

Musashi Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Musashi—known at the beginning of the story as Takezo—and Matahachi, friends from the same village who had joined the military together, wake on the battlefield to realize that they are among the few survivors. Both are wounded and fear capture. When they find a small farmhouse, they ask for help and a woman named Oko allows them to sleep in the woodshed. Her daughter, Akemi, brings them medicine and food and they discover she is the girl at the battlefield and that she was robbing corpses on orders from her mother. Healed, the two decide to leave but Musashi wakes to find that Matahachi has left with Oko and Akemi. Matahachi lives off the two for some time as they run a tea house. His failure to return to his own village prompts his mother, Osugi, to hate Musashi and to vow that she will kill him. Musashi is briefly captured by the opposing army but Matahachi's former fiancée, Otsu, helps him escape. He soon parts with her, determined to follow the way of the sword.

The two have many adventures, with their paths crossing many times over the coming years. Otsu makes friends wherever she goes and gains a great many admirers, but her heart always belongs to Musashi. Musashi encounters a young man named Jo and takes him in as a student. Jo eventually encounters his own father and the pair return to the way of the samurai. Musashi later takes in another student, this one named Iori. In truth, Iori is Otsu's younger brother though Otsu was abandoned by her parents long before Iori was born. Iori, having learned the identity of his sister, is frustrated with his inability to catch up with her or to return to his teacher, Musashi.

Matahachi eventually realizes that he has to take control of his life and one day walks out of Oko's house to start a new life of his own. He works as a laborer until he happens to see the murder of a young man. Taking the man's possessions, he finds a certificate from a martial arts teacher and some gold. He sets out to return the money but soon spends the money along the way, briefly taking the identity on the certificate only to later find that certificate did not belong to the slain man after all. That warrior, Kojiro, is alive and well and encounters Matahachi while Matahachi is using his name. Matahachi settles down with Akemi to raise their child and the three are at the final bout between Musashi and Kojiro.

Musashi spends his life in search of the "Way of the Sword" and finds himself always lacking as he continues to seek answers. Meanwhile, Kojiro has sold himself as a retainer and his natural cruelty is seldom held in check. The final battle between the two—years in the making—is brief, with Musashi the winner.



Book I, Earth

Book I, Earth Summary

Takezo and Matahachi, friends from the same village who joined the military together, wake on the battlefield to realize that they are among the few survivors. Both are wounded and fear capture. When they find a small farmhouse, they ask for help and a woman named Oko allows them to sleep in the woodshed. Her daughter, Akemi, brings them medicine and food and they discover she is the girl at the battlefield. One day they encounter a "freebooter" named Tsujikaze who says he knows Oko has recently sold items they took from corpses on the battlefields, and that he wants his share. After he leaves, Akemi says that Tsujikaze is the man believed to have murdered her father. Oko frantically hides everything in anticipation of Tsujikaze's visit and gives Takezo a sword he asks for. She gives Matahachi a purse but he covets the sword as well. She is obviously seeking the attention of Takezo.

Tsujikaze arrives, finds the loot Oko has hidden in the ceiling, demands that his men punish her and a fight erupts, ending with Takezo killing Tsujikaze. Oko says that Tsujikaze's followers will soon try to exact revenge and decides that she and Akemi will have to leave. Takezo and Matahachi plan to return to their own village as well, back to Matahachi's fiancée, Otsu. They drink heavily that night and Takezo wakes the next morning to find everything—including Matahachi—gone.

In her home village, Otsu spends time with a Buddhist monk named Takuan. Having waited a year for Matahachi, she no longer hopes that he will return. Takezo's sister, Ogin, believes the two boys are dead which makes Otsu angry. Takezo returns but is hunted as a member of the losing faction. Later, Takezo goes to Osugi, tells her as much of Matahachi's fate as he knows, and is preparing to leave when the old woman invites him to stay for a hot bath and a meal. He agrees but it is a trap and he kills again as he evades the soldiers.

Otsu gets a letter from Matahachi and Oko, explaining that Matahachi won't be returning to the village. The military captain seeking Takezo is rude, scaring Otsu who is forced to serve him. Takuan explains that he is personally acquainted with the man's commander, Lord Terumasa. The captain is immediately worried that he will be reprimanded and agrees that if Takuan can get Takezo to return without more death, Takuan can also determine his punishment. After three days in the mountains, Takuan and Otsu return with Takezo, who gave himself up to Takuan. Some want to kill him but eventually agree to tie Takezo to a high limb of a tree without food and water. When Osugi demands that Otsu move in with her, Otsu cuts Takezo out of the tree and they run away together. As soon as they are safely out of town, Takezo leaves her to search for his sister. Osugi and her brother, Gon, leave in search of Otsu, Takezo and Matahachi to restore the family honor.



Takezo is taken under Takuan's wing again, this time to serve out his punishment in the castle of the region's ruler. He is sentenced to remain in solitude and stays there for three years with only books as his guides. He ends the time by taking a new name, Musashi. When he leaves the castle, he finds Otsu has waited at the point they were to meet for three years. She tells him that she is going with him now and he does not disagree.

Book I, Earth Analysis

It is noted that in the current times of upheaval, almost everyone is impacted by war and many profit from it in several ways. One way is that people steal from the bodies of the corpses, taking the things they can sell. When Akemi confesses that she is doing this, she seems to feel at least some level of shame for her actions. However, it is also what her father did and she seems to feel that his actions were nothing less than honorable. She says that her mother demands it so that they can continue to live the affluent lifestyle they lived while Akemi's father was making the family's money. It is noteworthy that Akemi goes to the battlefields to gather whatever loot she can find, but that her mother does not. Another interesting point is that there must be a great many battles leaving behind many corpses as this has become a lucrative business, prompting some to claim regions as their own and disputing the right of others to gather loot from specific areas.

The relationship of the families in the village is typical of families everywhere in every time period. In this case, Matahachi's mother feels that her family is far above Takezo's family in terms of rank and status. She seems to be an overbearing personality and is accustomed to having everyone jump to her command, and is not willing to lower herself in any way. She is also not willing to believe that Matahachi might have done anything wrong, laying all the blame for his failure to return home on Takezo. Another interesting point regarding her personality is that she feels she is too good to enter the home of Takezo's sister by the back door, but once she has been formally welcomed she is overtly rude to her hostess, obviously indicating that the rules of etiquette do not apply to her.

Takuan talks to Takezo when they first meet in the mountains, telling him that it is nature that prompts Takezo to surrender to the coming punishment. When they arrive in the village, Takuan repeats his point, saying that he did not overpower Takezo or otherwise bring him to justice. When the people are calling for Takezo's head, Takuan refuses, saying that it is not acceptable for a priest to desecrate a body. For those who are calling for torture, he points out that if Takezo were tied in the branches of a tree and left there for days on end, the birds would eventually gore his eyes out. This idea pleases those bent on torture and is the reason Takezo is tied in the tree. It seems that Takuan then finds that Takezo is literally a captive audience and after several days imparts some knowledge about both the situation and Takezo's infantile attitude about his life. Takezo has said that he only returned to the village to bring a message to Matahachi's mother and Takaun says that Takezo wants to be lauded for a single good act, but that he has to find a way to live his entire life in that way if he wants to become a true



samurai. Takezo takes the words to heart and even stops crying out for help because Takaun says that he should meet death with some level of dignity.

Otsu is actually the accepted fiancée of Matahachi and the "union" means that Otsu has been formally accepted as the daughter-in-law of Osugi. Osugi comes to Otsu and calls her "daughter-in-law," which might have been a blessing to Otsu who is an orphan and—according to Takuan—is starved for the love of a parent. However, Osugi immediately makes it evident that she does not want to be close to Otsu. She actually wants another person to help with the chores. She blatantly says that there is too much work, but hides her motive behind the fact that it is her duty to see that Otsu knows how to do all the things a wife must do. It is this information along with a longing for a friend who understands her that seems to be the motivation for Otsu to cut Takezo out of the tree.



Book II, Water

Book II, Water Summary

A "Young Master" named Gion Toji and his followers, including Seijuro, go "whoring," where Akemi serves tea. The situation soon becomes obvious. Matahachi is married to Oko who is running a house of prostitution. He is living off Oko because she refuses to allow him to become a laborer. He wants to leave but feels somehow compelled to stay. At twenty-two, he is now soft and lazy but realizes that he made a mistake by not returning to Otsu. He is searching Oko's possessions for money, planning to leave her, when he learns that a man named Miyamoto Musashi is waiting for the Young Master. In fact, Musashi has beaten all the students of Seijuro's school who challenged him and killed two. It is decided that a fair fight is not possible. Seijuro objects but is secretly relieved to avoid the encounter, and a group kick in the door where Musashi waits only to find that he has escaped. As they pursue him, they encounter Matahachi who is now certain the warrior is really Takezo but is not willing to see his former friend in his current state.

Laker, Musashi encounters Osugi and Gon who challenge him, saying they have tracked him for four years and, though old, are aided by their ancestors and plan to kill him for his role in Matahachi's disappearance. Musashi refuses to answer their challenge, saying he cannot pick up a sword against the two and simply walks away, vanishing so quickly that rumors abound that he had jumped a six foot wall.

A young boy named Jotaro convinces Musashi to take him on as a pupil and traveling companion. Jo says his father was a great samurai who now lives in the temple. At Musashi's command, Jo returns to the school to deliver a message and searches for Matahachi but Akemi says Matahachi has left. When she realizes Musashi is Takezo, she longs for him, confessing to herself that she has always loved him. On his way back to meet Musashi, Jo encounters a samurai named Shoda and Otsu who says she is looking for a swordsman—a "ronin"—and is going in the same direction as Jo. They part ways soon.

Musashi finds the temple he had sought with the hope of finding someone to teach him about fighting and kills his opponent. An old priest named Nikkan tells Musashi that he is too strong and that he must learn to be weak. Musashi does not fully understand but thinks that it applies not to physical strength but to his fighting spirit, and admits that the talk makes him feel as if he lost that battle. Jo returns and the two prepare to leave only to receive word that a group of fighters from the temple are preparing a surprise attack. Musashi arrives at the designated place to find the men and a number of priests and when the fight begins the priests turn and kill all the men. They explain that these men were bad and that they undertook the action as a "house cleaning" endeavor. As Musashi prepares to leave, Nikkan says he must consider that he could have been killed, and that he cannot continue to pride himself only on his strength.



Musashi and Jo stay at an inn in Yagyu Valley and Otsu delivers a message to the inn but encounters only Jo during her visit. Musashi manages an audience at the castle of a great warrior and teacher. There is a disturbance when Jo kills a favored dog who had viciously bitten him and Musashi is in the midst of a fight when he hears the flute and knows it must be Otsu. He sees her again but runs away when she sees him. After he is gone, she encounters Takuan who warns her against grief, sensing her despair over the one-sided love for Musashi.

Book II, Water Analysis

As Seijuro awaits an interview with Musashi, there are several points that play an important role in the upcoming events. One is that Seijuro is the head of an important school and if he dies, the school—a major economic enterprise—will be in great danger. The school has become so prestigious that acceptance guarantees acceptance in society. Another is that Seijuro is not a particularly good fighter, an accepted fact among those who know him. Finally, Seijuro is not at his best on this particular day, having drunk too much and suffering from exhaustion and a hangover. Musashi was initially ridiculed for his unkempt appearance and the fact that he declared he has not learned under any one master but is seeking the best of many styles to create a fighting method of his own. Added to this is the fact that the samurai way of life demands honor. Seijuro voices anger at the idea of tricking Musashi rather than meeting him honestly, but is secretly relieved. Seijuro asks if it is because someone believes he cannot win, but he is lied to on this point and it seems to reassure him. The attackers are not filled with honor but once they realize he got away, they are very brave in their pursuit.

As Musashi and Jo prepare to leave a particular inn where the widow owner has enjoyed peace from harassment because of their presence, she gives Musashi a gift of an expensive robe. When Jo asks what gift she will give him, she asks what he wants and he decides on a mask that hangs on the wall. The woman first declines to part with it, then agrees, telling Musashi that perhaps she will be happier without it. This seems rather cryptic but she does not explain further and Jo leaves with the mask. When Otsu realizes that Musashi is nearby but has run away from her without saying anything to her, she is filled with grief. Jo thinks that the look on her face is very similar to that of the mask and it frightens him. Later, Takuan warns Otsu against allowing herself to die over her unreturned love for Musashi. When he sees Jo wearing the mask, he notes that it looks like Otsu at the end of a dark journey.



Book III, Fire

Book III, Fire Summary

Matahachi is among the many laboring at a public works project at Fushimi and he blames Oko and Takezo for the current state of his life. He is so weak he cannot pick up a watermelon he has purchased to eat. He watches as a young warrior he comes to believe is Sasaki Kojiro is killed after having killed a foreman on the job site. The warrior is actually named Tenki. Matahachi takes the warrior's possessions and runs away, later overhears an old priest bemoaning the fact that he has done his son—Jo—wrong, and learns that the dead warrior was carrying quite a lot of money. Matahachi travels on, continuing to search for the family of Sasaki Kojiro while searching for an opportunity to put himself into service as a swordsman, using the dead warrior's money to fund his search. One day Matahachi is drinking with a man and when introductions are made, Matahachi says his name is Sasaki Kojiro. He briefly wishes he could take it back, but there is an immediate change of attitude because the man has heard that name and knows him to be a great swordsman. Matahachi gives the man a great deal of his remaining money to be used as a bribe for a position as a warrior but learns that the man is a crook and he never shows up at the appointed meeting place. A few days later, Matahachi encounters his mother and Uncle Gon. She berates him for his failure to return home, spansks him as if he were a child and says that he must help them kill Takezo and Otsu and that none of them can return home without the heads of those two. Matahachi agrees to help but soon grows tired of his mother's constant bickering and leaves them.

Oko meets Toji's boat after he has been on a trip to search for supporters because Seijuro's school is in danger of folding. Seijuro forces himself on Akemi, saying that he has already paid her mother for the privilege. She tries to drown herself and Uncle Gon goes into the water after her where he dies though she is resuscitated. Toji encountered a young warrior on a boat who had cut off Toji's topknot and the warrior is later identified at Sasaki Kojiro. Sasaki fights with several of Seijuro's men who are trying to restore the honor of their school, lost when Toji lost his hair. Sasaki then encounters Seijuro who realizes the young warrior's identity and decides that having him around would be a good thing for the school, considering that he is expecting a return visit from Musashi soon.

Jo is now with Otsu, both having searched for Musashi for some time and Otsu is now working as a flute teacher for a group of young virgins. She is asked to leave, her own status as a virgin unclear, and agrees to deliver a scroll as she leaves. Jo believes he might have seen Musashi but decides it must not have been. It was in fact Musashi who has a limp from a foot injury. Musashi encounters a blacksmith who is a master with a particular weapon and hopes to learn something from him but finds that it is the brother of Tsujikaze and that the smith wants to kill Musashi in revenge. Musashi slips away safely but not before placing a sickle on the man's sleeping form to let him know that his



life had been in danger. He escapes and the men chasing him briefly capture Otsu who escapes with the help of a man named Tsuge Sannojo

Akemi is taken in by a priest named Tanzaemon but Kojiro finds that his monkey is in the room where she is staying. Akemi is bitten by a dog and leaves with Kojiro. Days later, Kojiro follows Akemi when she meets Musashi, though he was expecting Matahachi. Otsu also sees Musashi with Akemi and is disappointed. Then Osugi, who encountered Musashi at the home of a relative, also sees Otsu and convinces her to come back to the inn where Osugi is staying.

Book III, Fire Analysis

The priest who is Jo's father is described in some detail and it seems that he is deeply tormented by his life and, perhaps, his past. When he discovers that Matahachi has eaten his rice and drank his sake, the old priest is angry. He yells at Matahachi, irrationally demanding that he return the food. Matahachi tries to give the man some of the gold he took from the dead warrior's possessions, but the old priest says he does not want the money, though he does not explain. He then seems to realize the tirade and begins beating his head against a column until he bleeds, berating himself for having engaged in this argument. Nothing more is explained at this time, but it seems that his past, including the fact that he gave up his son, is likely the source of his torment.

Matahachi's decision to take on the identity of Kojiro is not something he thought about nor did he make any conscious decision to do so. He simply gave that name in reply to a question without taking time to consider the consequences. It is interesting that he furthers the deception by telling his mother that he has taken that name because he was ashamed of his time living off Oko. Matahachi continues to insist that he has encountered bad luck and that little of his current situation is of his own making. He likens the world to a rock wall without a single chink in it that would allow entrance to the fame and fortune he seeks. It seems that his decision to live with Oko is the only one for which he is willing to take the blame and that could be because he also took the initiative to get himself out of that situation.

It seems that it is not in Osugi's nature to be a typical mother. When she encounters Matahachi, she screams at him, spanks him as if he were a child and does not seem in the least pleased to find that he is alive and well, other than as a tool to help her achieve her own goals.

Musashi believes that he has matured greatly from the time Takuan tied him to a tree and believes that he would use this new maturity against Takuan if they met again. He then realizes that Takuan would likely say that Musashi remains a foolish boy. In fact, Musashi injures his foot and is bedridden for three days, but refuses to remain to allow the foot to heal. Instead he walks with a pronounced limp and is in terrible pain. After he is on his way again, he realizes that it was not a mature decision, and that he allowed his impatience to rule his action rather than waiting for his body to heal.



Book IV, Wind

Book IV, Wind Summary

Many are waiting for the fight between Musashi and Seijuro but neither show. Then Seijuro's servant arrives, saying that the two men met and fought at a different location. Musashi brutally injured Seijuro with a wooden sword. Seijuro's students rush to that place and find Seijuro with a shattered arm, begging that it be cut off. Kojiro does so then tells Akemi that his action should make up for Seijuro's attack on her. Musashi encounters an old woman named Myoshu who senses on him the smell of blood and runs away. He follows, taking a basket she dropped and reassuring her and her son, Koetsu, that he meant no harm.

Matahachi finds Akemi in a tree, hiding from the real Kojiro. Matahachi identifies himself as Kojiro, making the real Kojiro laugh. Matahachi is then tied up by a samurai posing as a monk. His name is Ichinomiya Gempachi and he is the retainer of the man, Tenki. Upon hearing Matahachi's story of Tenki's fate, Gempachi feels he must kill Matahachi simply so that Tenki's family will feel there was some vengeance taken. Kojiro interrupts, saying that there is no need for Matahachi to die. They leave Matahachi tied to the tree and Denshichiro, younger brother of Seijuro, finds and releases Matahachi as Denshichiro rushes to his brother's side. Seijuro hands the school over to Denshichiro, forbids him to fight Musashi but Denshichiro refuses to listen, then Seijuro leaves a letter when he disappears.

Otsu stays with Osugi who meets up with Matahachi and goads him into killing Otsu. Matahachi finds a person in the dark and kills him, mistaking the man for Otsu. The man turns out to be the same man who had tricked Matahachi out of his money.

Musashi stays several days with Koetsu and his family and is there when he receives the challenge from Denshichiro. They had planned to spend the evening in the geisha district and Musashi slips unnoticed from a gathering there and arrives at the appointed place, killing Denshichiro and one of Denshichiro's men quickly, slipping away after the fight.

Musashi encounters Takuan at a teahouse where a courtesan named Yoshino becomes infatuated with Musashi and convinces him to remain with her because Denshichiro's men are searching for him with the intention of attacking him. Meanwhile, Otsu is heartsick and Jo fears she might die. Takuan says that telling Otsu that Musashi is staying with a courtesan and that her love is one-sided might snap her out of it, but Jo refuses. He finds Musashi but Musashi refuses to return to Otsu.

Matahachi and Osugi learn of the coming match with Musashi and the students of Denshichiro's school and hope to be able to claim a lock of Musashi's hair so that they can return to their village with honor. On the day before the bout, Matahachi encounters Akemi, who steals money from them and leaves without paying for her own room.



Musashi encounters Otsu and Jo on the way to his bout and tells Otsu that he has always loved her, but that he is going to his death and that she must not follow him.

Akemi is on the mountain and encounters Jo who is wearing the mask he still carries. Matahachi investigates her scream and convinces her to leave with him, ignoring the fact that his mother is also on the mountain. Musashi slips up the mountain and attacks from the rear where he is not expected, gaining the advantage and slaying many—including the uncle of Denshichiro and his young son—before running away from the dozens remaining and slipping away unnoticed. He remains at Mudoji, a temple, to recover but is kicked out based on information provided by Osugi who later attacks Musashi again.

Musashi encounters Matahachi, who has just discovered that Akemi had pretended to be sick but then ran off with his money. Musashi, having sent a letter to Otsu, waits for her reply and overhears Kojiro telling several men that Musashi's performance at the recent fight was filled with trickery and that he took the first opportunity to run away. When Kojiro realizes Musashi was listening, he knows that they will someday have to resolve the situation with a fight.

When Otsu receives word that Musashi is waiting, she hurries to him. Matahachi is also hurrying to meet Musashi but Kojiro intercepts him, telling him that Matahachi cannot possibly go with the enemy of Osugi. Matahachi goes anyway but finds that Musashi is with Otsu and is jealously angry. He then vows again to get even.

Book IV, Wind Analysis

Gempachi knows that Matahachi had something to do with Tenki's death because Matahachi drank an enormous amount of sake at an inn, then "paid" with an exquisite pillbox that had belonged to Tenki. Gempachi, posing as a monk as he searches for Tenki's killer, sees the pillbox and makes the connection.

Musashi meets Denshichiro at the appointed place and it is noted that the two are not evenly matched. Denshichiro has had some sake to warm himself and has gotten his clothing prepared for battle, but not himself. Musashi began readying himself much earlier and is now fully prepared from an emotional standpoint. It is interesting that Denshichiro talks as if he is not at all concerned but is actually very worried about the situation and seems fully aware that he might be out of his league.

Musashi kills a thirteen-year-old boy named Genjiro who had been named the new successor to the house of Denshichiro. Musashi kills the young boy immediately after the fight begins, citing the fact that by killing he head of the household, he had won the battle. He notes that he could have killed dozens of the others but as long as Genjiro lived, Musashi would have been counted the loser. Musashi is disturbed by the deed though he tries to make excuses for the action. He notes that he had pledged to do nothing that he would regret later but it seems as if he does regret this. Even if he is



able to dismiss the killing as necessary, it seems that he regrets that it had to come to pass at all.

Otsu and Musashi have now admitted their love for one another but the path remains filled with problems. When they first encounter each other, they find themselves reluctant to talk about their feelings because there are several witnesses, including Jo. It seems that they each take the silence of the other as a negative sign and the situation grows more strained. As they journey together, Musashi's passion grows out of control and Otsu shrinks from it. She is angry at his action but he is also angry at his lack of self-control. It is not clear exactly what happens between them but the situation becomes even more tense between the two.

It is interesting that Otsu seems to have taken on responsibility for Jo. When he is hungry, it is she who buys food for him.



Book V, Sky

Book V, Sky Summary

Musashi travels some distance ahead of Otsu, allowing Matahachi to kidnap her and get away. Jo, injured, manages to follow and Musashi soon realizes they are missing and joins chase. He encounters a martial arts student named Gonnosuke who helps Musashi search and puts him on the apparent path to intercept Matahachi and Otsu. Musashi learns that Jo is likely accompanied by a man named Daizo who is often anxious to help underdogs find justice. Gonnosuke loses a fight to Musashi when they first encounter each other and challenges him to a rematch. This time, Musashi is almost killed by Gonnosuke's lance and both consider that they lost the match but learned a valuable lesson about martial arts.

Musashi continues his search and encounters a man named Ishimoda Geki who tries to convince Musashi to accompany him to offer his services as a samurai to Lord Date, one of the high-ranking officials. Musashi says he might come along later but that he must continue his search for Otsu first. Otsu had been carrying all the traveling cash, a gift from a friend just before she set out on her most recent journey, and Musashi now finds himself without food. He eats a bowl of rice and is preparing to offer a small carved statue for it when he discovers that Geki has slipped money into his bag.

Kojiro encounters a man named Jinnai who is traveling to Edo with several young girls, all apparently prostitutes. Jinnai realizes he is missing someone and it takes some time to determine that it is Akemi. In Edo, Osugi is taken in by a man named Yajibei. One day they are visiting a shrine when they learn of a fight and find that Kojiro has killed four men, one of them viciously after he was already very badly wounded. Kojiro agrees to give lessons to Yajibei's men three times monthly and on a particular day maims several and kills one, seeming unconcerned about teaching and more interested in showing his power and skill. Kojiro later gets drunk and encounters several more adversaries but easily sobers up and beats them as well. While he is out, he enters the house where Akemi works and she runs away, first just hiding outside then allowing her anger to grow so that she simply runs from the place with no idea where she is headed.

Musashi spends a night at the home of a twelve-year-old boy, Sannosuke. The boy's father died the morning Musashi arrived and the two carry the body up the mountain for burial. Sannosuke asks Musashi to take him along as a groom and student. Musashi has Sannosuke attack him, is brutal with his return attack, and when Sannosuke refuses to be beaten down, agrees that he can go along. Musashi has Sannosuke take the name of his grandfather, Iora. Musashi then tells Iora that it is time for him to give up the home that sheltered three generations of his family and to stand on his own. He agrees and Musashi burns the tiny hovel. He then announces that they are going to build a new house together, and that they will train here on the land of Iora's family. It takes months of failures before Musashi comes to realize that he cannot try to make the land into a



neat, square field but must admit that water will run in specific areas. Having come to this conclusion, he and Iora continue to work, finally with more success.

One day Iora races home to tell Musashi that bandits have attacked the nearby village. Musashi, telling the bandits that he is the messenger of the gods, attacks those leaving the village with hostages. Musashi gets the villagers to turn on the bandits, but reminds them that they are not warriors and must not come to believe they are. A retainer, Nagaoka Sado, learns of the incident but has not time to meet Musashi. He later returns and learns from a priest that Musashi has left. As the priest tells it, Musashi encouraged the farmers after the incident with the bandits to see their own strength. They helped with the fieldwork and soon had rice and barley fields growing. Musashi told the priest that he was worried that the people were overly dependent on him personally and left. Sado does not show his sadness but berates himself for having put off his visit too long and having failed to contract for Musashi's services for his lord.

Musashi and Iora arrive in Edo to find the city bustling and take a room at an inn. Musashi then goes to the shop of Kosuke, identified as a "soul polisher," and learns that Kosuke studied under Koetsu. Kosuke says that the sword is the samurai's soul but that few give the weapon the proper respect. He offers Musashi a room which is accepted and the two men sit down to talk. Kosuke shows Musashi a sword that Musashi immediately recognizes as Kojiro's "Drying Pole" and knows that Kojiro is also in town.

Iora has been sent to deliver a message for Musashi and there encounters Otsu who was tied to Matahachi for a long time until she encountered a man named Kimura Sukekuro whom she had met many years earlier in her travels. He immediately offers to take her home and Matahachi, faced with the prestige of Sukekuro's house, cannot object. She remains for a while then goes to the home of another old friend who is apparently dying.

Osugi learns that Musashi is in town and Kojiro agrees to help her attack him. Instead, two of the men who live at the home where Osugi lives are killed while Kojiro is trying to gain admittance to talk to Musashi. The quarrel between two feuding houses of samurais escalates and eventually includes Musashi, who is branded a coward because he ran when he was seriously outnumbered and had an injured man to protect.

Book V, Sky Analysis

Osugi, having arrived in Edo, is robbed and when a self-appointed boss of a work crew, a man named Yajibei, retrieves her purse, he takes Osugi home with him to heal from her beating at the hands of the thief. She remains at his house for a year and a half. Yajibei says that he is kind to her because he was not kind to his own parents and feels a filial duty to anyone of Osugi's age. Her transformation under his care seems incredible and there is really no explanation for it. She cares for the younger men who work of Yajibei. She mends and cleans and is referred to as a woman of quality. She herself even comes to a point of believing the city—which she initially hated—to be filled with kind people.



Musashi had noted that the land of Iora's family was fertile, but idle, and that there was an abundance of game waiting to be harvested. He does not seem to be greedy about the potential profits, but does seem to be looking for a place to remain stable for a time. He also notes that there are many aspects of a samurai's training, and that using a hoe could well be another of them.

Jo is traveling with Daizo and one night follows the man, discovering that he has gone to bury a great deal of money. Jo does not say anything and slips back to the inn before Daizo arrives. The next day, Daizo reveals that he knew Jo was watching and gives him the option to die or become Daizo's adoptive son. The reasoning behind this bizarre action is not explained but it is a foreshadowing that Daizo is not the benevolent merchant everyone believes him to be.



Book VI, Sun and Moon

Book VI, Sun and Moon Summary

Kojiro has been staying with a retainer of an official who was seeking to have Kojiro join the staff as a samurai. When the man tells Kojiro that he is not certain how much the annual stipend will be, Kojiro says that he is not interested in the financial aspect. He says that he is only interested in serving a reputable house. Then he is told that he will have to go for an interview and Kojiro thinks on the matter for several minutes before abruptly saying that he has changed his mind and does not want to be considered. He is urged to go anyway and does, beating a samurai in a bout. After the fight, Kojiro begins thinking that this particular house is probably more secure than most and that he wants to serve here. Toward that goal, he goes to visit the samurai he had beaten and even sends a gift, earning praise from that warrior that Kojiro knows will be in his favor.

One day, Kojiro encounters Matahachi who is selling watermelons. Akemi is living with him and hopes to avoid seeing Kojiro but he follows Matahachi and knows Akemi's whereabouts. Meanwhile, Musashi and Iori move to a new place, build a house and are living there when there is a visitor named Shinzo—the injured warrior who had been with Musashi when he ran away from the fight and was branded a coward.

Matahachi returns home one day to discover Akemi has left. He encounters Daizo who offers him thirty gold pieces to carry out a complicated assassination and Matahachi agrees. As he leaves, Daizo tells Akemi, who is now living with him, that Matahachi will probably go bury the money and she follows him to find out where and Daizo immediately goes and digs it up.

Musashi and Iori are watching a rite that includes dancing and Musashi is suddenly enthralled with the drummer. He notes that the musician uses both hands, each holding a drumstick, and that the two are used together to form a single sound. It suddenly occurs to him that two swords could also be used to make a fighter more effective. He imagines the disadvantage a fighter with one sword would have against another with two and spends some time pondering the situation. The following day, Musashi and Iori are attacked by a criminal faction intent on killing Musashi. He holds his own against the group, eventually killing a man named Baiken who is the brother of the freebooter Musashi killed so many years earlier. As he strikes the final blow, Musashi hears a voice and discovers that it is Gonnosuke, the martial arts student who had helped Musashi search for Jo when he and Otsu were kidnapped. Musashi says that he believes the best course of action now is to find some government officials and explain the dead bodies on the hillside near the shrine. He soon encounters many officials and is arrested though it is some time before he discovers that he is being charged with stealing from the temple.

After Musashi is taken away, Iori is to go home while Baiken goes to help in Musashi's defense. Iori takes a nap along the way and wakes to hear two men—Daizo and Jo—



talking. Iori soon realizes they are the real thieves. Iori follows Jo and the two fight, eventually coming to the realization that both call Musashi their teacher. Meanwhile, Takuan is waiting at Musashi's house and encounters a priest named Aoko Tanzaemon, Jo's father. The two visit briefly and Tanzaemon leaves, promptly finding the bodies of Jo and Iori who were knocked unconscious when the pair fell from a tree together. Under questioning by Takuan, Jo admits that he is part of a group planning to overthrow the current government to reinstate the government faction that was recently defeated. Takuan gives Jo two gold pieces and tells him to go to his father and for the two to travel together, disguised as priests.

Takuan then travels to the site where Matahachi is supposed to be planning an assassination. He has actually changed his mind and was caught trying to find a gun that had supposedly been buried for him so that he could throw the weapon away. Takuan tells him that Daizo is really a man named Mizoguchi Shinano and that he is planning to overthrow the government. Matahachi is arrested and is caned and released. Expecting death as a punishment, he is elated and leaves happily. At the same time, Akemi is caned though the details of her actions are not outlined.

Musashi is considered for an official position but is then rejected, much to his joy because he feels he would not be able to continue to follow the "Way of the Sword" if he were appointed. He decides to go into the mountains and entrusts Iori to Gonnosuke. Takuan asks Iori about his family and learns that he had a sister. Through a letter left to Iori by his father, Takuan figures out that Iori's older sister is Otsu.

Book VI, Sun and Moon Analysis

While Kojiro said to his host that he does not care about money, he is actually eaten up with an ambition akin to outright greed. He believes anyone would snap up his services without any need for an interview and seems unwilling to humble himself before a potential employer as would be required in this instance. Kojiro is an interesting character on several fronts. He truly believes that what he does is right. When he calls Musashi a coward for having run from a fight in which he was greatly outnumbered and had the care of an injured man to consider, Kojiro truly believes that Musashi was a coward. His acts of cruelty are similarly defended. It does seem that his conscience might sometimes bother him, as is the case with a young man he kills in his room and drops outside to be buried as an unknown. Kojiro does not admit to having killed the man but does leave money to help with a funeral service. As he rides away it is noted that he can almost feel the young warrior climbing off his straw mat and following along behind Kojiro. Kojiro winds up working for a fraction of what he had expected to be offered.

Daizo's crooked nature is explained in more detail here. He bribes Matahachi to say that he will carry out an assassination then digs up the money from the place Matahachi buried it. When Daizo gets home with it, he discovers that there are only twenty-eight of the thirty gold pieces, and that Matahachi apparently kept two. Daizo is angry, saying that he hates a thief. As is the case with Kojiro, Daizo seems to have a set of ethics that



only he can understand. This is also a foreshadowing of the events to come as Daizo apparently does not intend for Matahachi to survive the assassination.

Musashi is recommended to become a teacher to the shogun and it is an appointment that he initially covets. While he is in prison accused of the theft of the temple wealth, he apparently has time to think over the entire situation. When he is released, Iori notes that Musashi is thinner and has marks on his body, though his time in the custody of the officials is not detailed. However, when the appointment comes to the position of teacher, Musashi is suddenly beset by doubts. He does not seem at all to worry that he is lacking as a teacher or that he would be out of his realm, despite the fact that the lineage of teachers is typically as important as ability, meaning he would be in the company of some very old and noble family lines. What does worry him is that he will not continue to be as honorable. He cites the "Way of the Sword" as requiring diligence and seems to feel that he will lose the time or inclination to continue to follow that path. He does not really elaborate on why he feels this way, and does not indicate whether it is because he feels he will be corrupted by those around him or that he will not be in control of himself anymore.



Book VII The Perfect Light

Book VII The Perfect Light Summary

Otsu receives a letter informing her of Musashi's pending appointment as a teacher and prepares to join him without realizing that the letter has been delayed some time and that Musashi is no longer in the area. Otsu has been staying with Sukekuro and now takes her leave of him, though he regrets having to allow her to leave.

Otsu has made friends with a young boy named Ushinosuke who, from the first visit to the compound where Otsu is staying, wants to become a samurai. One day Otsu and Ushinosuke are going on an outing together when three ronin attack them. Ushinosuke, though only a youngster, holds them off and even manages to take the sword from one of them. He is too young for formal training but does find himself favored by a warrior named Hyogo. After Otsu leaves with the hope of finding Musashi, Ushinosuke and Sukekuro attend a fighting match together and encounter Gonnosuke and Iori who are searching for Otsu. Iori and Ushinosuke initially clash and fight when the grownups are not looking, almost causing the grownups to get into a fight over the situation. The differences resolved, Gonnosuke reveals the purpose of their visit and learns that they have just missed Otsu. Though Iori would never allow Ushinosuke to see him cry, he wants nothing more than to cry over having missed the opportunity to meet his sister. They continue their travels, encountering Koetsu and his mother at a temple where Gonnosuke stops to request a sutra for his mother.

Gonnosuke and Iori are attacked along the way by a warrior dressed as a priest who has followed them from the place where they encountered Sukekuro. They beat him off but the next day are caught unawares on a log bridge and Gonnosuke is captured. Gonnosuke is taken away and actually encounters the retainer named Sado who attempted to have Musashi work for his faction of the government. Sado also meets an old warrior who claims to have no interest in the intrigues of politics but who is obviously behind the attack on Gonnosuke. Iori is shoved into a ravine as the attack begins and is disoriented when he regains consciousness. He is soon taken in by the wife and daughter of a merchant who plan to have him work for them. Iori is not happy working for the merchant and one day gets into trouble. As punishment, he is tied to a crate and eventually gagged to stop his constant yelling. While in that position, he sees Otsu but is unable to gain her attention. For months he remains a part of the household, attends school and continues to watch for Otsu. One day he sees Kojiro waiting to board a ship belonging to the merchant Iori is living with and Iori, serving tea, throws a tray at Kojiro who initially is very angry but then forces a calm exterior and says that he will allow someone else to choose Iori's punishment for the action. Sado, recognizing Iori, asks that he be allowed to take the boy to study the way of the samurai and permission is granted.

Musashi, after having come down from the mountains, establishes himself as a teacher of reading and writing in a small village. He calls himself Muka and is known as a very



eligible bachelor. Every morning he teaches the children of the common people, spending the afternoons studying. In the evenings he goes out and though many wonder about his destination, he is actually going to visit Matahachi who is working on his own character and hopes to become a priest. On the way home that night, Musashi is attacked and later learns that men who have held a grudge against him for a fight long ago initiated the attack.

Gudo, the teacher both Musashi and Matahachi were waiting for, arrives and accepts Matahachi but tells Musashi that there is nothing he can do for the warrior. Musashi doggedly follows Gudo and Matahachi on their travels, waiting for notice and an answer to his troubles. Gudo finally turns to Musashi who is prone on the ground and draws a circle around him in the dirt, then walks away. Musashi is first angry then allows his mind to consider the situation, finally coming to realize that he has been caught up with the "leaves and branches" of life and yells out his thanks to Gudo but does not pursue him.

Otsu is working with her former nursemaid, dyeing cloth, when a man named Mambei tells her that Ogin—Musashi's sister—has requested that she come for a visit. Otsu agrees but Mambei turns her over to Osugi instead. Just then, Jo shows up, having been retained by an official and happening upon Otsu by chance. Jo puts Osugi in a cave and rescues Otsu from three men holding her. It begins to rain heavily and Otsu cannot stand the thought of Osugi being in the cold, so goes to find her. Osugi attacks again and knocks Otsu unconscious. The sight of the girl, apparently dead, makes Osugi realize that she has spent many years hating this girl who has never done anything bad.

Musashi has come to an agreement to meet Kojiro in combat. Over the months leading up to his departure, he has come to be considered teacher and champion of many and is somewhat embarrassed by the attention. He is seen off by Koetsu, among others, and Gonnosuke rushes up just after he departs. Gonnosuke tells Koetsu that his capture had been a mistake and learns that Iori is now living with Sado. Matahachi, Koetsu and Gonnosuke travel overland after Musashi takes the boat and along the way Matahachi sees Akemi. He suddenly realizes that the child she carries on her back is likely his and that this is his destiny. He excuses himself from the others, sending a message to Gudo of his decision, and remains behind.

Musashi arrives and takes up residence where he will not be required to give up a lot of time to well wishers until the day of the bout arrives. They are to fight on an island that provides a secure area so that the general public cannot intervene or even watch. Shipping is prohibited so that the island will remain secure. Kojiro spends much of his time with well wishers, many bringing gifts that they hope will be remembered if Kojiro wins. He too realizes the need for controlling his time and spends hours hunting with his bird. He has a young woman who cares for him and she cries as he leaves.

Musashi paints right up until the moment he is to leave. Just as he is headed to the boat, Osugi arrives with Gonnosuke. She tells Musashi that she is sorry for all the grief she has caused him and begs his forgiveness. He is moved by her grief and does



forgive her. She then tells him that Otsu is waiting to talk to him and he spends a few minutes with her. She is feverish, having not recovered from the beating at Osugi's hands and the night spent in the cold cave. She seems frail but at Musashi's plea that she send him off with a laugh, she pulls herself together somewhat. The beach is lined with those who care for him most as Musashi boards the boat headed for the island.

Musashi arrives two hours later than the appointed time. On the way, he carves a broken oar into a wooden sword and leaves his long sword in the bottom of the boat. Kojiro meets him on the beach and accuses him of cowardice for having arrived late. Kojiro then unsheathes his sword and throws the scabbard into the water. Musashi waits for a single wave to pull the item away from the shore, then says that Kojiro has already lost or he would not have thrown the scabbard away. The fight is brief. Kojiro slices through the air, barely missing Musashi's head and taking off his headband instead. Musashi responds with his wooden sword to the top of Kojiro's head and he falls to the ground, his lifeless face showing no sign of regret. Musashi bows to the officials there, then leaves. Some say it was because he feared reprisals but there is no way of knowing for certain.

Book VII The Perfect Light Analysis

Sukekuro is among those who lost his heart to Otsu though she has remained true to her love for Musashi. Sukekuro realizes that this is the case and that his love is unrequited, and does not press her to return his affection. It seems that Otsu's beauty is impressive and that her personality and manners are such that many men fall in love with her. There are also those who simply covet her. When she is staying with Sukekuro, she goes for an outing and is immediately set upon by a group of ronin though she manages to escape virtually unharmed.

Matahachi, hoping to become a priest, tells Musashi that he remains concerned about Otsu. Matahachi seems to be under the impression that Otsu is in desperate need of a man and pleads with Musashi to take over her care. Matahachi, though he has not seen Otsu in a long time, says that he has come to realize that he must become a priest. He says that toward that end, he must have Otsu's care off his mind and that he believes the way to accomplish that is for Musashi to take her as his wife. Musashi notes that the reasonable reply would have been to urge Matahachi to get his own life on a better path and then to try to win Otsu's love back for himself, but he does not say that. It is interesting that Matahachi, having not seen Otsu in so many years, now feels a responsibility for her that he apparently did not feel back when she was his legally-intended wife.

Musashi waits for a long time for the return of Gudo, a master teacher under whom he had studied many years earlier. When Gudo arrives, Musashi is anxious to have an answer to his situation and believes that Gudo can provide it. As Musashi explains it, he is "twisting in the wind." He says that he is unable to simply turn his back on the "Way," but is also unable to reach the "peak." He seems to be saying that he cannot imagine anything other than living with his entire life focused on the ideals that samurai and



warriors live by, but that he can never quite achieve the life he seeks. It seems likely that Musashi demands too much of himself and that he cannot be at peace because he can never meet his own expectations. Musashi follows Gudo as he and Matahachi leave, apparently continuing to hope that Gudo can provide some answer to his situation.



Characters

Musashi

Known as "Takezo" in the village where he grew up, he begins using the name Musashi, yet his formal name is Masana. It is Musashi who entices Matahachi to join Ishida Mitsunari's army, leading to the battle in which they are both injured. Musashi is a trouble maker in his village and wants to fight in order to gain respect. He is tall for the people of the time and is called a "child of the fat year" because of his size, though it is only a nickname and not an insult.

Musashi is a strong warrior but constantly berates himself for not being strong enough in spirit. He worries that he is never going to reach the "peak" in his quest to follow the "Way of the Sword," and seems to have a low opinion of his own abilities, though it is not shared by others who know him. Several call him "teacher" and he even spends a period of time teaching reading and writing to children.

Musashi cares greatly for Otsu though it is not always obvious. He seems to some to be totally uncaring, such as when he does not look back at those on the shore when he goes to fight Kojiro. In truth, Otsu understands that this is merely his way and accepts that he has nothing on his mind at that point other than the coming match. Musashi remains greatly misunderstood by many, including having some doubt his honor when he leaves the field after beating Kojiro immediately and without a backward glance.

Matahachi

Musashi's friend, Matahachi is somewhat shorter and stockier and follows Musashi into battle because they are friends and do everything together. Matahachi is with Musashi when the two are injured on the battlefield and both find a safe place to heal at the home of Oko and Akemi. There, Matahachi soon becomes enamored with the women though he has a fiancée waiting for his return.

On the morning he and Musashi are to return to their own village, Matahachi leaves with Oko and Akemi instead. He is willing to laze around for many months, living off the money Oko makes by running a "tea house." Musashi continually berates himself but eventually takes the initiative to leave the situation.

Matahachi is constantly seeking some easy way to fame and fortune and goes so far as to steal the identity from a certificate he takes from a warrior's body, calling himself Kojiro until he encounters the real Kojiro. It is not until he is spared from death that he realizes that he has to do something to make his own life better. When he sees Akemi with a child he knows must be his own, he becomes a devoted husband and father.



Susake Kojiro

Also known as Ganryu, he encounters Toji and cuts off his topknot. He then agrees to accompany Yoshioka Seijuro to his school. Kojiro later encounters Matahachi who claims to be Kojiro himself. Kojiro is on hand to witness one of Musashi's great battles and spreads the story that Musashi fought with trickery and that he ran away at the first opportunity. It is noted that to Kojiro's way of thinking, this was not far from the truth. Kojiro had been considered a genius with the sword from a very young age and was known for his tenacity. When a group of older boys beat him up, Kojiro later used a wooden sword to beat one of them to death. He is brutal and uncaring. When he later oversees the training at the home of a man named Yajibei, Kojiro shows no leniency at all for his inexperienced pupils. He seems uninterested in teaching and wants only to show off his power and skill. Kojiro and Musashi are fated to encounter each other in a bout and when it happens Kojiro is killed.

Akemi

The young girl Musashi and Matahachi first see on the battlefield, she wears a small bell and lives at the home where the two are allowed to stay while their wounds heal. Akemi is completely under her mother's control until she finally runs away. She lives for a while as common law wife of Matahachi, has his child and eventually settles down to live with him.

Otsu

Matahachi's fiancée. When Matahachi has been gone for a year, Otsu is sixteen and has given up on the possibility of his return, though she begs someone to tell her that he could still come home. When Musashi returns to their village, Otsu wants to know Matahachi's whereabouts. When she discovers that he is living with another woman, she is heartbroken and eventually rescues Musashi, leaving the village with him. She wanders around for many years, occasionally encountering Musashi and always loving him fully.

Ogin

Musashi's sister. When he has been gone for a year, she is twenty-five. It is noted that when Musashi was running wild in the village, only his sister's tears could sway him into doing what she wanted.

Oko

The woman who allows Musashi and Matahachi to remain in her woodshed while they recover from their wounds. She later entices Matahachi to remain with her and supports



him for some time, apparently enjoying the fact that she has a younger man as a husband.

Takuan Soho

A monk who lives in the village where Otsu lives, who goes with her to pick flowers for a religious ceremony, and who spends a great deal of time preaching to her about Buddha. It is said that he has been offered a temple of his own, but refuses to settle down. When Ogin first meets him, he is on his belly looking at the ground and insists that he has taught his lice to wrestle as a means of entertainment.

Osugi

Matahachi's mother. Osugi is eaten up with hatred for Musashi who she blames for the fact that Matahachi fails to return to their village. She allows this hatred to consume her and spends ten years tracking Musashi and Otsu, but finds her hatred abated when she believes she has killed Otsu.

Jotaro

A young boy of about eleven years who works in a sake shop and comes to know Musashi. The young man can write very well and Musashi predicts that he will make something of himself some day. Jo's father was a samurai who left Jo to work at the sake shop while he himself went to the temple to become a monk. Jo settles into a life with Musashi, insisting that Musashi take him along and receiving permission from the owner of the sake shop. Jo is eventually reunited with his father and lives as a warrior.

Tsujikaze

A "freebooter" who wants a share of what Akemi picks up for Oko to sell, and the man who reportedly murdered Akemi's father. He pushes himself on Oko, drinks her sake and pretends ignorance when she tells him she will not have anything to do with the man who killed her husband. When Tsujikaze demands that his men punish Oko, Matahachi and Musashi stand up to them and Musashi kills Tsujikaze. Tsujikaze's brother later stalks Musashi and threatens him on several occasions.

Nikkan

A priest at the temple where Musashi kills the young fighter named Agon. Nikkan tells Musashi that he is "too strong" and that he must learn to make himself weak. He also says that a belligerence Musashi claims to have felt the first time he met Nikkan was really Musashi's emotion. Though Musashi wins the battle against Agon, he feels as if he lost following his talk with Nikkan.



Gonnosuke

The young farmer who wants to start a school of his own but vows to give up the idea when Musashi beats him in a fight. He follows Musashi and challenges him to another fight. This time, Musashi barely wins, having almost received a fatal blow from Gonnosuke's lance. Both Musashi and Gonnosuke say they lost the match, and neither is seriously injured. Gonnosuke goes on to develop his own style of martial arts.

Daizo

He is introduced as a merchant who sells herbs and who is known to be a proponent of the underdog in any situation. Jo goes to this man after Otsu is kidnapped, hoping that he will help search for her. It is later revealed that his real name is Mizoguchi Shinano and that he is involved in a plot to overthrow the current government.

Iori

A boy of twelve who allows Musashi to spend the night in his house. The boy's father had just died and Musashi agrees to take the boy as his groom and student. It is much later discovered that the boy is the younger brother of Otsu.

Koetsu

A man Musashi first believes to be a poet and later discovers is a teacher himself. Koetsu has a talent for artistic endeavors, including pottery. Musashi admires him for this aspect of his life. Koetsu becomes a close friend to Musashi.



Objects/Places

Myamoto

The village where Mitahachi's mother and fiancée live and where Mitahachi and Musashi grew up.

Sekigahara

The plains where the battle takes place in which both Musashi and Matakachi are wounded.

Tarui

The small town Matakachi and Musashi are headed toward after being wounded at Sekigahara.

Moxa

A medicine made of mugwort that is used as a topical painkiller. Akemi and Oko make moxa as a way to make a living, though the majority of their income comes from robbing corpses on the battlefields.

Itadori Pasture

A small plain on the Takateru Mountain where Otsu and Takuan go to find Musashi.

Yagyu Valley

The place that captures Musashi because of the old trees and land unscarred by battle. It is also the place where Musashi hears Otsu's flute but runs away from her.

The Field of Rendaiji

Where Musashi is to meet Seijuro for a bout.

Kyoto

The ancient capital and city where the majority of the action takes place.



Mudoji

The temple where Musashi remains to heal after his encounter with a number of warriors.

The Drying Pole

The name given Kojiro's sword.

Okazaki

Where Musashi lives as a reading and writing teacher under the name Muka.

Edo

A new town that rivals Kyoto in size and where some of the travelers go.



Themes

Coming of Age

Musashi exhibits many of the characteristics of a typical "coming of age" character. He ages physically over the course of the story but also matures spiritually. Musashi is becoming a greater swordsman with every passing day but continues to worry that he is not meeting the letter of the "Way of the Sword." In truth, he has greater expectations of himself than anyone else has of him. It seems likely that he has set his goal too high and that it is not attainable, but he continues to strive for it and hates the fact that he cannot seem to achieve perfection. There comes a natural moment of awakening, aided by the priest, Gudo. In that moment, Musashi comes to realize that he can change but that the universe around him will not. With this as the basic premise and a greater understanding suddenly alive in him, he seems to accept himself and his place in the world.

Matahachi's coming of age is similarly the result of an epiphany. In Matahachi's case, he suddenly sees a young woman carrying a child that must be his own. While he has made no effort to contact or support the young woman since their parting years earlier, and despite the fact that he is planning to become a priest, he realizes that his true happiness lies in doing his duty. There are others in this story who also experience "coming of age" moments, including Osugi.

The Quest for Personal Growth

There are several characters in this book who find themselves on a quest for personal growth of one kind or another. In many cases, this is manifested in a desire to learn the way of the samurai under a recognized teacher. Musashi himself gains a number of people who consider him teacher, including Jo, Iori and Gonnosuke. While the younger two of these are still under the illusion that they will find fame and glory by becoming great swordsmen, Gonnosuke has come to an age at which he is seeking more. He recognizes Musashi as a person who can teach him things of greater importance.

While several are looking to Musashi for answers, Musashi believes his own answers lie in a priest named Gudo. Musashi follows the priest around for a long time, pleading with him for answers. Gudo does not have the answers Musashi seeks but Musashi refuses to believe that for a long time. He is eventually angry and frustrated that this priest seems indifferent to his sufferings and continues to allow Musashi to suffer. Finally, Musashi begs again, and this time Gudo calls for a stick. Musashi believes that the priest is going to beat him and is very surprised when that is not the case. Instead, Gudo draws a circle around Musashi and then walks away again. It takes Musashi some time before he can fathom the message the old priest has left and to realize that the priest has helped him, though not in the way Musashi expected.

Honor

Honor is an important part of the lives of the Japanese people of this time and the characters of this book are no different. Though there are some aspects of the story in which the characters display dishonorable behavior, the majority of the story is focused on honor. For example, Osugi wants to kill Musashi but is physically unable to carry out her threat. She satisfies herself by saying that she will continue her quest but will, in the meantime, spread rumors about Musashi and his lack of honor. In Osugi's mind, these stories are almost as serious as death. Osugi eventually comes to realize that she has been wrong in her treatment of Musashi and apologizes, an act of honor on her part.

Matahachi steps from one bad deed to another, but his own honor is often very much on his mind. When he is living off Oko's income at the tea house, he admits that the situation eats at him. It takes a strong resolution to leave the place but it seems that his honor is the driving force behind several of his actions.

Kojiro is another person to whom honor is vitally important. In Kojiro's case, his idea of honor is often different than others, but he truly believes in his own actions which, at least to some degree, excuses his actions.

Style

Point of View

The story is written from an omniscient perspective with many of the characters serving as the immediate point of view. For example, Otsu might encounter someone from her past and tell that person about her life over the recent months, thereby catching the reader up on the events of a particular character. These methods mean that some characters are "out of sight" for a period of time and this can be distracting considering the large number of characters present.

The fact that there are so many characters makes the omniscient perspective the only option available. Often, the reader will leave the life of one character while another takes center stage in the story line. These transitions are typically done with ease but some readers may find this distracting also. The fact that a particular character may be introduced in a manner that suggests this character will never again appear means the casual reader may have trouble keeping track of emerging relationships as the story progresses. At other times, these characters are nothing more than minor players who have no major role in the story line. Again, this makes it difficult for the casual reader, but makes the omniscient view imperative.

Setting

The story is set in Japan in the 1600s. Both time and place seem historically accurate, lending a level of credence to the story. The story includes long passages of description of both people and places and these details seem reasonable for the time and place. There are some details that are offered as fact that may not be immediately understood. For example, there are "freebooters" who claim territories as their own and demand payment from those living or working in that area. This "work" is actually the theft of goods from the bodies of those slain on the battlefields, apparently a fairly common practice at the time.

In addition to the setting of time and place, the book is set in a historically unstable time when the Japanese government was constantly in chaos. The fact is that a warrior who aligned himself with one faction would soon find himself at war with another. Those who chose the wrong side and lost would be at a great disadvantage. In addition, it was not uncommon for secret alliances to be formed and for friends to turn foe.

Another interesting point regarding the setting is that the Way of the Sword and the honor of the samurai are vital to a man's survival. In many cases, the "way" seems clouded and is sometimes manipulated to suit a particular person. For example, Musashi agrees to several bouts and then chooses to be late. He sees no dishonor in arriving late though he had promised to fight at a specific time.



Language and Meaning

The book is written in a fairly straightforward style but the sheer length and the number of places and characters involved make it difficult to read. There are few words that would be unfamiliar to a reader with an adequate vocabulary and most readers will find a greater problem is simply remembering who the characters are. In many cases, the characters are introduced in a chance encounter and may then be a major player in a later scene. Some characters simply vanish and the reader never learns what happens to them.

One of the main themes, the quest for personal growth, lends an air of hope to a story that might otherwise take on somber, dark overtones. Another theme, coming of age, similarly gives the story a hopeful outlook.

There are extensive descriptions, as is to be expected in a story of this length. Most are acceptable though some readers may be tempted to skip over some of the descriptions. While the historic setting is important, it is not vital to know who Musashi feels loyalty toward nor to keep track of the warring government factions in order to understand the main story line—that of Musashi's coming of age.

Structure

The story is divided into seven "books." These are titled "Earth," "Water," "Fire," "Wind," "Sky," "Sun and Moon," and "The Perfect Light." Each book is divided into chapters, ranging from eight chapters in the first book to more than twenty chapters. Each book consists of at least ninety pages with most consisting of more than one hundred pages. The chapters vary somewhat with some having as few as four pages and others ranging up to eleven. Seven or eight pages seems to be an average length. The chapters are also titled and these give a greater hint as to the upcoming events than the titles of the book. Chapter titles include "The Little Bell" in which Musashi and Matahachi first encounter Akemi wearing a tiny bell on her clothing, "The Birth of Musashi" in which Musashi takes his new name, and "The Drying Pole" in which it is revealed that the sword of the warrior named Kojiro is called "The Drying Pole." Other chapters include "The Younger Brother," "The Soul Polisher," "The Sound of Heaven" and "The Writing Teacher." The final chapter is "The Soul of the Deep" in which Musashi meets Kojiro and leaves immediately, peering into the water as his boat takes him away from the site of the battle.

Quotes

"While he felt pity for this obstinate tenacity characteristic of orphans, he was aware of a void deep within their stubborn hearts. They seemed to him doomed to yearn desperately for that which they could not have, for the parental love with which they were never blessed," *The Art of War*, p. 63.

"You seem to be under the misconception that if you perform one brave deed, that alone makes you a samurai. Well it doesn't! you let that one act of loyalty convince you of your righteousness. The more convinced you became, the more harm you caused yourself and everyone else," *The Old Cryptomeria Tree*, p. 81.

"Instead, at each school he had experienced disappointment. Though he always won his bouts, he was unable to decide whether that was because he was good or his opponents were bad," *Encounter and Retreat*, p. 130.

"At Fushimi alone, nearly a thousand laborers were engaged in extending the stone battlements, with the incidental result that the town around the castle experienced a sudden influx of peddlers, prostitutes and horseflies—all symbols of prosperity," *Sasaki Kojiro*, p. 228.

"Musashi was not afraid to die, but his objective was to win definitively, not just survive, and he was trying to build up the confidence to do so," *Eagle Mountain*, p. 300.

"We're here to kill Musashi and we can't be too fussy about how we do it. Dead men tell no tales," *The Death Trap*, p. 501.

"Suddenly he saw the truth: the techniques of a swordsman were not his goal; he sought an all-embracing Way of the Sword. The sword was to be far more than a simple weapon; it had to be an answer to life's questions," *A One-Night Love Affair*, p. 594.

"It pleased him that today, as on other days, he had on spotless underwear, in the tradition of the good samurai, who started each day with a smile and an uncertainty: that by evening he might be a corpse," *The Eagle*, p. 748.

"It occurred to Musashi what an odd fact it was that most children could draw—and sing, for that matter—but that they forgot how to as they grew older. Perhaps the little bit of wisdom they acquired inhibited them," *The Gateway to Glory*, p. 838.

"Warriors had weak moments, foolish moments, like everybody else. Still, his duty, that of every samurai, was clear: to persevere until he reached a state of stoic balance," *The Hemp Seed*, p. 859.

"Any person who followed the Way of the Sword was constantly in danger of being killed. If he survived one close call, chances were that by that very act he made new enemies or created a new peril," *The Writing Teacher*, p. 897.

"I laugh at my ten-year pilgrimage—Wilted robe, tattered hat, knocking at Zen gates. In reality, the Buddha's Law is simple: Eat your rice, drink your tea, wear your clothes," *The Circle*, p. 904.

Topics for Discussion

How does Musashi come to be known by that name? What is his name prior to that time? Name another circumstance in which he lives under a different name and describe how he came to that point.

Compare Musashi and Matahachi.

Who is Osugi? What is her role in the lives of Musashi, Otsu and Matahachi? How does her life change over the course of the story?

Who is Otsu? How does she come to transfer her adoration from Matahachi to Musashi? What happens to her life as the result of that incident?

How are the lives of Jo, Otsu, Iori, Musashi, Matahachi, Osugi and Akemi intertwined? Describe the relationships among these characters.

Who is Koetsu? What role does he play in the life of Musashi? Who is Gonnosuke? What is his role in Musashi's life?

Compare the lives and personalities of Musashi and Kojiro. How could their story be classified as a typical "good versus evil" situation?

Consider the lives of the main characters as they appear at the end of this book. What might have become of Musashi? Matahachi? Otsu? Iori? Jo? Akemi? Osugi?

What is the epiphany that occurs in the life of Matahachi that makes his life successful?