

A Guide to Reading *The Tale of Genji*

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Introduction

Composed in the 11th century CE by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji* is the great classic Japanese novel. In addition to being a masterpiece of world literature, the novel's influence on Japan has been immense; one authority remarked, "Anywhere you cut Japanese culture, you hit *The Tale of Genji*."¹ The novel tells the story of Genji, an idealized courtier, whose beauty, grace, aesthetic taste, emotional sensitivity, and cultural accomplishments win the admiration (or jealousy) of everyone he meets.

In the Yamato (c. 250-710) and Nara (710-794) periods, Japan had borrowed heavily from Chinese culture, importing Chinese characters (*kanji* 漢字), Buddhism, and Confucianism, and establishing a centralized government modeled on the Chinese imperial bureaucracy. However, during the following Heian period (794-1185), Japan became more insular, and more fully integrated its cultural borrowings into its own unique style. This is reflected in the fact that *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語), composed during and set in the Heian period, is the world's first novel, without antecedent in Chinese literature. It is not written in Chinese characters, but rather in *hiragana*, a phonetic script developed as a medium for women's writing. Its language is highly refined, with extensive allusions to other works of literature and poetry (both Chinese and Japanese), but its Japanese is nonetheless colloquial and conversational. The poems frequently used as a medium of communication in the novel are *waka* (和歌), a distinctively Japanese form of verse with a 5-7-5-7-7 syllabic structure. The novel also illustrates the historical shift in the role of the Japanese emperor from an absolute monarch (like the Chinese model) to a mere figurehead.

Like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* for English readers, *The Tale of Genji* is unintelligible to contemporary Japanese without special training. However, it is available in modern Japanese renditions (including film, cartoon, and comic/*manga* versions), and its cultural ideals continue to be influential even to those not intimately familiar with the story.

Structurally, *The Tale of Genji* has three major sections:

- Chapters 1-33: Genji's youth through middle age. Although Genji suffers reversals of fortune, his court career and personal life are increasingly successful. (In this course, we will read Siedensticker's abridged translation, which covers only the first half of this section.)
- Chapters 34-41: Genji's old age and death. Chapter 34 represents a major shift in tone, with Genji suffering increasing personal sadness even while he is superficially successful at court.
- Chapters 42-54: The story shifts to Genji's grandson Niou and supposed son Kaoru.

Themes in *Genji*

Early commentators on the *Genji* interpreted it as a Buddhist moral parable, in which Genji's lust is ultimately punished by the ghost of the Rokujō Lady and by his being cuckolded by another man. However, for the last few centuries, the most common Japanese view has been that Genji must be appreciated for his breathtaking aesthetic qualities rather than morally judged. In addition, for all the moral and aesthetic issues that it raises, the plot of the novel is driven to a surprising extent by court politics. Keep in mind these ethical, aesthetic, and political aspects of the novel as you read.

I. Ethics (Buddhist)

- A. attachment: According to Buddhism, the primary source of human wrongdoing and suffering is selfish attachment to the transitory people and things of this world.
- B. karma
 - 1. Technically, “karma” refers to the inescapable cosmic law.
 - 2. “Karma” refers especially to the law that good (unattached) actions have good consequences, while bad (attached) actions have bad consequences.
- C. fate and rebirth
 - 1. The karmic consequences of one's actions will often be evident in this life, but may also appear when one is reborn in a later life.
 - 2. Consequently, when bad things happen to good people, it is often attributed to a “fate” caused by actions in a previous life.
- D. “grudge” (onryō (怨霊))
 - 1. One form that karmic consequences manifest themselves is a “grudge.”
 - 2. A “grudge” or “vengeful spirit” is typically a woman who was wronged during her life and who comes back to seek revenge after death.
 - 3. The Rokujō Lady is the “grudge” in *Genji*; as her example illustrates, the source of the “grudge” need not be dead, and the direct target of her actions need not be the man who wronged her.
 - 4. This concept has deep roots in Japanese popular religion and folklore; the Japanese horror films *The Ring* (*Ringu* リング) and *The Grudge* (*Ju-on* 呪怨) are both inspired by it.

II. Aesthetics

- A. *miyabi* (雅)
 - 1. “Miyabi” might be translated “courtly refinement,” and refers to graceful skill at performing and appreciating the aesthetic activities of the Heian court:
 - i. performing and appreciating music (particularly with the *koto* 箏, a sort of zither derived from the Chinese *zhēng*)
 - ii. composing and appreciating poetry (particularly in the *waka* form, but intimate familiarity with Chinese poetic models is also assumed; any poem is expect to make learned allusions to other poems and stories)

- iii. writing and appreciating calligraphy (an old Chinese saying goes, “a person’s handwriting reflects his character,” 字如其人, a principle the Heian Japanese accepted)
 - iv. producing and appreciating painting (particularly ink painting, rather than the color painting favored in Europe)
 - v. performing and appreciating ritual dances
2. If *miyabi* seems like a shallow value, consider Oscar Wilde’s statement: “It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.”²
- B. *mono no aware* (物の哀れ)
- 1. “Mono no aware” literally means “the sadness of things.”
 - 2. It refers to the ability to appreciate and be moved by the sad beauty things have because of their transient nature.
 - 3. An example of this might be crying at your high school graduation: you are happy but also sad, because you are conscious of this moment as indicating a change you can never undo.

III. Politics

- A. royal vs. ministerial power
- 1. The Heian era is a transition between the Nara period (710-794), when the emperor had considerable individual power, and all later periods (beginning with the Kamakura, 1185-1333), in which the emperor was solely a figurehead.
 - 2. Standing emperors were under immense social pressure to conform to the wishes of their older relatives. (This is grounded to some extent in the Confucian value of filial piety.)
 - 3. Consequently, influential families at court vied to marry their daughters to the emperor, and thereby get one of their descendants on the throne.
 - 4. As we see from the sad example of Genji’s mother (Chapter 1), having influential support at court (and not just from the emperor) is necessary for success in life.
 - 5. Heian emperors are still sometimes able to assert their own will, though, as when the Suzaku emperor recalls Genji from exile, against the wishes of his consort, the Kokiden Lady.
- B. Ministerial factions
- 1. The two major factions in *The Tale of Genji* are those of the Minister of the Left and the Minister of the Right. (The titles are traditional Chinese ones.)
 - 2. The Minister of the Left leads the faction Genji belongs to; the Minister of the Right leads the faction that opposes Genji.
 - 3. Genji goes into exile (Chapter 12: Suma) in part because he is discovered in flagrante delicto³ with the daughter of the Minister of the Right, but this would have been considered a minor indiscretion had it not been exploited by his political opponents.
 - 4. Seemingly inconsequential events (such as the “Picture Contest” of Chapter 17) are opportunities to achieve greater influence at court that are hotly contested by the two factions.

The Tale of Genji (*Genji Monogatari* 源氏物語)
Abridged Translation Chapter Summaries

Original Chapter	Seidensticker Abridged Translation [[<i>Chapters in Italics Are in Complete Translation Only</i>]]	McCullough Abridged Translation	Topic
1. <i>Kiritsubo</i> (桐壺)	The Paulownia Court	Kiritsubo	Genji's mother becomes the emperor's favorite but is driven to her death by jealous competitors. Young Genji's elegance and beauty wins over everyone.
2. <i>Hahakigi</i> (帚木)	[[<i>The Broom Tree</i>]]	The Broom Tree	Genji, his brother-in-law To-no-chujo and two others discuss the characteristics of an ideal woman.
3. <i>Utsusemi</i> (空蟬)	[[<i>Shell of the Locust</i>]]	-----	Genji attempts to seduce the Lady of the Locust Shell but she rebuffs him.
4. <i>Yūgao</i> (夕顔)	Evening Faces	Yugao	Genji has a liaison with a fragile young lady, Yugao, with disastrous results.
5. <i>Wakamurasaki</i> (若紫)	Lavender	Young Murasaki	Genji becomes obsessed with Lady Fujitsubo's young niece, Murasaki, and has a liaison with Fujitsubo, resulting in pregnancy.
6. <i>Suetsumuhana</i> (末摘花)	[[<i>Safflower</i>]]	-----	Genji attempts a liaison with the Safflower woman.
7. <i>Momiji no Ga</i> (紅葉賀)	An Autumn Excursion	A Celebration among Autumn Leaves	Genji plays with and educates the young Murasaki, but his relationship with his wife, Aoi, deteriorates. Fujitsubo gives birth to a son, who suspiciously resembles Genji. Genji

			has an affair with an older woman, which To-no-chujo discovers and teases him about.
8. <i>Hana no En</i> (花宴)	The Festival of the Cherry Blossoms	-----	Genji and the other courtiers entertain the emperor with poems and dances. Afterward, Genji ravishes an anonymous member of Kokiden's household.
9. <i>Aoi</i> (葵)	Heartvine	Aoi	Genji tries to be circumspect during the reign of the new emperor (Suzaku), but as a result snubs a former lover, the Rokujo Lady. His wife becomes pregnant, but becomes possessed by a spirit.
10. <i>Sakaki</i> (榊)	The Sacred Tree	-----	Feeling guilty and humiliated, the Rokujo Lady leaves the capital to join her daughter, a Shinto priestess, at Ise. Genji pays a visit to her before she leaves. Genji's status at court continues to fall, and only worsens when he is discovered in flagrante delicto with the daughter of the Minister of the Right.
11. <i>Hana Chiru Sato</i> (花散里)	The Orange Blossoms	-----	Genji has a liaison with the Lady of the House of the Orange Blossoms.
12. <i>Suma</i> (須磨)	Suma	Suma	Having fallen out of favor with the court, Genji goes into exile along the coast at Suma.
13. <i>Akashi</i> (明石)	Akashi	Akashi	After a violent storm, Genji is invited to the beautiful coast at Akashi by a Buddhist novice with a noble background.

			As Genji flirts with the novice's daughter, events in the capital lead to Genji being summoned back.
14. <i>Miotsukushi</i> (漣標)	Channel Buoys	-----	The new emperor assumes the throne, and although he does not know that he is actually Genji's son, he favors Genji, whose restoration to imperial favor is complete. Genji visits the Rokujo Lady shortly before her death and promises to take care of her daughter. Genji's daughter by the Akashi woman is born.
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17. <i>E Awase</i> (総合)	Picture Contest	-----	The daughter of the late Rokujo Lady and the daughter of To-no-chujo vie for the emperor's attention in a contest over presenting and critiquing paintings.

More Help in Reading *Genji*

English Translations

- Helen McCulloch, trans., *Genji and Heike: Selections from the Tale of Genji and the Tale of the Heike* (Stanford University Press, 1994). Good, abridged translations of two classics representing two aspects of Japanese culture: the civil and the military.
- Edward Seidensticker, trans., *The Tale of Genji* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1978). Excellent complete translation.
- -----, *The Tale of Genji* (Vintage Books, 1990). An excellent *abridged* translation.
- Royall Tyler, trans., *The Tale of Genji* (Penguin Books, 2002). I have not had a chance to read this translation yet, but I have heard good reviews.
- Arthur Waley, trans., *The Tale of Genji* (Dover Books, 2000). An abridged version of Waley's complete translation (see below).
- -----, *The Tale of Genji*, reprint (Tuttle Publishing, 2010). Waley produced the first complete English translation of this work. Most scholars feel that Waley makes *Genji* sound too much like an English novel.

Secondary Works

- Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, reprint (Kodansha, 1994). A classic work on Heian society.
- Haruo SHIRANE, *The Bridge of Dreams: A Poetics of The Tale of Genji* (Stanford: 1988). This is the single best book I know of on the *Genji* as a work of literature.

¹ Personal communication, Andrew Watsky (currently professor of art history at Princeton; formerly of Vassar College).

² Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (numerous editions; originally published 1891).

³ Look it up. 😊