The Tale of Genji (the first seventeen chapters)

Murasaki Shikibu · *c. 1000–1010 · Suematsu Kenchō translation (1882, abridged)*

Around the year 1000 a Japanese court lady, Murasaki Shikibu, wrote the long story of Genji, the emperor's son who is made a commoner and spends his life in love and politics. Often called the first novel, it is a portrait of the Heian court, with its poetry and its sorrow. The library hosts the first seventeen chapters in a Victorian abridgment, which leaves out much of the poetry and softens many scenes.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What do love and beauty cost in a world where rank, jealousy, and the passing of time decide most things?

Genji is gifted, beautiful, and loved, and the story is gentle with him. Yet the early chapters follow a pattern of loss: his mother dies, the women he loves die or withdraw, and he is sent into exile. The book values feeling, art, and sensitivity above power, and it sees that these things are fragile. In this abridged version the reader gets the outline of that pattern more than the finer texture of the original.

KEY CHARACTERS

Genji
The shining prince, a commoner by his father's choice, gifted and loved.

The Emperor
Genji's father, who loves the Kiri-Tsubo consort.

Kiri-Tsubo
Genji's mother, whose death begins the story.

Wistaria
An imperial consort whom Genji loves in secret.

Violet
A girl whom Genji takes home to raise.

Aoi
Genji's first wife, who dies after bearing a son.

Tō-no-Chūjō
Genji's friend and rival.

Grades 11–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Emperor's Favorite

CHAPTER I

An emperor loves a consort of low rank. The court's envy wears her down and she dies after the birth of a son. In grief the emperor makes the boy a commoner and gives him the name Genji.

- The palace's jealousy is shown as a force, not a rumor.
- Genji's early beauty and talent are told as a kind of fate.
- His loss of his mother shapes all his loves.

02

A Rainy Night and First Loves

CHAPTERS II–IV

Young courtiers discuss on a wet night which women are worth loving. Genji's affairs follow: a lady who slips away from him, and a woman in a lonely house who dies suddenly.

- The 'rainy night' talk is a famous scene of men judging women.
- The lady who flees makes a pattern of pursuit and withdrawal.
- A death, and a fever, end this group of affairs.

03

The Ague and the Violet

CHAPTERS V–VII

Genji goes to a mountain hermit for a cure and sees a young girl, whom he takes home to raise. His secret love for the Emperor's consort runs under these chapters.

- Young Violet is the child he will shape.
- Forbidden love is made delicate and dangerous.
- Court ceremony, dance, and music take over the chapters.

04

Aoi and the Divine Tree

CHAPTERS VIII–X

Genji's formal wife Aoi dies after the birth of their son, from a malign spirit. The old emperor's death turns court politics against him.

- Aoi's death is attributed to a spirit of jealousy.
- The shift of power to Genji's rivals changes his position.
- The Divine Tree chapter turns on a farewell.

05

Exile at Suma and Akashi

CHAPTERS XI–XIII

Rather than wait for disgrace, Genji withdraws to the coast. Storms and a recurring dream test him, and a man from Akashi comes to his aid.

- Genji's exile is a retreat, not only a punishment.
- The sea storms are the book's great natural force.
- The Akashi family offers him a new refuge.

06

Return and the Picture Contest

CHAPTERS XIV–XVII

Genji is recalled to court and restored. The seventeen chapters close in a gentler time, with a contest of pictures that shows how much the court prizes art.

- His restoration comes as suddenly as his exile.
- The contest of pictures is a showcase for the court's taste.
- The hosted text ends here, with the story unfinished.

Beauty and Loss | Love | Court and Power | Exile | Art

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The text here is a Victorian abridgment. Notice what it leaves out, especially the poems.
2. Genji's loves often end in loss. Look for the pattern.
3. The chapters are named for flowers and places. Ask what each name suggests.
4. The book is from a woman's view of the court. Watch how it pictures the men.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the Suematsu Kenchō translation (1882, abridged) (sacred-texts.com (scanned, proofed and formatted December 2008), from the Japanese Literature edition of 1900 (revised edition of the 1882 London translation); mirror used: sacred-texts.xyz), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/murasaki-shikibu-the-tale-of-genji/.