and pervert cultural norms, forcing service workers to watch them have sex and throwing their own marriage ceremony to mark the beginning of their affair. In the way culture is portrayed and subverted, Ōshima seeks to show us the cruelty and emptiness of ultranationalist culture and life.

Illustrative moment While there are many moments in this film that focus on Japanese culture, one sets the tone, time, and place best. Later in the film, Kichizō returns to the inn where he's waiting for Sada after getting a haircut. On his way there, he encounters a marching column of soldiers headed off to a front, likely in China. Kichizō expresses frustration and shame in his expression and body language, pressed against a building by the roadside. Across the way, given far more space than him, is a crowd of women and children waving Japanese flags. This moment highlights the military pride Imperial Japan sought to impress on its population and looks at some of the people who were cast aside, in this case, men who could not or would not fight.



Gender There is a subtle exploration of gender in this film that usually lines up with its themes of sadism and masochism. Kichizō portrays himself as a man's man, but outside his hypersexuality, he is much more sensitive than one would expect. Conversely, Sada is a strong-willed, violent woman who struggles to keep herself within the norms of strict cultural expectations of Japanese women, especially those of the lower classes. In the bedroom, they quickly exchange social positions, Sada becoming the dominant and possessive one while Kichizō is more submissive and servile. It's a frequent joke between the two that Kichizō's penis actually belongs to Sada. At the film's end, we see Kichizō's corpse castrated, Sada physically taking possession of his genitals. In many ways, Sada is a woman who wishes to have the position of a man. We see a subtle side of Kichizō too: while he can be rough and cruel (such as when he rapes the manager for suggesting Sada would be his death), he avoids army service when it was considered the highest manly honor and expectation in Japanese culture. We don't learn why he has avoided service: His politics are never made clear, and he seems healthy considering how he can spend literal days on end having sex with Sada. Kichizō defies this expectation, and while in the words of others he is an upstanding man, he feels like less of a man because he is at home with the women and children while other men go off to fight.

Illustrative moment A clear moment of the subtle gender play in *In the Realm of the Senses* comes when Sada must go off to see a client to make money for she and Kichizō's affair. In her preparations for her train journey, she takes Kichizō's robes, saying she doesn't want him going home to his wife. Kichizō seems strangely calm about the demands and taking his robes, but he jokingly complains that he'll have to go around naked. Sada gives him her robe. He smiles as he wraps her robe around his body, asking how it looks. We see him in this robe later when he meets Sada at the train station, showing that he has not only taken her feminine garb but also a more traditionally feminine role in their relationship, the opposite of what we see in his relationship with his wife, where she waits for and tends to him.



Justice

Violence While the moments of violence in *In the Realm of the Senses* are fleeting, they have great weight. Sada is prone to violent outbursts, threatening her co-workers with a knife and beating a serving girl who says people say she and Kichizō are perverts. Kichizō doesn't react to her outbursts, save with some occasional arousal. In their experiments with asphyxiation, we see the perverse side of violence; sadism and masochism. The film's final act of violence sees Sada severing Kichizō's genitals. Even though he is dead, there is a grotesque brutality to this blood-soaked moment.

Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments of violence happens early in the film in Sada's mind. When returning to Kichizō and his wife after retrieving clean water for his shave, Sada sees the two having sex. She looks down to see the razor on the ground and imagines picking it up and cutting off Mrs. Ishida's ear.



Psychology

Obsession This is a key theme in this film. Both Kichizō and Sada are obsessed with sex and one another. They will refuse to eat or leave the room when spending the night at an inn, Sada often forsaking sleep in order to keep fulfilling her sexual desires. They push the boundaries of societal expectations and norms, having sex in front of people, forcing workers to enter the room when they're having sex in spite of their obvious discomfort, and refusing to hear anyone's reasonable concerns or advice about their obsession. Sada's obsessive attitude leads her to literally possess Kichizō's penis, demanding that she be the only one to use it. He jokes that the only time he gets a break from her is when he needs to pee, and even then, Sada asks him to urinate inside of her instead of leaving even for a moment.

Illustrative moment Of all the scenes featuring obsession, the clearest is the final scene. After accidentally killing Kichizō by erotic asphyxiation, Sada picks up a knife and cuts off his genitals. After she has completed this grotesque task, she writes "Sada and Kichi, together forever" in his blood across his chest. A voiceover explains the end of her tale and how she carried the severed body parts with her for several days as she caresses the corpse, holding his genitals in her hand.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does gender expression emerge from the film's overt sexuality?
2. How does war and imperialism play into the story? List two examples.
3. Would you call this film a tragedy? Why or why not?
4. Would this story have unfolded in a different way if it happened in a country that wasn't Japan? Support your answer.