The Dream of the Red Chamber (Hung Lou Meng), Chapters I–LVI

Cao Xueqin · *mid-18th century; first printed 1791 · H. Bencraft Joly translation (1892–93)*

A stone left over from the repair of the heavens is given a human life, and its story is the novel. Chia Pao-yue, born with a piece of jade in his mouth, grows up spoiled in the great Jung mansion, where the two cousins he loves, Lin Tai-yue and Hsueeh Pao-ch'ai, come to live. The library hosts the first fifty-six of the book's hundred and twenty chapters. It is the great novel of Qing China, a book of family, love, poetry, and a household that is slowly failing.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What lasts in a great household, in love, and in life, when the splendor around them is built on something that will not hold?

The novel treats the Chia family with love and with sorrow. The garden, the poetry clubs, and the banquets are shown at their brightest, and the quarrels and expenses that will end it are shown at the same time. Pao-yue's love for Tai-yue is made against the family's plans for him, and the book's Buddhist frame says that all such splendor is a dream. In this hosted half the house is at its height and the first strains are plain.

KEY CHARACTERS

Chia Pao-yue
The young heir, sensitive, idle, and born with a jade.

Lin Tai-yue
His delicate and gifted orphan cousin.

Hsueeh Pao-ch'ai
His prudent and poised cousin.

Dowager Lady Chia
The head of the family.

Lady Feng
The shrewd manager of the household.

Chia Cheng
Pao-yue's stern father.

Hsi Jen and Ch'ing Wen
Pao-yue's two maids, one gentle and one proud.

Goody Liu
A poor relation whose visits show the house from outside.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Stone and the Dream

CHAPTER I

The author says that his story is a dream and tells the myth of the stone. A man named Chen Shih-yin sees a vision of the stone and then the fall of his own house.

- The frame tells the reader to read the story as a dream.
- The stone is the source of the book's name and idea.
- A first household falls, as a preview of the Chias.

02

The Chia Family and Lin Tai-yue

CHAPTERS II–IV

A scholar's career and a traveler's talk introduce the Jung mansion. The orphan Lin Tai-yue comes to live in her grandmother's house.

- Pao-yue, born with the jade, is petted by his grandmother.
- Tai-yue is delicate, gifted, and watchful.
- The rules and rank of the house are laid out.

03

The Registers of the Fates

CHAPTERS V–VI

In a dream Pao-yue visits the Great Void and reads the registers of the girls' fates. He wakes into the household's affairs, and Goody Liu, a poor relation, visits.

- The registers foretell the sorrows to come.
- The dream is a key to the book's structure.
- Goody Liu's visit shows the house's wealth from outside.

04

The Garden

CHAPTERS VII–XXIV

The family receives the emperor's consort, builds the great garden Ta Kuan Yuan, and settles the young people in it. Quarrels, poems, and rivalries begin.

- The consort's visit is a high point of family favor.
- The garden is a world for the young.
- Pao-yue's attachments and the household's plans begin to conflict.

05

Illness, Beating, and Banquets

CHAPTERS XXV–XL

A bewitching strikes Pao-yue and Lady Feng. Pao-yue is beaten by his father, and Tai-yue and Pao-ch'ai are set side by side. The family gathers for banquets and poetry clubs.

- Pao-yue's father, Chia Cheng, is stern.
- The triangle of Pao-yue, Tai-yue, and Pao-ch'ai takes shape.
- Banquets and poems show the house in its pride.

06

Strain in the House

CHAPTERS XLI–LVI

Expenses and quarrels grow. Lady Feng falls ill, and others manage the house. The hosted text ends as the young Tan Ch'un starts to reform the accounts.

- Lady Feng's decline is a sign of the house's decline.
- The management of money becomes the hidden problem.
- The translation ends mid-story, with the family still standing.

Family and Fortune · Love · Dream and Reality · Poetry · Decline

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The text here is only the first 56 of 120 chapters. Notice what is left unresolved.
2. The book opens with a myth and a dream. Ask how that frame changes the story.
3. Watch the many women of the household. Each is drawn as an individual.
4. Money and management appear quietly in many scenes. Notice how they build into a problem.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the H. Bencraft Joly translation (1892–93) (Project Gutenberg #9603 and #9604 (Cao Xueqin, Hung Lou Meng, or The Dream of the Red Chamber, Chapters I–LVI, tr. H. Bencraft Joly, Kelly & Walsh, Hong Kong, 1892–1893); Internet Archive hungloumengbooki09603gut), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/hung-lou-meng-the-dream-of-the-red-chamber/.