

The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon, Translated [from the Japanese] and Edited by Ivan Morris Study Guide

**The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon, Translated [from
the Japanese] and Edited by Ivan Morris by Sei
Shōnagon**

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Plot Summary

The Pillow Book is a journal written by a tenth-century lady-in-waiting to the Empress of Japan. The author is Sei Shonagon, and she was given some notebooks that were lying around the Palace that no one else wanted. The Pillow Book is her journal, and the topics she covers are varied. She writes poetry in her journal, gossips about the people in the court, and writes about the wonders of nature.

There is no real plot in The Pillow Book, although there are recurring characters and themes. Some of her recurring themes include beauty, position, and nature. Recurring characters are other courtiers, especially the Emperor and Empress. Shonagon's life consists of taking care of the Empress, preparing for festivals and special occasions, and going on pilgrimages to temples. Occasionally, she goes home to visit her family, but after many years at the Palace, the Palace feels like her real home.

Some of the entries are stories of things that have happened at the palace or stories she has heard from others. Some of the stories are ancient stories or myths or fables, much as we would tell folk tales or fairy tales. Much of the poetry included in The Pillow Book is poetry made up on the spot to fill a need in a conversation or to bridge a gap in a relationship or apologize for something.

Some entries are lists. These lists always have a heading, such as "Embarrassing Things." The rest of the entry will be a list of embarrassing things. Some of the things will be accompanied by a long description or perhaps even a story, but other things will just be nouns followed by periods. These lists are never dull, especially because they feel so contemporary.

Shonagon's style of writing is very enjoyable, partly because she is so light-hearted and happy. She doesn't dwell on things that go wrong and seems to have an unflinching optimism. She sees herself in a very good light, perhaps better than other people do, but when it's your own journal, you can write it any way you want to.



Sections 1-12

Sections 1-12 Summary

In Section 1, Shonagon describes the four seasons and tells which time of day is most charming in each season. She says that in the spring, dawn is the most beautiful. Summers are most beautiful at night, autumns are beautiful in the evenings, and winter is most beautiful in the early morning.

Shonagon begins Section 2 by describing beautiful days throughout the year but she quickly turns to a story about a woman who hit a man in her household with a gruelstick. A gruelstick is a small stick that women carry around during the festival of the full-moon gruel. It is supposed to remind them of the festival, but many of the women use their sticks to hit people with. Shonagon notes that when women are hit with the sticks, they get angry or cry, but when men get hit, they think it is fun.

Sections 3 and 4 are about delightful things in the springtime. She talks about nature's blossoms and new animals, and then she talks about a festival that everyone dresses up for. She loves to see everyone washed and dressed in their finest clothes. She notes that she especially likes to see everyone dressed according to rank.

Section 5 is a short list of different ways of speaking. Section 6 is Shonagon's opinion that parents should not raise their sons to be priests because priests live poorly and have a difficult life. Section 7 is a story about Shonagon's interactions with Narimasa, the Senior Steward. She teases him about the narrow path leading up to a gate and he takes offense. He walks into the ladies' chambers unannounced to further discuss the path with Shonagon, and everyone thinks his actions are absurd.

Section 8 tells the story of the palace dog and cat. Okinamaro is the dog who lives in the palace. The palace cat, Lady Myobu, has her own nurse, Lady Uma. One day, Lady Uma tells Okinamaro to bite Lady Myobu because she is not being obedient. Okinamaro does bite the cat, and he is banished from the palace because of it. Two chamberlains flog the dog, and everyone thinks he is dead. But later, Okinamaro comes back. He is scraggly and almost unrecognizable, but he makes himself known to the ladies in waiting, and they rejoice to see him again.

In Section 9, Shonagon describes the perfect weather for certain days of the year. Section 10 is very short and tells merely how Shonagon likes to watch the officials stand before the Emperor when they receive their appointments.

Section 11 is longer than most of the sections. It retells a story about Korechika, the Major Counsellor, who asked the ladies in waiting to write down an ancient poem from memory. They agonize about this because they want to do a good job and make a good impression. Shonagon remembers one and writes it down. Later, the Empress tells the ladies in waiting a story about an Imperial Concubine who had memorized all ten books



of the Kokin Shu. The Emperor quizzed her on all of them, and she passed every test. In Section 12, Shonagon imagines what it would be like to be an average wife serving her husband. She is grateful that she is a lady-in-waiting at the palace.

Sections 1-12 Analysis

These first twelve sections help us get to know Sei Shonagon. She is about thirty years old at the time she writes this, and she is a lady-in-waiting for the Empress. She is witty and prides herself on smart remarks and originality. She also has a great love for nature, which is evident in the sections where she lauds the beauties of nature.

Shonagon is a very social person, and she loves to talk about people and their interactions. She is playful with others and likes to tease them. She also takes great pleasure in watching people. She likes to see what they wear, how they behave, and what they say.



Sections 13-24

Sections 13-24 Summary

Sections 13 and 14 are lists of depressing things and hateful things, respectively. Examples of Shonagon's depressing things include dull poems, howling dogs, and persistent rain. Hateful things include creaking carriage wheels, mice, fleas, and visits from men she would rather avoid.

Section 15 is a vignette about a lovely day when Shonagon overheard His Majesty playing the flute outside after a flute lesson. Shonagon hears the Emperor saying that nobody could possibly hear him play so he was going to really let himself go. Shonagon thinks this is most delightful.

Sections 16 and 17 are also lists. Section 16 describes things that make one's heart beat faster such as sleeping in a room where lovely incense is burning, watching babies play, and seeing a suitor arrive at one's house and ordering the servants to announce him. Section 17 lists things that evoke pleasant memories from the past such as a piece of purple material pressed between the pages of a book, dried hollyhocks, and a night with a clear moon.

Sections 18, 19, and 20 are very short, about a paragraph each. In Section 18, Shonagon describes the differences between a wickerwork carriage and a palm-leaf carriage. She thinks a wickerwork carriage should move fast, and a palm-leaf carriage should move slowly. In Section 19, Shonagon describes ideal animal proportions and colors, particularly for oxen, horses, and cats. Section 20 regards oxen carriage drivers, attendants, escorts, and page-boys. She believes that oxen carriage drivers should be large men, attendants should be slim, and page-boys should be small.

Section 21 is about preachers. Shonagon thinks that preachers should be good-looking. If they are ugly, people won't want to look at him while he is preaching, and then they won't learn anything from him. In Section 22, Shonagon talks about a visit to Bodai Temple to hear the Eight Lessons for Confirmation. She is unusually moved by the ceremony and wishes she could stay in the temple much longer.

Section 23 is about Yoshichika, the Middle Counsellor. He is very handsome, and he enjoys flirting with women at festivals and court events. As carriages arrive, Yoshichika sends messages to the women inside the carriages. Everyone watches him send a message to a woman in a carriage and wonders what is in the woman's reply. Furthermore, everyone is intrigued because they don't know who the woman is. The carriage drives away, and the courtiers never discover the woman's identity.

In Section 24, Shonagon describes a scenario in which a man is leaving his lover close to dawn. On his way home, he peeks into another house, where a woman is lying in bed. Her lover has recently left her for the night. He strikes up a conversation with this



woman and she is annoyed by his presence. Presently, a messenger comes to the house bearing a next-morning letter from the woman's letter, and the man leaves.

Sections 13-24 Analysis

Through her lists and opinions, Sei Shonagon shows that she is very concerned with aesthetics, as would be expected by a lady-in-waiting whose job is to make sure that the Empress looks perfect. Shonagon has a keen appreciation for the beauties of nature. She also has firm ideas about how people should look. This is evident in Section 20 where Shonagon talks about the ideal body types for different jobs, specifically, oxen carriage drivers, attendants, and page boys.

In these sections, Shonagon also shows that she is intrigued by human relationships. She creates several short stories and vignettes, no doubt lifted from experiences she was familiar with, in which she explores human relations. The story in Section 24 describes the ironies of relationships between lovers and how intimate moments are played over and over again among different people at the same time. The story about Yoshichika in Section 23 describes more public relationships and the amusement others can derive from them.



Sections 25-36

Sections 25-36 Summary

Sections 25 and 27 describe trees. Section 25 is specifically about flowering trees. Shonagon elaborates on which flowering trees are beautiful and which are not. In Section 27, she discusses non-flowering trees. In her opinion, the common oak is the most magnificent tree.

Section 26 is about festivals. Shonagon's favorite festival is the Festival of the Fifth Month. On this day, herbal balls decorated with braided strings are brought to the Empress's palace and attached to pillars. Gifts are exchanged, and little girls wear irises as accessories. Another name for the Festival of the Fifth Month is the Iris Festival.

In Section 28, Shonagon discusses birds. It is more of a list than a discussion. Some of the sentences are not complete because they are just lists. Shonagon likes the mandarin duck and thinks that the sound made by wild geese is very moving. Section 29 is a short list of elegant things such as duck eggs, shaved ice with liana syrup, and wisteria blossoms. Section 30 is about insects. Shonagon feels pity for the basket worm because it was begotten by a demon.

Section 31 is very short and discusses the weather during the seventh month. During this time, she likes to nap. Section 32 is a list of unsuitable things such as ugly handwriting on red paper, a woman of a lower class dressed in scarlet, and a handsome man with an ugly wife. Section 33 is a small scene describing an incident in a hallway at the palace. The ladies in waiting are standing in the hallway when some servants pass by carrying shields, swords, and bags. The ladies ask the servants to whom the items belong, and the servants refuse to say. The ladies in waiting find them "hateful indeed."

Section 34 explains Shonagon's opinion that gentlemen should always have escorts. In Section 35, Shonagon talks about Yukinari, "a most delightful man." Yukinari is the Controller First Secretary, and Shonagon feels that he is a most unusual person. One day, Shonagon tells the Empress that she thinks Yukinari is a very unusual person, and the Empress agrees heartily. Yukinari asks Shonagon to take messages for him to the Empress. Shonagon doesn't let Yukinari see her face and convinces him that she is ugly. Yukinari is intrigued, and he sneaks into the ladies' quarters first thing in the morning to see Shonagon because he has been told that a woman's face is especially attractive first thing in the morning.

Section 36 is a description of the roll call of the senior courtiers. Shonagon loves to watch the roll call because the men are dressed so nicely and their voices sound so good when they answer to their names. In addition, if there are men she wants to know about, she can find out who they are at the roll call. One of the chamberlains is named Masahiro. The roll call does not go so smoothly when Masahiro is on duty because he severely rebukes the courtiers and tells them that they must improve their behavior.



Because of his actions, he has become the laughingstock of the court. Shonagon writes about a time that Masahiro left his shoes in the Emperor's dining room on the serving board. Everyone wanted to know whom the shoes belonged to, and Masahiro himself came at that moment to fetch his shoes.

Sections 25-36 Analysis

Although Shonagon lives in the palace and has servants to help her with everything, she apparently spends a good deal of time outside. She is intimately acquainted with animals and plants. Her descriptions of trees, flowers, insects, and other animals are detailed, and she has opinions about each. She also pays particular attention to seasons, the weather, and the climate.

In these sections, Shonagon shows that she is very flirtatious, often more for the sake of entertainment than for genuine feelings toward the man. For example, she leads Yukinari on until the man shows up in her quarters first thing in the morning in order to get a glimpse of her face, which she has painstakingly hid from him. She also loves going to the roll call of the senior courtiers just so she can see the men dressed up and hear their voices. She also loves the roll call because she can find out who the new men are.



Sections 37-51

Sections 37-51 Summary

In Section 37 Shonagon talks about how hateful it is when a well-bred young man addresses a woman of lower rank in a casual way that lets everyone know that he is familiar with her. Section 38 expresses the opinion that babies and small children should be plump. Section 39 is about the clothing of servants. Shonagon believes that the appearance of servants reflects on their masters.

In Section 40 Shonagon writes about two little boys that she sees while traveling in her carriage one day. She says she would like to have stopped the carriage and taken them home with her. Section 41 is similar. Shonagon is riding in her carriage when she sees a charming scene. This time, instead of little boys, Shonagon sees a beautiful kitchen-maid asking if Lord So-and-so's attendants had arrived.

Section 42 is a list of herbs and shrubs such as sweet rush, nut-grass, sage. Section 43 is a list of poetic subjects. These subjects include colts, club moss, the jujube tree, and lawns. Section 44 is a list of things that cannot be compared such as night and day, rain and mist, and laughter and anger.

In Section 45, Shonagon says that summer is the right season for meeting a lover because one can look out into the garden and hear birds from outside. However, it is also pleasant to be with a lover in the winter because one can lie buried under the blankets talking. In Section 46 she says that lovers' visits are the most delightful things in the world. There is one annoying aspect to these visits, however, and that is when the lover's servants wait outside the door and complain about how long they must wait.

Section 47 is a list of rare things including tweezers that don't work well, servants who do not speak poorly of their masters, and brides who love their mothers-in-law. In Section 48, Shonagon describes the women's apartments along the gallery in the Imperial Palace. Section 49 describes a beautiful night when the ladies-in-waiting all went outside before dawn to look at the moon. The Empress hears their voices and joins them. They run into some of the senior courtiers who are reciting poetry.

In Section 50, the Empress says she is bored, so some of the courtiers are called to the Empress' apartments to perform a concert. Shonagon follows the music and amuses them when she appears, saying, "Whatever guilt this may bring upon me, I cannot resist such a charming recitation." Section 51 is about the Captain First Secretary, Tadanobu. Shonagon discovers that Tadanobu has spoken ill of her in the Senior Courtiers' Chamber. She lets some time pass without speaking to him or even looking at him. Some time later, Tadanobu begins to miss Shonagon and sends her a letter. In the letter is a poem about not seeing each other for a while, but Tadanobu leaves off the last line and asks her how the stanza will end. Shonagon finishes the stanza and returns the letter. The men love her last line so much ("Who would come to visit/ This grass-



thatched hut of mine?") that they all write it on their paper fans. The story continues in Section 52 when Tadanobu sends word that he is going to visit Shonagon in her apartment. However, shortly before he arrives, the Empress sends for Shonagon and she must go. So when Tadanobu arrives, Shonagon is not there. He is very insulted by this, but they make up in the end.

Sections 37-51 Analysis

Although there are several sections that follow the list format, some of these sections are much more personal. In the sections about Shonagon's relationship with Tanadobu, we see that she is very worried about being disliked or misunderstood. Nevertheless, her character is strong enough that she is always willing and able to stand up for herself.

Since *The Pillow Book* is a journal, we see very few literary devices such as foreshadowing, climax, and denouement. However, the language is very poetic at times, which is attributable to Shonagon's great skill as a poet. Even when she is writing prose, Shonagon uses colorful phrases such as, "grape-colored trousers." It's also interesting that when Shonagon first refers to her brother Norimitsu, she introduces him as "the Assistant Master of the Office of Palace Repairs" instead of as her brother.



Sections 53-69

Sections 53-69 Summary

In Section 53, Shonagon writes more about Tadanobu. Shonagon spends some time away from the palace and Tadanobu finds Norimitsu to ask where she has gone. Norimitsu isn't sure whether or not Shonagon wants him to give personal information to Tadanobu. Shonagon and Norimitsu send letters back and forth to one another, but Norimitsu misunderstands one of Shonagon's letters and acts very coldly toward her. Section 54 is a two-line entry describing things that give a pathetic impression. Section 55 is a short description of a brief interaction between Shonagon and the Empress.

Section 56 is a longer story about a beggar woman who comes to the Empress's palace to ask for clothing and leftovers from the priests. All of the ladies-in-waiting are annoyed with her, but the Empress sends one of her own robes to the woman. After this gesture, the woman comes every day for quite some time. Then, another woman comes begging, and when the first woman sees this, she ceases to visit. The second part of this section is about a contest the courtiers have to guess how long a pile of snow will last before it melts. Shonagon wins the contest.

Section 57 is a list of splendid things such as Chinese brocade, the Empress's birth chamber, and a large garden covered in snow. Section 58 is about musical instruments. The Emperor has a large collection of zithers, flutes, and other instruments that have strange names. Section 59 is a description of how beautiful the Empress looks one evening when she sits outside in the garden playing the lute. Section 60 describes how wonderfully Tadanobu smelled one evening.

In Section 61, Shonagon reports that the Empress's wet-nurse is leaving to go to another province. As a parting gift, the Empress gives the wet-nurse a beautiful paper fan with this note written on it: "When you have gone away and face the sun that shines so crimson in the East, be mindful of the friends you left behind, who in this city gaze upon the endless rains." Shonagon cannot believe that the wet-nurse could leave the Empress behind.

Section 62 is a list of annoying things including a poem that has already been sent but you wish you could change, sewing difficulties, and getting cold in the night. Section 63 is a list of embarrassing things. Some of these items are speaking about someone who overhears the conversation, loving a drunk man who keeps repeating himself, and watching parents of ugly children praise them and imitate them in their voices.

Section 64 is a list of surprising and distressing things including breaking decorative combs and being involved in a carriage accident. In Section 65, Shonagon introduces Akinobo. Lord Akinobu is a lord whose house is on the courtiers' route during a journey. He hosts them and introduces them to some of the local activities. He invites "a number of quite pleasant-looking young girls" to entertain the courtiers and serves them all a



meal. He is rustic and fun-loving, but the ladies-in-waiting are not amused by his common food and common manners. Several days after the journey, the ladies-in-waiting are still talking about the fern sprouts the Lord Akinobu claimed to have picked with his own hands.

In Section 66, the Empress and some of her attendants are sitting outside listening to flute music. The Empress tells Shonagon to say something because it is sad when she doesn't speak. Shonagon says, "I am gazing into the autumn moon," and the Empress is well pleased with this reply. Section 67 is a summary of another conversation between the Empress and Shonagon. They talk about other peoples' affections.

Section 68 is a recap of a conversation between the Empress and the Middle Counselor, Takaie. Takaie is speaking of a fan-frame, and he makes a fool of himself. Shonagon says this conversation deserves to be in the section about embarrassing things. Section 69 is a conversation between Shonagon and the Secretary of the Ministry of Ceremonial, Nobutsune. She tells him a story about an attendant called Enutagi, whose name means "dog vomit." Enutagi is asked why she doesn't look like her name. She says she does, but it depend on the weather."

Sections 53-69 Analysis

In these sections, Shonagon takes to writing down dialogue as if she were writing a novel. She uses quotation marks and short paragraphs in the conventional way of writing dialogue. The dialogue brings the stories and characters to life and seems to be an advance in the evolution of her journal writing.

We don't know how far apart these journal entries are written because there are no dates or indicators included with them, but Shonagon seems to be getting closer to the Empress. She records many conversations between herself and the Empress, and she also talks about how the Empress has come to depend upon her for entertainment and laughs.



Sections 70-84

Sections 70-84 Summary

In Section 70 the Empress's sister, Lady of the Shigei Sha, arrives at the palace for a visit. In the guest's honor, the rooms in the Empress's apartments are decorated more beautifully than normal. Shonagon is very curious about Shigei Sha. She wants to know if Shigei Sha could possibly be as beautiful as the Empress. When Shonagon finally gets to see her, she discovers that the sisters are both very beautiful, and she enjoys listening to them converse with each other so amiably.

Section 71 is a brief section about a poem Shonagon writes in response to a message from Kinto, the Imperial Advisor. Section 72 makes fun of Masahiro, telling a story about him eating a dish of beans behind a screen while he thinks no one is paying attention. In Section 73, Shonagon tells of her pilgrimage to Hase Temple. The courtiers who make the pilgrimage ride a ferry, and she thinks it is all quite picturesque.

Section 74 is a short list of "things that lose by being painted," such as yellow roses and cherry blossoms. Section 75 is a short list of "things that gain by being painted," including pines, cranes, and deer. Section 76 is a short description of ponds and their best features (moonlight, green color, water-oats).

Section 77 recalls the pilgrimage to the Hase Temple. She remembers that the priest asked some young men to get things ready for these "women of quality." The young men ran through the temple telling people to leave the women alone. When Shonagon goes to temples, she likes to look at all the strangers and imagine what their lives are like. She thinks it's important to go on such trips with companions, not just with servants.

Section 78 is a list of things "that give a hot feeling." These include a zither bag, hunting costumes, and extremely fat people with lots of hair. Section 79 is a list of shameful things. These items are elaborated upon. Priests on night duty are often confronted with shameful things, and a man's heart is a shameful thing. Section 80 is a list of things that have lost their power such as a large tree that has blown down and a man of no importance correcting a servant.

Section 81 is a list of awkward things. These include allowing yourself to speak ill of another and sobbing a pathetic story. In Section 82, Shonagon recalls seeing the Emperor stop his whole retinue to pay his respects to his mother. This scene greatly impresses Shonagon. In Section 83, Shonagon tells the Empress about the way Michinaga makes his obeisance. The Empress notices that Shonagon is very impressed with Michinaga. Section 84 is a description of a particularly beautiful morning after a heavy rain.



Sections 70-84 Analysis

This section is full of lists. The lists may seem to be of little relevance, but they tell a great deal about Shonagon and about the society she lived in. For instance, the list of shameful things tells us that Shonagon fully expects that her lovers are not loyal to her and that they tell other women about her. This probably is a cultural as well as personal expectation.

The lists also show Shonagon's gift for imagery. In Section 80, which is about things that have lost a power, Shonagon evokes powerful images in her descriptions. The first item in the list is "a large boat which is high and dry in a creek at ebb-tide." The reader can easily picture this in his mind and see how it relates to losing power, just as a person loses his power when he is not involved in the thing he does best. Another item in this list is "the retreating figure of a sumo wrestler who has been defeated in a match." Although Shonagon has never been a sumo wrestler, she has felt similar defeats and knows what it feels like.



Sections 85-99

Sections 85-99 Summary

In Section 85, Shonagon recalls asking some children about an herb she'd never seen before. They tell her it's called an "earless plant." She thinks the name is funny and makes up a poem about it. In Section 86, she tells about a day when she received a package containing two square cakes. She doesn't know how to respond, and the Empress tells her to consult Korenaka. She writes a poem and attaches a magnificent branch of plum blossoms to it and then has it delivered.

Section 87 recalls a heated discussion amongst the ladies-in-waiting regarding clothing. In Section 88, Shonagon talks about her strained relationship with Tadanobu. Section 89 is about a poetic interchange between Shonagon and Yukinari. He tells her that she has an unusual way of thinking things out before she speaks. She hears later that Yukinari has been singing her praises.

Section 90 is about an evening when the gentlemen-in-waiting come to visit the ladies-in-waiting. They have a nice conversation, and Yukinari asks Shonagon about her poetry. They recite poetry until the gentlemen return to the palace. Section 91 is about the time that everyone comes out of mourning after an Emperor has died. One of the women in the palace receives an anonymous letter with a poem about wearing brightly-colored clothes. She wants desperately to know who wrote it. After much consternation, the whole thing turns out to have been a joke.

Section 92 is a list of things without merit, such as an ugly person with a bad character and rice starch that has been mixed with water. Section 93 is a list of splendid things like a bright sun in a peaceful sky and dancers moving in rhythm. In Section 94, Shonagon talks about a period of time that she spends at home. She misses the Empress and then receives a letter from her. Then Shonagon tells a story about a riddle that keeps everyone at court entertained.

Section 95 is a description of some children playing. In Section 96, Shonagon describes two handsome men who have been absorbed in a game of backgammon all day long. Shonagon thinks watching them is delightful. Section 97 is a short list of things that give a person a clean feeling such as a rush mat, a new wooden chess, and a new metal bowl. Section 98 is a list of things that give an unclean feeling like a rat's nest, little sparrows, and children who sniffle. Section 99 is a list of adorable things. These include the face of a child drawn on a melon, a young page in a ceremonial costume, and duck eggs.

Sections 85-99 Analysis

Shonagon shows some vulnerability in some of these sections, especially in Section 94 where she is away from the palace and wonders if the Empress misses her presence.



She doesn't fully explain why she is home and not at the palace, but she says she is nervous when she goes back to visit the Empress. This seems out of character for Shonagon. She is very honest in most of her writing, but for some reason she does not disclose her reason for being away from the palace here.

In her lists, Shonagon shows opposition in this section. She places the list of clean things next to the list of unclean things. In creating opposition, Shonagon emphasizes the characteristics of the items in her list. Just as authors create foils for their main characters, Shonagon creates foils for the items in her lists.



Sections 100-115

Sections 100-115 Summary

Section 100 is a list of presumptuous things like coughing, spoiled children, and children who make messes in other people's homes. Section 101 is a list of squalid things such as the inside of a cat's ear, seams of a fur robe, and the back of a piece of embroidery. Section 102 is a list of people who seem to suffer. These people include nurses who take care of babies at night and women who are passionately loved by jealous men. Section 103 is a list of enviable people. People to be envied include people who can recite sacred texts by heart with little apparent effort and healthy people when one is ill. Section 104 is a list of things "one is in a hurry to see or to hear." Some of these things are rolled dying, a letter from a man, and a newborn baby.

Section 105 recounts a time when the ladies-in-waiting had to stay in cramped quarters. They make the best of it by turning a small garden into a "pleasure garden." The gentlemen come to visit them there, and even the stars seem closer together in the sky because they are all so close together. Section 106 is a short section about Tadanobu. Shonagon is impressed that Tadanobu recites an old poem that she likes.

In Section 107, Shonagon talks about her relationship with Tadanobu. They have an intimate friendship and develop secret code words between them. One of Tadanobu's friends, Nobukata, asks Tadanobu to tell him some of the code words. Then Nobukata uses the words with Shonagon. Nobukata tries to imitate the way in which Tadanobu recites poetry because it pleases Shonagon so much.

Section 108 Nobukata and a woman named Sakyo. Sakyo is the woman that Nobukata is courting. The ladies-in-waiting all talk about the liaison, and Nobukata is upset that they are gossiping about him. He breaks off with Sakyo because of it. Section 109 is a list of things that are distant but near like the last day of the last month and the first day of the first month.

Section 110 is a list of things that are near but distant like relations between men and women. Section 111 is a rant against a man named Iyo that Shonagon dislikes because he puts on a show although he has few prospects in life. Section 112 is a description of what Shonagon thinks a woman's house should look like if she lives alone. She thinks it should be disheveled. It would be improper for her to go running around making it perfect if she just lives by herself.

Section 113 is about what court ladies should do when they leave the palace. Shonagon believes that it is pleasant if they can go home and visit their parents. She also says that a woman can know how much a man loves her when he refuses to leave her all night long even if she continually insists that he leave. Shonagon prefers to stay in a house where no one cares about whether or not the gate is open, even in the middle of the



night. In Section 114, Shonagon describes how delightful a snowfall is, and Section 115 describes the origins of a poem about cooking a frog.

Sections 100-115 Analysis

We never find out whether Shonagon was married or not. She seems to have a very close relationship with Tadanobu, but she never mentions marriage. In this section, however, she does talk about being alone quite a bit. She talks about spending her holidays away from the palace at her parents' house, and she also philosophizes about what a single woman's house should look like.

Shonagon shows her penchant for aesthetics in her list of squalid things. Many of the "squalid" things on her list are merely the undersides of things. For example, the back of a piece of embroidery certainly does look sloppier than the front side, but the beautiful front would hardly be possible without a place to hide the loose ends of the threads. Likewise, a fur coat must have seams, even if lining covers them most of the time. Spending some much time in the court where everything is beautiful and the ladies-in-waiting never have to see the kitchen or the laundry seems to have skewed Shonagon's view of life.



Sections 116-135

Sections 116-135 Summary

In Section 116, Shonagon talks about how things were when she first became a lady-in-waiting. She says that she was so embarrassed and worried about doing the wrong things that she avoided people as much as possible. Section 117 is a list of people who look pleased with themselves. These people include an exorcist who takes care of a stubborn spirit and a man who receives the position of governorship after a long time. Section 118 is a list of different kinds of winds.

Section 119 is a description of the day after a fierce autumn wind. Section 120 is a list of wind instruments. Shonagon gives her opinion of different kinds of wind instruments. She loves the sound of the flute but thinks the flageolet is shrill. Section 121 is a list of things worth seeing like the chancellor's pilgrimage to Kamo. In Section 122 Shonagon says that she loves going into mountain villages because the journey is so beautiful.

In Section 123 Shonagon discusses hot months. She likes to sit out on the veranda during hot months and feel the sense of freshness. Sections 124 and 125 are both very short. Section 124 is a comment on how scented robes are even better after a few days than they are the first day. In Section 125, Shonagon says that she loves to see water scatter under oxen's hoofs in the moonlight.

Section 126 is a list of things that should be large like horses, oxen, and provision bags. Section 127 is a list of things that should be short like the hair of a lower-class woman and a lamp stand. In Section 128, Shonagon says that nothing annoys her as much as a person who arrives at a ceremony in a shabby carriage. In Section 129, a gentleman of a lower class visits the palace to see Shonagon. Some of the other ladies-in-waiting think it is inappropriate for Shonagon to invite a lower class person and tell the Empress about it. The Empress sends a short poem to Shonagon about it, and Shonagon replies with a funny poem, which causes the Empress to laugh off the situation.

Section 130 is about a day when the palace is preparing for a festival. Shonagon sends a brief note to the Empress, and the Empress replies with a poem saying, "You and you alone can see/ What feelings lie within my heart." Section 131 is a brief comment about how Narinobu has a special skill for identifying people by their voices, even when he cannot see them. In Section 132, Shonagon comments on the amazingly keen ears of Masamitsu, Minister of the Treasury. He can hear what people are whispering across a large room. In Section 133, Shonagon says that it's possible to judge a woman's character by the state of her inkstone or mirror. An inkstone that has collected dust in its corners is a sign of a negligent person.

Section 134 is an observation about how letters are both commonplace and splendid at the same time. Section 135 is a list of shrines including Mikuri, Tatsuta, Hanafuchi, and Ikuta. Shonagon wonders if the story behind a particular name is correct. She tells the



story of an Emperor who only liked young people and ordered that everyone over the age of 40 should be put to death.

Sections 116-135 Analysis

Shonagon seems to be increasingly proud of her closer relationship with the Empress. She begins this section by reflecting on her relationship with the Empress when she first arrived at the palace. At that time she was shy, nervous, and embarrassed about doing or saying the wrong things. Juxtaposing this example with poems that the Empress has recently sent, especially the one contained in Section 130, shows the reader how much their relationship has grown over time.

Shonagon praises individual men for their gifts, talents, and kindnesses regularly in her journal. In this section she praises Narinobu for his skill in identifying voices and Masamitsu for his skill in hearing quiet noises. Shonagon hardly ever praises women, however, unless they are women either far above her rank (like the Empress or the Empress's sister) or far below her rank (like the pretty servant girls she sees on one of her journeys). Shonagon doesn't give a reason for this discrepancy, but it is likely that she is in competition with the other women of her rank and doesn't wish to show them as more qualified or better than she is.



Sections 136-155

Sections 136-155 Summary

Section 136 is a list of things that fall from the sky like hail, sleet, snow, drizzle, and frost. Section 137 is a list of clouds. Shonagon differentiates clouds by their colors: white clouds, purple clouds, black clouds, etc. In Section 138, Shonagon talks about people who have changed so much it is almost as if they have been reborn. These "rebirths" depend on appointments or changes in status rather than changes in personal growth and demeanor.

Section 139 is a scene set in a snowy day when the gentlemen carry umbrellas outside when they walk. She thinks the sight is magnificent. In Section 140, Shonagon is on the way to the temple at Uzemasa when she watches some peasants harvesting sprouts in a field. She is very impressed with their skill and wishes she had included them in her list of "impressive things." Section 141 is a very short section about a night Shonagon spent in simple lodgings when she went on a pilgrimage to the Hase Temple. She awoke in the night and saw the moon's "clear white brilliance."

Section 142 is a scenario about a young man who has an arranged marriage with a woman, but he forsakes her and is on very bad terms with her family. Later, he is appointed Chamberlain, and everyone is surprised because of his poor relations with his wife's family. At a festival, his carriage is right next to his wife's carriage, but he seems not to notice and wears an indifferent expression on his face.

Section 143 is commentary on how sad it is to feel disliked by others. In Section 144, Shonagon says that men have very strange emotions and behave in bizarre ways. For example, she cannot understand how a man who is married to a pretty woman could leave his wife for an ugly woman. She also cannot understand how a man can seem so apathetic after just having broken a girl's heart.

In Section 145, Shonagon states that sympathy is the best of all qualities, especially when it is found in men. In Section 146 she says that people should never get angry because someone has gossiped about them because everyone makes foibles and people should be able to laugh about them. Section 147 is about human faces and how Shonagon never tires of looking at a beautiful face. Ugly faces are a different matter, however. Section 148 is a list of pleasing things like hearing new stories, getting new paper, and winning.

Section 149 is a short story about a conversation Shonagon has with the Empress and several other ladies-in-waiting. She is talking about how frustrating the world can be, but she says that when she feels very frustrated, a new straw mat or some new paper helps her to feel better. Several days later, a messenger arrives with a straw mat for Shonagon. She discovers that the Empress has sent it to her.



Section 150 is one of the longer sections in the book. It is about the ceremony of Texts of the Full Canon. This is a ceremony in the springtime, and everything at the palace should be beautiful and clean. The night before the ceremony, there is a heavy spring rain, which leaves the cherry blossoms looking withered and tattered. The groundskeeper has the blossoms removed because they look so bad, but the Empress misses them in the morning and wonders if thieves took them away in the night. Then she admits that it was probably just the rain. The day of the ceremony is long but beautiful. The day after the ceremony the rains return, and everyone agrees there was good karma for the ceremony.

Section 151 describes how delightful it is to hear the Emperor playing his flute in the middle of the night. Section 152 tells about Captain Narinobu, whom Shonagon describes as very handsome and delightful. Narinobu is attached to a woman, but he cannot visit her very often because he has other attachments, not to mention his wife. Then Shonagon talks about how women can know how fond men are of them when they visit them on windy, rainy, or snowy nights.

In Section 153 Shonagon tells about a man who spent the night with her and then the following morning sent a letter saying he saw no point in their relationship and had nothing further to say to her. She feels gloomy the next day until a child comes with a message from him that says, "The rain that swells the water." She likes this reply more than she would have liked receiving a whole sheaf of poems. Section 154 describes a scene in which a woman receives a letter late at night and is so anxious to read it that she uses the tongs to take a piece of burning charcoal from the fire and holds it to the letter to be able to read it. Section 155 is a short section about how inspiring the thunder guards are during a rain storm.

Sections 136-155 Analysis

Fidelity in romantic relationships is apparently unimportant to the courtiers, ladies, and gentlemen at the palace. Shonagon is not at all ashamed to talk about how handsome and delightful Captain Narinobu is, and she mentions that he is interested in a particular woman, but he is unable to see her very often because he has other attachments, in addition to his wife. One wonders if the lower classes have the same ideas about marital fidelity that the royal classes adhere to.

The length of the entries in this section is not as variable as the lengths of the sections at the beginning of the book. Her lists seem to come in chunks, and then at other times there will be several stories or scenes in a row. Perhaps her mind is attuned to one kind of entry, and she pays particular attention to those things over the course of several days or a week.



Sections 156-185

Sections 156-185 Summary

In Section 156, Shonagon talks about the proper ways to replenish a fire when it is very cold outside. Section 157 is a short vignette about how Shonagon perfectly understood the Empress's allusion to an ancient poem. Section 158 is a short section about the boys employed by Masters of Divination. She is envious of their cleverness and wishes she had such boys in her service.

In Section 159, the Empress criticizes one of Shonagon's poems. Of course, she doesn't like the criticism, but she feels she must have deserved it. In contrast, in Section 160, Shonagon is away from the palace on a pilgrimage to a temple when she receives the following message from the Empress: "What a long stay you are making! Surely you realize how much I miss you." Section 161 recalls a charming scene between an elegant couple in a carriage. The man keeps saying, "Piercing cold, it spreads like ice."

Section 162 is a fantasy of Shonagon's. She would like to have a large, attractive house where her family could stay with her. She would also have a close friend from the palace who lives with her there. Section 163 is a list of times when a person should be on her guard. These times include when one travels by boat and when one meets someone who has a poor reputation.

Section 164 is the story of a lieutenant who was ashamed of his lower class parent. When he was on a journey with them, he pushed them into the sea and they drowned. One of the courtiers writes a poem about this, and Shonagon thinks the poem is delightful. Section 165 is very short. Shonagon has written a poem, but one of her maids reads it aloud very clumsily, and this is irritating to Shonagon. In Section 166, Shonagon elaborates on the phrase, "Praise from a servant can damage a woman's reputation."

In Section 167, Korechika lectures the Emperor, Empress, and ladies and gentlemen about literature. He lectures all night long, and close to dawn the Emperor falls asleep. Everyone makes jokes about Korechika's expectation that the Emperor should wake up and be ready for the day. Korechika walks Shonagon back to her room and is pleased that she enjoys his poetry so much.

Section 168 is a conversation between Mama, the nurse of the Lord Bishop, and a man whose house has burned down. Section 169 is a story about a young man whose father remarries an unkind woman. He is banished from the main part of the house. Eventually, he gets a position at court, but he always seems unhappy. The only person he confides in is his older sister.

Section 170 is an analysis of sleeves and their proper lengths. Section 171 is a list of illnesses including chest troubles, beriberi, and illnesses caused by evil spirits. In



Section 172, Shonagon shares her opinion that men should never eat when they visit women. In Section 173, she says that it is very annoying to be bothered by common people when visiting the temple. Section 174 is an observation about the way carpenters eat. She thinks their manners are disgraceful.

Section 175 is a scene between a woman and her lover. He leaves while the moon is still high in the sky, but he comes back and hides in her garden. Upon seeing the moon, the woman says, "Like the moon that lingers in the dawning sky." He is overcome with emotion. Section 176 is a comment about how carriages are often lent to court ladies, and the owners are pleased to lend them, but the servants do not conceal their annoyance.

Section 177 is a vignette about the morning after a young bachelor returns home after a tryst. Section 178 talks about how pleasant it is to receive a letter on a very hot day. To think that a friend has taken so much trouble on such a day makes one feel wonderful. Section 179 is a short scene describing when a man comes to visit one of the ladies-in-waiting. In Section 180, Shonagon talks about how delightful it is to hear gentlemen recite poetry while they ride on horseback. Section 181 is also about men on horseback. Shonagon likes to see messengers' faces when they look up at the gentleman as he hands down a letter.

Section 182 is a story that takes place in a house with a spacious courtyard. Someone in the house is ill, and there is a priest with a wand in the courtyard. A sturdy girl with a great head of hair is standing near him. She is to be the medium. The evil spirit is going to be transferred to her body. After the incantations are said, the girl begins groaning and wailing in a terrible way. It is announced that the little patient is better. Attendants help the girl rearrange her clothing, and the priest leaves.

Section 183 is a list of things that are unpleasant to see like crooked seams in clothing, a noble's carriage that has dirty blinds, and a woman's swollen face after she takes a nap. In Section 184, Shonagon tells how her journal is discovered by others. One of the Captains of the Guard sees it on a mat one day and snatches it away from her. He takes off with it, and this is when it starts to be passed around the court. Section 185 is the last section. She says that her brush is worn out and it's getting so dark that it's difficult to go on writing, but she wants to say that when she wrote all of these entries, she had no idea that others would ever see them. The Empress has given her more paper, and she has all the paper she could possibly use. Shonagon regrets that others have seen her "Pillow book" because it was never meant for others' eyes.

Sections 156-185 Analysis

Section 182 has quite a different flavor from other sections in the book, but it partially explains why Shonagon doesn't like priests very much. The priest uses the sturdy girl for capturing the evil spirit that has made the child ill, but he doesn't seem to have any regard for her. Shonagon is embarrassed for her because she behaves in such an

unladylike when during the exorcism, but there's nothing anyone can do. After the episode, the priest hurries off to get to his next appointment.

Shonagon claims that the book was never meant for anyone's eyes but her own, but this is not the first time she has spoken in a public sort of way in her journal. Earlier, she writes that she's sorry if anyone is offended by the low things she writes about but she's just writing what she observes. This indicates that she is aware of either a contemporary or future audience.



Characters

Sei Shonagon

Sei Shonagon is the writer of *The Pillow Book*. She is a thirty-year-old lady-in-waiting to the Empress of Japan. In relation to many of the female courtiers, she is old, but she is very quick-witted and she is sought after because she is such good company and so entertaining. She begins writing the *Pillow Book* when the Empress gives her some notebooks that were found lying around the palace. Nobody else wanted them, so Sei Shonagon began writing down her daily observations and ideas.

Shonagon is from a well-bred family. Her elder brother Norimitsu is also a member of the court. One of her distinguishing attributes, however, is her literary talent. She is very clever and quick-witted and she has memorized a great deal of poetry in addition to writing poems for special occasions or daily discourse. She seems to be a favorite of the Empress's, but of course, everything is written through Shonagon's point of view, and we don't know how reliable she is in her observations and opinions.

Norimitsu

Norimitsu is Shonagon's older brother. He is also a courtier in the household of the Emperor. Norimitsu often delivers messages to Shonagon from his friends and acquaintances, but he also acts as a counselor to his younger sister. To some in the palace, Norimitsu is known as "elder brother" because of his relationship with Shonagon. They often get together to talk.

Like Shonagon, Norimitsu is from a well-bred family and is very comfortable in court. Unlike his younger sister, however, Norimitsu does not seem as intelligent or quick-witted as Shonagon. Sometimes he doesn't understand the poems she sends because he doesn't understand the literary allusions she takes for granted. This makes him feel frustrated and sometimes affects their relationship.

Narimasa

Narimasa is the Senior Steward in the royal household. Shonagon likes to tease him about things that are out of his control, and he becomes very uptight. For example, Shonagon teases him about the narrow paths leading up to a building, and he defends himself by blaming the weather. He walks unannounced into the ladies' chambers to further discuss the matter with Shonagon.



Okinamaro

Okinamaro is the dog who lives in the palace. The palace cat, Lady Myobu, has her own nurse, Lady Uma. One day, Lady Uma tells Okinamaro to bite Lady Myobu because she is not being obedient. Okinamaro does bite the cat, and he is banished from the palace because of it. Two chamberlains flog the dog, and everyone thinks he is dead. But later, Okinamaro comes back. He is scraggly and almost unrecognizable, but he makes himself known to the ladies in waiting, and they rejoice to see him again.

Yoshichika

Yoshichika is the Middle Counsellor. He is very handsome, and he enjoys flirting with women at festivals and court events. As carriages arrive, Yoshichika sends messages to the women inside the carriages. Everyone watches him send a message to a woman in a carriage and wonders what is in the woman's reply. Furthermore, everyone is intrigued because they don't know who the woman is. The carriage drives away, and the courtiers never discover the woman's identity.

Yukinari

Yukinari is the Controller First Secretary, and Shonagon feels that he is a most unusual person. One day, Shonagon tells the Empress that she thinks Yukinari is a very unusual person, and the Empress agrees heartily. Yukinari asks Shonagon to take messages for him to the Empress. Shonagon doesn't let Yukinari see her face and convinces him that she is ugly. Yukinari is intrigued, and he sneaks into the ladies' quarters first thing in the morning to see Shonagon because he has been told that a woman's face is especially attractive first thing in the morning.

Masahiro

Masahiro is one of the chamberlains who is in charge of the senior courtiers' roll call. The roll call does not go so smoothly when Masahiro is on duty because he severely rebukes the courtiers and tells them that they must improve their behavior. Because of his actions, he has become the laughingstock of the court. Shonagon writes about a time that Masahiro left his shoes in the Emperor's dining room on the serving board. Everyone wanted to know whom the shoes belonged to, and Masahiro himself came at that moment to fetch his shoes.

Lord Akinobu

Lord Akinobu is a lord whose house is on the courtiers' route during a journey. He hosts them and introduces them to some of the local activities. He invites "a number of quite pleasant-looking young girls" to entertain the courtiers and serves them all a meal. He is



rustic and fun-loving, but the ladies-in-waiting are not amused by his common food and common manners. Several days after the journey, the ladies-in-waiting are still talking about the fern sprouts the Lord Akinobu claimed to have picked with his own hands.

Shigei Sha

Shigei Sha is the Empress's sister. Shonagon writes extensively about Shigei Sha's visit because she is so intrigued by her. When Shigei Sha first arrives, Shonagon tries to position herself next to a curtain to get a good glimpse of her. She wants to know if Shigei Sha is as beautiful as the Empress. Shonagon is impressed with the relationship between the two sisters. There seems to be no competition between them. The sisters are respectful and congenial toward one another.

Tadanobu

Tadanobu is a good friend of Shonagon's. At times it seems that they are romantically linked because they seem a little fragile around each other. At other times, though, they just seem like good friends. One thing that they have in common is that they both have a great fondness for poetry. Not only do they like to read and recite poetry, but they also come up with a code language to use between them.

Nobukata

Nobukata is a friend of Tadanobu's. Nobukata becomes jealous of the code language and Tadanobu and Shonagon use with each other, and he gets Shonagon to teach him some of the words. He also becomes very self-conscious when he falls in love with a woman named Sakyō. He knows that Shonagon and the other ladies-in-waiting are talking about him and his love affair, so he breaks up with Sakyō.



Objects/Places

Gruel-stick

A gruel-stick is a stick that women carry around during the festival of the full-moon gruel. On this day, a bowl of gruel is presented to the Emperor. The women carry the gruel-sticks all day and use them to playfully hit other people. Shonagon describes this as very flirtatious, although she says that when women get hit with gruel-sticks, they often act like they're angry or hurt.

Palm-leaf Carriage

A palm-leaf carriage is a dignified mode of transportation, and Shonagon believes it should be driven slowly to emphasize its dignity. She is annoyed when she sees palm-leaf carriages moving quickly.

Wickerwork Carriage

A wickerwork carriage is less impressive than a palm-leaf carriage and arouses little interest. Therefore, Shonagon believes that wickerwork carriages should be driven quickly because she becomes bored if she has to watch one for very long.

Paper Fans

Paper fans are somewhat disposable, so they are used in many ways at the Palace. Sometimes, people write poems or messages on the fans. Other times, they draw pictures on them. Shonagon mentions that paper fans from previous year can evoke pleasant memories.

Plum Blossoms

Plum blossoms are used to decorate many different things, including packages and letters.

Hase Temple

Hase Temple is a temple that Shonagon travels to on pilgrimage. At the temple, Shonagon worships and prays. She also enjoys the pilgrimage to the temple as a sort of getaway. It's a great place to watch people and be free from everyday cares.



Shrines

Shrines are places of worship dedicated to different gods or ideals. Shonagon writes a list of shrines and discusses the virtues of each.

Inkstone

An inkstone is a writing implement the Shonagon is very familiar with. She says you can judge a woman based on the condition of her inkstone. A dusty inkstone is a sign of a negligent woman.

Bamboo Blinds

The ladies-in-waiting have bamboo blinds on their windows. On festival days, the bamboo blinds are cleaned. Also, men sometimes come to peer through the bamboo blinds.

Flute

The Emperor plays and collects wind instruments, and Shonagon likes to hear him playing his flute in the middle of the night.



Themes

Beauty

The theme of beauty runs throughout *The Pillow Book*. There are stories, lists, and characters that all revolve around this theme. Shonagon is clearly very attuned to aesthetics. She has opinions about everything from the length of sleeves to which flowers and insects are most beautiful and therefore most acceptable. She has little patience for ugly people and ugly things. They do not fit into her world.

Because she is a lady-in-waiting to the Empress, she is constantly surrounded by beautiful, elegant things. Every time there is a festival, the palace is decorated beautifully. She spends her time helping the Empress to look beautiful, and she appreciates beauty in everything. Because she is constantly surrounded by such beauty, she seems to judge things and people based on their looks more than she judges them based on their usefulness or virtue. When she comments on a man, she first talks about his looks and what he wears before she mentions any of his other qualities such as his kindness or intelligence.

There are several sections in the book that are vignettes or small scenes. These scenes are like paintings constructed of words. They are often quite beautiful, and one gets the sense that Shonagon has written them down so she can later recall the thing of beauty. For example, one day while she is out, she sees two very young boys who are especially beautiful. She describes them carefully, paying attention to the shapes of their faces and the length of their hair. She doesn't want to forget their beauty.

Position

Position, or rank, is an important theme in *The Pillow Book*. As lady-in-waiting to the Empress of Japan, Shonagon enjoys an important position. She is privy to much that goes on in the Palace, and she has servants of her own to do her bidding. When she comes across people of lower rank, she is often disgusted with their behavior or their looks. She has become so used to the fine things of people of position that she has little patience for those who live humbler lives.

In one section, Shonagon remembers what it felt like to be a new lady-in-waiting at the court of the Emperor. She remembers feeling nervous and embarrassed, always afraid that she would do or say the wrong thing. Now that she is accustomed to the Court and all the habits and perks related to it, she is highly attuned to position. Whenever she introduces a new character, she tells that person's exact title, even if the person is a relative of hers.

She also talks about positions as if they were more important than the person's inner attributes. From Shonagon's description, it sounds like all of the courtiers think the same way she does. Along with positions come power, wealth, and respect. She loves to



attend the roll call of the senior courtiers as they announce each man's name and position. This also allows her to see who is new to the Court and to see who is advancing in position.

Nature

Interspersed throughout the sections on court life and people are many, many sections focusing on nature. Shonagon is very aware of nature and pays close attention to the changing of the seasons and the beauties of each day. She describes in detail plants, animals, and the stars and moon. Shonagon also likes to observe nature at different times of day and night.

Perhaps her love of nature and love of poetry are intertwined. There are times when Shonagon describes a beautiful outdoor scene and then says the scene inspires her to write a poem. The opposite is also true. She memorizes ancient poems, and sometimes the poems lead her outside so she can enjoy the pleasures firsthand. One of the things about the festivals that she seems to enjoy the most is the decorations, most of which are cherry blossom branches and herbs.

Because The Pillow Book was written more than a thousand years ago, one wonders if Shonagon's interest in nature has more to do with her culture or the time in which she lived. Modern people from industrialized nations spend most of their time indoors away from breezes, animals, and plants. Perhaps modern readers would find nothing interesting about her observances with nature if they themselves were more familiar with the outdoors.



Style

Point of View

Because it is a journal, *The Pillow Book* is written from a first-person point of view. Shonagon is the narrator, but she doesn't always involve herself in her journal entries. Sometimes she just tells a story or records an overheard conversation. In such cases, the point of view changes to third-person just for that particular journal entry.

Sei Shonagon is a lady-in-waiting for the Empress of Japan in the late-10th century A.D. She was about thirty years old at the time of writing this journal. She refers to herself as an old woman at thirty years of age. At this point in her life, she has a great deal of experience in the court and is very familiar with the other courtiers. Her older brother is also a member of Court, and she seems to have a lot of clout with the others.

Setting

The setting of the *Pillow Book* is 10th-century Japan. Most of the action takes place in the palace of the Emperor where Shonagon is a lady-in-waiting to the Empress. The palace is very elegant and well-kept by numerous servants. Therefore, the characters introduced in the stories are used to finery and facades. They do not see what happens in the stables or the kitchens. They just see the well-prepared food and the fresh horses.

Occasionally, Shonagon witnesses the lower classes. When she goes on pilgrimages to the temples, she sees common people and lives in simpler lodgings. She also sees people working hard, and this is picturesque to her but only because she doesn't feel the pain or long hours involved. She is accustomed to such a sheltered existence that she doesn't realize how much work is involved in her standard of living.

Language and Meaning

The *Pillow Book* was originally written in 10th-century Japanese. This translation is done by Ivan Morris. He also edited it for fluidity and understandability. Despite the distance in time, Shonagon's language still sounds fresh and even modern. She clearly has a gift for words, as is evident in her reputation in the court as a gifted poet. We don't know how formal she intended this journal to be, whether she wrote it simply for her own amusement or whether she expected that others would read and scrutinize it.

Shonagon has some pet phrases that she uses over and over again. One of them is "hateful, indeed." You can almost hear her saying it aloud as an aside to her companion ladies in waiting. Therefore, we can assume that she tried to write in a conversational way as she would speak to her friends. She uses lots of imagery and some metaphor, which probably comes from her practice as a poet.

Structure

The Pillow Book is divided into 185 sections. The sections are not categorized in any way. They are probably laid out chronologically, but there are no dates provided to tell us this definitively. It's unclear what the span of time is that is covered by Shonagon's writing. The sections vary greatly in length from a couple of lines to seven or eight pages. The longer sections are usually stories. Sometimes there are stories told within stories. The shorter sections are observations or lists.

The lists are interesting in that they have a heading, such as "Beautiful things," and then there are usually incomplete sentences elaborating on different beautiful things. The things may be human or from nature. They might be behaviors or imaginary things. Shonagon's creativity in the lists is impressive. Sometimes a topic explored in one of her lists turns her attention to a memory or story.



Quotes

"That parents should bring up some beloved son of theirs to be a priest is really distressing. No doubt it is an auspicious thing to do; but unfortunately most people are convinced that a priest is as unimportant as a piece of wood, and they treat him accordingly." Pages 25-26

"A preacher ought to be good-looking. For, if we are properly to understand his worthy sentiments, we must keep our eyes on him while he speaks; should we look away, we may forget to listen. Accordingly an ugly preacher may well be the source of sin. . ."
Page 53

"The fly should have been included in my list of hateful things; for such an odious creature does not belong with ordinary insects. It settles on everything, and even alights on one's face with its clammy feet. I am sorry that anyone should have been named after it." Page 70

"An officer who thinks he is very fashionable in his open over-robe and who folds it thinly as a rat's tail before hanging it over the curtain of state—well, such a man is simply unfit for night patrol. Officers on duty should abstain from visiting the women's quarters; the same applies to Chamberlains of the Fifth Rank." Page 72

"When one has stopped loving somebody, one feels that he has become someone else, even though he is still the same person." Page 81

"Anything purple is splendid, be it flowers, thread, or paper. Among purple flowers, however, I do not like the iris despite its gorgeous color. What makes the costume of Sixth Rank Chamberlains so attractive when they are on night duty is the purple trousers." Page 111

"It is annoying when a messenger delivers a letter to a person not meant to see it. If he simply admitted his mistake, it would not be so bad. But when he begins insisting that he merely carried out orders, it is really infuriating. If I were not afraid that someone might see me I should rush up and strike him." Page 116

"Despite the bright sun, dew was still dripping from the chrysanthemums in the garden. On the bamboo fences and criss-cross hedges I saw tatters of spider webs; and where the threads were broken the raindrops hung on them like strings of white pearls. I was greatly moved and delighted." Page 148

"Rice starch that has become mixed with water . . . I know that this is a very vulgar item and everyone will dislike my mentioning it. But that should not stop me. In fact I must feel free to include anything, even tongs used for the parting-fires. After all, these objects do exist in our world and people all know about them. I admit they do not belong to a list that others will see. But I never thought that these notes would be read by



anyone else, and so I included everything that came into my head, however strange or unpleasant." Page 159

"I greatly dislike a woman's house when it is clear that she has scurried about with a knowing look on her face, arranging everything just as it should be, and when the gate is kept tightly shut." Page 182

"Whenever my friend went to the Palace, I should help her with her preparations and see that she had what she needed during her stay at Court. For everything about well-born people delights me. But I suppose this dream of mine is rather absurd." Pages 245-246



Topics for Discussion

Describe Shonagon's relationship with her brother Norimitsu. Which one of them has more clout with the Emperor and Empress? How can you tell?

What do you think Shonagon's motivation is for writing this journal? If you were in her place, what topics would you write about?

Describe temple worship in the context of the courtiers. What does Shonagon enjoy about going to temples? What purpose do temples serve for her community?

What is Shonagon's relationship with the Empress? Are they equals? Does Shonagon "kiss up" to the Empress? How do you think the Empress feels about Shonagon?

Do you think Shonagon was writing merely for her own pleasure or also for an audience? What leads you to this conclusion?

Discuss the rules regarding romantic relationships among the courtiers. What part does marriage play in their society?

What would Shonagon be like if she were alive today? Can you think of any characters from modern novels that remind you of Shonagon?