

**Every other month discussion groups—April**

**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 . . . ?