

Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji

Monthly discussion groups—November, ch. 8-13

TIPS FOR READING--The major characters to remember in chapters 8-13:

- Fujitsubo—Genji's stepmother, the empress
- Reizei—Fujitsubo's son by Genji, the heir apparent
- Suzaku—emperor after Genji's father abdicates
- Kokiden Consort—Genji's father's consort, mother of Suzaku, enemy of Genji
- The Rokujō haven—Genji's jealous former lover
- Akikonomu—the haven's daughter, the Ise Princess
- Aoi—Genji's first wife
- Yūguri—Genji's son by Aoi
- Tō no Chūjō—Genji's friend/rival and brother-in-law
- Oborozukiyo—Genji's conquest and sister of the Kokiden Consort
- Murasaki—the child Genji raises to be his second wife
- The Novice—a former minister, retired to religious life
- Akashi—the Novice's daughter, Genji's conquest

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Is there significant development in Genji's character in these chapters?
 - What is Genji learning, if anything, about the consequences of his actions?
 - What is he learning, if anything, about the inevitable tragedies of life?
 - How would you explain his wavering and sometimes contradictory attitudes toward the women in his life, especially the Rokujō haven, Aoi, and Oborozukiyo?
 - Are his feelings for Murasaki likewise subject to change?
2. The jealous woman who is transformed into a demon is an important figure in Japanese mythology (<https://yokai.com/hannya/>).
 - Of what specifically is the Rokujō haven jealous?
 - Is she the conscious agent of the destructive powers of her spirit?
 - How might the figure of this monstrous demon serve to help form female self-consciousness and identity?
3. How do Genji's sexual escapades entangle him in the power politics of the court?
 - Why does the Kokiden consort plot Genji's downfall?
 - Why is the heir apparent Reizei vulnerable in the current court atmosphere?
 - Why is Fujitsubo, Reizei's mother and Genji's great love, likewise vulnerable in the current court atmosphere?
 - Why does Genji go into voluntary exile?
4. Modern western ideas of marital fidelity obviously do not apply in Heian court culture.
 - What, however, seems to be a high moral obligation for these polyamorous men?

- What consequences do the men in this culture face as a result of the pervasive sequestration and oppression of consorts, intimates, wives, and daughters?
 - Which characters, male and female, are preoccupied with problems of protecting powerless and vulnerable women? Without male protection, what options do women have?
 - How do you evaluate Genji's treatment of the women, old and young, in his life?
5. Do Genji's sexual escapades, marital trials, and political entanglements seem to be having a cumulative effect on his world view?
 - How does he interpret his court rejection?
 - How does he interpret his discovery of the Novice and his daughter?
 - How does he interpret the reversal of his banishment?
 - How would you characterize the attitude that replaces his youthful optimism and reckless impetuosity?
 6. In exile Genji encounters a community of humble seafolk.
 - What is suggested by Genji's inability to understand their impenetrable jargon?
 - When he asks them to share their harvest of shellfish with his guest Tō no Chūjō, what does he learn about the world beyond the Heian court?
 - How does Genji treat the seafolk during the terrifying storm?
 7. What makes the Novice an eccentric, perhaps even comic figure?
 - What do you think of his ambitions for his daughter?
 - What problem do these ambitions pose for his commitment to religious retirement?
 8. What do you make of the poems that dot the narrative?
 - How does their technique of allusive indirection enhance the love stories in which they play a large role?
 - Do you find them beautiful, expressive, and romantic, or are they too often repetitive and commonplace? How does their variable quality characterize their authors?
 - In addition to writing poems and letters in fine calligraphy, painting, and playing musical instruments, how do these characters seem to live their quotidian lives (even in the most tragic moments) as if they were creating an aesthetically beautiful object?
 9. Periodically, Murasaki's narrator interjects comments—about what constitutes good or bad poetry, about what a woman can and cannot write, about how she will be judged for revealing Genji's flaws, etc.
 - What effects do these self-conscious interjections have on the reader?
 - Why would Murasaki craft her tale as mediated by a specifically female (and sometimes intrusive) presence?