

# **The Master of Go Study Guide**

## **The Master of Go by Yasunari Kawabata**

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# Contents

|   |                    |
|---|--------------------|
| <a href="#">The Master of Go Study Guide.....</a> | <a href="#">1</a>  |
| <a href="#">Contents.....</a>                     | <a href="#">2</a>  |
| <a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>                 | <a href="#">3</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 1-4.....</a>                 | <a href="#">4</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 5-8.....</a>                 | <a href="#">6</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 9-12.....</a>                | <a href="#">7</a>  |
| <a href="#">Chapters 13-16.....</a>               | <a href="#">10</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 17-20.....</a>               | <a href="#">12</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 21-24.....</a>               | <a href="#">14</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 25-28.....</a>               | <a href="#">15</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 29-32.....</a>               | <a href="#">17</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 33-36.....</a>               | <a href="#">19</a> |
| <a href="#">Chapters 37-41.....</a>               | <a href="#">21</a> |
| <a href="#">Characters.....</a>                   | <a href="#">23</a> |
| <a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>               | <a href="#">26</a> |
| <a href="#">Themes.....</a>                       | <a href="#">28</a> |
| <a href="#">Style.....</a>                        | <a href="#">31</a> |
| <a href="#">Quotes.....</a>                       | <a href="#">33</a> |
| <a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>        | <a href="#">35</a> |



## Plot Summary

The Master of Go by Yasunari Kawabata chronicles a championship game of go, an ancient and traditional Japanese board game. The game takes place in 1938 between the highest ranking player in Japan, Honnimbo Shusai, the "Master of Go," and a younger challenger, Otake. In an epic struggle that lasts over half a year, the younger challenger defeats the master, who dies shortly after the match concludes, signaling the end of an era in the tradition of go and in Japanese culture as well.

The match is to be the last for the Master, and is sponsored by a Japanese newspaper that sends a reporter, Uragami, to write regular articles on the match, which is played out over nearly half a year in several locations. The story is told from the view of Uragami, who has great reverence and respect for the Master, and is directly involved in the action of the story. Uragami himself is a talented amateur go player, and his devotion to the game and its traditions are evident.

The Master is old and frail and suffers from heart problems. When he falls ill, the match is postponed while he recuperates. More and more concessions are made to the Master to accommodate him, and the younger challenger grows impatient and threatens to forfeit the match. Uragami convinces him to continue to the end, despite the Master's increasingly deteriorating condition. The Master himself seems to be above all the disagreements and drama, with the expectation that deference will be paid to his high position.

Uragami describes the great deliberateness with which each player decides on his next play, sometimes taking several hours to determine a move. The players are "put in cans" for much of the match, meaning they are sequestered at an inn, where they do nothing but play out the match in day-long sessions broken up by rest days. During these rest periods, Otake anguishes over the match and visits with his family while the Master seems to put the game completely out of his mind, filling his time playing other games incessantly, such as billiards and chess.

The extreme physical and mental stress placed on the players is evident in the anguish expressed by Otake and the declining health of the Master. The match is described in terms of the younger, brasher Otake representing a new direction in Japanese culture, which is at odds with the older aristocratic world of the Master. Neither man gains a distinct advantage over the other until very late in the game, when the Master makes a crucial play that Otake is able to exploit to defeat him. In the end, Otake wins the match and the Master dies just a few weeks later.



# Chapters 1-4

## Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1 of *The Master of Go* begins at the end, with the announcement of the death in the Japanese town of Atami of Shusai, the Master of Go. The narrator, Uragami, introduces himself. He was a reporter at the Master's last professional game of go, and had visited with him just two days prior to his death. He was the last to play chess with him. The narrator explains that the Master's last game was played out in fourteen sessions over almost six months, and that he witnessed it and reported on it for a Japanese newspaper.

Chapter 2 describes the events immediately after the end of the match. The Master has just lost his last match against Otake, a highly-ranked young player, and the two men are still sitting at the game table in an inn where they are staying. After thanking one another formally, they sit silently, Otake looking very pale. They put away their stones and leave the room. Uragami, the narrator, returns to his room and reflects on the long game, then goes to pay his respects to the Master.

Chapter 3 continues the events following the end of the game. The judges and reporters and Otake and his supporters all leave the inn soon afterward, leaving the Master and his wife the only ones at the inn. Uragami takes a bus toward his home, eager to return to his life outside after having devoted so much time to covering the game. He reflects on his fond feelings for the Master and recalls a time several years after his death when he goes to visit Otake at his home where he teaches go students. He is also very fond of Otake.

Chapter 4 briefly describes the opening of the game between Otake and the Master. It is a ceremonial opening at the Koyokan, a kind of clubhouse for professional go players, with each player only making one play. Uragami recalls a pleasant evening passed with the Master and Otake at this time, with cordial conversation over sake.

## Chapters 1-4 Analysis

Kawabata begins his novel at the end, with the death of Shusai, the Master of Go. "Master of Go" is a formal position formally held by Shusai, who has retired and passed the position on. He retains the title, however, and is usually referred to as the Master throughout the book. He is described as being quite small, weighing less than 70 pounds. He is married and has no children. Otake is a man of 30 with a wife and young children, as well as go students who live in his house with him.

In Chapter 2, Kawabata describes the anguished appearance of Otake at the end of the game, as well as the Master's calm, emotionless demeanor after his defeat. This is contrasted in Chapter 4, as the action shifts to the beginning of the game when the two opponents share a pleasant social evening together, unaware of the "signs of discord"

that will arise (p. 13). Thus, Kawabata frames his novel and draws the focus to the period between the seemingly pleasant opening of the game and the final death of the Master.



# Chapters 5-8

## Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5 jumps ahead in the narrative to a resumption in the play of the game after the Master is hospitalized for a heart condition. He has proposed changes to the agreed rules of the match because of his health, but Otake is opposed to making changes, saying he will forfeit instead. The mood is tense, and Uragami and the Master's wife take him to an inn at the sea to relax between sessions. The Master seems to be in his own world and barely acknowledges his surroundings. The next day, Uragami takes Otake to the same place.

Chapter 6 returns to the time just after the death of the Master. Uragami has offered to take photographs of the Master's face in death for his widow. He is not confident of his photography skills or his camera, and takes great care.

In Chapter 7, Uragami is looking over his photographs of the master and notices a single long hair that grows from his right eyebrow. He recalls noticing the hair during his coverage of the final game, and an excerpt from the article in which he mentions it is included in the chapter.

Chapter 8 continues Uragami's reflection on the photographs of the dead Master's face. He sees something poignant in the features, and reflects that the Master was perhaps a martyr to his art.

## Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Uragami once again hints at the tension and dissension that is to come between the two opposing players over the rules of their game. The Master is in poor health and wishes to take more time between sessions. Otake is reluctant for reasons that will be made more clear once Kawabata begins to describe the events surrounding the game itself.

Chapters 6 through 8 focus on the Master's frail appearance, especially in his declining days. He is only 5 feet tall and very thin. Uragami lingers over his photographs of the dead face of the Master, finding meaning in his death. He closes Chapter 8 reflecting that a way of life died along with the Master—not only in the world of go, but in Japanese culture.



# Chapters 9-12

## Chapters 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9 returns to the ceremonial opening of the game between the Master and Otake. Dressed in formal Japanese garb, the players meet in a parlor of the Koyokan. Also present are Uragami, the editor of his newspaper, the directors of the Japanese Go Association, and several other highly-ranked go and chess players. After some brief words by the dignitaries, the players seat themselves at the go board. The Master, being of the higher rank, plays the white stones. Otake, the challenger, has the black stones and plays first. Otake makes a conservative opening play, and the Master considers his first play.

The Master seems about to place his white stone on the board when Otake reminds him that the agreement was that his opening play would be "sealed." The Master goes with one of the judges to a private room and writes down his next move, which is sealed and will be opened at the opening of the next session of play. He returns to the parlor and the ceremony ends.

Chapter 10 describes the first real day of play, which takes place the next day. The two players greet one another, and Otake apologizes in advance for having to get up several times during play to use the bathroom. Uragami attributes this to an intense nervousness that Otake experiences over the play, but notes that the Master does not seem to acknowledge Otake's anxiety. The Master is very quiet during the play, which disarms Otake, who likes to joke and talk to release his tension. Uragami observes the Master closely as he deliberates over his moves. He notices that the Master sometimes slips into a period of very heavy breathing, as if in a violent struggle, then his breathing calms again. He does not seem to be aware of this change in his breathing, and Uragami wonders about the "spirit facing battle" that exists in players of such skill (p. 39). The players complete through the twelfth move, with the final move by the Master a sealed play.

In Chapter 11, dissension arises between the two players. According to the agreement governing the match, after the first session at the Koyokan, the play would move to an inn at Hakone where the players would be sequestered for the duration. Yet the Master seemed to have no knowledge of this and has made no preparations for a long stay. Uragami meets Otake outside the Koyokan, who is upset that the Master has broken the rules of the agreement so casually and delayed the resumption of play, which was to have started that morning but is now delayed until the afternoon.

Uragami describes three of the Master's last title matches, all of which were delayed midway because of his illness. In his previous match with a highly-ranked young player, Wu, some controversy arose when allegations were made that the Master was using illness as an excuse to delay while he discussed the game with his students to formulate his next moves. One especially brilliant move by the Master, made



immediately after returning from a break, was rumored to have been thought of by Maeda, one of the Master's disciples. Uragami addresses these rumors by saying that they might be true, but since Maeda and the Master both deny them, nobody will ever know. He remarks that the Master seldom seems to ask for advice.

The chapter concludes with a description of some suspicious play by Otake that takes place later in the match after a delay of over three months. The men are back at the board and it is Otake's turn. To all the assembled onlookers, there seems to be one especially obvious move for him to make, and it is the move that he eventually does make. However, he takes several hours to make it, apparently deliberating over it, then apologizing as he made the move for having not seen such an obvious play.

In Chapter 12, Uragami describes some of the new "fussy rules" that have come to govern title matches of go, such as the sealed play (p. 52). In games that are played out over several sessions, the player who plays last for the day is at a disadvantage because his opponent will have all the time between the sessions to study the game and come up with a response. A new rule seals the last play, which is then opened at the beginning of the next session and made. Players are given total time allowances for deliberating all their moves.

These rules are a modern invention that the Master has no experience with, Uragami explains. With complex rules comes the search for ways to exploit them or find loopholes, and this is an insult to the tradition of the game itself, Uragami laments. The Master is the last of a kind of go player who relies on tradition and respect for the older and more noble player, who was usually given deference. The new rules have removed something essential from the game, Uragami believes, and views the Master as the last representative of the complete tradition. Even though better players may come along, he says, none will have the background and bearing of the Master.

## Chapters 9-12 Analysis

The central battle gets underway in Chapter 9, but very soon another kind of conflict arises between the older, traditional ways of the Master and the new style of professional go represented by the younger Otake. The Master is used to being treated with deference to his position and seems to be unaware of the complicated new set of rules surrounding the match, such as the method of sealing plays at the end of a session, or of sequestering the players at an inn while the game plays out. Such things are beneath him, Uragami seems to suggest. It is not so much that the Master is contemptuous of the new rules, but that his background in the traditions of go makes them foreign to him.

Uragami appears to be defending the Master's behavior, bringing up a controversial episode in a previous game against a talented young player named Wu. He balances this with an episode from the match with Otake in which Otake seems to be the one exploiting the breaks in play for his own advantage.





Chapter 12 develops the theme of the Master as a transitional figure in go and in Japanese culture, one of the central themes of the book. He belongs to an earlier tradition that is rapidly being replaced, and his death, foretold at the beginning of the novel, will represent the death of that old tradition as well.



# Chapters 13-16

## Chapters 13-16 Summary

In Chapter 13, Uragami admits to a kind of hero worship that he has for the Master. Once he attained the rank of Master of Go, Uragami explains, he was expected never to lose, and the Master came to believe this of himself, too. He has been in retirement for five years, but has been lured into playing the match with Otake, probably partly by the large fee offered by his newspaper, Uragami admits, but also, he thinks, because of a highly competitive drive. Especially complicated rules are drawn up for such an important match, and Uragami hints that these rules are partly to blame for the Master's tragic end.

More conflict ensues when, on the morning of the day when play is to begin in Hakone, the Master asks that the game be moved to a different inn. Rains and floods have made a nearby river swollen and loud, and the Master claims he has not been able to rest. It is the second time the Master has broken the rules, but out of respect nobody seems willing to arbitrate the situation and make a decision. Otake is upset, but sets out to find another place they might stay.

Chapter 14 is a brief observation of the Master as he leaves the game table at the noon break after play has been situation in an outbuilding of a new inn. The outbuilding is beyond a garden, and the Master is walking alone back to his room where his wife is waiting for him. He is bent over oddly, as if he is still sitting at the game table, and Uragami is touched by the sight of him, seemingly a relic from an older time.

Chapter 15 describes more of the early play. The Master's wife begins to express concern for his health as the weather suddenly turns hot. Otake continues to frequently ask to be excused from the game to use the bathroom, citing his nerves. He also continually drinks tea. His frequent trips to the bathroom become a source of teasing in the newspaper articles covering the match, Uragami explains.

Chapter 16 describes a few episodes where the Master seems to have trouble understanding the new rules. At the end of each session of play, the moves are reviewed by the timekeeper and the time each player has used of this allotment is given. On several occasions during the play, the Master is incredulous at the number of moves that were made or the time used, and asks for verification. He does not take as much time as Otake, Uragami notes. Each player has been given 40 hours total, and by the end of the match the Master will have used almost 20 hours while Otake will use over 34 hours.

## Chapters 13-16 Analysis

Tension continues to build surrounding the Master, but he seems to be unaware of it. The younger, more anxious Otake remains respectful, but is increasingly frustrated that



the Master so casually disregards the rules of the agreement and that it falls to him to appease the Master because nobody will step in and mediate. These early frustrations foreshadow more serious ones that will come later in the match. The Master's health also begins to become a concern.

Kawabata frequently includes brief, freestanding episodes such as the one in Chapter 14 to add poetic depth to the characters.

At this point in the game, neither player has gained a significant advantage, but the game play itself seems almost secondary to the larger events surrounding it.



# Chapters 17-20

## Chapters 17-20 Summary

The 40-hour time limit is more than twice the usual amount, Uragami explains in Chapter 17, and was probably a condition of the Master's for playing in the match, he guesses. Not used to the idea of time limits, the Master probably wanted enough time that he need not worry about the time.

Other concessions made in the rules of the match are that the players will meet every five days. Uragami figures that if each player took his full time and they played every five days, the match still would have taken three months, an impossibly long time to maintain the concentration needed to play at a professional level.

In Chapter 18, Uragami describes a trait of the Master's where he seems oblivious to everyone and everything much of the time, especially when he is playing a game of any kind. He is not a popular opponent because he spends so much time thinking about his moves, frustrating his opponents. Others play with him out of deference, but he seems not to sense their reluctance.

The Master does not observe many of the regular polite practices, such as thanking people. Instead, his wife expresses thanks for him. This is not rudeness, Uragami insists, just the Master's natural personality and comes from his detachment.

Chapter 19 provides more examples of the Master's intensely competitive drive and extreme concentration that seems to shut out everything else around him. His wife tells a story of having a visitor with a loud crying baby at their home while the Master was playing a match with someone. She was worried the baby would disturb him, but after it had gone, she learned he had never even noticed the noise.

Chapter 20 begins at the end of July, during the fourth session at Hakone. Play has stopped for the noon meal break, and the Master is lost in thought. Otake has just made an especially aggressive move, Uragami explains, and while the Master is expected not to consider his response during the break, he obviously has done so because he plays his response immediately upon returning to the table.

## Chapters 17-20 Analysis

Chapters 17 through 19 provide more character study of the tirelessly competitive Master. Even when not at the go table, he is continually challenging others to games of chess, mahjong or billiards. These sessions take many hours because of the slow, deliberate way in which he plays. This seems entirely natural to Uragami.

In Chapter 17 is the first mention of "White 103," which is the 103rd move of the game, made by the Master who is playing the white stones. This move is the turning point of



the match, a move that allows Otake to take the clear advantage over the Master. Mentioned in the context of the impossibly long hours of concentration, Uragami seems to hint that the Master has simply allowed his concentration to lapse after such a long time, which has included a period of illness for him.



# Chapters 21-24

## Chapters 21-24 Summary

The Master makes a brilliant response to Otake's aggressive move before the break as Chapter 21 begins, holding back his attack. They make several more plays before the end of the session.

In Chapter 22, the game has entered the middle phase. Each player has staked out his territory on the board and will soon have to decide on how and where to make advances against his opponent in the end game. For the first time, the Master seems eager to leave the table at the noon break, Uragami notices.

It is early August as Chapter 23 opens; the Master's health is deteriorating quickly. Play on August 5 is to be delayed while he is examined by a doctor, but the doctor is called away. The Master insists on playing, even though Otake would rather not while he is in such obvious discomfort. The Master sits with a pained look on his face at the go board, face swollen. Afterward, he describes the palpitations and pain in his chest brought on by his heart condition.

In Chapter 24, Kume, the editor of the literary section of Uragami's newspaper comes to the match, alerted by reports of the Master's bad health. The newspaper arranges for a heart specialist to come examine the Master. He is diagnosed as having a problem with a valve in his heart. Nearly bedridden with weakness, he still proposes a game of mahjong as soon as the doctor is finished.

## Chapters 21-24 Analysis

Chapters 21 and 22 are brief synopses of the middle moves of the game. Otake, a younger player known for making quick moves and bold plays shows some of this spirit. To this point in the game, he has been forced to play a slower, more deliberate game by the Master. The Master deftly deflects Otake's attack to the great admiration of the onlookers.

The Master's heart condition is the subject of Chapters 23 and 24. Like in other things, the Master seems to be able to temporarily shut out his declining health while playing, but it begins to get the better of him. Otake expresses to Uragami that he would rather not make the Master play in his condition. This frustration of OTake's will grow as he is put in an increasingly difficult situation by the Master's poor health.



# Chapters 25-28

## Chapters 25-28 Summary

Uragami's newspaper wants the match to continue if at all possible, and after examination by two doctors, it is decided the Master can continue to play. Rather than playing for five hours every five days, the rules are changed to hold sessions every two or three days for half as long. Otake lodges a complaint that he cannot get enough rest in only two days, and cannot get fully into his game in only a few hours of play. He is in a difficult spot, he confides to Uragami, because if the Master gets worse it will be said that it is Otake's fault. He feels the proper thing for the Master to do if he cannot meet the rules of the match is to forfeit. Otake threatens to forfeit himself, but his wife and others convince him to continue.

The Master's health seems to hold steady during the short session described in Chapter 26. He retains his insatiable appetite for games even when away from the go table, Uragami explains in Chapter 27. He approaches all games with the same intensity. His physical condition continues to worsen, though, and by mid August the match is postponed.

In Chapter 28, Uragami is leaving the inn for his summer house after the match has been recessed because of the Master's health. He has been coming and going in between sessions, he explains, as he finds it difficult to write about Otake and the Master while he is still so close to them.

He describes his process of writing for an audience that may not have a deep understanding of the game of go or its traditions. He adds "a certain amount of embroidering," to maintain their interest, he admits (p. 114).

On the train ride home, an American man recognizes his go board and asks if they might play a game. Uragami agrees, and they play several games. The American has had some study of the game and plays adequately, but seemingly without much thought, Uragami feels. He does not seem to have the proper spirit or desire for battle, and does not mind losing game after game. The sight of a foreigner playing go draws a small crowd of others on the train.

Uragami mulls over the history of go and how Japan is the country that has elevated it to an art form. While it came originally from China, all the great players are Japanese with the marked exception of Wu, a Chinese man who showed early talent at the game and moved to Japan to study it as a youngster.

## Chapters 25-28 Analysis

The game is recessed for the Master's heart problems, and the novel itself leaves the go table as Uragami travels home to write his accounts and await the resumption.

Otake's sometimes childish stubbornness is revealed in Chapter 25 when he refuses to accept the new rule changes. This is not the last time he will raise this kind of objection.

Chapter 28 is an interesting assessment of the unique properties go holds in Japan, where the game has been elevated to a kind of national art form. Other countries may produce players of excellent technical ability, but Uragami suggests that it is only in Japan that the proper "spirit" is maintained and can be cultivated.

Wu, the professional go player from China is a case in point, and he is re-introduced in Chapter 28. While born in China, he came to Japan while young and has risen to be one of the highest-ranked professional players.





# Chapters 29-32

## Chapters 29-32 Summary

In Chapter 29, Uragami goes to visit Wu to get his opinion of the game between the Master and Otake, to include it in an article. Wu has played against the Master and is a close friend of Otake. He is conservative in his comments, only noting that the game is close. This disappoints Uragami, who had hoped for something more profound and insightful.

Chapter 30 is an assessment of the game up to the point where it was recessed. The last play made is White 100. The game has been conservative, Uragami notes, to the disappointment of many amateurs who expected a clash with many reversals and drama. Otake had occasionally made aggressive moves, but the Master had parried them, forcing him to play more conservatively.

Chapter 31 opens in early November. The Master has been released from St. Luke's hospital where he has been resting and announces that he will be ready to resume playing on November 19. The recess has lasted three months. In preparation for the match, he has a barber come to shave him and dyes his hair black, which Uragami takes as a sign that he is mustering his resolve to finish the match, which is to be moved to the town of Ito. He is not completely healthy, having developed a cold and possibly some fluid in his lungs. His wife and the match organizer ask him not to mention this to Otake or he may become difficult as he did at Hakone. The Master sees no reason to keep his health a secret, and talks openly with anyone about it.

The game resumes at the beginning of Chapter 32, as the Master's sealed play is opened. The move is a somewhat obvious one meant to strengthen his position, and Uragami believes that it would have been an obvious move to Otake, who therefore had three months to consider his response to it. Otake's move in response seems equally obvious, yet he takes two and a half hours to make it, puzzling and finally annoying some of the onlookers. Uragami attributes Otake's long deliberation to his being a kind of player who is always dissatisfied with his play. He simply wants to be certain to be making the proper move.

## Chapters 29-32 Analysis

After three months the game resumes, but almost immediately there is controversy once again. The organizers do not want Otake to learn that the Master is still suffering from his condition fearing he might stubbornly refuse to play again. When play is resumed, Otake seems to take far too long to make what most feel is an obvious move. This episode is destined to become a serious controversy.

Earlier in the novel, Uragami has told the reader that the decisive point in the match is the move White 130. It is the 100th move that opens the resumption of the play, as the

location changes to Ito. With more conflict on the horizon, the game and the novel move into the final segment.



# Chapters 33-36

## Chapters 33-36 Summary

The second session at Ito is left up in the air after a dispute over the schedule again causes Otake to refuse to play. The organizers, eager to get the match finished and out of concern for the Master's health, have asked that the period between the sessions be shortened. Otake refuses and several of his friends approach him to ask him to change his mind. He finally relents and agrees to playing every third day.

The Master learns of Otake's compromise at the beginning of Chapter 34 and announces play will continue the following day. Otake wishes to have an extra day to rest, however, and another conflict arises. The judges and organizers, out of respect for the Master's rank, do not want to ask him to reconsider waiting another day and instead decide appeal to Otake to play the next day. The Master does not know that Otake continues to threaten to forfeit rather than give in. Otake calls Uragami to come to him, and announces that he will indeed forfeit the match.

Uragami pleads with Otake to reconsider, describing the historic nature of the game. Uragami knows the game is in a transitional stage, and Otake is the only player who really represents the new age of the game. If he forfeits, Uragami tells him, the sympathy of the country will be with the Master and Otake will not only have damaged his own reputation, but also the future of the game. Otake does not seem convinced, but Uragami does receive a promise that if the Master will agree to waiting one more day he will continue to play.

Uragami goes to the master and plainly asks if he will agree to wait a day. The Master simply replies that this will be acceptable. The matter is resolved so quickly that Uragami nearly weeps. Otake is surprised as well, when he learns the Master has agreed.

With the Master bundled up to fend off chills from a fever, play resumes at the agreed time as Chapter 35 opens. The Master plays quickly, but Otake again takes long periods to deliberate his moves, muttering to himself that he is running out of time. The final play of the session is Black 109, which is sealed.

The game heats up in the following session, described in Chapter 36, which ends with Black 121. For the 21 moves since the resumption of play, Otake has used nearly 12 hours, which is more than the complete time allowed for a regular match. The Master has used less than two hours, and for the first time makes a slight complaint about how long Otake takes.



## Chapters 33-36 Analysis

The high respect for the Master's rank is evident when nobody dare ask him to consider compromising on the schedule. Uragami takes a small but crucial role in the game when he alone musters the resolve to approach the Master to ask him to consider waiting one more day at Otake's request. He cries at the Master's affirmative response, taking it as a sign of the great man's understanding and grace.

Otake's anxiety stretches him nearly to the breaking point, and only after several entreaties does he even consider compromising on the schedule. Uragami is sympathetic to Otake's stubborn response. It is not the end to the conflict that extends beyond the go board, however.



# Chapters 37-41

## Chapters 37-41 Summary

During the rest period before the next session, the Master diverts himself with other games, as usual. Otake, on the other hand, spends his time reading and studying go.

The next session begins with the opening of Otake's play, Black 121. At first, the judge cannot find where it is marked on the chart on which Otake marked it before it was sealed. The game had ended with a battle near the middle of the board, but Black 121 is in a completely different part of the board. It is a mild threat to the Master, who has only one response, which is to strengthen his position nearby. Otake then returns to the central battle, making several aggressive plays up through Black 129.

The Master responds with an aggressive move of his own, White 130. Otake responds that the move is a brilliant one that leaves him in a tough spot. Uragami admits that, as an amateur, he does not see that White 130 actually seals the Master's fate to go down in defeat.

Play has stopped for the noon break as Chapter 38 opens and Uragami joins the Master at his meal. He is astonished to learn that the Master was so furious at the opening of the sealed play Black 121 that he almost forfeited the game right then. By making a move far away from the central battle that required a quick response, Otake left the positions unchanged in the important parts of the board, thus making use of the recess to consider his next important move. He seemed to have taken advantage of the rules. Uragami sympathizes with the Master, but in his role feels he can neither openly agree with him or defend Otake. After the match is over and before his death, the Master publishes a commentary on the game and describes Black 121 as a solid move, without any of the anger he shows at the time, and Uragami wonders if perhaps it is not just the heat of the moment that makes him accuse Otake of a kind of cheating. Still, Uragami admits, he is puzzled by the episode.

His puzzlement extends to the play made by the Master at White 130, which is the subject of Chapter 39. In his own post-match commentary, the Master considers it his fatal mistake. At the time, Uragami admits, he himself thought it a bold play, but now sees it as a kind of "psychological or a physiological failure" of the Master's (p. 169), possibly the result of his anger over the sealed play.

After White 130, the play continues quickly up to the sealed play Black 145. Otake takes the offensive and the advantage. Uragami notices that for the first time, the Master is regularly checking his watch.

Chapter 40 describes the final session of play. At the opening, the master suggests to Otake that they finish the game. Otake nods. That the Master will not win is plain to all,



including the Master, who turns to the onlookers while Otake is out of the room at one point and smiles, saying that the match is over.

Tasting victory, Otake plays intently and with momentum. The crowd outside the room thickens as the final stages are reached, and the Master invites them into the room for a better view. Otake makes his final move, Black 237 and the Master fills in a neutral point, a kind of admission that the important play is over. He agrees with the assessment of the judge that Black has won by five points.

Uragami ponders what might have happened if the Master had not played at White 130. He concludes that Otake would still have found a way to win. He seemed destined to be the victor. It was not a match characterized by one player taking strong advantage of the other. It seemed to Uragami that the Master had simply not had the strength or tenacity to come out ahead.

The following day, Uragami leaves for home.

Chapter 41 revisits the final days of the Master. After the match, his health deteriorates rapidly. He seems to lose some of his drive at the go table, but still enjoys playing games. He and his wife visit with Uragami and his wife in Atami in January. Uragami and the Master play some chess and the Master wins. He urges Uragami and his wife to stay for dinner, but they decline and go home. Later that night, the Master dies. The book closes as Uragami and his wife reflect on their last meeting with him. His wife regrets not having stayed to eat that day, suspecting the Master was lonely. Uragami replies that he was always lonely.

## Chapters 37-41 Analysis

There is no surprise about the outcome of the novel. The Master is defeated and dies soon afterward. Yet the closing chapters are among the most dramatic of the book as the two great players come to realize the end is in sight. Otake seems to forget his nervous complaints and becomes even more intense. The Master plays on serenely, not betraying any emotion even when he is outraged by Otake's sealed play.

Uragami offers several assessments of the end of the game and opinions on why the Master made the fatal move that assured his defeat. He does not explicitly state what is hinted, however, which is that the Master lost the match on purpose. It does not seem Uragami could bring himself to believe such a thing, but does admit that the fatal move might have been a result of the Master's temporary rage. Elsewhere in the book, Uragami calls the Master a martyr to the game, suggesting that he may have gone to his defeat partly willingly.



# Characters

## Honnimbo Shusai, Master of Go

Honnimbo Shusai, Master of Go, is the current master in the centuries-old line of recognized masters of the game. He is in his late-60s and in poor health, suffering from a heart condition. He is quite small at just five feet tall and weighing less than 70 pounds. He has devoted his life to the game and at the time of the events in the novel has been the top go player in Japan for over thirty years. He is also an ordained Buddhist priest. He is married, with no children.

The Master is a noble and aristocratic figure, used to being treated with deference and respect. He is at odds with a new generation of professional go players and a system that places more emphasis on the actual performance at the go table rather than the ancient traditions.

The Master has been in retirement from play for several years at the time of the match, but has been "lured" out of retirement to face a young challenger. He is somewhat bewildered by the new system of match play with a complicated set of rules and schedules.

The Master sinks into a kind of trance when he plays, and does not notice anything else going on around him. In between sessions of go, he fills his time playing even more games. He takes extreme care in deliberating his moves, even in casual games. He is oblivious to the demands he makes of his opponents and thinks nothing of drawing a game out for several hours or half a day.

The Master's health deteriorates over the course of the match, and within weeks of its end he finally dies.

## Otake of the Seventh Rank

Otake of the Seventh Rank is a young professional go player who has won a series of competitions for the honor of facing the Master in his final match. Otake is thirty years old and married with young children. He also has several students of go who live in his home and learn from him.

Otake is usually a talkative and gregarious go player, but is more subdued when facing the venerable Master. He suffers from various nervous complaints, including indigestion and enuresis, an excessive need to use the bathroom. He frequently excuses himself from the go table for this reason. He maintains a variety of medicines and treatments for his complaints.

Otake spends his time between session of play studying go literature. He has not yet become tired of the game and seems eager to continue to learn and improve.



Otake is sometimes portrayed as being childish in his stubbornness. When the organizers of the match want to change the schedule of play sessions in order to accommodate the Master's poor health, Otake resists, threatening to forfeit rather than compromise. He finally relents in his protests and finishes the match, which he wins.

## Uragami

Uragami is the narrator of the novel and the proxy for the author, Kawabata, who actually covered Shusai's final match for a Tokyo newspaper and has novelized an account of his experiences. Uragami is an author and devotee of the game of go, although not of a professional rank. He is friendly with both players and spends time between sessions visiting with them.

Uragami is highly respectful of the Master, and his admiration for the man and what he represents is evident throughout the novel. He becomes close to the Master and his wife, who asks him to photograph the Master's body in death for her own remembrance. He is one of the last people to see the Master alive.

## The Master's Wife

The Master's wife is not named in the novel. She is always present, however, accompanying the Master everywhere. She walks with him to the sessions of play and waits for him afterward. She frets about his health and helps care for him, encouraging him to eat and gain strength.

## Mrs. Otake

Mrs. Otake is the wife of Otake, the professional go player. She is a young mother and does not stay with Otake for the entire duration of the match, coming only from time to time to visit along with their children. She maintains a household that includes several of her husband's students as well as their children.

## Wu

Wu is a highly ranked go player born in China, who comes to Japan as a youngster to study the game after he shows promise. He has played against the Master in a match that sparked some controversy. He is a good friend of Otake.

## Maeda

A former student of the Master and a professional go player. It is rumored that Maeda helped the Master win a match against Wu by coming up with a brilliant move between sessions.





## **Onoda**

One of the judges of the match.

## **Iwamoto**

One of the judges of the match.

## **Kume**

The literary editor of Nichinichi, the Tokyo newspaper that has sponsored the match and for which Uragami is writing. Kume knows little about the game, but comes to the match once he learns about the ill health of the Master.

## **Dr. Kawashima**

A heart specialist called in to examine the Master when he falls ill.

## **The American Go Player**

An American met by Uragami while traveling on a train. The American is an amateur go player and plays several games against Uragami, who beats him repeatedly. Based on his experience with the American, Uragami wonders if foreigners have the required spirit to excel at go.



# Objects/Places

## The Game of Go

A game for two players featuring black and white stones placed alternately on a 19 by 19 grid. The object is to capture or enclose more territory on the board than one's opponent. The game originated in China and was been elevated by the Japanese into an important game of cultural significance. Professional players are ranked based on their performance and the ranking of those they beat, with the higher the number the higher the ranking. Otake is of the seventh rank and one of the highest ranking players at the time.

## Koyokan

A club house for the playing of go. It is where the match between the Master and Otake has its ceremonial beginning.

## Hakone

The Japanese town where the match is continued after the ceremonial opening.

## Ito

The Japanese town where the match is moved following a turn in the Master's health.

## Atami

The town where the Master spends winters, and where he is when he dies.

## China

Japan's most important neighbor and opponent in war at the time of the novel.

## The Urokoya Inn

The inn in Atami where the Master is staying when he dies.



## **Nichinichi**

The Tokyo newspaper that sponsors the match and for which Uragami is producing regular reports.

## **St. Luke's**

The hospital where the Master recuperates during the recess in play

## **The Japanese Go Association**

The official national organization that oversees professional matches and rankings.

## **Master of Go**

An ancient title that has been passed down for three hundred years to the highest-ranked go player. The Master is the twenty-first in this succession.



# Themes

## Transition

The Master of Go takes place in Japan in 1938, at a time when Japan is at war with China and on the eve of World War II. It is becoming a strong and modern nation. Otake, a man of 30 who is among a new generation of strong professional go players, is of this modern generation. Shusai, the Master, is of an earlier era.

The Master is born in the late-19th century in what is known as the Meiji period, named after the Japanese emperor who brought sweeping changes to the Japanese government at that time. Kawabata portrays the Master as a kind of living fossil from this earlier time when there was still great deference paid to the noble class. In Chapter 14, Uragami describes watching the Master leave the go table during a break in play. "In that figure walking absently from the game there was the still sadness of another world. The Master seemed like a relic left behind by Meiji" (p. 63).

As with Japanese culture in general, changes have taken place in the world of the game of go. The Master ascended to his high position under an older system of recognition which has been replaced by a carefully-calculated point system. The former etiquette based on deference to the senior, higher-ranked player has been replaced by systems of complicated rules. In the past, the Master would have been allowed to stop play for a break any time he wished. This has been replaced by a strict schedule with sealed plays at the end of each session.

The central game of go in the novel pits these two men against one another, Otake representing the new and the Master the old traditions of Japanese culture. It is Otake who wins, as the new always does. Uragami compares him to a kind of natural force, and describes his victory as inevitable. Just as the new must always replace the old, Otake emerges the victor and the Master soon dies. The events of the novel open in the early summer and move through the fall and into winter, and descriptions of the weather run through the narrative, as if the game is following the natural transitions of nature.

The Master of Go is originally published in 1951, following World War II and the devastating effects it had on Japan. An even greater transformation is coming after the events of the novel close. Kawabata refers to this only in passing, when he describes Master visiting a hot springs resort which has been turned into a military hospital.

## The Psychology of Competition

At the beginning of Chapter 19, the Master is quoted as saying, "You do not learn about your opponent's character when you play Go or when you play chess. Trying to judge your opponent's character perverts the whole spirit of the game. I lose myself in the game, and my opponent stops mattering" (p. 79).



The novel is filled with episodes in which the Master seems to be unaware of everything except the game before him, which is nearly constantly as he spends most of his time away from the central go game playing chess, mahjong and billiards. His trancelike devotion to the game comes at the expense of his appearing to ignore his own fragile physical condition. Otake, on the other hand, seems to suffer from all manner of nervous disorders brought on by the intense competition and is constantly treating them with various medications.

Otake does not seem to have the luxury to ignore his opponent in the same way as the Master does. Because of his exalted standing, the Master is accustomed to being deferred to, and Otake is placed in a position where the Master's actions away from the go table directly affect his ability to play the game, as when the sessions are shortened and rescheduled to accommodate the Master's health. By necessity, these delays and changes become part of the competition for Otake. When he is backed into a corner, he holds his line and threatens to forfeit if there is no compromise. Most of this part of the competition is hidden from the Master, as nobody dares suggest to him that if he cannot meet the agreed upon rules of the match he should forfeit.

The result is that the two opponents are playing by different rules. The Master adheres to the old traditions where other than the rules of go itself, the match is simply governed by the tradition of deference to the more distinguished player. Otake, representing the new, more egalitarian system, is caught between his expectation that he also defer to the Master and a respect for the new order of things ruled by contracts and agreements.

While the Master seems able to ignore the larger context of the contest, he is not immune to it, Kawabata suggests. In the end, his loss is not confined to the go table.

## **The End of the Game of Go as an Art Form**

In Chapter 28, Uragami states, "Go came to Japan from China. Real Go, however, developed in Japan. The art of Go in China, now and three hundred years ago, does not bear comparison with that in Japan. Go was elevated and deepened by the Japanese." This statement comes in the context of Uragami having met an American on a train with whom he played several games of go. The American has a good grasp of the forms and motions required to play the game, but Uragami senses that he lacks something distinctly Japanese in his regard for the game. He does not share the traditions of Japan which have elevated the game to an art form.

The Master of Go is treated like a kind of priest in Japan, and Uragami notes that Shusai had indeed been ordained as a buddhist priest. His title has been handed down for three hundred years, with each master expected to act as a kind of protector of the game. It is not simply that the Japanese take the game more seriously, Uragami suggests. It is an ingrained part of the culture.

The comparison between art and go is sometimes made quite blatantly in the novel, as when Otake makes a move that offends the Master and his traditional approach to the



game. He confides in Uragami during a break in play that the move angered him so much he considered forfeiting the match. "Mr. Otake ruined it with that sealed play. It was like smearing ink over the picture we had painted." For the Master, the go board, with its bold contrasts in graceful patterns, is like a painting collaborated on by two artists. Otake, who the Master thinks has taken unfair advantage of the rules governing the match, has insulted this process.

Kawabata seems to agree that the new emphasis on rules and rankings detracts from the tradition of the game and lowers its status. In the past, the Master of Go would seldom even play once attaining the highest rank for fear of possibly losing and thus tarnishing the title. This will not be possible in the future, he laments, as is shown by the example of Shusai. Future Masters will be continually challenged and will have to adhere to the new methods. The game will become a means to an end rather than an artistic pursuit.



# Style

## Point of View

The Master of Go is told from the point of view of a journalist who is also somewhat involved in the proceedings he reports on. The narrator, Uragami, is a reporter for the newspaper that has sponsored the go match between the Master and Otake. He is a devoted amateur player himself who approaches his description of the actual play of the game with seriousness.

The narrator is also a great admirer of the Master and the older aristocratic culture he represents. He describes him as a noble, tragic figure in the final days of his life. While he is a journalist, he does not treat his subject with objectivity from an external viewpoint. His admiration for the Master and the traditional form of the game seem to cause him to excuse the sometimes arbitrary and arrogant behavior of the older player.

The events in the novel are actual events that the author actually did report on. All of the names except that of the Master have been changed for the novel. Since the novel is based on actual people and events, it seems that the narrator and the author share the same point of view. It also seems that since the name of the Master is the only one he did not change for the novel, that his book is intended to be a memorial to this remarkable man.

## Setting

The setting is Japan in 1938, on the eve of World War II. It is a transitional time in Japan between an older aristocratic society and a younger, more modern one. A Japanese newspaper has convinced the reigning Master of Go to come out of retirement and face a young challenger who has won a tournament giving him the honor of playing the Master. The match opens in a building called the Koyokan, a club house for professional go players. From there, the match moves from place to place over the course of six months, taking place in inns where the game resumes at intervals of several days, and where the players are sequestered.

The game is played on a low, square board, with the players sitting on the floor on either side. A timekeeper, judges, reporters and other spectators surround the players. Play is deliberate and the players sometimes take several hours between moves. During this time, they sometimes converse with others in the room. In between sessions of play, the players stay at the same inns where they play, often playing other games such as chess and billiards. The game begins in early summer and concludes in early winter, and the weather changes accordingly, including the onset of fall storms that cause widespread flooding, requiring the match to be moved.

The events of the novel sometimes move outside the sessions of play as Uragami, the narrator, travels by train to interview other go players or to scout out new locations for



the game to resume. When the Master falls ill during the match, he stays for a time at a hospital. The Master finally dies in the town of Atami in January of 1939.

## Language and Meaning

The Master of Go was originally written in Japanese and then translated into English. As with all works in translation, the word choices and sentence structure of the original work are filtered through the choices made by the translator.

Kawabata was himself a reporter during the actual events that he describes in his novel, and he tells his story from the point of view of the reporter Umagami. The language is frequently journalistic and direct, with clear description of the action, names, times and dates. Excerpts from newspaper articles are sometimes included within the text.

Go is a game of deep and complex strategies, with several hours passing between moves. High-ranking games such as the central game in this novel take weeks or even months to complete. The challenge acknowledged by the narrator Uragami is to create a compelling story for readers who may not have the strong appreciation for the game required to maintain high interest over several months. Kawabata meets this challenge by condensing the six-months over the course of the game into a impressionistic portrait of the characters and their struggles. The language is spare, with Kawabata sometimes presenting short episodes intended to illustrate larger points.

## Structure

The Master of Go is structured as a chronicle of events, and as such is laid out in generally chronological order, with occasional moves into the past and future to provide background information. It is divided into 41 short chapters, most of which describe a discrete episode in the action centered on the playing of the game of go.

The game of go is complex, with over two hundred plays in a typical game. Kawabata includes diagrams of the game board at several points within the novel to illustrate the moves made by the opposing players.

Kawabata begins at the end, with the death of the Master, and moves on to describe the events immediately after the end of his final match with Otake. In the opening eight chapters, Kawabata extracts episodes from the six-month time span covered by the novel and intersperses them with narrative comment. This introduces the characters and provides a framework for the novel, and draws focus to the game itself, which is commenced at the beginning of the ninth chapter. From this point, the novel progresses in chronological order through the match and its many recesses, through the defeat of the Master and to his final days before his death.





## Quotes

"Shusai, MAster of Go, twenty-first in the Honnimbo succession, died in Atami, at the Urokoya Inn, on the morning of January 18, 1940. He was sixty-seven years old by the Oriental count." Chapter 1, p. 3

"I had long been fond of the bright, open view from Kawana. I had thought I would show it to the gloomy old man, and I watched to see his reaction. He sat i silence, as if not even aware of the view before him." Chapter 5, p. 17

"That the Master seemed to grow larger when he seated himself before the Go board had to do of course with the power and prestige of his art, the reward of long training and discipline; but his trunk was disproportionately long." Chapter 6, p. 20

"And I looked at the body. The head of a doll, and the head only, seemed to protrude from the honeycomb pattern of the rough-woven kimono." Chapter 8, p. 31

"Otake was much given to jesting when he was at the board; but since the Master offered no sign that he even noticed, the effect was somewhat blunted. In a match with the Master, Otake was unwontedly meek." Chapter 10, p. 41

"It may in fact be said that the Master sold his last match to a newspaper at a price without precedent. He did not so much go forth into combat as allow himself to be lured into combat by the newspaper." Chapter 12, p. 53

"He had not yet come out of his trance, and the absolutely straight trunk and head were as if he were still at the Go board. He seemed uncertain on his feet. In a state of bemusement, he suggested some rarefied spirit floating over a void; and yet the lines of the figure we saw at the board were still unbroken." Chapter 14, p. 64

"Nor did the Master offer anyone a word of thanks during his retirement match. His wife took responsibility for such niceties. He was not presuming upon his rank and title. He was being himself." Chapter 18, p. 77

"The Master forced Fujisawa Kuranosuke of the Fifth Rank, who also happened to be present, into a game of chess which lasted from noon through the afternoon and on until three in the morning. the moment he saw Fujisawa the next day, the Master pulled out his chess board again. So it was with the Master. " Chapter 19, p. 81

"At this late date the rules were to be changed. For Otake the matter was of grave import. If the Master could not respect the original contract, then the honorable thing would be to forfeit." Chapter 25, p. 102

"It was hard for me to write about the Master and Otake when we were together at the inn. Even when I stayed overnight at Hakone I would go down to Miyanoshita or Tonosawa. It made me uncomfortable to write about them and then be with them at the next session." Chapter 28, p. 114



"Unhappy with the delay, the Master was poised to begin immediately. The matter seemed to him a simple enough one. But Otake's feelings were complicated. Weary from the long days of altercation, he needed rest and a change of mood before he resumed play. The two men were of two quite different natures." Chapter 34, p. 142

"'I think I would like if possible to finish today,' the Master said to the managers on the morning of December 4. In the course of the morning's session he said to Otake: 'Suppose we finish today.'" Otake nodded quietly." Chapter 40, p. 172



## Topics for Discussion

Uragami describes the game of go as especially suited to the Japanese "spirit." What does he mean?

Compare the ways that Otake and the Master approach their competition.

Is the Master a tragic figure? Why or why not?

Is the reader meant to sympathize with either opponent? If so, who, and why?

What are the differences in character between Otake and the Master? How are they similar?

Uragami suggests that the Master is destined to lose the match. Why might he think so?

Does the Master lose on purpose?

How does Kawabata treat the passage of time in laying out his novel?

Is Uragami a reliable narrator?