

The Harsh Cry of the Heron Study Guide

The Harsh Cry of the Heron by Gillian Rubinstein

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Plot Summary

The Harsh Cry of The Heron by Lian Hearn is a fantasy novel set in a fictional version of the Far East, and in particular the island of Japan (known here as the Three Countries). This book occupies the last 'spot' in Hearn's cycle, The Tales of the Otori, that began with Across The Nightingale Floor and the arrival of our protagonist, Otori Takeo.

Otori Takeo is now the leader of the Three Countries (something similar to a shogun), who has been ruling the land peacefully for a number of years whilst he attempts to raise his daughters Shigeko (the eldest) and the young twins Maya and Miki with his wife Kaede. During his reign he has managed to maintain control over the Tribe (the clans and the bloodlines of the ninja-like assassins from which he himself is descended), while attempting to bring justice in the form of religious tolerance and gender equality. For the most part, the book starts with a peaceful reign and the idea that he has been successful.

Unbeknownst to Takeo, his illegitimate son Hisao has now come of age and is living with his sworn enemy Kikuta Akio (the Master of the Kikuta family), who is training him how to kill his father. Even though he has none of the overt magical Tribe skills himself, the son actually has the ability to contact the spirit world, and the know-how to use and make firearms.

Into the middle of this seething plot, Takeo receives word from the God Emperor of the Eight Islands that his overthrow of the previous warlord is unlawful and that, unless he abdicates immediately, the emperor's own general will be conducting an invasion. Knowing that all he can do is act diplomatically, Takeo is advised to act according to the way of peace (the religion of the realm) and takes himself and his retinue to the God Emperor's court in an attempt to placate him and prove his worth as a vassal of the Three Countries. While there Takeo has to undergo a challenge for the right to rule his realm, as well as having to face the treacheries of his most powerful liege lord back in the Three Countries. The ending is one of high tragedy, in which Takeo is forced to realize that a man can never out run his fate, and that the sins of the father are always revisited upon the land that he may govern.

Written in an engaging style that uses many elements with which we are familiar (wuxia Kungfu, Hong Kong Style martial arts, Far Eastern legends), The Harsh Cry of the Heron is an imaginative and grand epic that attempts to present this genre to the reader in a new, fantastical way.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

The Harsh Cry of the Heron starts with the scene of Otori Takeo, Lord over the Three Countries and hero of the preceding Tales of the Otori series, attacking his wife Kaede.

Takeo Otori, once the shy, secretive child who is a member of 'the Hidden' (a tribe of Ninja-like mystics, reviled by most of the Three Countries), rose to prominence over the last sequence of books and finally became the supreme war leader of the lands (under the Emperor, that is). He is now married to Kaede (the daughter of his old enemy), a father to three daughters and living at one of his palaces at Inuyama.

Chapter 1 sees Takeo and Kaede's oldest daughter, Shigeko, shouting to her younger siblings Maya and Miki that their parents are fighting again, and that they must come and watch. Takeo rarely spars with anyone any more since he has become the Lord of the Three Countries, but this time he has been encouraged to take up the bamboo cane and spar with his old fighting partner, lover and now wife Kaede. Takeo's wife wins the bout, and Takeo reveals that he now feels old and that the wounds of the past, particularly his missing fingers on one hand, have been troubling him. Shigeko, his eldest daughter, announces that she wishes to fight her father, to which he agrees and wins the first round. Shigeko learns quickly, however, and defeats her father in the second bout, after which Takeo leaves the Nightingale Floor and lets Miki, one of his other daughters, fight Shigeko.

Shigeko has been training in the Way of Huou, a martial art, in the monastery of Terayama, and easily beats her younger sister and displays almost magical powers. Takeo wonders how long it will be before the powers inherent in all of the Hidden will manifest themselves in his two youngest daughters, whom he loves dearly. Whilst Takeo is musing, he notices that his wife Kaede is uneasy and upset; she seems to share the superstitions that most people have in the Three Countries that it is unlucky for twins to be allowed to spend time together — their two youngest daughters, Miki and Maya, are twins. Takeo reluctantly splits them up and sends them away. Later that night he sleeps with his wife, and tries to ease her fears for their future.

Chapter Two continues the story of the ruling family of the Otori as they go to the temple at Inuyama, making their first holy visit to the shrine of the New Year. The temple is dedicated to The Enlightened One, the Buddha, and Kunan, Quan-Yin, the All-Merciful White Goddess. The women of the household — Shigeko, Kaede and the two daughters — separate to go to the shrine of Kunan the All-Merciful, where they are accompanied by Shizuku, a lady-in-waiting. The royal court hasn't gone very far when Shigeko notices something odd about one of the servants approaching, and warns her sister not to go near the servant just as the servant and two other assassins leap from the shadows. Shigeko, only fifteen and Shizuku, their lady-in-waiting, manage to defeat



their opponents, and Shigeko realizes just how well trained she has become at the hands of the Abbot of Terayama.

Chapter Three sees Takeo asking his oldest mentor and most trusted advisor Kenjii Muto about the attack, since the elderly Kenjii has now become his spymaster and master of gathering information across his reign. Takeo reveals that he had last seen the attackers when they were infants, for they are in fact his distant relative and sworn enemy Gosaburo's children. Gosaburo is a member of the Kikuta family, who are also members of the Hidden Tribe, and thus connected with Takeo and his own personal past. When the rulership of the Otari Tribe had been won by Takeo, many years before, the Kikuta family had sworn a blood oath to avenge themselves against this 'usurper' Takeo, and had now started to sending their own nieces and nephews as assassins to attack the family of their enemy. Although they are alive, Takeo realizes that he cannot reach the Kikuta stronghold in the mountains as the new year's snows will fall very soon. Gosaburo will have to agonize over the potential success and failure of his children until the next spring. Takeo wonders whether having these would-be assassins as hostages is actually an advantage, since he could use their release as leverage with his aging enemy and hopefully broker a lasting peace for the Otori Tribe once and for all.

Takeo then turns his attention to the other reasons why he had come to see Kenjii. His adviser is of fading health. He has started showing symptoms of a wasting disease that has forced him to become weak in the limbs and cough up blood, but his mind is still as sharp as ever. Kenjii has spent the last few years working on a system to replace the old Otori Tribe's way of doing things with a newer system, since it turns out that the Otori Tribe used to be renowned for their methods of handling justice, assassinations and poisoning. Muto Kenjii has also discovered that the old martial warrior classes of the Tribe are beginning to cause problems again since the Otori used to train their warriors exclusively to war against each other, and so has been trying to institute a system where they could act in works for the public good. At the end of the meeting, Takeo and Kenjii are talking about old times in the Tribe, and Takeo raises the subject of Hisao, his son by another woman who is even now living unaware of his real father in Gosaburo's village. Kenjii, the boy's grandfather, since Takeo had once been married to his own daughter, states that he would like to see the boy again, before he dies.

Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

These first chapters re-introduce the reader to the characters of the Otori Tales; Takeo, Kenji, Kaede and the daughters Shikeko, Maya and Miki.

By focusing immediately upon the family dynamic at the very start of the story, the author is signalling to the reader what the central themes are really going to be about and foreshadowing the later events of the plot. We can quickly fathom that this seemingly happy family is about to be challenged in some way, and in a sense has to be challenged for the plot to develop. This notion of the family being central also echoes the later notion that the nation and the ruling family are in actual fact one and the same



thing. A common belief in feudal and monarchical cultures is that the events of the central ruling family mirror what will happen to society as a whole. In this light, we can understand that the very beginning of the story starts in happiness and therefore the society itself must be experiencing a time of bliss and contentment.

Another interesting feature to note straight away is the setting. The setting of the Otori and the Three Countries is clearly very similar to feudal Japan. From the naming conventions, the cultural habits and the descriptions of people and objects, we are clearly meant to understand that this book is set in a fictional version of Japan itself.



Chapters 4 - 5

Chapters 4 - 5 Summary

In Chapter Four we see the boy Hiseo, Takeo's only son, as he toils in the fields above Gosaburo's village. As a member of the Kikuta family, Hiseo lives the life of one of the Tribe, but has yet to develop some of the more overt supernatural abilities common to many of the Tribe. Hiseo is wondering why he does not have the acute hearing so obvious to many of the Tribe, nor the increased eyesight, nor the ability to become night invisible. In fact, Hiseo believes himself to be a clumsy oaf.

Hiseo's adopted father was the master of the Kikuta, a man named Akio who obeyed all of the harshest rules of the Tribe and tried to deliver them to his village and his family. Hiseo reveals that he seems to know more than he should. As he thinks about his mother, he seems to 'know' how she died, that she had been forced to take poison by Akio after Akio found something out, and that his mother took the poison defiantly and with hatred in her eyes. It seems to Hiseo that he is sometimes haunted by his mother's ghost, and that sometimes even he can hear her voice in his ears when no one else can. The narrative explains that since Hiseo has told no one of his strange gift to be able to hear the voices of the dead, no one knows that Hiseo is actually in ownership of one of the oldest of the Tribes magical abilities, that of being able to communicate with the spirit world. Everyone else in Akio's community just believes that Hiseo is slow-witted.

Hiseo thinks about his circumstances; that every year some member of the Kikuta family swears vengeance on the Lord of Otori - Takeo, and travels to Inuyama to attempt to assassinate him. Every year they fail. Hiseo thinks all of these things as he works alone in the pasture fields above the village of the Kikuta, where he is devising a water wheel to be able to carry buckets of water upstream. Suddenly invisible fingers clasp around Hiseo's own and Muto Kenji emerges from his invisibility. He holds the boy fast and tells him that he will not harm him; but that he has come to talk to his 'father' Akio. Muto Kenji is amazed to find out that Hiseo, Takeo's son has none of the obvious Tribe powers that his father does, and cannot even become invisible. Muto Kenji senses something else in the boy, a type of fey otherworldliness but has no time to fathom it out before he has to go to see the Akio Kikuta family.

When Kenjii and Hiseo get to the Kikuta village, the older Kenji is immediately treated with hostility as everyone knows that he is working for Takeo as his most trusted advisor, but before they can attack Muto Kenji replies that he has news of Gosaburo's children and would-be assassins.

Kenjii and Akio have a meeting where Kenjii tries to broker a deal that would ensure that, if Akio gave up these ridiculous assassination attempts, then there would be a way for the children of Gosaburo to be released. Akio denies Kenjii the deal and, just as Kenjii is about to leave Akio orders his men to seize him. Kenji quickly bites down on the



poison pellet that he has in his mouth, and as he dies is happy to see Hiseo looking at him with his mothers - Kenji's daughters - eyes. Kenji realises just how powerful Takeo's son really is, and then departs.

Meanwhile in Chapter Five the winter has passed swiftly in Inuyama. Muto Kenji departed for the Kikuta village as soon as the snows had started to clear, and Kaede had taken their daughters to Hagi to begin their training there. Although Kaede disliked to have the twins together for any long periods of time (because of her previous superstitions), this was proving to be a vital time as the eldest daughter Shigeko had to be trained to rule the province of Maruyama which was one of the Three Countries that Lord Takeo ruled and that his eldest daughter was about to inherit in a few months. Takeo himself waits anxiously in Inuyama for any word from Muto Kenji but soon sees that he can wait no more and has to travel himself to the port city of Hofu, there to confront some other vassals under his charge.

Hofu is the port city belonging to the province of Kumamoto and the family of Arai Zenko and his wife Hana. Takeo remembers that Hana and Zenko used to be deeply jealous of himself and his wife Kaede, and wished to see themselves on the Otori throne. Recently Muto Kenji had told Takeo before he left that a shipment of lead and iron and gunpowder had been noted going into Kumamoto, and more soldiers were being recruited there. Takeo suspected that Zenko and Hana were gearing up for some kind of armed rebellion or to make a move against one of the other provinces, and so wanted to come to Hofu himself to confront them.

Zenko and Hana appear to be generous and happy to see him, but Takeo can sense that underneath their pleasantries there is an acidic dislike for everything he stands for. Takeo surmises that Zenko and Hana are gearing up to fight against their neighbour or cause trouble and so reprimands them that arming themselves in this time of peace can only be seen as an aggressive act. To mollify the situation, he accepts their request that he take under his wing their two sons Sunaomi and Chikara. Zenko and Hana imagine that if they can get Takeo to adopt their sons, then naturally the next step might be for their sons to marry the daughters of Takeo and Kaede, making their family one of the most powerful in the realm.

Takeo concedes that he will take on one of the sons, but is unsure whether he will fully adopt one as of yet, and whilst they are discussing this Hana also presents to her liege Lord Kono, an emissary from the Emperor himself.

Chapters 4 - 5 Analysis

In these two chapters we gradually start to see the notion of politics and of a creeping danger start to infect the plot. This is spread by the author primarily through the way that he sets threatening events inside non-threatening scenes, creating a feeling of sudden alarm and tension.



In Chapter Four for instance we follow the story of Hisao as he is toiling in the fields of the idyllic village. Although Hisao's narrative reveals that everything is far from well for him, this is contrasted with the narrative's presentation of the environment as quite blatantly idyllic. Chapter Five also shares this quality as Takeo confronts Zenko and Hana over their treachery, but does so in polite ways, amidst gifts and the luxuries of a palatial castle and with the words of family and friendship. The tone that the author is trying to set is one of a creeping unease or of corruption, that is unseen until looked for and palpably makes the reader start to wonder just who or what they can trust.

Another interesting theme that we can see here is the notion of family inverted. Just as Takeo, Kaede and his daughters represent the 'perfect family' talked about earlier. Kikuta Akio and Hisao represent the inverted, torturous and corrupted family. Not only are there lies about Hisao's parentage and about their 'real' relations to each other, but their very familial ethic seems to be the reverse of what happens for the royal household. We can see clearly that this 'evil' version of the royal family is set for a confrontation with their pure counterparts!



Chapter 6 - 8

Chapter 6 - 8 Summary

The next chapter continues the story of Takeo at court with his vassal lords Zenko and Hana in the port city of Hofu. Takeo is walking with his sword Jato, which he hasn't used in combat for some years, and his most trusted scribe Minoru to a meeting with Lord Kono, who is acting as a messenger from the very Emperor himself.

Takeo is inwardly confused to see the man here and wonders why the Emperor has suddenly taken an interest in the 'backwards' Three Countries, when Kono declares that a new War Master has been declared. Kono also says, because Lord Otori Takeo did not consult with the Emperor before he became the ruler of the Three Countries, it has been declared that his rule is illegitimate. Takeo is betraying the Emperor, and, unless he steps down immediately, the Emperor will send his War Master to the Three Countries to destroy him.

Takeo fights to maintain his composure, before stating that obviously he cannot issue any edicts right away, and that he will have to think about his reply. That evening he asks for Lord Kono to be confined in his room and not allowed to leave while he thinks of what he is to do. Minoru tells him that a ship was seen leaving the port just yesterday, with the suspected guns and gunpowder that Zenko and Hana had been amassing. Takeo quickly orders his guards to make sure that no one leaves the compound at all while he goes to discover the truth about this ship. He puts on the disguise of a merchant, slips into his Invisibility power that he has inherited by virtue of being a member of the Tribe, and leaves for the docks. When he arrives and finds that the ship has recently departed, he sees another familiar vessel already docked: the boat of his friend the explorers Terada and Ishida. Takeo calls out to a sailor asking if the boat at which he is looking does indeed belong to Terada. The drunken sailors loudly announce that yes, it does, and that Terada has also brought back with him a present for the Lord Otori: a magical beast known as a Kirin!

In Chapter Seven Takeo goes to the local inn where he finds Ishida and Terada, his old friends who themselves have traveled half the world. He tells Terada urgently about the boat that had just left the previous day bearing arms and gunpowder away from Hofu. Terada agrees to give chase to the vessel and leaves immediately. Doctor Ishida is left with Takeo, who tells him that his hand is still giving him trouble. Takeo believes that it must be a residue of the poison with which he was once attacked left underneath the scars of his fingers. Ishida agrees to treat it with a new powerful drug that he has acquired on his travels, decanted from the poppy.

While in the tap room, Takeo recognizes another man, a foreigner names Don Joao, who is a traveling missionary for a foreign religion. Don Joao calls Doctor Ishida and his patient over, but does not recognize Takeo in his disguise as a merchant. The woman accompanying Don Joao, however, Takeo suddenly recognizes as Madaren, his long



lost sister whom he hasn't seen since he was an infant and had thought long since dead. Madaren is apparently acting as an interpreter for Don Joao and has seemingly also become his wife in the years that they have been separated. Takeo whispers to her that they cannot talk now, but that he will be at the nearby shrine and temple of Daifukuji the next day to see the kirin, and that she should also be there so that they can talk properly.

Chapter Eight sees the story being picked up by Madaren, Takeo's Hidden sister as she contemplates her previous life. The attack that destroyed their village and had separated them as children had left Takeo adopted by the Tribe while Madaren had not been so lucky. She had found employment in the pleasure houses of the cities of the Three Countries, where she had come to know the foreign travelers. One such traveler is Don Joao whom she had met while working as a geisha. Don Joao had fallen in love with her, and she had convinced him to take her on as his companion. Madaren had become his traveling interpreter accompanying him as he explored and spread the word of his god, the Deus. Madaren had been at first skeptical of Deus, but had seen that the foreign deity actually had much in common with The Secret One, the god of the Hidden. Madaren had become a believer of sorts and now that she has suddenly seen her long lost brother once again, she is sure that this must be a sign from god that it is her duty to bring back their family together.

At the temple of Daifukuji, Madaren slips away from Don Joao and hangs around the main gates when she hears a clarion call and an announcement that the Lord Otori has come to view the kirin. With deep shock she realizes that the Lord Otori is actually her brother, Takeo.

Chapter 6 - 8 Analysis

The notion of the unbalanced or corrupted family seems to spread throughout the first part of the book as it is revealed in these chapters that not only does Takeo have a Hidden son, but that he has a Hidden sister in the character of Madaren. As if to confirm the imbalance and add to the feeling of reality going awry, suddenly out of the blue Takeo is given the order to abdicate by the Emperor through Lord Kono.

This section presents the first clear moments of challenge, conflict and inversion as every classic story expresses. The natural order as expressed in the first chapter has to be 'challenged' by the existence of the 'evil' family and by the edict of the Emperor in order for the plot to develop and the characters to be allowed to grow. This is known as literary theory. In many stories this is a fairly straightforward sequence, but we can see that in this story what we are seeing is an actual inversion of the world order as Takeo now realizes that his rule is considered unlawful, criminal and unjust. This appears as a deep insult to the honorably-minded Takeo. The fact that he struggles to keep his composure and immediately sets about answering this claim shows how deeply Takeo believes in legality and justice. What is actually happening for his character, as we shall see later, is that Takeo is expressing his own fears and doubts of his own Tribe heritage. This sensitivity naturally makes him aware, on some level, that the Emperor's edict is

correct. As long as his rule is propped up and supported by the Tribe, then it will always, in a sense, be unjust.



Chapter 9 - 12

Chapter 9 - 12 Summary

Chapter Nine begins with Lord Takeo going to the temple at Daifujkii to see the beast that Doctor Ishida has brought back from his travels - the kirin. Here he finds that the kirin has an impossibly tall neck and a gentle manner, with tortoiseshell markings all over its fur. Takeo marvels at the beast, since it has long been believed that the appearance of the kirin portends the arrival of a just and successful ruler.

Also in the precinct of the temple is Takeo's sister Madaren, who has come at his request in order to see her brother. Little does she know how little Takeo really wants to converse with her, but nevertheless they find a little time together amid the ceremonies. Madaren reminds him that she is his sister, and that she therefore has responsibilities towards him. Takeo offers her any protection and support that it is in his power as the Lord of the Three Countries to bestow, but Madaren herself seems to be asking for more. His sister reminds him that she is still a follower of the Hidden Tribes God, and that she has come to convert her brother, lest he fall into the avarice and pride usual for one of so high a rank. Takeo coldly tells her that she will be looked after all of her life, but that he wishes to never see her again.

In Chapter Ten, Kaede and her daughters are in Hagi, where they have all once again returned together to meet with their father Takeo when he finally returns from Hofu. The youngest girls Maya and Miki have returned from their training in one of the Tribe's villages, learning about their magical abilities, while Shigeko has been learning the Way of the Huou and states craft with her mother Kaede. The eldest daughter Shigeko is reprimanding the two younger daughters, Maya and Miki, that they should spend more time learning while Maya and Miki are willfully teasing Shigeko about her obvious attraction to one of her sword teachers, a young man named Hiroshi. Despairing of her sisters' naughtiness, Shigeko decides to wear them out by taking them down to the shrine in Hagi devoted to the River God.

The shrine and its attached precinct at Hagi is well known to the older Shigeko, since she has come here often to spend some time with the animals that Hiroko the holy man and keeper of the shrine looks after. When the girls get there, Hiroko greets the eldest daughter Shigeko warmly but acts coolly towards the two youngest, Maya and Miki. As they are talking, a ginger and black striped kitten, another animal charge of the elderly holy man, arrives. Maya decides to stay and play with it while the other sisters go to inspect the horses that Hiroko keeps.

Hiroko is bemoaning the fact that one young black stallion seems unable to be calmed or gentled, so much so that he is now being kept in a small enclosure for fear that he will do damage to the other horses. Shigeko immediately falls in love with the wild young stallion, and suggests that the holy man give the horse a bigger pasture and two older barren mares who will be able to teach the younger horse some manners. If that



works, Hiroko agrees that Shigeko can have the stallion to train, if she can! When they get back to the well where they had left Maya, they discover that Maya is sitting over the kitten, which has died. Shigeko and Hiroko are immediately traumatized by the sight, and Shigeko hurries her strange and fey sisters home. Back at the house, Shigeko tells her mother Kaede what has happened and Kaede reacts angrily with all of her daughters, knowing that this must be some Tribe power that Maya is developing and angry that the twins had been allowed to spend time together outside of the palace.

Chapter Eleven sees the news of Muto Kenji's death spreading throughout the Three countries. Already a well known man as Master of the family of Muto, Kenji had been known to have had a lung disease and had been ill for some time, but no one had known of his secret mission to the Kikuta village and of his assassination. The news of his death, strangely, first arrives to Taku, one of his son's. Taku is now acting as the spy master of the Tribe and of the Otori, and so he races to Hofu to consult with Takeo about the death of his most trusted confidante.

Takeo is of course distressed at the news, but unsurprised. He wonders whether he should act in retaliation against the Kikuta and Akio, but knows that this will only further the blood feud between his two families. Even Taku seems to agree and sees that Takeo's only hope is to outlive Akio. Taku also wonders who should become the head of the Muto family and the Tribe now that Kenji has died. The obvious answer is his older brother Zenko, but Zenko has proved himself disloyal to Lord Otori on many occasions. Other than Taku himself, the only other option is for the family headship to pass to Shizuku, their eldest sister.

Chapter Twelve of this section sees Takeo burdened by grief, agreeing to take Zenko's son Sunaomi with him to the holiest shrine of the Otori, that of the shrine of Terayama. On the road he meets Lord Kahei of the Miyoshi, his leading war general and one of the best strategists in his realms. When they get to the shrine, Takeo meets with Gemba and Makuto, two of his oldest friends and advisers to him in the way of Huou. Gemba is actually the older brother to Lord Kahei, but has forsworn violence while Makuto is the abbot of the holy shrine. While at the holy site, Takeo visits the graves of his ancestors and then meets with Gemba and Makuto, his wisest men. When he tells them about the Emperor's War General and about Zenko sending firearms to his enemies, he reveals that he is unclear as to what he should do — whether to strike out at his enemies first or to try to deal with them all. Makuto advises that he should go personally to the Emperor's city and deal with him there, stating that this is the will of the gods and would be in accordance with the Way of Huou. Takeo agrees to this, but still secretly wonders whether the advice is at all practical. As he looks out at the enchanted woods and the deep forests, he wonders what it would be like to give up all of his worldly duties and come here to study and learn the true path of non-violence, rather than the path of politics that he follows.

The next morning he takes his foster-child Sunaomi to see the rare Huou birds where they are roosting further up the valley. They see two of the large, colorful birds from almost under their tree and Sunaomi is delighted at also finding a feather. Takeo appraises his nephew for a second and realizes that Sunaomi would indeed make a



good prince, since his gestures and his sensibilities seem to be winning, sensitive and noble. At that, Takeo suddenly yearns for a son of his own whom he could school in the Way of the Huou.

Chapter 9 - 12 Analysis

This section starts with the visit to the temple precinct of Daifukji to see the kirin and where Takeo has arranged to talk to his blood-relation sister, Madaren.

The kirin, brought back by Doctor Ishida, appears to actually be a giraffe, incredibly gentle and very sensitive to its surroundings. In the mythology about the Three Countries, it appears to be a blessing that the ruler is a just one, and can be understood as such, but also stands as a symbol for just how strange their shared reality is becoming. The kirin is like a promise of peace for the characters, but its very appearance in the narrative is so strange that it immediately suggests to the reader that the promised peace is a fragile opportunity.

Another interesting element of this section is the juxtaposition between the way of the Huou and the politics of the Three Countries as exemplified by Takeo and Matsuda. In this encounter we understand that Takeo himself is a deeply wounded character, who, despite his Tribe training, really does not wish to be a leader or a king but would rather study the way of peace.



Chapter 13 - 16

Chapter 13 - 16 Summary

Chapter Thirteen sees Taku leaving to speak to his older brother Zenko about their father's death. He brings the news discretely to Zenko, and can see that Zenko is already fuming at the Kikuta Clan and wonders whether Zenko will try to take revenge. Taku realizes that Zenko seems to be angry at everyone — at Lord Takeo Otori, at Taku himself, at the Kikuta. When Taku tries to state that the leadership of the Muto clan will be now under question, Zenko will hear none of it, announcing that he will be the head of the Muto clan and of the Tribe entire, even if he does not have many Tribe magical skills himself. Wary of angering him further, Taku agrees and secretly plots to offer the leadership of Muto to their sister Shizuku.

That night, Lord Kono arrives back and Taku sits down to dinner with the Doctor Ishida, Kono and his brother Zenko. Taku keeps a close eye, as he has been asked to do, on Kono, who is acting on behalf of the Emperor here in the Three Countries. While they are eating, the conversation naturally turns to the Lord Otori and, to Taku's horror, the drunken doctor starts revealing more and more of the psychology of their liege lord to Kono. Ishida believes that Takeo believes himself to be immortal, because a prophesy he once heard stated that only his own son could kill him. Kono is incredulous and speculates that Takeo has no sons but Zenko interrupts, stating that there is a rumor. Taku ends the chapter in anger at his drunken friends and relatives, who apparently cannot keep secrets even from their enemies.

Chapter Fourteen sees Takeo finally arriving at Hagi and his family, where he is warmly greeted by his wife Kaede and his daughters. Before he can spend time with his daughters, however, he has to talk to Kaede about all of the developments that have happened while he has been away. He asks after his family, but keeps the conversation that he has to have with Shizuku about Kenji's death away from his wife. Kaede is annoyed that her husband will not talk to her about Tribe business, but accepts it as a fact of being married to the most powerful man in the realm.

Takeo immediately summons Shizuku, tells her that Kenji has died and that the headship of the Muto Clan is now under question. He knows that Taku will support her if she claims it, and Shizuku agrees that it would be good for the Clan instead of her brother Zenko taking the headship. It would also mean that more women would be in obvious positions of power, Shizuku recognizes. She also understands that this must be another move by Takeo to make the Three Countries more accepting of women by the time that Shigeko becomes the ruler of the Three Countries.

Shizuku herself has news. however, about Takeo's youngest child Maya and the way that she had used her Tribe gifts to kill the kitten. Takeo agrees that it is possible that she could have done this, since one of the Tribe gifts is to make people dizzy and fall asleep if they stare too long at them. Because the Kitten was so young, then perhaps it



succumbed to the power and died. Shizuku herself has other ideas, believing that the spirit of the cat leapt into Maya, as legends have talked about, and now, a part of her spirit is possessed by the cat spirit itself.

In Chapter Fifteen, Takeo confronts Miki and Maya about their burgeoning Tribe powers as he orders them to attend to him the next day while he is bathing. They think that he is going to be angry with them, but Takeo instead tells both of them that they are in a very difficult position; they must learn the skills of the Tribe because it is their birthright, and yet they are never allowed to fully use them since they are princesses. He questions Maya on what happened to the cat and his daughter confirms that she killed the cat, but accidentally. She says that she could not control her power and the kitten started to fall ill. She had felt the Cat 'leap' into herself, confirming that a part of her spirit is indeed possessed by the Cat Spirit. Takeo finds this very troubling news, but vows that, instead of being punished, they should instead learn the ways of the Tribe, which will teach them mastery over their emotions and their powers.

Chapter Sixteen sees other events concerning the princesses in Hagi, this time with the eldest Shigeko. Shigeko is delighted that Hiroshi, her fellow student and teacher in the Way of the Huou has returned to Hagi to hold a council with her father. He is only twenty-five, and always respectful, but Shigeko is already feeling the stirrings of a romance for the young man. She idly asks Shizuku how old her sons had been when they married, and she laughs as if guessing her intentions. She states that her sons had been older than most, and that nothing should really stop lovers from marrying. Emboldened, Shigeko asks Hiroshi to help her tame the horse that she has been gifted from the shrine of the River God, and Hiroshi helps her to train the horse without breaking its spirit. Their work proceeds well over the next few weeks as they succeed in getting the wild horse to respond to its name, accept handling and allow simple ribbons to be placed around its neck. Shigeko starts to feel that their affection for each other is about to blossom, but every time that she gets close to saying something, suddenly she or Hiroshi realizes their place in society and one or the other pulls back. The end of the chapter finds Shigeko happy to be spending time with him, but wistful and resigned at the same time.

Chapter 13 - 16 Analysis

This section releases the tension somewhat as it introduces other, more supernatural themes to the plot. Takeo is at last returned to his family and his daughters where he has to deliver to Shizuka the news of her father's death and the offer that Shizuka become the head of the Muto family and of the Tribe. This is actually a highly political maneuver by Takeo, since he wishes to ensure that the Tribe — the bloodlines of the assassins of the Three Countries — is kept close to his own control, and that it visibly increases the standing of women throughout the realm. He is ensuring that, one day, his daughter Shigeko will be accepted as a female head of the country.

The news that Shizuka herself has is far more ominous — that one of the twins, Maya, has been possessed by a Cat Spirit. We can detect two elements to this; first is the



author bringing in the Eastern mythology of the Kami and the spirit world, and the second is the foreboding that the author injects into the characters around Maya. We begin to suspect that Maya has the ability to perform terrible things, as she did with the kitten in the precinct, which is surely a foreshadowing of later events at the end of the book) The notion of possession should probably be explained, since the Eastern view of possession is very different from the Western view. In the Eastern world view, there is a high account of people taking on the 'traits' of others, other animals and even of places which are accounted as acts of 'possession'.



Chapter 17 - 20

Chapter 17 - 20 Summary

In Chapter Seventeen Takeo and Kaede plan a visit across the bay of Hagi to their old friend and accomplice Terada, a former pirate chief who is now the chief of the navies and the merchant vessels of the Otori. Terada, who is advancing in years, had once been a threat, as a pirate, to the security of Otori trade. However, since the civil war that Takeo led, Terada has been enlisted as chief of the navies.

Terada, being a lover of fine dining and exquisite entertainments, has devised this evening party to take place on the many pavilions that jut out over the small ornamental streams and diverted waterways that fill his garden. He intends that those attending can float trays of delicacies or wine or play games of riddles and clues by setting them on wooden floats that they send down the river to the next pavilion. The ruling family members are enjoying themselves when Takeo finally sees a group of homing pigeons arrive back at the Terada mansion. Terada uses homing pigeons on all of his vessels. A messenger brings the notes to Terada who gestures for Takeo to come over and hear the news. Within the hour, Takeo has organized a Council of War. At the Council is Hiroshi, Lord Kahei, Shizuku now acting as head of the Muto family, Shigeko because she has to learn the ways of state craft, and finally Kaede and Takeo himself.

They consider what to do about the message that says Fumio has been unsuccessful in capturing the smuggled shipment of firearms that were delivered to the 'free city' of Akashi by Zenko. Takeo also announces that any move against the merchants could mean that the Emperor moves against the Three Countries as well, and he proceeds to tell them about the advice that he received from the temple of Terayama, about biding his time until he has talked to the Emperor. Lord Kahei argues that they should attack the free city immediately, but, after a general vote, the Council of War decides to agree with the Masters of the Way of Huou and bide their time.

Chapter Eighteen sees Takeo taking the opportunity to talk with Muto Shizuku as they walk through the gardens of the castle at Hagi. Now that she is the head of the Tribe, they have to keep their discussions of Tribe politics secret. Like Kenji, they find that courtly life provides them ample time to meet and discuss matters as if they were discussing 'normal' matters of state. Shizuku tells Takeo that she has received word that her husband Doctor Ishida is returning to Hagi with the kirin as a present for Shigeko, but that Zenko has allowed the foreigners to travel with them to see the capital resting place of the throne of the Three Countries. The foreigners, Don Joao and Carlo, are the missionaries that Takeo had previously met in Hofu. No one really knows what they are capable of doing and why they are here. Takeo is annoyed at this and is sure it is another little spite from Zenko to further inconvenience him. He is not only annoyed because of having to put up with the foreigners, but also because he has to find a way to deal with his sister Madaren who is their translator.



When the ship arrives, the whole city of Hagi is astonished at the arrival of the kirin. Shigeko almost forgets that she will be losing Hiroshi on the same boat since he has been ordered to go to Taku to help keep an eye on Kono. She helps escort the kirin to its new home at the precinct of the River God, where it seems to feel comfortable alongside the other animals. Shizuku notices yet another disturbance. When the foreigners arrive with their translator, the translator, Madaren, seems already to know Takeo in the way that she defiantly looks at him and is seemingly unafraid of the Lord of the Otori.

Chapter Nineteen sees the immediate aftermath of the arrival of the foreigners. Unable to contain himself, Takeo goes to his wife and tells her the true tale behind the mysterious Madaren. His wife is at first pleased, and Takeo has to explain to her that Madaren could be a dangerous element to his life now, that too much has changed for both of them and that if the gossip gets revealed — that he is originally one of the Hidden — it could even mean Civil War. He asks his wife for help, and suggests that perhaps she also learn the foreigners' language from his sister. In that way, they will be bringing his sister into the family at the same time as keeping an eye on both her and the foreigners Don Joao and Don Carlo. Kaede agrees, and the two discuss the fact that the ruler of the Three Countries must be seen to be a believer in the rituals and the celebrations but, in reality, he must be a believer in none if he wishes to rule wisely.

In the short Chapter Twenty, we see more of the mischief of the two youngest daughters of Takeo and Kaede — Maya and Miki. Now that Chikara, the other son of Zenko, has arrived, there exists a growing rivalry between the twin girls and the sons of Zenko. Sunaomi is showing himself to be well liked around the court, but disrespectful of the girls, stating that if they had been born in Hofu then they would likely have been separated or killed. Maya states that she should set him a challenge to prove his courage and bravery, his superiority to women.

Above the Bay of Hagi is the ruin that used to belong to the widow Akane, who, so legend tells, lured ships to their death by lighting candles on the rocks. Her spirit is said to haunt the ruin. Maya knows that now there is another wood carver who has been granted permission to tear down the accursed Akane building and instead turn it into a shrine dedicated to the White Goddess, Kunnan. She dares Sunaomi to go to the ruin in the dead of night, take a spray of flowers from the bushes there, and return them to her. Sunaomi almost succeeds that very night, but is disturbed by Maya who uses her magical abilities to terrify him while at the ruins. He is brought back to the castle by the wood carver, and the chapter ends as he makes a vow to avenge himself against the daughters of Takeo.

Chapter 17 - 20 Analysis

In these sections we see the theme of modernity playing itself out as the debate about the foreigners and the new firearms are discussed through the actions of the characters.



The chapter starts with the news that Fumio has been unsuccessful in recapturing the firearms that Zenko had smuggled to the free city. Therefore, it is decided that there must be a Council of Ear to discuss what they should do about the armed merchants of Akashi. Takeo, it seems, is unable to see how the future could progress peaceably with firearms being equally owned and controlled; he understands that the spread of vast destructive power necessitates the need for this in human nature. These concerns are matched by the characterization of the foreigners, whose views appear to be dangerous to the way of life of the Three Countries. In a cunningly historic note, the author has presented the foreigners as a missionary and as a merchant, whose activities and exploits go hand-in-hand. We can see their appearance throughout the Three Countries, indeed, as a sign that the 'old order' is threatened and destabilized.



Chapter 21 - 23

Chapter 21 - 23 Summary

It is now early autumn in Chapter Twenty-one, and Takeo is preparing to travel to the city of Yamagata, because it is customary in the Three Countries for the ruling capital to change between each solstice and equinox. Just as he is preparing to depart Hagi, a letter arrives from the Temple of Terayama informing him that the old abbot, Matsuda, has died, and Abbot Makoto has been installed in his place. Takeo is sad that one of his oldest mentors and advisers has passed away, but glad that he died as he lived — in the Way of Peace, of Huou.

Finally, he is about to leave when he has a conversation with his daughter Shigeko who questions him on his apparent connection with the translator Madaren. Takeo considers what would be the wisest course of action, but decides to tell his eldest daughter the truth, since she is almost ready to inherit the province of Maruyama anyway. Shigeko is amazed that Madaren is actually Takeo's sister, and urges him to tell his wife and her mother, Kaede. At the end of the chapter Shigeko has an idea that they should make a gift of the kirin to the Emperor when Takeo goes on his mission of peace.

Chapter Twenty-two sees autumn coming to the Kikuta village where Muto Kenji died and Hisao is the only person to mourn him. Hisao has a strange feeling of remorse at the old man's death, half worried that his spirit might present itself to him, since he can see some shades of the dead. The father of the two assassins, Gosaburo, requests an audience with Hisao's step father Akio. The older man asks that they consider making peace with the Lord Otori since he does not wish his children to be executed and he is tired of the Kikuta family living in hiding.

Akio attacks him when he is about to leave and garottes him. Akio then informs his stepson Hisao that they will be traveling to the trader city of Akashi, there to find some more news on how to defeat Takeo, the Lord Otori. Hisao is excited about this adventure and as they travel the roads he is finally able to see his stepfather in a new light. Many people respect him for being the Master of the Kikuta family but also, Akio seems stuck in the past and the modern cities and towns that they pass seem to have left his stepfather behind. After staying in Akashi and learning that Takeo must present himself to the Emperor to avoid war, Akio presents a plan to his traveling accomplice Kazuo suggesting that they travel to meet Arai Zenko, Taku's brother, and suggested head of the Tribe. Everyone knows that Zenko is angry with Takeo and chafes under his rule, so Akio wonders whether he can be used in an alliance to overthrow his enemy, Lord Otori Takeo.

In Chapter Twenty-three, one of Takeo's youngest daughters, Maya, is being sent to train with Taku in Maruyama. After her father had discovered her cat possession and the tricks that she had played on her cousin Sunaomi, it had been decided that it would be best for her to be trained in the ancient Tribe skills. She travels with Sada, pretending to



be her little sister for most of the journey until she arrives at Maruyama. When she gets there, Sada works on Maya's disguise while she talks to her. Maya is now to appear to be a boy to the outside world, and Sada cuts her hair and instructs her on how to act and dress like a young boy. Maya responds by telling her how easy it would be if she had been born a boy, since then her family would accept her and she could do what she wanted. Now she has these Tribe skills and no way of truly expressing them, which is why, she says, that she is naughty and plays tricks on those around her.

Later she meets with Taku, the brother of Zenko and the Takeo's current spy-master who questions her as to the Cat Spirit that she has now gained. He asks Maya if she can transform into its cat form and she replies that once she does, to follow Sunaomi to the ruins of Akane's house. Taku dismisses her power as meaningless, provoking a reaction which brings the Cat Spirit to the fore of Maya, making her hiss and spit at him. Taku smiles and calms the girl down, and it is obvious that Taku had just been trying to provoke Maya to reveal her powers. Maya thinks to herself that she dislikes turning into the Cat Spirit, because with it comes the awareness of the dead, which frightens her. When she is in cat form she can see all of the dead shades around her who try to reach out to her for something, but she does not know what. Taku sends Maya away and talks for a while with Sada, but the girl Maya overhears with her super sensitive hearing. Both Taku and Sada believe that Maya is probably very powerful, and both do not know what else they can see inside her - whether it is a Cat Spirit, or a little girl attempting to get out. Maya listens as they make love, and feels a curious jealousy and a longing for the experience.

Chapter 21 - 23 Analysis

At this point in the story, the plot starts to unfold as we begin to detect the probable shape of future events.

Kikuta Akio and his son Hisao come out of hiding, because they hear that the rule of Lord Otori, Takeo, is threatened by the Emperor's general, Lord Saga. This again is a reiteration of the 'sacred balance' idea of the ruling family and the kingdom. Now that the ruling family has been destabilized with Maya starting to become questionably possessed, and Takeo is about to leave the confines of the country, it becomes possible for the 'opposing' family, that of the Kikutas, to emerge and vie for power. At this time, we still feel some sympathy for the character of Hisao since he essentially appears to be a victim of his step father Kikuta Akio.

One of the most interesting characters to emerge in their own right in this section is not Hisao, however, but of course the character of Maya. Maya feels herself to be trapped by her family and her circumstance — treated unfairly and with suspicion as she had been when she was seen as just another twin alongside Miki. When Maya is finally given the attention and the recognition that she deserves, it becomes obvious that Maya has been waiting to flourish and has not been able to do so. The characters of Maya and Hisao can be compared to each other, in the ways that they are both 'unwanted' children who have to find ways to express their conflicting desires.



Chapter 24 - 27

Chapter 24 - 27 Summary

Chapter Twenty-four follows the character of Taku as he talks with Hiroshi, the senior retainer of Maruyama. Hiroshi has been Taku's friend since they were children, and now that Shigeko is about to assume the control of the province of Maruyama, Hiroshi is going to act as the head of the province to oversee the transition of duties. Taku is astounded at his feelings for his servant Sada since he has never really been deeply in love or lust with anyone - not even his wife. His friend Hiroshi chides him for taking another woman when he is married, even though the practice is accepted in the Three Countries, and Taku replies that his wife doesn't mind and accepts the fact that Taku will have other lovers. This time, however, is different, because Taku feels a deep obsession developing for Sada.

In return, Taku questions Hiroshi about why he hasn't taken a wife yet, and he guesses correctly that Hiroshi is secretly in love with the eldest daughter of Lord Takeo, Shigeko. Hiroshi understands that he can never be married to her, because her marriage will be too important to ensure political success of the Otori. Instead, he has decided that after he has handed over the administrative duties of Maruyama to Shigeko, then he will return to the temple of Terayama and spend the rest of his life in the monastery.

Chapter Twenty-five sees the Autumn Festival in the tenth month of the year, and everywhere the preparations in Maruyama for Shigeko to celebrate her crowning. The festivities reach far and wide and even come to the ears of the secluded Maya, Sada and Taku who are continuing Maya's training. That night, they are discussing the fate of the country as Taku muses on how he will deal with his own brother Zenko, who wishes to oppose their mother Shizuku as the leader of the Tribe. Taku and Sada send Maya to bed while they continue to discuss politics, but Maya finds herself slipping into her cat form and sneaking back into the central living room. There she overhears Taku tell Sada that Akio has been sighted in the city of Akashi and that he is bringing with him Hisao who is Takeo's son. Maya hisses at them in alarm, fear and outrage at hearing that her father really has a hidden son and escapes through the window in her cat form.

In Chapter Twenty-six, we see the crowning of Shigeko as the ruler of the Maruyama province, celebrating her coming of age. Her father Lord Otori and Arai Zenko arrive in Maruyama as well as Lord Kono the ambassador from the Emperor. On the first day, Takeo summons Hiroshi and discusses his future with him, now that Shigeko is about to assume control over the province. He asks that he arrange a marriage for the retainer but Hiroshi disagrees, stating that all he wishes to do is to return to Terayama and study the Way of the Huou for the rest of his life. Bemused, Takeo accedes to his wishes. That night, before the ceremony there is a feast where Takeo finally gets to meet Lord Kono and Arai Zenko together. Kono congratulates Takeo on having such a wonderful daughter and is glad that Takeo will be coming to the Emperor's court with him. They



both dance around the issue that Shigeko is as yet unmarried and could, in fact, become one of the Emperor's wives to ensure a lasting peace between their peoples.

The next day sees the ceremony announcing Shigeko as the ruler of Maruyama province. She is handed a sword by the retainer Hiroshi, and uses the sword to indicate to the four directions that she will rule over them all. At the last moment, the horse that she is riding shies away from the other people on the ground, threatening to unseat her. Takeo, with the keen eyesight of the Tribe, spots how distressed Hiroshi is. He immediately sees that Hiroshi and Shigeko are in love, but have not yet acted upon it. The ceremony continues without a hitch, as Shigeko fires an arrow into a target while galloping the horse and then presents the black stallion to her father Lord Takeo, alongside her oath of fealty to the Otori clan.

The next day Hiroshi, Shigeko, her father Takeo, Kono, and Zenko and his wife Hana all go out hunting together to celebrate the new ruler of the province. While they are riding, Takeo realizes how much he misses his wife Kaede and wishes that she were here to see their daughter. He muses on the way that the people spontaneously cheer and salute both him and his daughter, not in the hungry or the oppressed way that peasants celebrate tyrants, but in the genuine way that beloved leaders are treated.

Chapter Twenty-seven concerns itself with Lord Takeo as he discovers some disturbing truths about his own daughter, Maya, who is staying with Taku and Sada as she learns the secrets of the Tribe.

Takeo tells his scribe Minoru that he is not to be disturbed as he puts on his Tribe gear — the black robes and the concealed throwing stars. The lord of the Otori sneaks out of the palace and uses his Tribe skill, the power of invisibility, to sneak past the guards. He jumps the walls and pads quietly through the city, heading for the safe house where his daughter Maya should be hidden.

Suddenly, Takeo senses another presence watching him. He turns to see a large cat, and is about to dismiss it when he realizes that he cannot tear his gaze away because the cat is using the Kikuta gaze upon him. Takeo starts to feel dizzy and reacts instinctively, twisting away and throwing one of his daggers as the cat launches itself at him.

As they both fall to the floor, Takeo's face scratched with the claws of the cat and the face of the cat cut by the throwing knife, Takeo manages to stop his killing blow as he hears the cat calling his name and realizes that the creature must be his own daughter Maya. Maya cries, scared that she has done wrong and that she has hurt her father, stating that she couldn't control the Cat Spirit after she thought that he was a Kikuta assassin and had attacked him. Takeo is not angry with his daughter, only worried how badly that she might be hurt and so he takes her into the house and orders Taku and Sada to tend to her. They use a special gel-like salve to glue the cut on her face together, as Takeo reprimands them for being negligent with her care. After Maya has been sent to bed, Takeo takes his anger out on Taku, seeing that he has become infatuated with Sada and that that has impaired his judgement.



The next day, Takeo has a confrontation with Arai Zenko as they are about to bid each other farewell and both great men leave the province of Maruyama to its new ruler Shigeko. Takeo takes Arai Zenko aside and informs him that, even though he has looked through Zenko's books and found nothing amiss, he still suspects that Zenko has been smuggling firearms out to the merchant city of Akashi. Takeo reminds him that Zenko rules only by his favor and grace. Zenko objects, but Takeo reminds him that if there are any more moves to undermine him, Takeo will order his arrest. At the end of the chapter, Takeo sees his eldest daughter Shigeko before he leaves to be with his pregnant wife Kaede. He tells Shigeko about his fears for her sister Maya, and about her possession by the Cat Spirit. Shigeko urges him to tell their mother, and that their family should have no secrets from one another.

Chapter 24 - 27 Analysis

The main elements of this chapter concern themselves with politics and love. Although the power of the central ruling family is displayed through the ceremonies of Shigeko's coronation, there is still an omen of foreboding as Shigeko's horse shies away during the ceremony at the last moment. Shigeko herself is presented as almost the perfect ruler, perfect in every way that her sisters and her step brother Hisao isn't.

Previously in the story, Shigeko had appeared to be an older girl yearning for her teacher Hiroshi to notice her, trying to look after her younger twins and generally appearing in a sisterly-like fashion. In this chapter, we see Shigeko assume her mantle of responsibility and become not just a young woman, but a young ruler that Takeo could not himself be. Shigeko's character can best be held up against the other sisters and rulers as a possibility of what a ruler can be.

One of the important elements that is holding back the 'perfect ruler' notion from being realized in the story is obviously the appearance of obstacles between her and her love, Hisao. Even Shigeko is bound by convention since she is unable to choose her own husband.

Another interesting development is the continuation of the character development of Maya. When Takeo goes to see her and Taku that night, disguised in the way of the Tribe, it becomes obvious that Maya cannot stop herself from attacking him. A part of us wonders whether the character of the little girl actually wanted to harm her father or not, and perhaps whether this is the playing out of Freudian themes in the story. The explosive violence displayed by Maya is also indicative of just how dangerous her character could become.



Chapter 28 - 31

Chapter 28 - 31 Summary

In Chapter Twenty-eight, we again return to Kikuta Akio and his stepson Hisao as they attempt to remain undercover in the castle-town of Kumamoto, the stronghold of the Arai clan.

Akio is annoyed that his meeting with Arai Zenko has been postponed because Zenko and Hana have been summoned to Maruyama to see Lord Otori, who wants to call them to account. While they wait, Hisao begins work at one of the Kikuta-friendly forges and starts experimenting with firearms and weaponry. One evening, their host Yasu brings a foreigner to their door, a trader who shows them pictures of the rifles, muskets and pistols that his homeland can manufacture. Hisao has an idea that, with the right forge he could construct a pistol — a shortened form of firearm — and use it to assassinate Lord Takeo. Just as he is about to start work, he suffers a crippling headache as the shade of his dead mother Yuki warns him again not to kill his father.

In Chapter Twenty-nine we see Arai Zenko and Hana discussing their increasing treachery and plotting against their liege lord, Takeo. Both Zenko and Hana are incensed at the seeming insults that Takeo had delivered when he announced that Zenko had been moving against him, and that Zenko must not become the Muto Master of the Tribe. Hana and Zenko discuss whether they will have to kill their own brother Taku as well. Zenko tells his wife that he has someone special that he wants her to meet, Kikuta Akio, who arrives a few moments later with Yasu. The figure of the Kikuta Master impresses Hana immensely, as both sides talk about their different grudges against Takeo and their plans to move against him.

Back at Hagi in Chapter Thirty, Kaede is starting her lessons with the foreigners in an attempt to learn their language. She is residing at one of their smaller residences, and enjoying having her two younger nephews, Sunaomi and Chikara, around, even as she misses her own children and husband. She summons the foreigners Don Joao, Don Carlo and Madaren to start instructing her in their language, finding them to be very interested in trying to convert her to their religion of 'Deus'. Kaede feels like she wants to get to like Madaren, Takeo's birth sister, but that their positions and their religious beliefs are separating them.

Chapter Thirty-one sees Takeo returning from Maruyama and Shigeko's inauguration ceremonies. He is tired and greets his wife Kaede warmly, marveling at how soon it will be when she will give birth. Now everything is set for Takeo's journey to meet with the Emperor. While at Hagi he had arranged for bolts of the most expensive silk and Kaede chooses a landscape painting by the famous painter Sesshu as gifts to go with Takeo to the East. Shigeko provides, alongside the magical kirin, a brace of mares and stud horses that she has trained herself. Takeo asks his wife how things have been going with the foreigners and she surprises him by knowing much of their language already.



She tells him of her concerns, that they wish to establish a religious mission and that other foreigners are already here in the Three Countries, trading in firearms. Takeo summons Don Joao, Don Carlo and Madaren to their audience chamber and proceeds to question them himself with the help of his wife to interpret. Don Carlo replies that he wishes for the royal family to convert to the worship of Deus, and he wishes the funds to build a mission for his religion. Don Joao states that he would like to have free access to trade in the Three Countries. On both counts the foreigners are denied by Takeo, who states that they will be allowed to set up a room wherever they are able to freely preach their beliefs, but that trade - and especially trade in firearms - has to be conducted through the Otori family and through Hagi itself. The foreigners are angry, especially when they realize that Takeo is not the absolute monarch of the entire land, but that the Emperor of the Eight Islands is. They ask Takeo to take with him letters of greeting to the Emperor while they consider their position. Finally, at the end of the chapter Madaren makes one more attempt to try and reach her long lost brother, and tries to convince him to convert back to the religion of the Hidden with which he grew up. Takeo refuses once more, stating that a king cannot be seen to favor any particular religion.

Chapter 28 - 31 Analysis

This section deepens the sense of unease that we have for the protagonists as events seem to spiral out of control.

The political order of the Three Countries is threatened as Akio and his son appear to exist almost in the open in the castle-town of Kumamoto. Their 'public' existence indicates that the threat is almost about to be revealed and become manifest in the story. The fact that Hisao is so concerned with making things, with forging weapons in particular, adds a horrid feeling to our understanding of his character, particularly when we see that his magical powers are so closely aligned with the realms of the dead. It almost seems that Hisao is starting to become a symbol of death itself, and the the real juxtaposition in this novel is between life and death in the same manner that Takeo's sword jato represents Honor, whereas the firearm represents corruption and defeat. Perhaps the author is attempting to make a statement about the modern world and the past, and here recognizing that not all gifts of the modern world, such as the guns that Hisao is so keen on developing, are necessarily good things.

Even the traditional spiritual order of the country seems to be imbalanced as the foreigners present their ideas to Takeo. They would like free access to build churches and for the people to decide upon their God or another, not both, as was the way with many spirit-based cultures. What Takeo can sense is that the balance of the society is starting to unravel but that he cannot find the cause.

On a positive note, one very worthwhile point is made here by the author about the use of interpretation and linguistics. Previous to this, the foreigners had been regarded as little better than demons, because their appearance is so different to that of the Three Countries. However, as Kaede begins to learn the languages of the people who have nominally come to study her, she also begins to generate a friendship of sorts with

Madaren. Language and the ability to understand one another correctly is shown to be the key to being able to generate good will and cooperation between people rather than distrust.



Chapter 32 - 35

Chapter 32 - 35 Summary

In Chapter Thirty-two, Terada Fumio is walking through his gardens with the expectant father Takeo. They are discussing the future and Takeo is examining the explorers' collection of exotic and foreign plants — the rose, the lilies and orchids. Fumio remarks that Takeo has never left the Three Countries and should take ship to explore the rest of the World one day, to which Takeo replies that he would like to if he ever retires or abdicates. Fumio is surprised that Takeo would ever consider such a thing, and Takeo confides in him this challenge and contest that Lord Saga the Dog Catcher has planned for them, and how it perhaps would have been better if they prepared for war rather than sued for peace. Terada agrees.

Not long after that conversation, Kaede gives birth to a boy and it seems for an instant to Takeo that all will be well with the world. He remembers his place and just what he is about to undertake, however, and prepares to go. Before he does, he asks after his youngest daughters Maya and Miki, whom he has not seen for months. Shizuka replies that Miki seems to be doing well in the Tribe village where she is secluded while Maya has disappeared into Taku's teaching.

Chapter Thirty-three follows Takeo on his travels as he makes the first part of his journey to the edges of his kingdom and the land controlled by Lord Saga. Along the way, he becomes concerned about not hearing anything at all from his new spy master Taku and his other daughter Maya. He grows worried and paranoid, wondering whom he can trust, since he knows that Taku's brother is Arai Zenko. When he arrives at a friendly fortress halfway to his goal he sees that the two young relatives of Kikuta Akio, who tried to kill his wife and children the previous year, are still alive, and that the messages that he sent ordering their execution never arrived. Takeo orders their death the very next day and attends the ceremony even though he finds it distasteful. Takeo begins to wonder if any of his letters are getting to where they should be going, and his scribe Minoru echoes his concerns that the Muto network might have been compromised.

In Chapter Thirty-four, the plot thickens at Kumamoto as Arai Zenko and his wife Hana now openly meet with Kikuta Akio while they plan their moves against Takeo. Hana reveals her plan that she is going to go stay with her sister Kaede in a gesture of sisterly affection after the birth of her sister's fourth child, but will actually be going to tell her sister the news that Takeo already has another, older son in Hisao. This secret, she believes, will drive the couple apart and force Takeo to flee his responsibilities becoming an easy target for Akio and Hisao. Later that day, they hold a feast in which the foreigners Don Joao and Don Carlo are welcomed and Zenko agrees that he will submit to their religion and allow them to trade if the foreigners will arm him and his clan with firearms. Don Carlo, the missionary, seems sad at this prospect, but agrees reluctantly. That night Hana whispers one more secret plan that she has had to her husband who



responds that they should at least give this person one more chance; he is Zenko's brother. It becomes clear that Hana plans to test the firearms to kill Taku.

Chapter Thirty-five sees the final confrontation between the brothers Taku and Zenko as Taku discovers the depth of his brother's treachery to the ruling Otori clan.

Maya's face is now healed from the thrown dagger that split her cheek, and she works assiduously on her Tribe skills while her teachers Sada and Taku seem immersed in one another's love. Maya starts to see that the servants are becoming lazy and not turning up for work, so she follows them to a local inn where she hears them discussing openly that their masters Taku and Sada are sorcerers who have conjured a cat spirit. She also begins to hear reference to the Kikuta Master. After a few nights of searching, Maya comes to an inn where it becomes obvious that both Zenko and the outlaw Akio are involved in celebrations together. Maya sneaks into the inn ready to kill Akio, but Akio detects her instantly and flies towards her with his own Tribe skills. Maya transforms herself into a cat and barely escapes by running away. As she does so, she sees Hisao in her cat-vision; he glows and seems to have an ability to command her.

Maya tells Taku that his brother is openly harboring her father's enemy and Taku arranges for them to leave the town. First he decides to have one last meeting with Zenko to decide whether or not there is any chance he can convince him to give up this course of action and hand Akio over. Taku realizes now that Hisao must be what is known as a ghostmaster, or someone who can command spirits of animals and of the dead, explaining why Maya feels such an allure for him. Taku marvels at how dangerous Akio and Zenko have suddenly become with Hisao and the guns at their disposal. At their audience, Zenko is boastful and offers Taku a place at his side but Taku refuses, knowing that what he is doing will probably start a civil war. When he gets back to their hiding place, he packs up Sada and Maya and they leave immediately for Hagi and Kaede.

On the road, Maya is the first to hear the sound of their pursuers but Taku and one of his guards are the ones who decide to turn back and face them. Sada and Maya keep fleeing until they hear the sound of gunshots and they turn around, believing it better to die in the defense of their loved ones than to run away. When they get back to Taku, they find that he has killed many assailants, but even as they get close both he and Sada are shot. Maya is too distraught to run away as Akio and Hisao emerge from the undergrowth, quickly disabling her. Akio realizes just who Maya must be as sees that she has Kikuta blood, and renders her unconscious before she can turn herself into her cat form.

Chapter 32 - 35 Analysis

This section sees the escalating threat spiral out of control as Kikuta Akio kills Taku and Sada, and captures Maya.



What makes the tensions in these chapters all the more dire is that they are happening almost 'behind the scenes' as the protagonist Takeo does not realize what is happening elsewhere in his country. One of the principle reasons for his ignorance is, of course, the author attempting to create a realistic picture of his times. Messages travel, at their quickest, by messenger on horseback, and so still take a couple days to reach most cities. Otherwise, news is carried to the local lord and a messenger has to be dispatched and relayed throughout the realms. What we are allowed to see in our position as external observers is how the events of the plot are happening concurrently and how each of the characters has no idea what the other characters are doing. This adds tension and drama to the story on the whole. This sense of danger is heightened by the switching of narrative every chapter between one character and another as we follow the events of the plot impacting every character in a causal fashion. For example, we may hear of Taku's death, and then subsequently hear Arai Zenko's plots and plans in the light of his 'achievement', and then afterwards hear of the effect of Taku's death on his friends.

An element that makes this progression of threat all the more believable and effective is that we soon realize that the only means for Takeo to hear and understand what is happening is through the Muto network of the Tribe. When we see just how complicit the Muto are in Taku's death, we finally see with horror how isolated the royal family really are.



Chapter 36 - 40

Chapter 36 - 40 Summary

In Chapter Thirty-six, Shigeko is traveling between Hofu and Hagi with the kirin and her senior retainer Hiroshi. She is wondering what is about to happen to them all, and whether it is true that she will have to marry the Dog Catcher, Lord Saga. Hiroshi, her companion, shares her distaste and between them passes a moment of tenderness as they both realize that they may never be able to express their love for each other.

A few days later, in Chapter Thirty-seven, Takeo leaves Inuyama to begin his long journey into the East. Along the way, he meets up with the procession of his daughter Shigeko and Hiroshi. While traveling, he instructs his scribe Minoru to take note of every detail as it happens, and also to dismiss his Tribe bodyguards for fear of their loyalty being called into question. Minoru is surprised, but acquiesces. On the journey, Takeo also takes up the brush and starts painting again, making ink sketches of the birds around him and a bellflower. This distracts him until they reach the outskirts of the Lord Saga's lands and are met by the regional chief called Okuda. Okuda is amazed by the kirin and the Maruyama horses, and equally as impressed by the resolve displayed by the people of the Three Countries. He assures Takeo that both Lord Saga and the people of the Empire look kindly upon him, but that they are forced into this predicament.

Chapter Thirty-eight introduces the characters to the imperial city of the Emperor and to Lord Saga Hideki, otherwise known as the Dog Catcher. Takeo and his retinue arrive at the grand city to be greeted by Lord Kono, who takes them to a smaller mansion — still palatial by the standards of the Three Countries. Here, Lord Kono bids the whole party to rest while a feast is prepared in their honor at which they will meet Lord Saga for the first time.

That night, Takeo, Gemba and Shigeko are summoned to a private feast where they meet Lord Saga. The Dog Catcher proves to be a large, powerful and somewhat ruthless man in the prime of his life who likes the idea of marrying the young Shigeko and attempting to fluster Takeo. They joust with words over knowledge of the arts and the science of governing a country. Lord Saga tells them of his many feats and skills at arms, but does not genuinely seem to dislike Takeo - merely to revel in the contest. When he finally states that Shigeko will make him an excellent wife, Takeo's eldest daughter herself speaks up and tells him that the rulers of Maruyama have always chosen their own husbands.

The next day, in chapter Thirty-nine, the party from the Three Countries meets the Emperor himself. Again it is Takeo, Gemba and Shigeko who meet this prestigious person as the bamboo palanquin is lowered in front of them and a young, effete man is produced from within. He asks for Jato, the sacred sword of the Otori, and Takeo gives it back to the Emperor, since it had been originally given to the Otori clan many



hundreds of years before. The Emperor is overwhelmed by the gift of the kirin and sees it as a great pronouncement upon his realm, and, eager to show much he approves, he gifts the Otori sword back to Shigeiko of Maruyama to show his assent and approval of her realm.

Later that day, after the meeting with the Emperor had seemed to go spectacularly well, Takeo is surprised to see someone with invisibility following him. He imagines it to be a Tribe assassin and is ready to attack when it is revealed to be Mai, a young girl of the Muto family and sister to the late Sada. She informs Takeo of Taku and her sister's death at the hands of Kikuta Akio and Zenko, revealing that now Arai Zenko is almost in full revolt. Takeo thanks her, and realizes that there is almost nothing he can do until after the contest the very next day, when he will have to leave as quickly as possible to try and stop Zenko from destroying his country.

Chapter Forty details the dog hunting contest, and the fate of the Three Countries. Takeo, Gembai, Shigeiko and Hiroshi are all taken from the palace where they are staying early that day and brought to a circular compound where the rules are explained to them before the spectators are allowed in. Each team of mounted riders will have to shoot a dog running inside the circle, and will gain points for where their shot hits and how gentle their shot is — the point being to not injure the hounds. First Hiroshi performs well, but bloodies his dog. Then Okuda for the opposing team does well, and Gembai for the Three Countries misses. Lord Kono for the Empire takes the court and scores a good hit, and finally Shigeiko for the Three Countries performs flawlessly. Lord Saga himself rides out as the last on his team and performs well, but suddenly the dog unexpectedly dies after it is revealed that his strong 'masculine' shots must have ruptured the internal organs of the poor beast. The best shot of the day had been by Shigeiko using her light 'woman's' bow with less power. After the Emperor has announced that they are the winners, and that the Three Countries are therefore free to self-govern, Takeo takes his retinue back to his quarters and informs them of Taku's and Sada's deaths, and of his missing daughter Maya. They are all sad and happy at the same time, sad for the tragedy happening at home and happy that they are now free to go and put a stop to it.

Chapter 36 - 40 Analysis

This section is perhaps one of the climaxes of the book, because within it Takeo and his retinue leave the confines of the Three Countries and come face to face with the Emperor.

In this section, the danger becomes the most acute for Takeo's reign but not, perhaps, in the ways that we might think; the final confrontation with the Lord Saga seems distressingly normal and human compared to the unsettling treacheries of Zenko and Akio behind him.

The character of Lord Saga is presented to the reader in comparison to Takeo and the Empire of the Eight Isles as a comparison to the Three Countries. Here we see that

Lord Saga is taking delight in goading and testing his rival Takeo — a quality that Takeo does not share — and that Lord Saga's own attitudes towards his wives, children, his servants and to women in general leave a lot to be desired. In all respects, the Empire is shown up as a somewhat weakened, more pompous and a more corruptible version of the Three Countries — so much so that we feel saddened by the idea that Shigeko might have to be joined in marriage to this man.

The tension between the two realms however is not merely present in the Dog Hunt which, we suspect, is displayed for its apparent cruelty and acts as a further reminder of how different the two realms are, but is also present in the idea that change is now inevitable. As we have been seeing again and again throughout the story, there is now world travel between the foreigners and the Eight Isles.



Chapter 41 - 44

Chapter 41 - 44 Summary

Chapter Forty-one sees the full extent of Zenko's treachery revealed to his mother Shizuka as she confronts him about his brother's death.

Shizuka is traveling as she does in her new role as the Muto Chief of the Tribe, and is hearing reports again and again that the Muto network is beginning to fail. She hears rumors that the Tribe is beginning to turn against her because she is a woman and because she supports Takeo - a warlord - rather than her son Zenko. Some even whisper that Kikuta Akio has come back out of hiding. Shizuka realizes that she must confront her son Zenko and find out what happened to her other son Taku. First she makes her way to Kagemura, the secret Tribe village where Miki is staying and studying, only to find that Miki has become thin and is hated by the rest of the village. Although the family of Kagemura treat her with respect, especially the women, the young men listen to her but pay her no real respect even though she is the head of the Muto family and therefore the Tribe. She hears that Taku her son has been killed on the road by bandits, and whispers that Zenko allowed it to happen. She decides that it would be better for Miki to come with her and for her to confront her son rather than for Miki to stay here in a Muto controlled village.

So Shizuka travels to Kumamoto, the home of the Arai clan and there confronts her son Zenko. Her son informs her that he cannot confirm nor deny what happened to his own brother Taku, but that if Shizuka were to join with him immediately, then she may be spared. Shizuka tells him that that will never happen and leaves, planning to flee until she sees that Miki has run away, to try to find her sister Maya. Knowing that she will never be allowed to leave the city, Shizuka decides to go to the Temple of Daifukji and there she sits, prays and meditates until the heavens give her justice. She does not eat but it is said that the birds feed her grain and that the rains quench her thirst.

Chapter Forty-two jumps narratives and explains what has been happening with the captured Maya all of this time. Maya has been held captive at the hideaway of Hisao and Akio, where Akio treats her unkindly and demands that she work for the Kikuta. Maya realizes that she could flee in her cat form, but knows that if she goes into cat form that, strangely, the boy Hisao has power over her. One night, the subconscious call from the boy becomes so strong that she decides to put an end to it and attempts to kill him in his sleep. While Akio is away she sneaks to his room and they struggle. Maya shifts into her cat form only to suddenly find that there is a ghost presence in the room. It is Hisao's mother, Yuki. Hisao can now hear his mother, Yuki, when Maya is there since she acts as a kind of bridge between the real and the spirit realm.

In Chapter Forty-three, we see the continuation of this story as the serving girl tells Maya that Hisao and Akio are to leave the town that very day. Maya has already heard from the ghost Yuki and has told Hisao that he is a ghost master. She sees that he



plans to shoot her father Takeo because of a hatred that has been given to him by his stepfather Akio. Maya seizes her opportunity to escape, turning into her cat form to flee into the city. She is about to get away when Hisao calls to her and she finds herself unable to resist him. Just as she is about to be caught again, the form of her sister Miki comes to her, severing their bond and the twins escape using invisibility.

In Chapter Forty-four, Takeo is returning from the Emperor's city laden with gifts when disaster strikes. The kirin approaches them, galloping, and it is obvious that it has run to catch up with them since it could not bear to be on its own and given away to rough handlers. Takeo immediately understands that this will be seen as a grave insult to the Emperor and prepares his retinue for battle. That very day, they are met by Lord Kono acting as a messenger who says that the Emperor has seen this as a trick and is sending Lord Saga out to capture or kill them. Takeo advances his small force to the closest mountain pass, where he has to use his powers of invisibility to lure the guards out to attempt to attack him. When he does so, Shigeko's archers decimate the small force and take the mountain pass. When they arrive on the other side, Takeo realizes that they now have no choice but to fight the Emperor's army and Lord Saga.

Chapter 41 - 44 Analysis

This section concentrates upon the swift turn of events that turns the peaceful victory of the Three Countries into devastating battles between the two realms.

As the kirin re-emerges in the narrative when it has escaped the sacred city of the Emperor, we can see immediately that the author is using this to foreshadow the war that will be instigated between the two sides. There can never be any real or lasting peace between the two sides and the 'righteous leader' as foretold by the kirin is, in fact, Takeo and not the Emperor. The fact that Lord Saga takes this escaping animal to be a sign of Takeo's trickery is indicative of his eagerness to go to war with Takeo and a measure of his suspiciousness.

During the fight at the pass, all of the impressive skills of the main characters are mentioned, in an effort by the author that places them firmly into the role of martial arts heroes. Each protagonist — Hiroshi, Takeo, Gembai, Mai and Shigeko — exhibits extraordinary courage, resilience and skills in a way that is sure to be reminiscent of Hong Kong wuxia. The writing style is immediate and terse with less account for detail, but contains more of an immediacy about each character's circumstances. For example, the narratives of Shigeko and Hiroshi are both figured in the battle scene but from their own perspectives and not mixed. This creates the impression of confusion and danger inherent in the battle.



Chapter 45 - 50

Chapter 45 - 50 Summary

Chapter Forty-five deals intricately with the events of the night preceding the Battle of the Pass, in which Takeo and his general Lord Kahei face Lord Saga Hideki and the emperor's troops.

Shigeko is tending the kirin, which is now ill after its long ordeals and journeys. She fears that it is going to die, and is worried about what it symbolizes for her rule and for her love of Hiroshi. As she is consumed with worry over how to preserve the Way of the Huou and what will happen to her father, Shigeko finally declares to Hiroshi that she loves him and that if she is ever free; she will choose him to be her consort. Hiroshi is happy, but is unable to act upon that happiness as they turn to hear the sound of Lord Saga's men pouring through the pass.

In Chapter Forty-six, we see the main battle between the two sides as Takeo and Kahei directs his men to hold the pass and pick off Lord Saga's men. The fighting goes well at the start as Shigeko and Gembai's archers attack the advancing troops, but by midday the archers are overwhelmed and Lord Kahei himself joins the fight. When it appears that they are about to lose their stand to the mounted knights of the enemy, Takeo joins the battle and kills the enemy second in command, Lord Okuda, and is wounded in the process. Hiroshi too flings aside all pretenses at pacifism and succeeds in driving the enemy back before becoming grievously wounded. Just as Shigeko fears that it is all lost, she sees the Tribe assassin Mai and asks her to lead her high up about the pass where she can try to wound Lord Saga. Mai does so, and at first Shigeko shoots her strongest bow and misses, but then when she shoots her smallest bow she manages to hit Lord Saga in the eye and wounds him deeply. At that point, the battle starts to turn and Lord Saga retreats.

Chapter Forty-seven brings the news of the victory of the battle to Takeo and also the unwanted form of Doctor Ishida, who arrives at their camp with sad tidings to tell Takeo. Doctor Ishida has to inform him that Zenko is now in open revolt, and that his wife Kaede has left Hagi for Inuyama with Hana, and that she has forsworn to have nothing to do with Takeo any more. Also, their baby son is dead. Takeo is distraught at the news, thinking that his wife Kaede must have gone mad with the grief that the death of their youngest child has induced. He tells the rest of the army to rest and wait, but he and Gembai speed ahead to try and reach Kaede.

Chapter Forty-eight jumps to the narrative concerning the two girls, Maya and Miki, as they attempt to escape from Akio's and Zenko's clutches. At first they travel unseen through the canals of the village, stealing food where they can before Maya realizes that Miki is the only thing that is stopping her from returning to Hisao. The twins strike out cross country in an attempt to reach their mother Kaede. One night they are traveling when suddenly they see a small cottage and a beggar woman who takes them in, feeds



them and watches over them as they sleep, calling herself Yusetu. In the morning when the twins wake up, they realize that it must be the ghost woman Yuki, Hisao's mother, because the cottage and the woman have gone. They travel the rest of the way to Hagi and Hofu like this, every night encountering the ghost woman Yusetu and being cared for by her.

In Chapter Forty-nine, the unthinkable happens. Miki and Maya reach Hagi where, down below, Hana has arrived to be with her sister after the birth of her new son. Maya uses her invisibility to slip into the small house where she sees Hana laughing at her mother behind her back, singing a song under her breath about how Kaede is to be the downfall of Takeo. Maya cannot stand it, and that night creeps into the house to murder Hana when she sees the cot of her youngest brother, the baby boy. She approaches the boy and sees immediately that he has Tribe skills; he can see her. Unable to contain her rage at being usurped by this new child, she uses her Kikuta gaze and sends her brother to sleep, killing him. Only then does Maya realize just how awful she has been, and how she has been manipulated by the ghost Yusetu/Yuki.

Chapter Fifty concerns itself with the aftermath in the normal world of Maya's actions, as Kaede is plunged into a deep despair and Hana uses the opportunity to tell her about the prophecy concerning any of Takeo's male heirs and that Takeo has kept the secret of his son Hisao from her. In her anger and grief Kaede decides that she is renouncing Takeo and the Otori family completely, and will be returning with Hana to Inuyama.

Chapter 45 - 50 Analysis

The penultimate chapters play themselves out in an almost fatalistic manner that is typically resonant of Japanese legends. As Takeo is concerned with the battle, we discover afterwards that Kaede has left their family home and that Takeo and Kaede's new infant baby boy, for whom Kaede had been praying so long, has actually died.

In a fatal and a cruel twist, the author splits the story into two different sorts of narratives — one that concerns itself with Shigeko and one that concerns itself with Takeo. The narrative surrounding Shigeko, her possible marriage to Lord Saga, and the future of the Three Countries is dealt with quickly by the author in just one short chapter, which reveals to the reader that the real events of the story are in fact the personal ones to do with Takeo and his feelings towards his family.

The rest of these chapters move on to discuss, in the past tense, how these tragedies came about. The characterizations of Maya and Miki are played out to their full extent as Maya is inevitably sucked into the thrall of the cat spirit. She becomes, for all intents and purposes, an 'evil character' but she recognizes and is aware of her evilness. Maya truly is at this point in the story a tragic figure.



Chapter 51- 55

Chapter 51- 55 Summary

Chapter Fifty-one sees the abandonment by Kaede of her family home from the other side of the story, by her daughter Miki.

The twin had waited for Maya to return but when, after a day had passed, she had realized that Maya was gone forever and had descended into the town herself. She approaches the house where her mother and Hana are inside, only to hear the news of the death of her new baby brother and the cooks take pity on her. She is struck dumb by the sudden knowledge of what Maya has done, and the cooks keep her out of sight of both Hana and Kaede for fear that her mother will go mad with grief and rage. Instead, the results are even worse as Kaede orders the house burnt to the ground, and Maya has to flee with the other refugees to the riverside, watching her mother's retinue depart.

In Chapter Fifty-two, Takeo confronts his wife Kaede in Inuyama, seeing the depth of her pain and how far she has been manipulated by Hana and Zenko.

Takeo takes Gembai and races for Inuyama on Doctor Ishida's suggestion, getting there the next day. Gembai the warrior-monk has told him that this effort will probably end in heartbreak but Takeo is prepared for this. Before he leaves, the ruler of the Otori clan dictates to his scribe Minoru his last Will and wishes as regent, and abdicates his reign of the Three Countries. He is now free to try and win back his wife Kaede from her grief. Takeo scales the walls and sneaks into the castle, only to find that his wife Kaede is angry and disgusted with his Tribe secrets, demanding that he take his own wife and that he has shamed her. Takeo barely escapes with his life and decides to travel to Terayama with Gembai, where he will spend the rest of his days as a monk.

Chapter Fifty-three sees Shigeko and the last of Lord Kahei's army suddenly hearing unexpected news. As they start to gather their tired forces to attack Zenko they see a ship carrying the banners of Lord Saga Hideki approaching, and upon it a messenger from the Emperor's general. Shigeko reads the letter that states that Lord Saga regrets attacking the Three Countries but wishes that there will be no war between their peoples. Instead, Lord Saga indicates that if he and the Lady Maruyama, Shigeko, are married then there will be peace between their realms and he will use his army to defeat Zenko and the Kikuta forces allied against them. Shigeko does not know what to say, but her lover Hiroshi indicates that she should accept the proposal. That night, the gentle kirin dies as if the beatitude of heaven had left with its spirit.

Chapters Fifty-four and Fifty-five, the last in the book, are different from the previous passages in the fashion that they are written looking backwards at events as they happened. Chapter Fifty-four is narrated as a letter sent to the Lady Otori of how Takeo and Maya found their deaths. Written by Makuta, the abbot at Terayama, the letter reveals that Takeo had lived at the temple peacefully, painting the last screens of



swallows and birds so lifelike that everyone thought that they were about to fly away. He seemed to be deeply sad, but approaching peace when Hisao, Kikuta Akio and the spirit-cat approached. Hisao was holding a short firearm, a pistol, and was about to shoot something when he apparently stopped as if listening to something - the ghost of his mother - as Akio tried to wrest the gun from him and the gun misfired, killing his step father. The spirit cat was also wounded and suddenly Miki was there, seizing it as it transformed back into Maya while Takeo went to his wounded son Hisao and took his hands in his own. As his other daughter died, Takeo forced his son's hands around a knife and forced Hisao to kill his father. Thus, the abbot writes, no one ever escapes their fate.

Chapter Fifty-five concludes the story a little later as the Lady Otori arrives at the shrine of Terayama where she begs apologies for her anger from the spirit of Takeo, and agrees to stay there with Miki and Hisao to learn the way of peace. Her other daughter Shigeko is now married to Lord Saga Hideki and the Three Countries is now a province of the Emperor and the Eight Isles. Zenko, Hana and the Muto family have been defeated by the Dog Catcher's men and the madness and turmoil appear to have ended.

Chapter 51- 55 Analysis

In the final few sections of the novel, the ending is almost inevitable as Takeo decides to try to give up his power, influence over others and retire to the monastery at Terayama but cannot because Kikuta Akio and Hisao follow him there to try and kill him. Takeo renounces society and family when he sees that his beloved wife Kaede no longer wants him, and that all of his former teachers in the Way of the Huou had been right; that the way of the warlord and the warlord both end in the same place - they end in tragedy and violence. He sees that he is better off leaving his country to the best of his family — Shigeko — than to become any more involved in the tragic politics. It is an irony that he is not allowed to fully renounce his past as it comes back to haunt him - quite literally - in the form of Hisao and Yuki.

There is, finally, a sense of cosmic justice if not cosmic balance to the end of the story; as the truly innocent characters — Hisao, Miki, Kaede and Shigeko — are allowed to survive.



Characters

Otori Takeo

Otherwise known as 'the Otori' or 'Lord Takeo', this character is the hero of the Tales of the Otori Trilogy. He was once a member of the Hidden, a secretive cult inside the Three Countries, who is trained by the Tribe — the families of ninjas who all possess magical powers — and later uses his powers to destroy the Tribe and assume leadership of the entire Three Countries. His personal family politics and the plotting of his enemies makes up the majority of the plot as he tries to strike an uneasy balance between the two.

He is a pragmatic and a disciplined man in the prime of his life, perhaps in his early forties, who is quite capable of ordering an execution or suing for peace. He appears to ride these contradictions of ethics and morality easily, with anything being sacrificed, including his own family, for the good of his country.

There is an undercurrent of emotion here, however, as he reveals his love for his wife and their unborn child, as well as his desire to retire to Terayama and spend the rest of his life in contemplation pursuing the gentle arts of painting and meditation. He is obviously tired of ruling a kingdom, and desires above all things peace, which is why he seeks to negotiate a treaty with the Emperor rather than to declare war. However, this ability to be truly ruthless as seen in his treatment of his own sister Madaren, questions our liking of his character as a moral figure in the tale.

Otori Kaede

The wife to Lord Takeo, Kaede is Takeo's true love in this world but is actually his second lover, the first being the bearer of his first child, the now dead Yuki. Kaede is Hana's sister. Both were saved from death by Takeo in the previous cycle of books, when Kaede and Takeo fell deeply in love. Kaede was hideously burned over half of her body and now occupies an almost mythical status for many people.

Kaede herself is suspicious of her two youngest children the twins Miki and Maya, because twins are regarded as unlucky in the Three Countries. She is, therefore, delighted when she becomes pregnant with Takeo's fourth child, a boy. Although obviously an intelligent and a strong woman, we cannot help feeling a little sorry for Kaede since she is constantly in her husband's shadow, and many secrets of the realm are kept from her. This eventually leads to feelings of distance and anger as the two argue at the end of the book, thanks to the manipulations of Hana.



Shigeko

Shigeko, the eldest daughter of Takeo and Kaede, seems to exemplify the best characteristics of both as she matures throughout this book. Starting as a headstrong girl who has a crush on her teacher Hiroshi, Shigeko applies herself to training to become a skilled warrior and a wise administrator by the time she comes of age and inherits the province of Maruyama.

Unlike her younger sisters, the twins, or Takeo's hidden eldest son Hisao, Shigeko's character does not seem to be deeply troubled or split and instead seems to act as a positive example of the best qualities of her parents. Shigeko falls in love with her tutor Hiroshi, but is unable to express her love due to their difference in rank and because her role will be pivotal in the confrontation between the Three Countries and the Emperor.

Maya & Miki

The two youngest daughters of Takeo and Kaede, Maya and Miki are twins and as such are deemed deeply unlucky in the culture of Three Countries. Their mother Kaede, in particular, acts to separate the girls from an early age, but the development of their Tribe skills over Shigeko only brings them more and more together. After one incident when Maya apparently is possessed by a cat spirit, it is decided that they have to be separated; so Maya is sent to live with Taku and Sada where she will learn the arts of self-mastery.

Miki appears to be headstrong but otherwise obedient, while Maya has a deeply riven character. She is opposed to her position in society as a girl, as a princess, and for being looked down upon as a twin. She succumbs to her Tribe skills as a way of expressing her own individuality and special nature.

Arai Zenko

Arai Zenko is the grandson of Muto Kenji and the son of Muto Shizuku, brother to Taku. He is one of the most influential leaders of the Three Countries, because he and his wife Hana control the port town of Hofu. Arai Zenko is viciously opposed to the rule of Otori Takeo, so he and Hana constantly make plots to undermine Takeo's authority and power.

During the story, Zenko becomes more and more tyrannical, bigoted and opulent as, towards the end of the story, he starts to conspire with the Kikuta to bring about the death of Takeo while he smuggles firearms out of the Three Countries. Zenko seems unceasing in his quest for power as he 'trades' his sons to Takeo for the promise of power. He hopes that they will be married to Takeo's daughters or at least adopted by the great ruler as his own. In the end, it is Zenko's own greed that proves to be his downfall.



Arai Hana

Arai Hana is the sister to Kaede and is known as the most beautiful woman in all of the Three Countries. She was once desired by Hiroshi, Takeo and Zenko before being married off to Zenko to hopefully satisfy his ambitions. However, her own lust for power and Zenko's appear to inspire each other. Hana helps her husband to bring Akio Kikuta into his confidences and plots to kill Zenko's brother Taku.

Hana has a great love for the new consumable objects that the foreigners are bringing with them to trade, and this can be seen as another device to highlight her greed and covetousness.

Sunaomi & Chikara

The two young boys of Zenko and Hana, Sunaomi and Chikara, are 'gifted' to Takeo by Zenko as a means to encourage Takeo to consider adopting them as his own or marrying them to his own daughters. Takeo has no male heir.

Both Sunaomi and Chikara appear to be bright youths, and Sunaomi starts to impress Takeo by his interest in the Way of the Huou, but an altercation with Maya where Sunaomi is shamed for his cowardice drives a wedge between them.

Muto Kenji

Nominally the head of the Tribe, Muto Kenji is the oldest advisor to Lord Takeo who instructs him on Tribe politics and helps him in his governance of the Three Countries by using his network of spies and assassin's to further Takeo's aims. When Kenji realizes how near to the end of his life that his lung disease is bringing him, he travels to the secret Kikuta village to see his grandson Hisao before being apprehended by Kikuta Akio. His final act is to ingest a poison pill that results in his death and brings the leadership of the Tribe into question.

Muto Shizuka

Kenji's first daughter, Shizuka, starts the story as a lady in waiting to Kaede who is helping to bring up Maya and Miki in the ways of the Tribe. When her own father dies, however, Taku and Takeo ask her to become the leader of the Tribe, even though it will bring her into direct confrontation with her eldest son Zenko.

Shizuka is a practical and level-headed woman who supports the Otori and Takeo unreservedly, and seems willing to even sacrifice her own family for the good of the realm.



Yuki (Yusetsu)

The daughter of Muto Kenji, Yuki was married to Kikuta Akio but used by him to seduce Takeo in the previous cycle of books to encourage him to become one of the Tribe. Yuki fell in love with Takeo and the two had a short love affair, resulting in her pregnancy and the birth of Takeo's and Yuki's son Hisao. Her legitimate husband Akio saw how she bore a real affection for Takeo and so ordered her to commit suicide. She now exists in the story as a shade that warns Hisao not to kill his father, although whether she means Takeo or Akio we do not know until right at the very end.

Dr. Ishida

Doctor Ishida is Shizuka's husband, and the chief physician to Lord Otori Takeo. He is often away on long sea voyages acting as an explorer and an ambassador alongside Terada Fumio. It is during these expeditions that he finds the poppy-cure that he uses on Takeo and other medical wonders. Not the least of his discoveries is the mythical kirin, or giraffe, which he brings back to gift to Shigeko.

Doctor Ishida is a well meaning but indiscreet man, shown in the way that he gets drunk and blurts out to Lord Kono that Takeo has another son.

Minoru

Minoru is the Lord Takeo's chief retainer and scribe, noting every judgement and meeting that Takeo has, and acting in his stead on legal judgements and administrations. He is known for his absolute discretion and his loyalty, since he is party to most of the secrets that happen behind the scenes in the Otori court.

Terada Fumio

Terada Fumio was once a pirate chief who threatened the Three Countries but was brought into Takeo's governance with the promise of his control over the navy of the Otori. Now Terada Fumio is known as an impetuous, somewhat foolhardy man who immediately acts on Takeo's behalf to try and apprehend other smugglers, and also as an explorer with his friend, Doctor Ishida.

Lord Kono

Lord Kono is the son of one of the noble families of the Three Countries, who arrives back in his homeland when he discovers that he is the last surviving relative and thus heir to a tract of land. He is also ambassador to the Three Countries on behalf of the Emperor of the Eight Isles.



While visiting, Lord Kono delivers to Takeo the message that the Emperor has ordered him to abdicate or suffer an invasion, so Takeo arranges for Kono to be supervised throughout the rest of his trip until Takeo himself can leave the Three Countries on a mission of peace to the Emperor. Lord Kono proves himself to be a skillful diplomat and an accomplished liar, but underneath appears to prefer the idea of negotiating a marriage rather than a war.

Don Joao, Don Carlo & Madaren

These three characters represent the 'foreign' interest in the land of the Three Countries. Don Joao is a merchant explorer who has fallen in love with one of the native women, Madaren, whom he teaches to be his translator. Don Carlo is a missionary of their monotheistic god 'Deus' who attempts to sway the beliefs of Kaede and Takeo towards accepting his religion in this new land. Takeo treats them with suspicion since he knows they bring with them the knowledge of firearms, and many consumable objects unheard of in the Three Countries. He attempts to have access to these foreigners limited, but realizes too late that he cannot close off his country from the rest of the world.

Madaren is the native woman who works as the translator for the two foreigners but who also has a secret. Upon meeting Lord Otori, she instantly recognizes him for who he is — Tomasu of the Hidden, her long lost brother. She attempts to reach him to convert him back to their family's strict religion and 'save him' from his position as the pagan ruler of the Three Countries. Takeo reacts angrily and rejects her completely.

Sugita Hiroshi

Sugita Hiroshi is the senior retainer of the Maruyama province of the Three Countries, and holds this large region in trust until Takeo's eldest daughter Shigeko comes of age to accept it as her own province.

Hiroshi himself is trained in the peaceful Way of the Huou, and acts as the student-teacher to Shigeko throughout her own training. Their closeness develops a deep bond between them until they both individually realize that they are in love with the other, but neither can act upon their desires. Hiroshi is perhaps the most 'honorable' person of the entire novel, who always attempts to act according to his beliefs in justice and peace above all things, even his own feelings.

Kuba Matsuda

Kuba, or Abbot Matsuda is the elderly guru of the Way of the Huou who teaches this path of peace from the Temple at Terayama. He has become a close spiritual guide to Takeo, but accepts that Takeo cannot always follow his advice because Takeo is immersed in the way of politics and not that of spirituality.



Matsuda gives Takeo some almost prophetic advice on the eve of his death when Takeo consults him about what to do concerning the impending war with the Emperor. When he dies, he is followed by Kuba Eikan, otherwise known as Kuba Makoto who was also one of Takeo's oldest friends.

Kikuta Akio

The head of the Kikuta family and one of the most fearsome and powerful members of the Tribe, Kikuta Akio was once the husband to Yuki and the step father to Hisao who ordered his wife killed when he realized that she was in love with Takeo. He swears vengeance against Takeo for this and for splitting with the Tribe as well as for lessening the Tribe's power across the lands.

Akio sends many members of his family to their deaths in various attempts to assassinate Takeo, until he finally hears that the Emperor has sent for Takeo himself. Akio comes out of hiding. He is a deeply ruthless, prideful and cruel man who seems motivated by tradition, hatred and little else. He harbors a desire to change everything that Takeo has instituted and revert the realm back to what it was like before Takeo took control of it.

Kikuta Hisao

The character of Kikuta Hisao could just as easily be named Otori Hisao or Muto Hisao, since he is the grandson of Muto Kenji, head of the Tribe, the step son to one of the most powerful families in the Tribe — the Kikuta — and also the illegitimate son of Takeo Otori. As such, he is destined for greatness and to be the crux of the power politics that swirl around him.

Although brought up in the ways of the Tribe, Hisao apparently has none of the magical abilities that they display, no ability to become invisible, throw a second self, known as a *doppelgänger*, or change shape. He appears to be clumsy and non-observant, apart from an unusual aptitude for machinery. Hisao does have one magical ability, however, that only Muto Kenji sees, which is that of a shaman or spirit-master. He is able to see and 'carry' the spirits of the dead and hear their supplications although he himself suffers from headaches every time he uses this power.

Since he is brought up half loving and half hating his cruel stepfather he comes to believe that his real father Takeo is an evil overlord, and so decides to try and design a new type of firearm, a 'pistol' that can kill the enemy of his adoptive Kikuta family.

Kikuta Gosaburo

Kikuta Gosaburo is the father of the two young assassins who are sent to kill Takeo's family while they are at prayers at the start of the story. Their fate eventually causes a whole cycle of events that unleashes the plot of the novel as Muto Kenji himself goes to



bargain with the Kikuta over their release. Gosaburo eventually decides to bargain with Takeo. This decision is countermanded by Akio, however, who then kills Gosaburo before he can set up a bargain.

The Emperor of the Eight Isles

The Emperor of the Eight Isles is nominally the god-king, descended from the goddess of the sun who rules over all of the Eight Isles of which the Three Countries are only a part. He is manipulated by his general Lord Saga into declaring Lord Otori's rule unlawful and sends Lord Kono to demand that Otori Takeo step down.

Lord Saga Hideki

Otherwise known as the Lord of the Eastern Isles, the Eastern half of the Emperor's realms, Lord Saga is a proud, powerful and arrogant war leader called 'the Dog Catcher' of the Emperor. Lord Saga desires the prosperous kingdom to the Three Countries greatly, and challenges Otori Takeo to a contest over the right to rule the Three Countries. Failure to attend would result in an invasion by his armies.



Objects/Places

The Three Countries

The Three Countries are the three provinces that split the Island realm and are united under the current leadership of the Otori clan through Lord Takeo. They broadly have a medievalist Japanese flavor, but with elements of fantasy melded in. The Three countries are banded by the Heavens Mountains, over which lies the Free City of Akashi and the port that leads to the city of the Emperor.

The Hidden

The Hidden are a secretive cult that believes in a monotheistic god into which Takeo was born before he was taken away as a young child. They re-emerge in the figure of Mada,ren Takeo's long lost sister, as Takeo wonders what to do with her and the similarity between the Hidden's beliefs and that of the foreigners' 'Deus'.

The Kirin

The kirin is a creature from ancient Japanese folklore which is 'discovered' in the expeditions of Doctor Ishida and Terada Fumio. It is a horse-like creature with an impossibly long neck, a gentle nature and tiny antlers resembling a giraffe.

Firearms

Firearms in the form of muskets are closely controlled by the Otori, as is the production of gunpowder and the manufacturing of bullets. They are brought into the country by foreigners who wish to trade them with Otori or his enemies. The struggle to stop the swell and flow of this weaponry is an undercurrent throughout the book.

The Nightingale Floor

Mentioned several times since there are numerous Nightingale Floors, these wooden slatted floors are strung with fine wires and even apparently the barest feather drop can set them 'singing' if weight is put upon them. They are reconstructed in the houses of Takeo as a memorandum of his first achievement, which was to navigate the Nightingale Floor of his enemy in the very first book of this series.



The Poison Pellet(s)

The Poison Pellets are concealed in the mouths of the assassins and are a common trick of the Tribe when they fear capture. Muto Kenji uses one rather than let himself be captured, thus ensuring that he has chosen his own death rather than dying at another's whim.

Jato, Takeo's Sacred Sword

Jato is Takeo's sacred sword and a symbol of his office as ruler of the Otori and the Three Countries. Takeo carries Jato with him at all public ceremonies and displays of power, as well as when he fears a public attack. When he is going about his 'secretive' business he prefers the other knives and daggers of the Tribe. In this way, Jato represents the spirit of the brave Warrior King, which is a role that Takeo has to take on during the book and cast off when the need arises.

Poppy Oil

The oil of a certain species of poppy is discovered by the explorer Doctor Ishida to bring about pain relief and drowsiness. Doctor Ishida brings this medicine back to use in his medical work. Takeo is the first to try it to ease the pain of his crippled hand.

Inuyama

Inuyama is one of the palaces from which Takeo rules and where the story starts. Inuyama is deep in the Otori-held 'Middle Country'.

Hofu

Hofu is the nearest port town to Inuyama, through which Takeo attempts to control the spread of the foreigners' influence and goods. It is here that Takeo visits in his guise as a merchant to talk to Terada Fumio and here that he sees Madaren, his long lost sister, for the first time.

Daifukjii

Daifukjii is the temple precinct where the kirin is held after it is presented to Takeo and Shigeko by Doctor Ishida. It is also here that Takeo agrees to meet his sister Madaren secretly to discuss their current lives and what Takeo can do for his sister now that he is the ruler of the Three Countries.



The Tribe

The Tribe are a number of the great families who all have magical abilities and historically have been trained as ninjas, assassins and spies. Although these families sometimes fall out and rifts occur, they all attempt to work together as one under the name 'Tribe' to offer their services to whomever can afford them. Takeo, his children Maya and Miki, and many characters from the book are all also members of the Tribe, and thus have specialist training and abilities that no other character has.

During his time as the ruler of the Three Countries, Takeo sought to untangle and undermine the influence that the Tribe had over the governance of society, so by the start of the story the Tribe is weakened and fractured. With the death of Muto Kenji, the overall headship of the Tribe comes into question also, as both Zenko and Shizuka wrestle for control over these families of assassins.

The Huou Bird

The Huou bird, similar to a bird of paradise, is an ancient mythical bird in the legends of Japan whose appearance is said to announce the arrival of peace, prosperity and tranquility. The bird is also the motif for the spiritual path known as the Way of the Huou which is a mixture of Buddhism and the Shaolin monks of real-world history.

The Shrine at Terayama

The Shrine at Terayama is home to the spiritual Way of the Huou and its abbot Matsuda, as well as being the final resting place of the ancestors of the Otori. It is here that Takeo returns when in need of spiritual guidance and sustenance.

Kunnan the White Goddess

Kunnan the White Goddess is also known as the Ever-Merciful and is the author's version of the deity of Quan-Yin. Kunnan is a female enlightened spirit or otherworldly figure who represents compassion and to whom Kaede in particular devotes her prayers.

The Enlightened One

The Enlightened One in the story is the author's version of the Buddha, whose veneration was practiced throughout medieval and feudal Japan alongside Shinto, a religion based on the otherworld and the spirits. In this context, the Enlightened One is something approaching a deity and is the original figure behind the Way of the Huou, toward which all of the characters send their prayers.

The Sesshu Paintings

The paintings of Sesshu are regarded as some of the best paintings of the classical period immediately before that of the book's narrative. They are considered to be some of the best examples of the Way of the Huou and the Enlightened One inspired art, and are used by Kaede and Takeo as gifts to the Emperor.

Kumamoto

Kumamoto is the castle-town of the Arai clan, and home to Arai Zenko and Arai Hana. it is here that Zenko retreats to plot against Takeo and where he holds an audience with Kikuta Akio as they plan their rebellion.



Themes

Secrets

Secrets are a constant theme throughout the books of the Otori and this book in particular, concentrating as it does on the conflicting politics of the Tribe, the Emperor, and the Otori-run state. This situation is further compounded by the personal lives of Takeo and the ruling family, as he particularly has to manage his own feelings and sometimes the members of his own family in order to stop uncomfortable truths getting out — such as the fact that he was born to one of the Hidden communities, or that his daughter Maya is possessed by a Cat Spirit.

Secrets seem to be a part of life for Takeo, trained as he was by the ninja Tribe and used to plotting, machinations and deceit. He rules his country with this in mind, on the one hand appearing to be a just and a fair ruler, while on the other having a 'secret council' headed by the Tribe leaders Muto Kenji, Taku and Shizuku. This form of secretive behavior and the trading of information can be examined by the reader as a means to study the power politics and governance of the time.

Much more important, however, are the personal secrets with which Takeo and other characters have to deal during the course of the narrative. Takeo himself has had a full past and wishes to keep some aspects of it away from his wife Kaede, including his relationship with the dead Yuki and their son together, Hisao. This secret proves his undoing as he finds that he cannot live with Kaede's anger once she finds out that he has kept this from her all of these years. This is a cycle that appears to be constant in Takeo's character as we see him sneaking out on missions in the dead of night. Takeo appears to be still in love with the secrets of his lifestyle and is unable to fully give them up in order to be a better husband or a better ruler. He keeps Kaede in particular out of Tribe business since she is not a member of the Tribe, but does not realize how this cold-shouldering will affect his wife and co-ruler of his realm.

Secrets eventually prove to be the undoing of all of their bearers in this story, and the message of the plot becomes clear — that the secrets that the characters hold run contrary to the symbolic expression of morality and virtue in the story, the way of the Enlightened One and the Way of the Huou. The character of Shigeko acts several times as a representative to prove this point as she urges her father on two occasions to tell their mother the truth.

Modernity

Modernity is also a constant theme that underscores a lot of the events and the drama of the story. The story takes place in a mythical version of feudal Japan, one which is on the verge of 'being discovered' by the outside world and having an internal discussion about what this means and whether they should open up to the world or whether they



should reject its advances. This can most plainly be seen in the different approaches that Takeo and Zenko takes towards the foreigners Don Carlo and Don Joao.

Don Carlo is a missionary representing 'Deus', the Latin for 'God', and a thinly-veiled masquerade of the Spanish and Portugese explorers such as Marco Polo. Don Carlo seems intent on getting Kaede or Takeo to convert to his system of beliefs, but finds an unlikely spiritual candidate in Arai Zenko and his wife in return for their country's support in the forthcoming civil war. Don Joao, on the other hand, is a merchant who brings with him mirrors and porcelains not before seen and, of course, firearms to the Three Countries. Don Joao is angry when Takeo places trade restrictions upon him, and then later finds out that Lord Takeo is not even the ruler of the entire Eight Islands.

This theme of modernity can be examined in two ways — through the spread of firearms and the inability of a feudal society to withstand them, and through the changes in regime that Takeo himself is attempting to bring about, such as female inheritance laws, and the jurisdiction of the courts over the old death threats and assassination-politics of the Tribe. One form of this modernity, the firearms, appears to be dangerous to Takeo's realm, while the other, the changes to civil society, appears from our point of view to be prosperous. The question asked by the underlying narrative is 'what counts as good development?'

Mythical Japan

The setting for the novel is that of a mythical version of Japan sometime during the feudal period just before or around the same time as the European Renaissance. This Japan was still very much considered a 'closed kingdom' for the West, and was regarded as mysterious, strange and a part of the 'Other'. It was characterized in many ways by Western scholars in terms of its differences to Western culture rather than its similarity. In actual fact, feudal Japan had a very highly developed social caste structure and many of its arts and skills excelled those of the West, but a lack of trade opportunities and limited resources meant that they never spread their economic clout as the Western countries did.

The mythical Japan of Lian Hearn is based very strongly upon historical Japan of the past, mingled with elements of ancient China and Korea to create a tapestry of the fantastical East that captures our imagination. People in Hearn's work mimic real world skills and abilities. Within 'the Tribe', instead of the ninjas being a social caste, they are part of a familial bloodline whose abilities are based on the purity of their lineage and closeness to the Tribe bloodline. Other elements, such as The Enlightened One and Kunnan, closely resemble Japanese Buddhism while Hisao and the animal spirits form a close approximation of how the real world spirit religion of Shintoism might have been practiced during this period. In short, the mythical Three Countries of the Otori novels can be understood as the author attempting to recapture some of the fables and magic of the mythical Far East in order to present those elements in a new light for a modern audience.



Family

The last enduring theme for this novel is that of family, understood in terms of blood relatives and of kith, kin and loyalties.

The main character, Takeo, is torn by his ties to his family amidst his duties as the stern ruler of the Three Countries. This dichotomy of appearance and feeling becomes so strong for him that he even starts to consider retiring or abdicating, fleeing to the monastic sanctuary of Terayama to live a life of quiet seclusion and reflection rather than have to deal with this conflict any more. The ties that bind, quite clearly, also become for Takeo the ties that seem to hold his character down. The same conflict can be seen for the character of Maya as she matures through the novel from being one of twins, an unlucky occurrence in the Three Countries, acting out to assert her own identity and finally becoming, in her own right, a powerful member of the Tribe able to transform into a cat. The character of Maya detests being a princess, and even detests being a girl and would much rather become a boy or a trained assassin for the Tribe rather than have any sort of restrictions placed on her loyalties in the form of familial obligations. This rebellion causes great problems for the royal family and for Takeo himself as, finally, he has to find a way to curb her foolishness and her excesses.

However, family is not always presented in an authoritative, restrictive way. The peace of the realm is caused, it is claimed, by the matrimonial and familial harmony of the family and in this way 'family' becomes a metaphor we can use to examine the society as a whole. Takeo, on several occasions, has to act like a patriarchal father figure towards his other liege lords that are underneath him, reprimanding them if they have been bad, but not too much lest they become rebellious.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of *The Harsh Cry of the Heron* is almost exclusively seen from that of the third person personal perspective, switching to a different central character in each chapter. This means, broadly, that the reader experiences the events of the story outside of the characters inside the narrative, but the 'personal' aspect allows the narrator to focus on the thoughts and feelings of whoever the principle actor of that chapter happens to be. For example in one chapter we may be experiencing the terrors of Tribe training alongside the character of Maya, hearing what she is feeling and also what is happening around her (third person perspective), but in the next chapter we focus upon the perspective of Taku, and what he is feeling as he trains Maya. Both perspectives and, indeed, the whole book remain firmly in the third person outside of the characters, allowing different changes in scenery as well as the arrival of other characters in behind the scenes plot developments to occur.

This use of the third person personal perspective allows the reader to come to grips with a potentially difficult plot, making it easier to see the twists and turns of allegiances and reactions to each other as each chapter allows the reader to understand each character's motivations and actions.

Setting

The setting for the novel entire is the fictional place called the Three Countries, a place which closely resembles feudal Japan just prior to the Early Modern period that saw the end of the Samurai period. There are some notable differences in the setting, however, since the Three Countries form just one part of a larger network of islands under the 'God-Emperor' called the 'Eight Islands' which seem to resemble most of Japan, some of China and part of Korea all rolled into one. The setting is otherwise highly reminiscent of the early Japanese period and Japanese mythology.

The principle places of the setting are the castle-towns and the palace-fortresses of the different family clans such as Kummamoto for the Arai, and Inayama for the Otori. This gives the feel of the secluded areas ruled almost exclusively by ancient family overlords over which one of the protagonists, Lord Otori Takeo, is trying to institute collective control.

The settings in the first half of the book take on the feeling of 'familiar' and usual as Takeo leads his family or sends them from one castle to another to continue their administration, overall this traveling feels 'safe'. During the latter half of the book, however, this traveling and the setting become more dangerous and more mysterious as Takeo and most of his court have to travel beyond the mountains into the Emperor's realm. At this point, the significance of the traveling, of the new and the strange begins



to make itself clear as the characters move away from their comfort zone and the author heightens the dramatic tension and promised conflict of the plot.

Language and Meaning

The language of the book is perhaps one of the most interesting aspects, borrowing as it does heavily from ancient Japanese culture, calligraphy and language.

Language, naming conventions and the significance of names in the book could almost be thought of as another character in the book. The author goes to great lengths to highlight the detailed world behind the story through the use of his language; some names are used by some cultural groups, whereas other names are actually homages to other legendary personages. Naming conventions and titles are also resonant of the setting and ancient Japan. There are 'Masters' of clans which all have their Clan or family name prefixed to their own, and when a character is recognized or adopted into a clan, that prefix is also added onto their own name. Another example is that of Jato; originally the name of a beautiful hero of myth is now the name of Takeo's sacred sword of office and of the Otori Clan.

The language generally used in the writing of the story can be heavy with description, as we sometimes see that the author has a lot of details to impart to the reader, and sometimes they take on a feeling of intricate detail ("he held onto her artery until she fell unconscious"). This intricate detail enhances the exact, detailed and historic nature of the story as a whole.

Structure

The structure of the book is that of a singular narrative plot organized into fifty-five fairly short chapters. Each chapter could be little more than a prolonged conversation between two characters or it could tell the story of a whole season spent in one location by the characters. It reads somewhat similarly to a diary or a monologue of ancient times, recording all of the pertinent events that enhance the plot, even if they are weeks apart or happening at the same time in different corners of the kingdom.

The episodic nature of these chapters keeps the pace of the novel moving briskly since there is a lot of ground to cover, and ties very quickly to a notion of the seasons. A number of the chapters start in a similar fashion, such as 'it is the tenth month of the year,' 'it is the eleventh month of the year,' giving the impression of the characters being tied to the cycle of the year.



Quotes

"Words could be altered and manipulated to mean almost anything. If a prophecy was believed, it often came true. He would not utter the words, in case by doing so he breathed life into them." Takeo, Chapter One, page 11

"They are learning good manners from our people." Hana, talking about the foreigners, Chapter Five, page 59

"I was a young man then, and fearless. I did not believe anyone could kill me. Now I am old, crippled and I fear far more... for my children, and my wife, and for my land and people..." Takeo, Chapter Twelve, page 127

"It is not right to want to send your own daughter away and favour other people's sons." Maya talking to Kaede, Chapter Twenty, page 213

"Now he saw the same strength in his daughter, and felt a kind of release deep within him. Whatever happened to him, he had an heir." Takeo commenting on his daughter Shigeko, Chapter Twenty-six, page 265

"..the Tribe will no longer be divided,' Zenko said. 'We will recognize this boy as heir to both Kikuta and the Muto families, and through him control the Tribe ourselves.'" Arai Zenko, Chapter Twenty-nine, page 309

"The first day we met, Kenji said I should learn ruthlessness from you,' Takeo replied, amazed that she should advise him so coolly to kill her eldest son." Takeo considering Shizuka, Chapter Thirty-Two, page 348

"He woke from these dreams with an aching sense of loss that his daughters were no longer children, that even his baby son would eventually grow to manhood and challenge him; that parents bring children into this world only to be supplanted by them, that the price of life is death." Takeo, Chapter Thirty-seven, page 405

"Everything has combined to convince him that you have the blessing of Heaven."
"I thought him sufficiently worldly to see in me a check on Saga's power."
Takeo joking with Gembai, Chapter Forty, page 451

"All I know is that something that has held the delicate web together has snapped."
Gembai, Chapter Forty-four, page 512

"I have never pretended to you to be anything other than I am... I know all my failings: I have shared them with you often enough." Takeo pleading with Kaede, Chapter Fifty-two, page 608

"I must live for Miki's sake...' She lifted the knife and threw it from her, then opened her arms to her daughter." Kaede, Chapter Fifty-five, page 631



Topics for Discussion

Examine Takeo's character. What is his greatest weakness, and what is his greatest strength?

Was Takeo right in keeping so many secrets from his wife Kaede in this novel? Why did he do it? Why did he feel like he must?

Why does Maya do what she does when she finally comes home to warn her mother? What does this tell us about her character?

Contrast the two eldest children of Takeo and Kaede — Shigeko and Hisao. In what ways are they similar and in what ways are they different? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.

Using examples from the text, what historical culture do you think this book is attempting to recreate? How is the author's vision different?

What do you think is the author's message at the heart of the book? Cite examples and page numbers that highlight this message.

Examine the theme of modernity and modernization in *The Harsh Cry of The Heron*. What does the term mean with reference to the book? Consider the role of the Tribe, firearms and gender equality in the novel in particular.

What does it mean when we say that this book is a tragedy? What is a tragedy, and how does the author present this theme to the reader?

Examine the notion of family in the text. What different family groups are there? Why are they important to the society?

Consider the cast of antagonists or the 'evil' characters in the novel. What makes them 'bad' and are they truly evil or can we understand their motivations at all?