

**Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji**  
**2 meetings discussion group—May**

**Chapters 33-36**

**TIP FOR READING**—It will be helpful to keep track of these previously-introduced characters who become important in this section of the novel:

- Kashiwagi—Tō no Chūjō's eldest son
- Kumoi no Kari—Tō no Chūjō's daughter, who was the childhood playmate of Yūgiri
- Yūgiri—Genji's son by Aoi, who rises through the ranks
- Suzaku—Retired and eventually Cloistered Emperor, half-brother of Genji
- The Third Princess—Suzaku's favorite daughter
- The Rokujō Haven—Genji's deceased former lover, mother of Akikonomu, whose jealous spirit killed Yūgao (mother of Tamakazura) and Aoi

1. As we have discussed in the previous section, many conflicts arose with the arrival of Tō no Chūjō's lost-and-found daughter Tamakazura in Genji's household. Similarly, in this section, the appearance of a daughter in Genji's household—this time the Retired Emperor Suzaku's Third Princess—entangles the old friends and rivals, Genji and Tō no Chūjō, as well as their sons, in new rivalries.
  - Why, according to Suzaku (see pp. 582-84), are princesses even more problematical to raise than other daughters? What options does he consider for the Third Princess's future?
  - How and why does the presence of the Third Princess in Genji's household destabilize Tō no Chūjō's family, which had just made peace with Genji's family by accepting Yūgiri as Kumoi no Kari's husband?
  - How and why does the arrival of the Third Princess threaten to destabilize Genji's own household, where Murasaki and Hanachirusato live and where the Akashi lady and her daughter, as well as Akikonomu, often visit?
2. In this section, we also see how female comportment is not simply a matter of convention, but can have profound consequences.
  - Both Suzaku, the Third Princess's father, and Genji, her protector, worry that she is irredeemably "childish." How does this childishness manifest itself? According to the norms for female comportment in Heian era Japan, does she bear any responsibility for her violation?
  - Genji repeatedly praises Murasaki's comportment, saying that there is no woman like her. What attitudes and actions make Murasaki the novel's ideal of feminine behavior?
  - Since Murasaki is so adept at handling Genji's household and the delicate problems that arise from Genji's polyamorous relationships, why does she long to become a nun? Why does Genji resist her choice so strenuously?
  - How does the Rokujō Haven, albeit deceased, serve as a foil for Murasaki? (A foil character serves as a contrast to the protagonist. The foil's personality traits, attributes, values, or motivations serve to highlight the traits of the protagonist.)
  - Does Murasaki, the author, tell the story of the near death of Murasaki, the character, as an exemplary tale in which a manifestation of female evil destroys a manifestation of the

female ideal? Or, even for her 11<sup>th</sup> century audience, does Murasaki, the author, suggest a critique of this clear binary?

3. This section of the novel emphasizes the dynamic relationship in Heian court culture between what is veiled/occluded and what is seen/understood.
  - When Tō no Chūjō decides to accept Yūgiri as a son-in-law, why does he convey his acceptance in a drunken exchange of poetry about wisteria blossoms (pp. 563-65)?
  - When a cat, entangled in a curtain's cords, momentarily reveals the Third Princess and her ladies, how do Kashiwagi's and Yūgiri's reaction to this full sight of the women differ? What do their different reactions reveal about the sons of the two friends/rivals, Tō no Chūjō and Genji?
  - Why does the clear sight of what is always behind screens and curtains have such a profound effect on Kashiwagi?
  - How does the offending cat itself become a substitute for Kashiwagi's necessarily hidden passion?
  - Why is the moment of Kashiwagi's rape of the third princess veiled as a dream: "Upon dozing off a moment he dreamed that the cat he had made into such a pet came to him, mewling sweetly, and that he brought it to Her Highness as a gift" (p. 651)?
  - Why is Kashiwagi's deathbed confession to Yūgiri so oblique: "There is a little matter on which I wronged His Grace of Rokujō, and for months I begged his pardon in my heart, until I became so miserable that I despaired of life . . ."? Does Kashiwagi expect Yūgiri eventually to divine his precise sin against Genji?
  - How does this episode of sexual concealment and revelation relate to the secret at the center of Genji's life?
4. Shame, almost more than any other emotion, seems to motivate the characters in the court of Heian era Japan. What specific role does shame play in the decisions and actions of the following characters? What do they fear will bring them shame?
  - Yūgiri
  - Suzaku
  - Genji
  - Kashiwagi
  - The Third Princess
  - Murasaki
  - The Rokujō Haven

How does shame interact with the dynamic relationship, which we are probing in question #3, between what is veiled/occluded and what is seen/understood?

5. This section of the novel includes elaborate descriptions of jubilees, birthday celebrations, progresses to shrines, state visits, contests, musical soirees, etc., during which the participants consume copious quantities of alcohol.
  - What role does alcohol play in this elevated court culture? Do any important actions occur while the characters are drunk?
  - At the conclusion of one poetic and detailed description of the music, dancing, and costumes during a pilgrimage, the voice of the narrator adds, "One would have wished to

watch them forever” (p. 633). Why does Murasaki, the author, have her narrator call attention to what appears to be first-hand experience of the glittering court world she describes?

## Chapters 37-45

**TIP FOR READING**—It will be helpful to keep track of the most important characters in this section of the novel:

- Kashiwagi—Tō no Chūjō’s eldest son, deceased father of Kaoru
  - Yūgiri —Genji’s son, husband of Kumoi no Kari, but pursues Kashiwagi’s widow
  - Kobai—Kashiwagi’s younger brother, father of 2 daughters + 1 step-daughter
  - Tamakazura--Tō no Chūjō’s daughter, widowed with 3 sons + 2 daughters
  - The Eighth Prince—Genji’s half-brother, a widow with 2 daughters, who has retreated from the world to study the scriptures
  - Kaoru—“The Fragrant Captain,” thought to be Genji’s son
  - Niou—“The Perfumed Prince,” son of the Empress Akashi and thus Genji’s grandson
  - Ben—daughter of Kashiwagi’s nurse, who cared for him when he was dying
1. As the novel follows the life of Genji and then his descendants, more and more characters take religious vows and retire from the world, or they yearn to retreat, but can’t.
    - What motivates these characters?
      - Religious commitment to renounce life’s never-ending cycles of desire and loss?
      - Intention to prepare for an approaching death?
      - Escape from an untenable situation?
      - Despair, depression, guilt, or other negative psychological state?
      - Other possibilities . . . ?
    - Which characters experience which of the above motivations?
    - Which characters find themselves unable to act, despite these motivations?
    - What factors prevent characters from acting on their desire to retreat from the world?
  2. Secrets and gossip, especially about parentage, often become the engine that drives the plots of novels, and the revelation of secrets is often a climactic moment.
    - How does the revelation of the Emperor Reizei’s true father compare/contrast to the revelation of Kaoru’s true father?
    - What has aroused Kaoru’s suspicions about his birth? How has growing up with these suspicions shaped his personality?
    - Who else shares Kaoru’s suspicions? What has aroused their suspicions?
    - Why are nurses, waiting women, and monks so often the keepers of these secrets? What prompts them to reveal what they know?
    - Gossiping, keeping secrets, and sometimes revealing them are only one aspect of the importance of waiting women in propelling the plot of this novel.
      - What other important roles do waiting women play in the stories of both married and unmarried women?
      - Do these often-unnamed characters wield a measure of social power that belies their low social status?

3. As the friends/rivals Tō no Chūjō and Genji age, the focus of the novel shifts to the second generation. Specifically, chapters 34-36 relate the tragic death of Tō no Chūjō's eldest son Kashiwagi, then chapters 37 and 39 relate Yūgiri's pursuit of Kashiwagi's widow.
- How does Yūgiri's comportment in his pursuit of Kashiwagi's widow (the Second Princess of the Retired Emperor Suzaku) compare to Kashiwagi's pursuit of her sister (the Third Princess)? How would you compare/contrast their treatment of their wives?
  - Does Yūgiri's friendship/rivalry with Kashiwagi mirror the friendship/rivalry between their fathers? How do these supposed half-brothers resemble and/or differ from their real fathers?

4. The narration of Murasaki's final months, her death, and Genji's mourning seem to bring The Tale of Genji to a natural close.

- In what way does Murasaki perform the Heian era ideal of a good death?
- What does Genji's mourning reveal about the self-knowledge that he achieves (or fails to achieve) before his own death?
- Why is Genji so moved and comforted by the letter and poem of condolence that he receives from Akikonomu (the Rokujō Haven's daughter whom Genji had cared for and placed as Reizei's consort, then Empress)?

*"Had she no love then for sere wastes of withered*

*Moors, that the departed*

*never wished to set her heart on all*

*That commends autumn?*

Now at last I understand." (p. 763)

What episodes earlier in the novel do these words of condolence evoke? How does this letter relate to Murasaki's dying commendation of her red plum tree to her favorite, Niou?

5. Do you notice a change in prose style and/or narrative style after the blank chapter, "Vanishing into the Clouds," which signifies Genji's death?

- Prose style?
  - For example, after the blank chapter (p. 781), do you find many descriptive passages like the following excerpt?

"Down a mountain wind that stripped the trees and swept a rushing storm of leaves from the kudzu vines on high came faint scripture chanting and the calling of the Name. . . . The waterfall roared as though to rouse the stricken from their sorrows. Crickets among the grasses sang forlornly, in failing voices, while tall, dewy gentians sprang from beneath withered weeds as though autumn were theirs alone." (p. 737)

- For another example, before the blank chapter, do you find many passages of exposition like the following excerpt?

"His Excellency of the Right took over the Left after that Minister's death, and the Fujiwara Grand Counselor assumed the Right, with a concurrent appointment as Left Commander. Their juniors all rose in turn. The Fragrant Captain became a Counselor and the Third Rank Captain a Consultant. No one seemed to matter then but those two gentlemen's sons." (p. 823)

- Narrative style?
  - For example, chapters 42 narrates the youth of Kaoru and Niou; chapter 43 digresses to Kobai's plans for his daughters; chapter 44 details the problems

Tamakazura faces in finding suitable partners for her daughters; and chapter 45 begins the story of the Eighth Prince, his daughters, and the revelation of Kaoru's true parentage.

- Did you find the plots in these chapters more difficult to follow than you found earlier chapters?
- Did you find any narrative or thematic elements that connect the separate stories introduced in these chapters?
- Which of these threads (Kobai and his daughters, Tamakazura and her daughters, the Eighth Prince and his daughters) seems to be the most promising for further narrative development in relation to the third-generation protagonists, Niou and Kaoru?
- Do you agree or disagree with the scholars who suggest that the part of the novel that follows Genji's death may have been written by someone other than Murasaki Shikibu? (This is a much-debated question.)

### **The most important characters in chapters 46-49:**

- The Eighth Prince—Genji's half-brother, a widower with two daughters, who has retreated from the world to study the scriptures
  - Ōigimi—the Eighth Prince's older daughter
  - Naka no Kimi—the Eighth Prince's younger daughter
  - Kaoru—"The Fragrant Captain" (promoted to Counselor), thought to be Genji's son, but really Kashiwagi's son, Tō no Chūjō's grandson
  - Niou—"The Perfumed Prince," son of the Empress Akashi and thus Genji's grandson
  - Ukifune—the Eighth Prince's unrecognized daughter
1. The Eighth Prince faces a predicament: he can't find serious suitors for his two daughters, even though "he would have winked at courtship from anyone, even if not ideal, who genuinely wished to take one in hand, provided only that he was acceptable enough not to cause unfavorable gossip" (p. 852). Besides, he complains, "Women are trifling creatures on the whole, good only for passing pleasures, but they arouse strong feelings . . . a daughter . . . is likely to be a great worry even when one must acknowledge how little she is worth" (p. 853). His parting advice to his daughters as he retires from the world is this: "Never let yourselves be persuaded to leave this mountain village unless by someone worthy of you. Simply . . . decide to remain here all your lives . . . What matters above all, particularly for a woman, is to remain unseen and never to arouse such criticism as to bring her to others' unfriendly attention" (p. 855).
    - What seems to be the Eighth Prince's greatest concern about the fate of his daughters?
    - Is the predicament of Ōigime and Naka no Kimi more precarious than that of other daughters we have encountered? Tamakazura? Suzaku's third princess? If so, why?
    - Later, when the Empress tries to persuade Niou, who has quietly married Naka no Kimi, to marry Yūgiri's daughter, she tells him, "Once you have achieved so sound an alliance, then behave yourself and bring anyone else you may be keen on to you" (p. 905). Why does Niou consider this solution "a disaster"? What would make the life of a Consort or an Intimate for Naka no Kimi unacceptable?
    - Would the two princesses have been happier if they had lived their lives in isolation at Uji, as the Eighth Prince advised? What other options seem possible for them?

2. The Eighth Prince chooses Kaoru as the protector of his daughters before he retires from the world, then dies.
  - Why does he choose Kaoru?
  - What kind of guardian does Kaoru turn out to be? What trials threaten his reputation as staid, serious, even unworldly?
  - Why does Ōigime adamantly reject his advances?
  - Whose plan seems to be the wiser choice for Naka no Kimi's future: Kaoru's support of Niou's suit or Ōigime's suggestion that Kaoru transfer his desire from the older to the younger sister?
  - What becomes the driving motivation for Kaoru's behavior? What has happened to his desire to retire from the world, as did the Eighth Prince, his mentor?
  
3. The Eighth Prince distrusted Niou as a suitor for his daughters because of his reputation as a "gallant."
  - Should Kaoru have known better than to encourage his pursuit of Naka no Kimi? What blinded his judgment?
  - How would you compare/contrast Niou to his grandfather, Genji, the "gallant" *par excellence* of this novel?
  - How serious are Niou's feelings for Naka no Kimi?
  - Was Naka no Kimi's fate, to have been supplanted by Niou's marriage to Yūgiri's sixth daughter, almost inevitable? Or might the birth of her son perhaps alter the hierarchy?
  
4. The Tale of Genji describes in excruciating detail the constraints on the lives of these aristocratic women. But what constrains the lives of these aristocratic men?
  - How does Niou's position as a prince constrain his movements and choices?
  - Kaoru is a commoner, albeit high-ranking. But how are his choices also constrained by his position?
  - How many male characters have we encountered who long to retire from the world, but are prevented or delayed because of obligations to women, especially daughters? Does the novel suggest (intentionally? or unintentionally?) that patriarchy oppresses both genders?
  
5. Throughout the novel, the plot is complicated by substitution or surrogacy in sexual relationships. Genji is attracted to Fujitsubo, in part, because he is told she resembles his deceased mother, then he is attracted to Murasaki because of her resemblance to Fujitsubo. Moreover, Genji is attracted to more than one daughter (e.g. Akikonomu and Tamakazura) because she reminds him of a former lover (e.g. the Rokujō Haven and Yūgao). Kashiwagi even substitutes a kitten for Suzaku's third princess, with whom he is obsessed! This pattern of surrogacy and substitution is expanded and complicated in the story of the third generation.
  - What motivates Kaoru, at first, to reject a substitution of Naka no Kimi for Ōigime, with whom he falls in love? After Ōigime's death, why does he regret not following her advice to choose the younger sister?
  - How does sexual longing and nostalgia for the lost Ōigime come to dominate Kaoru's decisions and actions?

- At the end of chapter 49, when Kaoru spies on the Eighth Prince's unrecognized daughter, who so resembles her two sisters, he muses, "He and she must have shared a bond of destiny from the past" (p. 971). Consider the following substitutions:
    - Kaoru took Genji to be his father, but the Shining Prince was a substitute for his real father, Kashiwagi.
    - Kaoru took the Eighth Prince as a surrogate "father," to whose mountain village he retreated from the court to study the scriptures.
    - Kaoru successively desires the Eighth Prince's three daughters—each one sequentially substituting for the previous one.
- Is "destiny" the best explanation for this repetitive pattern? How does this plot pattern relate to the other incidents of sexual surrogacy and substitution throughout the novel?

**The most important characters in ch. 50-54:**

- Naka no Kimi—the Eighth Prince's younger daughter, sister of Ōigimi
- Ukifune—the Eighth Prince's unrecognized daughter, half-sister of Naka no Kimi
- Ukifune's mother—whose second husband is the Governor of Hitachi
- Kaoru—once "The Fragrant Captain," now "The Commander"
- Second princess—wife of Kaoru, daughter of the Emperor and a consort
- Niou—once "The Perfumed Prince," now "His Highness of War"
- Wife of Niou—daughter of Yūgiri, now "His Excellency, Minister of the Right"
- Jijū and Ukon—Ukifune's gentlewomen
- A nun who finds Ukifune—daughter of a Prelate

1. The Tale of Genji ends with a laser-like focus on the plight of Ukifune.

- In what ways is she the example, *par excellence*, of the unprotected woman in this culture? What protection has her father offered? Why can't her mother protect her? Can her half-sister, Naka no Kimi, protect her? What protection might Niou or Kaoru offer her? Do the nuns and Prelate protect her? What is the significance of her name, "drifting boat" (see the title of chapter 51)?
- In what ways is she the example, *par excellence*, of the trapped woman—of which we have seen so many in this novel? Why can't she just let one of her suitors take charge of her?
- Where do the important people in Ukifune's life (e.g. her gentlewomen, the nuns who later care for her, Kaoru, even her mother) lay the blame for her plight? Whom does Ukifune blame? Does the novel, as a whole, suggest that the blame for Ukifune's plight lies elsewhere?
- Unprotected, trapped, and blamed—how is Ukifune, in the end, erased? Why does she choose suicide? Why does she choose to become a nun, and continue to insist on her decision despite pressure from all sides? Why is it significant that Kaoru, at the very end of the novel and "after full deliberation, consigned her to invisibility" (p. 1120)?

2. What are Niou's motivations in his pursuit of Ukifune?

- How does his relationship with Ukifune begin?

- What piques his curiosity and impels him to search for her once she is hidden away? Then, when he finds her, what spurs him to continue to pursue her, despite the impediments imposed by his position at court and the hazards of he must face in his escapes to her hiding places?
  - Does Niou love Ukifune? If so, in what way?
3. What are Kaoru's motivations in his pursuit of Ukifune?
- How is his pursuit related to his past love for Ōigimi and his present, extreme attentiveness to Naka no Kimi? Why does Naka no Kimi tell Kaoru of Ukifune's existence?
  - Why doesn't Kaoru consider taking Ukifune as a second wife, as Yūgiri took Kashiwagi's widow as a second wife? Why, instead, does he hide her away?
  - What seems to cause Kaoru the most anxiety as he considers how to manage his relationship to Ukifune?
  - What does Kaoru's reaction to his discovery that Niou has been visiting Ukifune reveal about his deepest concerns?
  - Does Kaoru love Ukifune? Or is she, perhaps for both Kaoru and Niou, a token of exchange in their relationship with each other?
4. The story of Ukifune brings to a climax the theme of surrogacy and substitution that we have followed throughout the novel. In one of Kaoru's conversations with Naka no Kimi—a conversation which reveals both his continued mourning of Ōigimi and his desire to take Naka no Kimi as a substitute—Kaoru says, "I would make a doll in her [Ōigimi's] likeness . . . and paint her picture, too, and pursue my devotions before them" (p. 954). Here Kaoru alludes to the practice of addressing a Buddhist rite to a sculpted or painted image. In a later conversation, Naka no Kimi tries to distract Kaoru from his overtures to her by telling him that the "doll" he had mentioned, Ukifune, is hiding in her house. He responds with this poem:
- If she is truly the double of her I knew, I shall keep her close:  
she shall be my cleansing charm through the cruel shoals of love.*
- Here Kaoru alludes to a Shinto purification ritual in which malign influences are transferred to a doll by stroking it, then sending it down a stream or river to the sea.
- Might both these Shinto and Buddhist practices of using images help explain the pervasive seeking of substitutes and surrogates in the culture of Heian era Japan? If, from a Shinto perspective, spirits can be transferred from body to body (as we see in the novel's multiple descriptions of illness), AND if, from a Buddhist perspective, the endless cycles of rebirth continue until a state of enlightenment and liberation is achieved—then does the novel's portrayal of characters who obsessively seek surrogates and substitutes reflect a concept of personhood that is somewhat fluid?
  - How does this perspective on personhood differ from Western notions of personhood?
5. Does The Tale of Genji end abruptly to you, with no resolution of the plot that the novel is developing or the themes that the novel has addressed? If so, do you attribute this abrupt ending to external factors, like the death of the author or the loss of manuscripts?
- Or does the novel close in a manner consistent with a Buddhist representation of the futility of life's endless cycles of suffering and sin?



- Or with a climactic representation of the inevitably tragic life of women in Heian era Japan?
- Or with the triumphant resistance of a very unlikely heroine?
- Or . . . ?

